

Athamor

& other poems

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by Gellu Naum

translated by MARGENTO
and Martin Woodside



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Naum AUM...

—An Introduction—

Gellu Naum was an AUM of the 20th century poetry. And just like the sacred Zen syllable, he abides, appealing to generations and generations of poets and poetry readers who keep returning to his unique path in search of their own. One of the aims of this selection—intended as the first in a series that will cover the poet's collected works—is to prove that Gellu Naum's readership can become as abundant in North America as it already is in Europe.

Naum attracts aspiring poets and artists from Romania and beyond. He has become known as an under-voice, a "performance poet" who would start improvising in the middle of a conversation as if suddenly starting to speak in his sleep, a collector of Neolithic statuettes and amulets spotted by his self-effacing psychic powers during long solitary walks across the southern plains, an apparently absent-minded friend who, when least expected, would raise an oracular question striking to the heart of one's innermost concerns, an incredible host whose house was always open to anyone and everyone. A hermit, a self-ironical sage, a magnetic yet laconic and reluctant, although often quite funny master, a lifetime Romantic lover of his beloved wife Lygia—Naum was all this and more, and consequently, his complex personality came to loom larger and larger in spite of his quiet life and the climate of political censorship surrounding him.

Gellu Naum was born in 1915, in Bucharest. After publishing two collections of surrealist poetry in the mid 1930s and becoming involved in the underground anti-fascist movement, he accepted a PhD scholarship from the Sorbonne. In Paris, he was reunited with his best friend, the Romanian painter and sculptor Victor Brauner. Brauner introduced him to the Surrealist circles in Paris, including André Breton and many others, and Naum soon found himself in the middle of a number of exciting projects—such as an essay on the “demonism of objects” for Breton’s magazine *Minotaure*, doctoral research into Abélard’s philosophy with a personal interest in the latter’s tragic romance with Héloïse, the pursuit of rare ancient books on alchemy, and much more.

But soon after the outbreak of World War II, the poet had to return to Romania where he was drafted and sent to the Eastern Front. The terrible experience of the war and the famine that followed, along with the murderous communist regime enforced under Soviet occupation, left a subtle though enduring imprint on his poetry. In the 4-year period between the end of the war and the onset of the communist take-over, the Romanian Surrealist group reemerged with fresh energy and gusto, publishing an impressive amount of (especially collaborative) work—poetry, prose, manifestos—from Naum and others, most notably Gherasim Luca and Virgil Teodorescu. Their activity made André Breton declare that “the center of the world has moved to Bucharest,” just as Sarane Alexandrian stated (in *Le surréalisme et le rêve*) that the Romanian Surrealist group was “the most exuberant, the most adventurous, and what’s even more, the most delirious of them all within the international movement.”

Still, history would prove merciless to this group, especially to its central figure. Once the new regime was in place, Gherasim Luca immigrated to Israel and then Paris, where he and Victor Brauner became famous, and Teodorescu joined the Romanian communist party elite, while Naum (who was not Jewish) could not follow the former, and would have never followed the latter; in fact, he turned down both academic and governmental positions. The result was nearly 20 years of imposed silence, in which Naum published almost none of his own writing, living off editing and translation work. And then, Breton’s center of the world shifted again, from the Romanian capital to Comana, a village outside of Bucharest where the famous couple chose to take residence in the early ’60s. People started to come visiting, to meet him, learn from him, to show him their (literary or art) work and ask for feedback or... even for spiritual guidance. These pilgrimages to Naum’s place in Comana (and to the tiny one-bedroom apartment in Bucharest where they would later spend the winters when age started to take its toll) went on till the day he died, in September 2001, continuing even until Lygia’s passing in 2005.

The first book he published after that long period of silence was *Athanor* (the title being a term for the alchemist’s cauldron), which came out in 1968 and was hailed as a groundbreaking collection by major literary critics, most of them thrilled to find the legendary Surrealist as vigorous as ever and, having refined and enriched his art with humor and confession into a one-of-a-kind fusion of realism and the oneiric, popular culture and mysticism, worthy of being widely praised for his distinctly personal version of Surrealism.

His Romanian comeback was reinforced by the great interest he also received from Western readers, translators, and editors, which resulted in a likely unique phenomenon of (re)becoming famous both at home as well as abroad all at the same time. Not long before his death in 2001, the Romanian PEN Club nominated him for the Nobel Prize in literature, and thus the pendulum had gone full swing. Tireless literati championed Naum's cause. Simona Popescu, a visionary poet in her own right, edited and published his uncollected manuscripts and, later on, the collected works. Joined by other critics, translators, and editors, this Naum resurgence contributed and still contributes to the ever-growing interest in and literature on the poet's work and life in Romania and elsewhere.

Gellu Naum may be back, but, in fact, he never actually went away. His erudition and intellectual alertness have permeated Romanian letters, and his poetry remains both radically innovative and tied to tradition. In the "Animal-Tree," for instance, the alchemical and prophetic symbol that appears comes from one of Paracelsus' "Prognostications" ("And a white Eagle will be changed into black./ Milk and Blood will decrease, and the Animal Tree will begin to grow"). The Romanian poet claims this powerful symbol, reworking it into a deeply personal motif that he ultimately embeds in his own poetics, revisioned with both its traditional contours and the para- or trans-biographical values it gains for himself, and thus, for the age and culture(s) he lived in.

Typically and uniquely, for Naum the updating/recycling, the 'translation/transmutation,' as well as the often humorous 'profanation' of such traditions, concepts, and symbols—the

funny way in which he chose for instance to spell the word 'poem' as *pohem* is in itself an epitome of such poetics—always sounds like the unraveling of deeply personal (and intriguingly communal) memories and experiences. On the other hand, any "real" story/encounter/dream is also recounted in the language of those participatory alchemical symbols. One of Naum's trademarks is that he accomplishes the latter not in the sense of projecting personal experience on a metaphoric mythical or ritualistic screen, but in that of *living an alchemical life* (... and, therefore, living an alchemical poetry, since to such a poet, poetry is a mode of existence) by turning one's psyche, body, and biography into an *athanor* in which traditional concepts are (re)discovered, melted, (re)forged/refined and (re)shaped as intimately experienced realities, agents, and energies.

Take "He Waited for Me," for instance. One afternoon, during one of his long walks across the plains, the poet spotted a little Neolithic statuette at the roots of a tree, an "idol" with a finger on the lips, as if motioning for the viewer to keep silent, or maybe to keep a certain secret. Still the scenario the poem develops around that simple event is amazing, insidious in the beginning, but then gradually amplified right to the point where it becomes overwhelming: "He waited for me in the earth// I was wet with mud in my shoes/ the buffalo had emptied the wells and were gnawing at stone slabs/ I know about some small ditches with greenish water/ where two women smelled like willows/ he waited for me near a root."

Naum brings the ritual to a climax by bridging the heavens and what is conventionally most elevated or spiritual to what is most common, profane, and/or everyday; the real mysteries, powers, and tranquility are thus found in or performed

by unexpected, apparently insignificant but nevertheless “maddening” characters, things or places. The skies therefore start to roar crossed by tramcars, whereas the little idol in the ground is silent and gestures to genuine quietude). “Above us on the bridge of the sky/ an iron tram rumbled past// In that maddening vegetation/ near a root he motioned me to silence/ he who was born with a finger on the lips/ with a hopeless finger stuck on the lips/ he who was never a fetus/ motioned me to silence...”

Such aesthetics can be read through Mircea Eliade’s concept of the sacred hidden in or disguised as the profane. What Naum actually accomplishes, though, is the endless immersion of the sacred in the profane, insatiably probing and experiencing the fusions, metamorphoses, and multilayered processes or significations stemming from that, and continuously aiming at genuine freedom from any fixed concept or given ‘theory.’ What in fact singles Naum out among other great surrealists and major modern poets is this continuing enactment of the ritual in and by the poem through masterfully controlled hybridizations and processes that are meant to help one find their own path using cliché-dismantling complexities and concatenations impervious to allegory and even metaphor. Naum never forgets about the aims and functions of the poem (the path, the ritual, the gradation, and their role in one’s liberation and fulfillment) and about the pitfalls of ‘literature’ and the ‘systematic,’ or categorical. In poems like “He Waited for Me,” along with several others included in this selection, it is not that the symbol gives meaning to ‘real life’ and (therefore to) the poem, but that both symbols and experience are given (ever new) meanings by the ways in which the poem absorbs

and (re)fashions them.

At the same time, Naum never becomes ‘just’ a ‘philosophical’/‘spiritualist’ poet. His unfaltering openness includes the most unexpected ‘banalities’ of everyday life, rendering his work shrewdly and forcefully political. A prose poem like “The Poet’s Arrival at the Great Airport” is both a fearless critique of the murderous communist regime and a prophecy of this era’s Western terrorism-related paranoia and discrimination against eastern immigrants: “That’s when the customs officers ambushed him, tore his clothes off, made his face bleed, dug through his immaculate suitcases. Brand new departures and spectacular arrivals were in store. And then, the PA went out.” Still, the true threat and ‘terrorism’ is in the poet’s head: “Just beneath the ceiling, among the sciences, something roared like an ocean of milk, the memory of a breast. He sat down for a moment to draw his breath, careful not to tilt his skull full of hand grenades.”

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On a hot summer afternoon of 1998 I knocked on the door of a cabin in Comana, a small village on a hillock hidden among giant slouchy willows, lush shrubs, and greenish ponds on the Wallachian plains, not very far south of Bucharest. I was a fresh graduate in English and Romanian literatures with a dissertation on Gellu Naum and Charles Simic, and my supervisor, poet Monica Pillat, had strongly encouraged me to show my paper to both the Romanian and the Serbian-American poet. A slim but vigorous man stooped to peer at me through the thin wooden bars on the door’s window-pane. A pair of restless eyes pierced me, but the voice I heard sounded

rather playful. “Whom are you looking for, young man?” “Mr. Gellu Naum.” “Well then, you found him...” When he let me in I was stunned by the incredible richness of the universe hoarded in what was a rather cramped traditional house: ancient coins and archeological findings, original African art, old French, Romanian, and Latin books, photos of French and Romanian Surrealists, drawings by Victor Brauner or Lygia Naum and other Surrealist paintings or collages, ancient Romanian furniture paired up with African demon-chairs and avant-garde side-tables, *kilims* from Oltenia or Moldavian floral geometric pattern carpets, smoking pipes of various sizes and origins, ritual masks from Maramureș alongside South-American ones, and so on and so forth.

Little did I know at the time about the poet’s amazing personality and extraordinary capacities. But when I did find out about the lesser known side of his life and preoccupations (the ‘alchemy,’ the psychic-like capacities and the visions informing his poetry), from his other disciples/fans/friends or from Lygia, I was even more surprised to see how reluctant he was to talk about such things, how self-effacingly, even humbly he genuinely refused any credit for all the ‘miraculous’ episodes in his biography. From Sanda Roșescu’s book-length interview with the poet, *Despre interior-exterior* (On the In/Out-side), I later learnt that he was more than sure that whoever had a true inclination towards things magic or ‘esoteric’ (a term and concept he actually despised, interestingly enough, while his own diction gravitated around simpler and thus genuinely mysterious terms like “the gesture,” “the stone,” “the path,” etc), would follow such things on their own anyway, and would learn what they needed from his poetry without any explicit urge or direction from Naum himself. Still, his work has also

helped people who could not care less about ‘spiritualism’ (another concept he was not happy about) or things ‘literary’ (which all Surrealists have found suspicious), to “live their own lives” while discovering new values and truths in that, as well as in themselves. As he wrote in his alchemical diary, *The Path of the Snake* (1948, but discovered in the poet’s personal archive, edited and published only after his death, almost sixty years later), “Clear your head of the belief that you’re reading poems—it is prophecies that you’re reading!”

These are prophecies indeed that we’ll be reading here, yet not grand ‘universal’ ones, just prophecies of poetries at hand or very far in space and time, while also ‘prognostications’ regarding both our cultural biographies as well as our personal lives—coming from a one-of-a-kind yet virtually everybody’s ‘p(r)o(p)het.’ But how is that possible? Just come and see.

—MARGENTO

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