

*From Dada to Infra-noir: Dada, Surrealism, and
Romania*

Urmuz, the Solitary

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Urmuz, the Solitary¹

Simona Popescu

Let us begin with an obvious fact – Urmuz is a myth, is he not? Useless like all myths, functioning due to inertia, the coronation of certain clichés. Who reads Urmuz these days?

Urmuz was the object of critical studies, his work has been translated, and his name was associated to those of great creators. Still, in a culture like ours, whose resistance structure is “made up” (to use Urmuz’ word) of the heavy pillars of national specificity, the author of *Bizarre Pages* is rather lonely, incongruent, eccentric. What irony of fate has made Urmuz, whose work is made up of just a few dozen pages (let us say 50), an important writer? What is the appeal exercised by his little infinity? What extraordinary laws of the natural selection of books made his pages, written to amuse his family and close friends, the leading direction of a new literary orientation?

It is a pity that Urmuz was not French. There he probably would have had his place in a great culture that has for centuries had a sense of noble gratuity and of a lofty “frivolousness.” In another corner of the continent, at the time when Urmuz decided to liberate himself with the help of a Sovereign of the World (handgun), other writers spoke about a morality of life in a direct relationship with all the creative acts of an individual. In the Romanian culture of the time, Urmuz was the Alien, a Fuchs experiencing his fantasies, his super-sexual and super-musical adventure, in an authentic and devouring manner, beyond “the fads of the time.”

Inner Psycho-Mania

I discovered the “inner psycho-mania” (a phrase somebody came up with in the 1930s) of this weird man, a show of pure gratuity, a result of the gratuity of the individual who is not interested in literature, in the posterity, or in any other serious or terrifying futilities of the same kind. Not long ago I saw a show based on his *Bizarre Pages*: it appeared to me as the most suave, the most discreet, and at the same time the most profound (plastic!) discourse on Urmuz’ work. Without explicit commentaries, in the absence of alien words that live like parasites on his

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texts, his fantasies appeared “in the flesh,” they were “installations” made of veils, wood, celluloid, and other surprising materials, unfolding like a dream, which is neither good nor bad, colored, fascinating, full of those inexpressible meanings that are sometimes mistaken for nonsense. That show made it even clearer than all the exegeses of Urmuz’ work that imagination is a “function” working according to a surrealist definition, and that the human being, like all the other creatures, like Urmuz’ characters Stamate, Fuchs, Gayk, Cotadi, Dragomir, Ismail, Turnavitu, Algazy, or Grummer, is “an irrational machine by nature, combining the character of a beast with that of a poet,” as Esquirol put it in the previous century. That show was the most adequate representation of Urmuz’ phantasmagoric substance. There, on stage, there was more than parody, irony, debunking, and the germs of a new literature; there was also Urmuz’ dream and his abyssal obsessions: death, the Eros, creation, and destruction. The most interesting character is the author himself, the one who invents this world of archetypes, of inner, ancient, aggressive, hybrid, instinctive, disquieting, and irrational human shapes, archetypes that no longer have anything human left, and which express our innate atavism so well.

The world created by Urmuz is a pantomime game from the beginning to the end, ferocious and gracious, it is the universe of Terror, manned with brainless, violent, petty, decrepit people, who are ridiculous in their downfall, and, at the same time, it is a dream world peopled by vestals, gods, music, innocent Venus’s shells, of metaphysicians and “pata-physicians,” creators of “imaginary solutions.” In this world of his, like in any other world, survival takes two forms: violence (destruction, exploitation, devastation) and contemplation (creation, love, dream). Urmuz’ couples function in an ethical void, they are fortuitous concentrations in the detritus pit, the place of the derisory, full of decommissioned objects. Terror and Dream, innocence and corruption, the underground (*under ground*), and the Nirvana are in a hallucinating continuity.

A Midsummer Night’s Dream

The rest of Urmuz’ *Bizarre Pages* include many of the author’s nightmares, the Saga of Fuchs and his great Dream, another *Midsummer Night’s Dream* (because everything happens during a beautiful summer night, with the merriness of songs, sweet words, and harmony). Fuchs is an ineffable musical creature, an auditory Ariel: he has the force of a perfect chord, he wears a pair of moustaches, glasses well hooked behind his ears, and an umbrella, and he is the holder of a frail vegetable sex (a vine leaf)! The force of his suave genius is in his impotence and delicacy. He lives isolated, shuns the world by hiding in a piano or in his own umbrella, and, when he does not do music, he dreams, which, come to think of it, is yet another creation form, because his dreams are full of sound. He lives an ecstatic life, and, like Shakespeare’s Ariel, he travels through time and space like a real creator, playing the piano. The mysterious charm of the night makes him give

in to the pleas of the Vestals of Pleasure in a less high-brow neighborhood, so he wonderfully performs concertos, fantasias, etudes, and sonatas, practicing legato and staccato and the "Schule der Geläufigkeit." Like every real artist, he does not really need anybody else, alas. He is innocent, which does not help him at all in the world of omnipotent gods. Chased away from paradise, he is punished by being assigned the task to destroy the snobbery and cowardice of artistic reflection in the terrestrial realms.

So, depressed, confused, disgusted with people and with gods alike, and disgusted with love like the Muses, Fuchs will disappear forever in the bosom of the grandiose, infinite nature. Like him, Urmuz decided to terminate the transition faster and to dream in all liberty, in a world where good can be active and evil passive.

What Urmuz has created is matchless in Romanian literature. This does not only have to do with his style and form, but also with the force of his fantasies, concentrated in such short texts, and with his general, existential attitude. He left behind almost no views about himself as a person or about his artistic thought, no meta-text "escort." His mystery is impenetrable and his miniature work sends equal beams of light in all directions, like the unknown music composed by Fuchs.

Urmuz' love and horror "stories" are not just a game (of "premeditated lucubration" as some people called them), but also a manifestation of the absolute independence of the spirit faced with the spectacle of the laws of existence, of moral principles, and of the mechanisms of life in any and all kingdoms. They are not satire, but rather the expression of a lack of obstinacy with a man who, come to think of it, only has the experience of the great void, of the infinitely small, and of contemplation in a world where crowds are thirsty, a world of disorder and of contradiction, of great distances and great speeds, lacking sense and necessity. His creation is a manifestation of pure spirit, something which, like faith, is part of a superior essence of thought.

Translated from the French by Monica Voiculescu

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