



HYPERION

On the future of aesthetics

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**GELLU NAUM
CENTENARY ISSUE**

HYPERION

On the future of aesthetics



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HYPERION

On the future of aesthetics

Valery Oisteanu Gellu Naum: Surreal-Shaman of Romania



Curator's statement: To commemorate the centenary of Gellu Naum's birth, I asked the editors of *Hyperion* if they would be interested in publishing a special issue on Gellu Naum to underscore Naum's complex character, which is not entirely revealed in his writing, and they welcomed the proposal.

A victim of his own dilemma, a prisoner of his own country and language, a multi-disciplinary writer who indulged in theater, philosophy, poetry and fiction, Naum also tried his hand at collage, blind-drawings, archeology, and occult experiments. How to

summarize such a complex figure? I asked some of my Romanian, French, and American colleagues to contribute essays and poetry to this endeavor — writers such as Ion Pop, Simona Popescu, and Petre Răileanu, who devoted part of their literary lives to writing books and essays about Naum. In the process, I availed myself of some of Naum’s English and French translations done by his close friends, Sebastian Reichmann, myself, and others.

This also proved to be a perfect occasion to unearth some of the photographs, video and audio recordings, and memorabilia that PASS (Poets and Artists Surreal Society) accumulated from 1977 until Naum’s death in 2001. With this issue then, we intend to underscore Naum’s alchemical experiments with words, images, and extreme experiences, often in collaboration with his wife Lyggia.

One of his experiments with sensory deprivation is highlighted in the following quote from *Zenobia*: “After that I was deaf for a while. It was extraordinary, I couldn’t hear a thing, I was stopped up with solid earwax, I was like a bottle filled with the pure and free simplicity of my situation, I would point to my ear: ‘I am deaf, what do you think about that!’ ... The best part is that one day, pop! my earwax cracked and I started to hear again. I could have stopped speaking instead and made myself mute, but that seemed too weird to me, it would have been unfair and then, however mute you are, you still can hear the words, they sneak unhindered through your marrow, so I just minded my own business.”¹

Shamanism for Gellu Naum meant a process — a stated intention to heal himself and others through poetry. But to heal from what? He experienced death at an early age with the loss of his father, Andre Naum, in the First World War. Subsequent travels to Paris and separation from his first wife led to his forced return to his native Romania to serve in the army during the Second World War, in which he again encountered death face to face. This resulted in his worldview changing: From that time on, Naum considered nature to

¹ *Zenobia* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1995) 67–68.

be a huge Hermetic book in which all creatures are words. He credited two museums in Paris as influences: the Museum of Dreams and the Museum of Suicide. Following in the footsteps of the French surrealist poets before him — Crevel, Desnos, Éluard — he began to record his dreams in a book, *Medium*. His centenary gives us the perfect occasion to reread and interpret this and other works anew, in a spate of new editions in Romanian, French, German, and English. In his 1936 review of Naum's poetry collection *Incendiary Traveler: Nota Bene*, Romanian-born French playwright Eugène Ionescu said that Naum "is aiming toward a revolutionary poetry socially, culturally, and spiritually. He is integrating and confirming the hooligan mentality of the new generation remarked by Mircea Eliade, indifferent of the extremes to which they are going."² At the time, Eliade was a far-right conservative; Naum was clearly leaning toward the left, Surrealism, and the avant-garde.

There are only a handful of surrealists in the world who have invented new strains of the "freedom of imagination virus," and whatever name by which they are known — neo-dada, post-surrealists, Lettrists, Situationists, Pataphysicists, etc. — they constitute a brotherhood of dreamers and they discovered (and continue to discover) each other even in total darkness, in the underground, or in the absolute void.

I often knocked at the door of Gellu and his wife Lyggia's tiny apartments in Bucharest at Galatzi St nr. 68, or at Aviator Petru Cretzu Nr. 64, and sometimes at their wooden gate in the countryside of Comana an hour south of the capital city. One day in 1983 they arrived at my door at 170 Second Avenue. Lyggia with her broad

² In 1935, Mircea Eliade wrote the novel *Huliganii* (Hooligans), a portrait of a family and an entire generation of Romanians in the early 1930s. To David Cave, Eliade seems to "tacitly condone such revisionist behavior [idealistic youths overturning history to begin anew]," for he "depicts only certain youth, notably Petru, as willing to assume full responsibility for their actions. In *Huliganii*, at least, it seems authentic living is unavoidably the domain of the individual; groups are more susceptible to compromise." David Cave, *Mircea Eliade's Vision for a New Humanism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993) 111.

smile, Gellu with his big magician's eyes and deep voice, smoking a Magritte-like pipe. They were welcomed by my wife Ruth into the landscape of my anti-war sculptures, neo-dada collages, portrait of John Lennon, a copy of Victor Brauner's drawing of Gellu, an interior window garden, and a selection of surrealist art books and jazz music. The first words that I remember Naum saying in my East Village pad were, "Mă simt ca acasă!" — "I feel at home here!" Then the conversation turned to Edgar Cayce, the "sleeping prophet," who every day for over 40 years would lay on a couch and enter a self-induced sleep state, something Naum admired. In the following days I steered him to jazz performances and art shows, occasions for him to meet American writers and artists; besides Romanian, he could speak fluent French, and his deep, calm voice and signature humor captivated those around him.

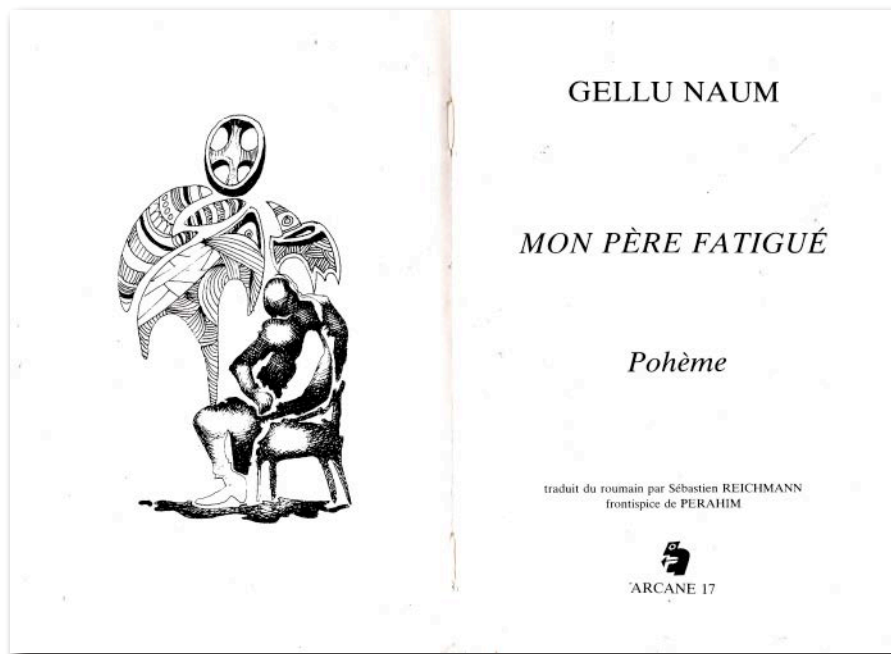
Naum's poetry performances during this sojourn (which also included a stay in San Francisco) radically changed the scene as such, not just for me but for Ira Cohen, Bill Wolak, Timothy Baum, George-Therese Dickinson, Allen J. Sheinman, Bimbo Rivas, Miguel Algarin, and musician Ljuba Ristic, to name just a few, and for those who laboriously translated and published his poems in literary magazines and anthologies.³

Romanian surrealism gave a new boost to the almighty imagination. The surrealists tried to reach its source, where antinomies coexist without excluding one another, because "there is a certain area of the spirit where life and death, reality and imagination, the past and the future, the communicable and the incommunicable, the higher and the lower cease to be perceived as contradictory."⁴ The space where imagination and reality interpenetrate is surreality. The structure of the term seems to denote another world parallel to or above reality. Surreality is a desired realm, but one inherent in reality. But such a meaning has

³ Poetry such as *Dream Helmet* (New Jersey: Somniloquist Press, 1978) 86, 87, 88; *Third Rail* (San Francisco: Third Rail, 1984); *Arsenal* (Chicago: Black Swan, 1973), etc.

⁴ André Breton, *Manifestes du Surréalisme* (1962).

nothing whatsoever to do with the surrealist doctrine. One of the bridges between the subjective, with the subconscious, and the objective, is the dream, which acquired the same status as objective reality. "Our life," wrote Naum, "the mean part of our life bearing that name, would perhaps deserve a challenge from dreams refusing to grant it any reality"... According to the theory of Freud, "our innermost hidden desires are released in dreams. To pour dreams into reality by transposing them into poems, will enable poetry to act on reality."⁵



The romantics emphasized the revelatory capacity of dreams while the surrealists focused on the activity of the imaginative consciousness, therefore of men. Human desire, so far suppressed,

⁵ *Medium* (Bucharest: Surrealist Press, 1945) 74, quoted in "Surrealism: Contexts and Interpretations" by Valentin F. Mihaescu, *Romanian Review* (Bucharest: Romanian Review Cultural Monthly, 1981) 88.

was now fulfilled in a world where every approach was permitted. This was a delirious reconstruction of reality meant to remove contradiction. "Surrealists claim a conduct in total separation from reality completely outside constructivist utilitarianism,"⁶ a conduct which steers in the fountains of dreams the reflected image of a vision devoid of any connection to problems and projection beyond dream and half-wakefulness. For dreams to become potent, they must regain their subversive character and be capable of determining the "total crisis of consciousness" (Breton). "Everything begins in the infinite chalice of dreams."⁷

By means of automatic dictation, Naum attempted to spontaneously exteriorize the unconscious. For him poetry was the realm of absolute freedom in which everything acquires the shape of our desires. In this way, the antinomy between dream and reality disappears. The split between the individual and the world is transferred into poetry, giving life to images by spontaneously and surprisingly joining two seemingly irreconcilable realities. Naum wanted to create a new order to annul these antinomies. Dreams were understood and eulogized as a refuge from a reality that exasperated the surrealists. For Naum, contact with the material world, and interrupted communication with the cosmos, could be achieved only through dreams.

"I have with me the deep sadness of poets who, throughout their lives...have tried hard not to produce literature, and eventually, on leafing through their 100 odd pages, have found that what they wrote was nothing but literature. What a horrible deception!" Naum was against mediocre (i.e. academic) poetry, never accepting any compromise, refusing to surrender. This kind of spirited refusal is summarized in ironic form by the following paragraph taken from *Medium*: "I read my poems with a low voice, extremely low, in deepest silence, especially while a beautiful woman stood near me.

⁶ "Uncle Vineá's Alms," *Unu*, #29 (1930).

⁷ Gellu Naum, "Avenue of the Dead," *Unu*, #18 (1929).

This is nowadays the poetical state, and I kept on being a poet, sure that one day at the end of my speech I would burst into the most trivial laughter, into the most terrifying howls and that would be the first poetic gesture I would undoubtedly consider as my own." The poet of the future, he believed, will be able to reach this unconditional freedom only if he starts "by unleashing his desires" in a spiritual form.⁸

The new world that Naum and the Surrealists hoped to create would be the result of a poetic transformation of reality. In fact, there was no direct action involved. Everything takes place at the level of the spirit — a vision of a universe in which well-known laws are useless presides over the entire poetic realm of Naum.

His concern was to theorize the surrealist liberation of the object. The object becomes "mysterious and malevolent" by being placed into unusual relationships, which annul its natural destination and lend it meanings in harmony with the urges of the unconscious. In *The Castle of the Blind* (Surrealist Collection: 1946), Naum made a sustained effort to liberate human expression in all its myriad forms, a total revolution. Naum affirmed that poetry is the science of action, and its lyricism should be recuperated in unexplored zones. This "oneiric movement" focused on infra-reality, an occult romanticism. Naum talked about an exorcism of the language — "We should cretinize the language" (*Critique of Misery*) — and the disturbance of grammar through the practice of the playful instinct that would function in his poems.

* * * * *

Shortly after the end of World War II, poets and writers like Gherasim Luca, Dolfi Trost, Virgil Teodorescu, Saşa Pană, Jules Perahim, Jacques Herold, Lucian Boz, Constantin Nisipeanu, Sesto Pals and others, all active in Romanian Surrealism, were swiftly

⁸ *The Forbidden Terrible* (Bucharest, 1945).

banned by the Communist authorities. By 1947, Naum's book of poems, *The White of the Bone* (1946), was rejected by censors, and for the next 20 years he was permitted to write only in the approved "socialist realism" style. Two politically engaged books, "later repudiated" by their author, were *Poem About Our Youth* and *Calm Sun*, both of which were illustrated by Jules Perahim. Unfortunately, the first book ends with these unworthy and unpoetical words: "Lenin Party Communism" (1960–61).

Naum was also permitted to write children's books (*The Books of Apolodor*) and to publish Romanian translations of 30 titles from the French by the likes of Gérard de Nerval, Denis Diderot, Théophile Gautier, Julien Gracq, Samuel Beckett (*Waiting for Godot*), René Char, Jacques Prévert, Franz Kafka, Victor Hugo, and even Jules Verne. After an intense period in which he worked 12–14 hours a day for 21 years, his doctors declared him physically exhausted and advised him to better pace himself.

In Naum's poem "Beginning and the Center" (alluding perhaps to the structure of a labyrinth) from *Athanor* (1968), there is a character named Platon, the same name he gave to his horse while in combat during World War II, who takes grammar to an extreme. Here Naum broke with the logic of linear narrative, according to Simona Popescu (editor of Naum's complete works, *Polirom*, 2011), and strained standard grammar through an absurd, obscure sieve, channeling verses like a seer. He learned these techniques in dreams, such as one described in *Medium*: "I saw people, blindfolded, whose good faith it is impossible to question, making all sorts of phrases on a board on which alphabet is drawn, the order of which I do not know anything, without difficulty and without help from a spirit."⁹ Typical for Naum was engineering a humorous desecration of poetical tradition. He also used alchemical symbols to project his personal

⁹ *Medium* in *Gellu Naum II: Proza*, ed. Simona Popescu (Bucharest: Editura Polirom, 2012) 116.

experiences in a furnace (athanor) in which traditional poetical concepts are melted, re-forged, reshaped and reinvented.

From an ancient gesture burnt four thousand years ago

Rustle of ashes extinguished memories of fire
over tattoos of limestone
shirts of clear water between sands
vegetal worms going around pebbles
roaring of buckets dropped into wells

"Athamor" (*Athamor*, 1968)

The symbol of the labyrinth appeared in several other poems via multiple entrances and exits. "The bees from the labyrinths are giving me honey." According to Popescu, the metaphor of the labyrinth was a trap for Naum, as in little books that were "dragging me into their labyrinth."

During his lifetime, Naum ironically constructed a philosophy of "poetry" that opposed academic notions. In his theoretical text, "The Specter of Longevity," written jointly with Virgil Teodorescu, Naum proclaimed that "poetical necessity finds an enemy in poetry as necessity." Among his experimental poems were photographs of his face with words such as "rape," "death," and "freedom" typed on slivers of paper glued to his eyes, cheeks, and chin,¹⁰ while among the text of "Advantages of the Vertebrae" there are images of hats, shoes, and shirts cut out of a fashion catalogue.

"Nigredo" is a poem made out of unrecognizable signs — would-be ideograms or runes invented by Naum — alchemical symbols, astrological signs, hobo marks — transcribed after a dream. Nevertheless, there is a connection to alchemical names of "black

¹⁰ "Autopoem," 1938–40. Photo by Teddy Brauner, Victor Brauner's brother.

matter — originator and destroyer of all” (*Nigredo*), and the hieroglyphs similar to notations above the Philosophical Tree.¹¹

Perhaps all these experiments were ironic gestures toward poetry, such as his playfully philosophical “Cadavre Exquis,” written jointly with Virgil Teodorescu:

Through the armor that covers our gaze penetrates a savage cry.
Passing your hand through your heart, you tear off a fingernail.
Don’t forget to close your eyes before closing your eyelids.¹²

Naum insisted on the meaning of the marvelous and the “miraculous,” which he said must inhabit any authentic poetry, and he struggled to sustain the dynamic evolution of surrealism during the very difficult socialist period. “No exact definition of the surrealist marvelous has come to us,” notes J.H. Matthews. “The reason is, evidently, that surrealists shared Péret’s view of the marvelous as ‘heart and nervous system of all poetry,’ hence as no more susceptible than surrealist poetry to close analysis.”¹³ As André Breton wrote in the *Surrealist Manifesto*: “The marvelous is not the same in every period of history: it partakes in some obscure way of a sort of general revelation only the fragments of which come down to us: they are the romantic *ruins*, the modern *mannequin*, or any other symbol capable of affecting the human sensibility for a period of time.”

The Romanian post-war surrealists tried to abandon the thorny road of images, instead focusing their attention on other aspects of dreams, namely, verbal automatism as a means of sounding the depths of the subconscious, the recognition of objective chance (as described by André Breton in *Mad Love*) as a means of reconciling the purposes of nature with the purposes of men, and the surrealist

¹¹ *Opus Magnum*, in Alexander Roob, *Alchemy & Mysticism* (2001) 306.

¹² “122 Corpses,” first published in *Surrealist Collection* (1946).

¹³ J.H. Matthews, *The Surrealist Mind* (Selinsgrove: Susquehanna University Press, 1991), 92.

object and its possibilities. Seen in the perspective of the linguistic invention, Naum may be likened in structure and composition to Soupault, Reverdy, and Breton, who knew his writing and praised his verse.

Yet Gellu Naum hated labels and being labeled. "I did not seek Surrealism. I did not seek my friends. I met them on the way. And of course, the breakup happened all the same... Surrealism was a circle, maybe the brightest of all circles, and closer to the center of the concentric circles of collective necessity."¹⁴ For him, it was more a poetical condition, a way of life and not only its literary aspect.

As politically imposed censorship loosened after 1967, Naum resumed publishing surrealist poetry, leaving us a unique look at the unconscious mind in more than 40 books, among them *Athanor* (1968), *Poetizați, Poetizați... (Poeticize, Poeticize... (1970))*, *Poeme Alese (Selected Poems (1974))*, *Copacul-Animal (The Animal-Tree (1971))*, *Tatăl Meu Obosit (My Tired Father, (1972))*, *Descrierea Turnului (Description of the Tower (1975))*, *Partea Cealaltă (The Other Side (1980))*, and *Malul Albastru (The Blue Shore, (1990))*. Here is an example from *The Blue Shore*, written partially in the mental-health ward of a hospital, where he was placed, apparently due to a faulty diagnosis:

Top of the Soul

Breast-feed me tree with your cat's breasts

because I fought for you with two military types
one was wearing white silk stockings
the other one was saluting by sticking out his tongue
their heads were fluttering in the wind like a white wedding scarf

and my silent witness was hanging like a plant¹⁵

¹⁴ Rémy Laville, *Gellu Naum. Poète roumain au château des aveugles* (Paris: Editions L'Harmattan, 1994).

¹⁵ "Vârful sufletului," from *The Blue Shore*. English version by Valery Oisteanu.

Naum's existentialist autobiographical novel *Zenobia* is a dreamlike story recounting an encounter à la *Nadja* with a predestined woman (his wife Lyggia).¹⁶ Naum called it "a kind of novel," but more accurately it could be labeled an anti-novel with no clear plot, no character development, and no clear timeline. The author warns us from the beginning: "In some places I will say what I was not supposed to reveal." The opening line is a quotation from a furrier in a Bucharest slum in 1813: "And all those of us who were alive thought we were dead and walked about in a daze" (unnumbered dedication page). Lyggia Alexandrescu-Naum, whom he married in 1946, was the inspiration for this novel. An artist and a muse, she also remained a co-conspirator in his artistic adventures for more than 50 years, until the end of his life. According to Penelope Rosemont, Lyggia stands as the most influential Romanian female surrealist, who was a companion for Naum's experimentations, such as automatic "blind drawings" and "blind writings" created in total darkness with a blindfold.¹⁷

In one of the drawings from the "voluntary blindness" series titled "Gellu and Lyggia Breaking the Darkness," she is represented with the blindfold and Gellu with his pipe. An (absurd) irony occurred near the end of her life, when she became clinically blind, but could still take care of her aging husband, including cooking at the country house in Comana where she knew her way around the garden filled with flowers and vegetables and the simple country kitchen.

This year on August 1 we celebrated the centenary of Naum's birth, and on September 28th, the 14th anniversary of his death/disappearance: 14 years will have passed without his distinctive voice, his humorous cynicism, his critical eye, and his generous smile.

¹⁶ Published initially in 1985 in Bucharest and later translated into German (1990), Greek (1992), French (Éditions Maren Sell/Calmann-Levy, 1995), and into English by James Brook and Sasha Vlad (Northwestern University Press, 1995).

¹⁷ *Surrealist Women: An International Anthology* (University of Texas Press, 1998) 200.

Thanks to the contributions of poets and artists, and the efforts of the Gellu Naum Foundation, a magazine (*ATHANOR*) is published annually with his memorabilia, letters, and personal photographs. His memorial house in Comana hosts an annual gathering-cum-poetry reading, attended this year by over two-dozen of his closest friends and countryside neighbors. His writings are collected by Polirom Press in 4 volumes, encompassing a vast legacy of poetry, fiction, theater, and essays, edited by his longtime biographer Simona Popescu.

Naum is one of the few surrealists who survived the cultural vandalism of the Stalinist/communism era, though of course not without scars. But when he resurfaced after 20 years of near silence, he did so with an even stronger voice, that of an oracle of poetic wisdom. From 1967 on he created a vortex that revitalized regional Eastern European surrealism in Romania (V. Teodorescu, C. Nisipeanu, Sasha Pana, Jules Perahim, etc.) and in Yugoslavia (he was close friends with Vasco Popa, a Serbian surrealist poet). Naum painted with words as if his *pohems* were mysterious paintings. Only in the process of re-reading them from a distance can we appreciate the layered occult messages in detail, the depths, colors, compositions and his own particular alchemical symbolism. In New York, Naum shared with us his experiments with “psychedelic states” achieved through deprivation of sleep, speech, light and even food. They were but a window into his subconscious realms and perhaps even into the spiritual domain.

In his words “the Alchemist of unacceptable existence,” Naum was preparing himself for a state of ghostliness before dying, as expressed with this statement: “We wish to reincarnate without dying beforehand.”¹⁸

¹⁸ “Fantomas in his Decree,” in Naum’s posthumous collaboration with the phantom of Maximillien de Robespierre, *Poetizați, Poetizați (Poeticize, Poeticize)*, Editura Eminescu, Bucharest, 1970).