

GELLU NAUM AND CREATIVE EXASPERATION

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Abstract:

The article aims to analyse Gellu Naum's dramaturgy in the context of Romanian surrealism. Being the only one among the representatives of the group in Bucharest who approached the field of drama, Gellu Naum has impressive artistic achievements in this regard. We propose a reconsideration of his plays in the context of his work and of the literary-historical reality as well.

Keywords:

Surrealism, avant-garde, chance, self-irony, puppet, demythologisation.

Considered by many as the unique and authentic representative of Romanian surrealism, Gellu Naum, a surrealist left without a group (after Luca, Trost and Păun left the country and Virgil Teodorescu betrayed the movement's principles), cloistered within his own poetic principles as well as in his own country, often considered strange, extravagant and peculiar, stubbornly continued to be a surrealist until death, so his position in the post-war Romanian literary landscape remained singular. Or, more accurately:

“That he was – and will remain – one of the most important Romanian poets of the 20th century is known. However, he had a contradictory literary destiny, with spectacular recognitions both at home and abroad, but also with ingratitude. Even when, in the last decade of his life, he came to enjoy increasingly widespread admiration, seen as a great poet, reprinted multiple times, he remained structurally a ‘marginal’, both through his writing and his way of being.”¹

The hostility he had to face from the beginnings of the avant-garde movement and its failure in our country followed him throughout his life, but his singularity in Romanian literature is undisputed.

¹ Ion Bogdan Lefter, 2005, pp. 58-59.

Despite all adversities, sympathisers or opponents, totalitarian regime or democratic freedom, diatribes or praises, Naum persisted in writing and remained a coryphaeus without a chorus in Romanian literature, preferring self-isolation in a singular space which, geographically, is called Comana...

Like a victorious marathon runner, he separated himself from the pack and continued the race, alone, until the grand finale...

The consistency and constancy with which Gellu Naum (1915-2001) remained a benchmark of the Romanian surrealist avant-garde, with its theatrical-explosive manifestations, compels us to discuss him, as mentioned above, as a singular case today. In the realm of surrealist manifestos of the years 1945-1946, published alongside of Virgil Teodorescu and Paul Păun, Gellu Naum had the great chance of being a complete poet and a unique playwright in our literature. It seems that the author of *Cartea cu Apolodor* did not deviate from the principles that appeared in 1945, in *Critica mizeriei*, which were different from those of Gherasim Luca and Trost:

“The permanent effort for the liberation of human expression in all its forms, a liberation that cannot be conceived outside the total liberation of man.”

As can be seen, there is a kernel of existentialism here, specific to the movement and present throughout the work of Gellu Naum. And yet, Gellu Naum is the only one, with minor variations, who tends towards “classicisation”. The numerous volumes of poetry, from his debut in 1936 with *Drumețul incendiar*, illustrated with three reproductions by Victor Brauner, in which the seed of rebellion against the situation of confinement, behind the forms and not the contents, is synonymous with the vital impulse for the establishment of a new world according to the norms of full living, to the 1980 anthology *Partea cealaltă*, outline a disturbing poetic profile. The universe that greets us is imbued with strangeness and sensuality.

In the avant-garde group of 1945, Gellu Naum came with a “creative exasperation” (Eugen Simion). But it is not the nihilistic exasperation closing our access to the world, but that of the independent creator who perceives the already created world, which, dissatisfied, turns upside down. Implicitly, he becomes a resident of the second world, created by him, also proposing the type of possible inhabitants. The revolt acquires, in this sense, a double

meaning and manifests itself through the separation from artistic norms and “ontological norms”, both false separations.

However, this is also the purpose of accepting the idea of an apparent separation in order to self-ironize. The awareness of this false-certainty – actually, the impossibility of overcoming the status of the man of the interval – gradually infiltrates his entire creation, leading to the birth of a tutelary mechanism: *Irony* as a sign of continuous agony, without even noticing.

In his dramaturgy, this gaining of lucidity translates into its themes and the perspective from which they are approached. In terms of composition, this is explained by the abandonment of the character and the adoption of an element from the Romantics, but updated in the theatrical experiences of the 20th century, especially by the Italian futurists, such as the puppet. This is the perfect inhabitant of a world under the sign of “objective hazard” and lack of causality, as the semantic spaces of the pseudo-intrigue present themselves. Moreover, in the author’s forward to the publication of the play *Insula*, in issue 11/1964 of the *Teatrul* magazine, the “demystification of the essence of the character” is programmatically announced, being associated with the idea of the inability to self-transcend. Formally, these are transposed into an “integral language”, the only one that is free, but not entirely.

“What strikes first is the destruction of the constructions, in order to be rebuilt and then destroyed again, the radical ellipticism applied to a background of the most humble events, unexpected explosions in the ostentatious banality of an irritatingly insignificant gesture, the apparently friendly tone of a banal-frivolous conversation, which applies a violent contortion to the lexis, word order, onomastics and any grain of meaning, in general.”²

It cannot be said that Gellu Naum’s dramaturgy has been the focus of literary criticism. The impression of bizarreness that it produces during reading has also been accountable for the lack of appeal on the part of show creators, and its introduction into a repertoire for a puppet theatre has been insufficient. There seems to be a prejudice that his dramaturgy (as well as the novel *Zenobia*) does not represent defining coordinates, as poetry established him in a certain typological gallery since his debut.

² Gheorghe Crăciun, 1997, pp. 89-90.

However, his dramaturgy should be viewed as a personal achievement, and also as a belated expression of a phenomenon that has not made major contributions in this field.

The only Romanian surrealist who experimented in the dramatic genre, Naum wrote his first play in 1945, *Exact în același timp*, published in the volume *Teribilul interzis*; it is the moment from which he might be considered one of the precursors of the theatre of the absurd. According to the study by Ion Cocora in the “Preface” to *Exact în același timp*, it is evident that the appearance of the play predates the first dramas written by Eugen Ionescu (*The Bald Soprano*, 1947) or Beckett (*Waiting for Godot*, 1951).

The play *Exact în același timp*, published in the volume *Teribilul interzis* in 1945, was not included by the author in the 1979 theatre volume, as he was probably dissatisfied with its artistic realisation. It is more of an experience, in which the imagination moves relatively chaotically, within the limits offered by the particular tone of black humour.

The play, characterised by a demythologising subtext typical of surrealism, deconstructs the clichés of Romantic literature, ranging from sentimentalism to ostentatious symbolism. The drama transitions into melodrama and, through the use of humour, devolves into farce.

The one-act play, divided into four scenes, introduces us to Robert in the home of Luiza and her blind father, Homer. Due to excessive ennui, Homer seeks a location to hang himself, stating:

“I was actually looking for a place to hang myself because this boredom Machine still operates, that is all, and I wish to stop it.”

Luiza perceives him as the lover she has been awaiting, albeit slightly altered, and is horrified when he suggests hanging himself before her. Ultimately, Robert departs under the pretext of having debts to pay but promises to return.

The third act presents us with Cécile, who impatiently awaits her lover Robert’s suicide. The dialogue reveals that his motives include the need to purchase a perfume and to settle urgent debts.

In this setting, two other bizarre characters emerge: a distinguished gentleman who has gone for a walk due to a migraine, and Rudolf, who enters through the window in search of his lost dog.

After a coin toss determines the location, Robert commits suicide.

The Girl with the Hoop enters the scene, kisses the suicide victim and smears her face with his blood as makeup. In the second scene, Cécile, disguised as a man and adopting the name of the painter Raphael Sanzio, visits Luiza, Robert's first love, bringing her a coffin containing her lover's dead dog and a poisoned beetle, which Luiza, at the urging of Cécile, consumes and dies.

The Girl with the Hoop reappears and, intending to colour her lips with liquid lipstick, stabs Luiza in the heart. Luiza's father, Homer, remains to bury the dog beneath the bush of black roses in the garden.

The dark humour and dreamlike nature of the farce naturally combine the tragic with the grotesque, the sentimental with the macabre, and innocence with cruelty, in a succession of delirious scenes of overwhelming absurdity.

The other three plays were written in 1962-1966 and it was not until 1979 that they appeared in volume: *Insula, Ceasornicăria Taus* and *Poate Eleonora...*

In *Insula*, a play in two acts, each comprising six scenes, although the plot appears to reenact the predicament of Robinson Crusoe, since Naum's protagonist is also a castaway on an island, it does not follow the epic narrative of Defoe. Instead, it parodies certain literary clichés of the 19th-century English novel.

Besides the character of Vineri 'Friday', the island is populated by a diverse cast of dramatic personae that constitute an eccentric menagerie: three policemen, several Bedouins, three blue kittens, two seals, a number of tourists, two singing seals, song parrots and, among others, a mermaid in the role of a lawful wife etc.

The plot satirises all the strong elements upon which the romantic genre relied a long time: a woman with a sullied past, rescued by the enamoured Robinson from the clutches of a scoundrel (here, Pierre Surcouf, a pirate by profession); he is the lover willing to sacrifice even his life for love, yet fails to adapt to the conditions of the island and attempts to flee with his beloved, a flight followed by a duel and the anticipated return home of the hero.

The burlesque note is omnipresent in the text, through the blatant disregard for the convention of roles, by parodying stage directions, scenic and directorial patterns etc., and through the absurdity of the situation.

The decrypted parable of the play is the drama of modern man, incapable of adapting to the alien conditions in which he is forced to exist.

The surrealist arsenal finds its auxiliary here in the violence of language. Strident, exaggerated images, seemingly the reflex of a diseased spirit, compose a world of the neutrality of opposites, of hybrid associations.

In the volume *Vasco da Gama*, as a reiteration of the theme from *Drumețul incendiar*, the ideational foundation of what would years later become the play *Insula* begins to take shape, albeit in a reverse sense. It concerns the parodying of the central motif of his youthful creation – the traveller who discovers not the real world, but the one he longs for, dreams of, and desires – a world that becomes an existential mirage. In *Insula*, the caricatural image seems to disrupt conventional norms and impose sensations rather than certainties. However, the play is not merely a parody of Defoe's work but an autonomous creation, born from a theme already established and embedded in cultural memory. The preface accompanying the play, from the same issue of the *Teatrul* magazine, fully elucidates:

“Insula aims to present to the audience the boundary hero tied to the feeling of loneliness, isolation, steeped in the substance of fierce individualism, who, even in the conditions of a demiurge, is incapable of fostering relationships detached from the world that conceived him.”

It is also an attempt to parody literary clichés, leading to the dislocation of the dramatic structure through the epic borrowing of each scene. The proposed argumentation is of another theme, major and congruent with the human structure: non-communication. The impossibility of communication, a theme that lives subsidiarily in the play *Poate Eleonora...* but strikingly in *Ceasornicăria Taus*, is a state of existence, even if, as can be easily observed, verbal delirium is its form of expression. Everything is satirised following the principle of “everything is permitted”.

The basic technique in *Insula* is free association, complemented by the procedure of multiplication, theorised especially in visual art and present in the work of Salvador Dali, with whom Gellu Naum shares spiritual affinities. In the virgin space of the island, the world is created through memory, which is why age becomes a matter of mathematics rather than biology or psychology. Created through cultural anamnesis, it receives

caricatural traits, translating through the agitation of the Robinsonade a true vocation for irony. The protagonist himself emerges from the incidence of gratuitous humour, becoming trapped in a secondary space, contaminated by the virus of a true verbal factology. The author's great capacity in this case is to maintain a constant dialogue with the erudite knowledge. Provoked by it, the author seems to challenge it through satire. An example is the parodying of the recognition motif from melodrama: Robinson is recognised by his long-lost mother by a mole on his belly.

The same absurd manner sets in motion the dramaturgical mechanism of *Ceasornicăria Taus*, subtitled *Comedie statistică în două acte*. The play explores the alienation of modern individuals in contemporary society, the crisis of identity loss and the lack of communication.

The paronymous names of the main characters (*Taus, Maus, Klaus, Papus*), which are also the secondary characters, suggest ambiguity and indeterminacy of identity from the very beginning.

Wordplays give rise to absurd puns:

“TAUS: But he has premonitions.

MELANIE: Preconceived...

TAUS: Premeditated.”

Numerous verbal automatisms are included:

“MELANIE: Let's escape somewhere, to the ice floes...

MAUS: In a closed, transparent, odourless space...”

The incongruity of dialogues placed in unusual situations creates an easily noticeable comic effect:

“A clock strikes one. KLAUS: It's eight.

TAUS: It's always eight for me.

KLAUS: Even number.

TAUS: What shoe size do you wear?

KLAUS: 1846.

TAUS: Well, there you have it!...”

The characters, marionettes without inner life or distinct personalities, adjust their lives to the mechanical rhythm of the clock. Its malfunction leads to true deviations in behaviour

The comic effect also relies on demythologising and ridiculing mythical or religious themes: Atlas, who here cannot support the terrestrial globe; the centaur is mocked due to suicidal intentions because two women ignore him...

The overall character of the play is that of absurd burlesque, born from an insubordinate pleasure in play.

Prior to this play was *Poate Eleonora*, in which the seed of negativism from *Exact în același timp* had not disappeared but merged with a kind of literary defiance that was new in Romanian drama. It defied not only formal but also conceptual canons. The tragic, considered obsolete, had fallen into the raw trap of black humour.

Inevitably, imagination gets accustomed to the chaos of this behaviour, which becomes a literary style. The thematic focus, the only coherent one, was that of duality. However, it governed a norm of the oneiric that could calmly organise language into antithetical series, neutralising them through artificial functionality rather than passivity. *Poate Eleonora* revisits, in the same negative key, an individual's existence, conditioned by the motif of the clock (which is perpetually out of order, leading to the obsessive question "*What time is it?*"). The dramatic heroes – Mother, Father, Iulius etc. – are like robots, without names, identity or individuality, whose inner automatism is revealed through verbal clichés or the loss of term meanings, as their dialogues engage in continuous senseless polemics, never achieving true communication.

Prosaic lines and verbal tics accompany the characters in a dizzying oneiric space, where the motif of "life as a dream" develops and blends the succession of planes in which they, confused, slide.

The end of the first act plunges us into a nightmare fuelled by traumatic memories of war, a scene conveyed through pantomime, suggesting silent fear in people's souls.

The set recreates the oppressive atmosphere of a waiting room, with trains passing by at high speed. The surreal scene features numerous characters with blank faces, devoid of particular features, who fall to the ground whenever they hear alarms or explosions.

Another theme dear to surrealists and Gellu Naum is that of statues, which appear here as symbols of life stagnation or spiritual petrification, depicted through Iulius's dream. As he sleeps on a bench in the park,

contemplating the equestrian statue of the mayor with Eleonora at its feet, he dreams of falling in love with the woman from the statue group:

ELEONORA: But I love him, Iulius... I mean, I love you... In the park, there's an empty pedestal... We'd be wonderful there together.

IULIUS: Of course it's an empty pedestal... It's always an empty pedestal...

ELEONORA: And the horse, no matter how it smelled...

IULIUS: True, it smelled... Bronze horses have their own scent. And that's perfectly fine...

ELEONORA: I'm made of bronze, Iulius... I'm a widow...

IULIUS: Perhaps another time... Maybe when I return... Why shouldn't I return?...

Correspondences with André Breton's famous anthology exist, and the significant motto places it in the lineage of European surrealism alongside Max Ernst:

"La tranquillité des assassinats anciens et future".

Let us not forget that the operating principle of the "objective hazard", which Gellu Naum undoubtedly knew well from André Breton's writings, was grounded in the shadow of arbitrary subjectivism, to create a world that is both defined and simultaneously devoid of meaning.

What Gellu Naum seems to employ in this exploration is a "Frottage Technique", initiated by Max Ernst as a way to amplify the imaginary production, which implicitly also refers to the theories of Dali, with his multiple and paranoid images. The relationship with the surrealist painters and their techniques is not coincidental; it finds its argument in the very character of the dramatic fragment, pictorial par excellence, bookishly suggested through the onomastics of pseudo-characters: "The Girl with the Hoop", Raphael Sanzio.

The omnipotence of the image, often subjected to a metonymic process, is a desideratum of art.

Similarly to *Insula*, the play *Ceasornicăria Taus* does not offer a comfortable level of reading, since the semantic causality of words is cancelled in favour of a parodic causality. It is not about what we might easily call "linguistic games", but about achieving through words a plasticity that is related, as we have said before, more to painting than to literature, a situation that is consistent throughout Gellu Naum's dramaturgy.

Ceasornicăria Taus, a “statistical comedy in two acts” according to the indication, has two planes of development: one profane and one sacred. The differences between them are almost imperceptible, the space itself being not different, but the same, nevertheless subjected to a metaphorical treatment (the space of the watchmaker’s shop becomes a cathedral through the play of light). The actions of the character-figures, identifiable with imaginary objects, undergo the effects of parody and of the absurd: the tiger takes piano lessons, Mrs. Burma kills the Angel in a fit of jealousy.

The parodied motif is that of the androgyne, but with an added aggression. The bourgeois sentimental drama is parodied almost to the lower limit of the burlesque through the play of couplings and de-couplings. The “ontic” state of the inhabitants of this world is the couple subjected to the relative embodied in individuals. As in *Insula*, *Ceasornicăria Taus* also highlights an existential familiarity of the characters, limited on a pragmatic level, but unlimited on the undulating and fluid terrain of dreaming. The characters move from one plane to another with a nonchalance that is in full consensus with the particular semantics of frozen time.

There is also in Gellu Naum’s dramaturgy a dramatic state of the author himself, detectable throughout his work, a reflection of a continuous desire for spiritual escape.

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