

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

Gellu Naum and his “Beginnings” (Which Are Dead Ends)

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Gellu Naum and his “Beginnings” (Which Are Dead Ends)*

Simona Popescu

Gellu Naum, According to the Dictionaries

Gellu Naum was born in 1915 in Bucharest. He studied philosophy in Bucharest and, encouraged by his friend, the painter Victor Brauner, in 1938 he continued his studies in philosophy at the Sorbonne where he embarked on a doctoral dissertation about Pierre Abélard. In Paris, through Brauner, he made the acquaintance of André Breton and a few other French surrealists. In 1939 he returned to Romania where he was mobilized and sent to the front lines; soon, he was able to return home due to a serious illness. By 1941 the Romanian surrealist group was constituted (it would consist of Gellu Naum, Gherasim Luca, D. Trost, Virgil Teodorescu, and Paul Păun), whose activities – extremely intense between the years 1945-1947 – would purportedly impel Breton to state: “The center of the [surrealist] world has moved to Bucharest.” In December 1947, the group had to dissolve. The times had changed. It would be only a full two decades later that Gellu Naum published another surrealist volume of poetry. In the intervening time, he made a living from translation. He led a mostly reclusive life at Comana, with his wife Lygia, whom he had married in 1946 and who would become the emblematic main character of the volume *Zenobia*, published in 1985. His work was translated into English, German, French, Greek, etc. In 1995 he spent the year in Germany on a DAAD grant. He died on 29 September 2001, in Bucharest.

A Brief Addition

Gellu Naum debuted in 1936 with a volume of poetry titled *Drumețul incendiar* (The Incendiary Traveler), which, on the surface, was a typically surrealist work (and was savagely criticized as such by the traditionalists of the time). In its subtext, however, the collection was also a subtle parody of surrealism (of the superficial, strictly “literary” kind) that had already started to be historicized and classified. After publishing several other volumes, all experimental in nature, Naum was forced to go through a difficult period, marked by all kinds of

* This essay is largely adapted from the author’s preface to the first volume of Gellu Naum’s *Opere* (2011). Simona Popescu, critic and poet, offers here both a critical and a personal view of Gellu Naum’s work.

privations – the world changed, history changed, and he would remain a prisoner in communist Romania, in “the castle of the blind” to paraphrase him, while others like Victor Brauner or Gherasim Luca saved themselves by leaving and settling in Paris. After a few editorial accidents, Naum would return to his surrealist roots in 1968 with a volume titled, quite symbolically, *Athamor*. With this collection, composed after the writer had been through the “flames” of a personal and poetic experience, surrealism was *naumized*, as it were.

Regardless of the form in which they were written, all works of the surrealist Gellu Naum, starting with *Drumețul incendiar* and including the strange *Calea Șearpelui* (The Way of the Serpent) (to appear posthumously in 2001), are in fact parts of a grand poetic project, fragments of a zone free of “lithérature” (as he himself would have put it, adding the ironic “h” – one of his trademarks, incidentally – in order to distance himself from everything that was institutionalized). Just as interesting is the fact that each new volume of poetry would be an echoing, in inverse chronological order, of an earlier volume (a process that indicates a personal philosophy of “repetition and difference,” but also a key for interpretation for the reader). The repetition-permutation of some older and some newer texts has its own significance: poetic periods can be mixed because he, the Poet, remains as he himself put it somewhere, “identical and different” at the center of a vast “narrative” of signs and extremely personal symbols, whose meanings multiply through endless reciprocal reflections.

Face and Surface. The “Philosophy of Composition” and Recapitulation. Tarot.

Therefore, from the very first volume, *Drumețul incendiar* (1936), to the very last, *Ascet la baraca de tir* (Ascetic at the Shooting Gallery, 2000), the works of Gellu Naum constitute a “strange” poetic object of the kind we could call fractal,¹ with every new volume developing *structures of self-similarity* through reiterations, presenting new details at all “scales” at *points of ramification* from which “the splendor of stray lines” starts. This is an iterative poetry, without center and without margins (without “centru și început” ‘center and beginning’ to paraphrase one of Naum’s titles), or better yet “un cerc cu centrul pretutindeni” ‘a circle with its center everywhere,’ a poetry of networks. In the very first published poem, *Drumețul incendiar*, we already find present all principles of the later grand

¹ In science, a fractal is an irregular object that cannot be described in the language of Euclidian geometry. (The inventor of this “new geometry of nature” is Benoît Mandelbrot.) Self-similar objects are created through a recursive process that imposes a certain correlation at all scales of the object. Indeed, many concepts associated with the word “fractal” as it appears in the scientific literature (such as roaming, chance, geometry of turbulence, self-similarity, self-affinity, random element, to randomize, that is, to introduce an element of chance) fit well the poetry of Gellu Naum.

structure: “the merry science” of words,² nonconformity, repulsion for what had become official poetry (“zeama puturoasă a viersului dulceag” (*Opere* 1: 77) ‘the putrid juice of oversweet poetry’), the empire of signs (“Drumețul incendiar își pipăie geanta cu semnele vremii” (*Opere* 1: 78) ‘The incendiary traveler fondles his bag with the signs of the times’), ridicule of all manner of authoritarian manifestations (“și-a auzit poeți buboși apostrofând școlari pe / străzile Craiovei” (*Opere* 1: 78) ‘and heard pockmarked poets lecturing schoolboys / on the streets of Craiova’), ridicule which will be later produced by a simple insertion into the interior of words of a salubrious and dimension-changing “h” (as in “culthure,” “literathure,” “nathure,” and even “pohetry”), the mixing of realms, “the perturbation” of corporeality (“Ochiul stâng a devenit pe rând o pălărie de păslă / o aripă o cutie cu febre” (*Opere* 1: 80) ‘The left eye became in turn a thick felt hat, a wing, a box of fevers’) and, last but not least, the traces of a biographic approach treated ironically (“Gellu, inimioara mea, să nu uiți o fotografie” (*Opere* 1: 76) ‘Gellu, dear heart, don’t forget a photo’) that will later “transmute” into a one-of-a-kind autobiographical sweep of great complexity. From this point on, Gellu Naum’s poetry will self-generate continuously, using repetition: it will be built on an entire “system” for reconfiguration and redistribution, just as with Tarot cards – the major and minor Arcana – according to an endless art of combination that opens up multiple forms of interpretation. I am employing the metaphor of the Tarot here, as an equivalent to an inventory of themes and symbols again and again rearranged, differently distributed. I would also like to mention a “paraphrase” of the Tarot cards named by the surrealists “Jeu de Marseille” in which they replaced the classic Tarot symbols with new symbols in the surrealist vein: flame (Love), bloody wheel (Revolution), black star (Dream), the ace, king, queen being replaced by genius, siren, magus, etc. For its illuminating value, it is well worth quoting here a line of poetry of enigmatic and emblematic value from Naum’s *Vasco da Gama* (1940): “Din măduvă ai făcut jocuri de cărți. . . .” (*Opere* 1: 121) ‘From bone marrow you made card games. . . .’

Most often, the apparent metaphor (which Naum abuses willingly!) is in fact an image (and it must be taken as such) that has the same status as the image in the plastic arts – in Victor Brauner’s work, for example. When they met in 1935 on the occasion of Brauner’s exhibition at the Mozart Gallery, the young poet is said to have told the young painter: “That is how I write,” pointing at the paintings on the wall.

² Allow me to make a reference here to a book by Jean-Pierre Brisset, *La Grammaire logique*, published in 1883, of which Gellu Naum himself was fond, and also greatly appreciated by the Surrealists for its humor, its poetic gratuitousness as well as beauty. Brisset was also chosen by André Breton for inclusion in his *Anthologie de l’humour noir*.

The (“Ultra Sensitive”) Picture, Network-Poetry, the Plate, Perpetuum Mobile

The poetry of Gellu Naum can be divided into two major periods: the work before and after *Athanor* (1968). The first collections could be said to stand under the sign of “historical surrealism,” from the time when, as Aragon wrote, “le vice appelé *Surréalisme* est l’emploi déréglé et passionnel du stupéfiant *image*” (*Paysan de Paris* 190) ‘the vice named Surrealism is the immoderate and impassioned use of the stupefying *image*’ (*Paris Peasant* 66). In the beginning was “grammar” (with its *declinatio* and *conjunctio*). More precisely, the need to (literally and figuratively) perturb grammar – as the emblem of an ineluctable system of “rules” – and from there, many other systems associated with it, that is, symbolically speaking, associated with “systematization,” “legislation,” “norm,” and, by extension, with the classical poetic image, with sober, mortifying thinking, the rigidity of a certain type of logic, or rationality and its entire procession of all-round “collective dressage.” The acts of “perturbing” grammar (and everything else at the same time) are produced primarily in an incredible activation of the ludic instinct (which will always function contrapuntally in Gellu Naum’s poetry). “Să cretinizăm langajul!” (*Opere* 2: 176) ‘Let us dumb down language!’ goes the invitation in *Teribilul interzis* (The Terrible Interdiction). For the liberation of expression (and of the human being along with it), what is needed, first and foremost, is an “exorcism” of language.

After *Athanor*, Naum’s poetry gains more and more the appearance of a poetic screenplay (the function of the image being no longer “retinal”), the appearance of certain happenings, of koans. Then with the longer poems starting with *Copacul-animal* (The Animal Tree) or *Tatăl meu obosit* (*My Tired Father*), we note the appearance of a strange journal in which daily entries mingle with dream-like or esoteric descriptions, reflection with sensation, the lyrical with the narrative and aphoristic; the diction of ideas with the vision of the emotions (or vice versa), humor with nostalgia, the art of dreams with the art of remembering, and so forth. The volumes of the surrealist Naum create a vast network, a dynamic structure: “CONSTRUIESC PERPETUUM MOBILE CAUT SURSĂ DE FINANȚARE AM SOLUȚIA” (*Opere* 1: 650) ‘BUILDING A PERPETUUM MOBILE SEARCHING FOR SPONSORS HAVE SOLUTION’ goes one of the poems – in fact, a quotation from an ad where the address of the advertiser is also offered: Aviator Street in Petroșani (Gellu Naum himself lived on Aviator Petre Crețu Street!).

Gellu Naum would build, over time, an entire philosophy of poetry that is in a certain way opposed to (or parallels) what he called “poetry as such.” In fact, to “poetry as such” he openly declares hostility early on when he loosens “un centaur siluind arborii poemului” (*Opere* 1: 82) ‘a centaur raping the poem’s trees’ (*Athanor & Other Pohems* 41). In *Copacul-animal* he revisits the topic, specifying, “regret domnule dar eu am altă părere despre pohem” (*Opere* 1: 282) ‘I regret to say, sir, that I have a different opinion about the pohem’ and adds a confession “am scris

un poem în care spuneam cu totul altceva dar care exprima exact sufletul și carnea mea jignite” (*Opere* 1: 284) ‘I wrote a poem in which I said something entirely different but which expressed exactly my offended flesh and soul.’ In *Calea Șarpelui* (The Way of the Serpent) he advises his future reader “Scoate-ți din cap că citești poeme. Amintește-ți că îți vorbeam de profeți, de oameni liberi, de tine chiar.” ‘Forget that you are reading poems. Remember that I told you of prophets, free people, even yourself.’ Poetry – poetry “as such” – is not the goal, because “pohemele mi s-au părut totdeauna îmbibate cu ceva care nu m-a interesat niciodată” ‘poems always seemed to me saturated with something that never interested me in the slightest.’ Poetry – seen as a way of life, as he repeatedly said – is tied to “poetic necessity” not “poetry as necessity.”³ It is not “the literary aspect” (“bietet aspect literar” (*Opere* 2: 277) ‘poor old literary aspect’ as he puts it in *Poetizați, poetizați...* (Poeticize, poeticize...)) that interests him, but rather, as mentioned in *Zenobia*, “bâiguiala care îmi dizolvă inteligența și cultura ca să-mi deschidă alte porți” (*Opere* 2: 302) ‘the mumbling that dissolves my intelligence and my culture in order to open other doors for me’ (*Zenobia* 25).

Gellu Naum and Surrealism

“Gellu Naum este singurul nostru suprarealist veritabil. Remarca a mai fost făcută, într-un context hagiografic, dar argumentele n-au fost totdeauna impecabile” (842) ‘Gellu Naum is our only true surrealist. This remark has been made before, in a hagiographical context, but the arguments hadn’t always been impeccable,’ said Nicolae Manolescu in *Istoria critică a literaturii române*. Gellu Naum was our only true surrealist. Paradoxically, as he himself confessed, “la cei care au fost realmente suprarealiști, cel mai puțin interesant este tocmai faptul că au fost suprarealiști” ‘regarding those who were truly surrealists, the least interesting fact is precisely that they have been surrealists.’ He carried surrealism on, and ended up quite far from the place dedicated to this movement in the literary histories of the 1930s and 1940s. Beyond that, surrealism was the most appropriate way to arrive at himself, to find the road to himself. As for the way surrealism was understood in Romania, he would say already back in 1945, in *Critica mizeriei*⁴ “În ce privește suprarealismul, el e de multă vreme obiectul unei bucatării critice în același timp abuzivă și superficială” ‘As to surrealism, it has long been the object of critical trappings that are at once abusive and superficial.’ For Gellu Naum what matters is a poetic condition, not a “literary aspect”:

³ It is more the case that “necesitatea poetică își găsește primul ei dușman în necesitatea poeziei” ‘poetic necessity finds its prime enemy in the necessity of poetry,’ as it is said in *Spectrul longevității* (The Specter of Longevity), a text written in collaboration with Virgil Teodorescu.

⁴ Written with Paul Păun and Virgil Teodorescu.

N-am căutat suprarealismul, nu mi-am căutat prietenii, i-am întâlnit pe drum, firesc, iar despărțirea s-a petrecut la fel. Aș spune . . . că suprarealismul a fost și el un cerc, cel mai strălucitor și mai aproape de centru dintre cercurile similare ca necesitate colectivă. Poate așa se explică imensa lui influență și marea lui putere de atracție, reală și acum, după atâția ani. Poate tot de asta s-au lipit de el atâtea cercuri pierdute, hrănite de iluzia că ar putea avea ceva comun cu centrul lui. Cunosc atâția oameni, poeți sau pictori, gata să jure pe suprarealismul lor cu atâta convingere încât mă simt adesea obligat să spun: dacă dumneata ai fost (sau ești) suprarealist, eu n-am fost și nu sunt, pentru că vorbim despre lucruri diferite. . . . Ciudată nevoia de etichete, mai ales când ele nu-ți mai aduc mari neplăceri. . . . Multe dintre drumurile spre libertate pe care le-am întâlnit odinioară au devenit acum atentate la libertate, probabil pentru asta nu le mai suport. . . . Nu știu de ce unii, încercând să înțeleagă sau să explice vreun poet care a fost suprarealist, încearcă să reconstituie suprarealismul. . . . Și în suprarealism, ca și în orice altă mișcare eliberatoare, au existat rămăneri în urmă ale unora, trădări ale altora, părăsiri motivate sau gratuite: comună a fost doar aparența începutului, după care cei ce se întâlniseră o clipă și-au urmat fiecare drumul propriu. . . . Limitele suprarealismului le-am simțit încă de pe când mă declaram, fără nici o rezervă, suprarealist. . . . Eu îmi căutam frații milenari, altceva decât adepții unei dogme comune, chiar dacă dogma se afla la momentul de antidogmă. (*Despre interior-exterior* 31-32)

I did not look for surrealism, nor I did not search for my friends, I just met them along the way, quite naturally, and our falling out happened the same way. I would say . . . that surrealism was a circle, maybe the brightest and the closest to the center among similar circles of collective necessity. Perhaps this explains its immense influence and its strong powers of attraction, real even now, after so many years. Maybe it is for this same reason that so many other stray circles attached themselves to it, fed by the illusion that they might have something in common with its center. I know so many people, poets or painters, ready to swear upon their surrealism with so much conviction that I often feel compelled to say: if you, sir, were (or are) a surrealist, then I could not have been, or cannot be one, for we speak of very different things. . . . Odd, this need for labels, especially when they no longer cause any serious trouble. . . . Many of the roads to freedom that I have encountered once upon a time have now become attacks on freedom, which is perhaps the reason why I can no longer tolerate them. . . . I don't know why some people, while trying to understand or explain a poet who once was a surrealist, try to reconstitute surrealism. . . . And in surrealism, as in any other liberating movement, there were those who lagged behind, others who betrayed, and those who left for either gratuitous or motivated reasons: only the

appearance of a beginning was shared, after which all those who had converged for a brief moment followed each their own way. . . . I already felt the limits of surrealism back when I declared myself, without reservation, a surrealist. . . . I was searching for millenarian brothers, not the followers of a common doctrine, even if the dogma was at an anti-dogmatic stage.

In 1936, Gellu Naum's debut volume, *Drumețul incendiar*, appeared to be in the "typically" surrealist mode (and for this reason, as mentioned earlier, was savagely criticized by the traditionalists of the time). Typically surrealist mode? "Cum lesne se poate vedea, poezia este două lucruri bine distincte" (*Opere* 2: 173) 'As can easily be seen, poetry is two distinctly different things,' said Gellu Naum in "Cerneala surdă" (Deaf Ink). Not only poetry, but also surrealism – as so many other things – can be grasped in their process of metamorphosis: from the phase of a garland of images, to surrealism as a state, as a way of life; from poetry as "a perturbing language" (logic, grammar, "poetic expression" all perturbed) to the perturbation of anything stagnant. Even the practice of writing, specifically "automatic dictation," brings something else to the surface. Surrealism was for Gellu Naum a theme upon which to meditate and a quest that lasted his entire life; rather than a given, it was a continual discovery. If, as already suggested, *Drumețul incendiar* was in fact a fine parody of surrealism (of the superficial, strictly "literary" kind) that had already started to be classified, historicized, with *Athanor* a new twist is performed: "vremea ochiului" (*Opere* 1: 180) 'the time of seeing' is replaced with a different gaze ("privirea lucidă a somnambulilor" (*Opere* 1: 148) 'the lucid gaze of sleepwalkers') by a different eye ("ochiul cu care vedea nu era cel uman" (*Opere* 1: 309) 'the eye with which she saw was not human').

The Romanian avant-garde was and has always been European. Pity that centers can be swept away by history. When Gellu Naum studied philosophy in Paris in the late 1930s and met there the French surrealist group, he was invited by Breton to contribute, together with Victor Brauner, to a future issue of the famous review *Minotaure*. They had proposed the theme of "the demonic existence of objects." Pity that projects can be destroyed by history. After the war had broken out, that issue of *Minotaure* could no longer appear. Separated from the European avant-gardes, Naum remained prisoner in "the castle of the blind," as Remy Laville, his French exegete, put it. In 1947 he wrote Victor Brauner: "Nu știu ce faceți, nu știu nimic, încerc să mă descurc singur și e foarte întuneric. . . . E înfiorător la marginea lumii unde mă gășesc" ("Trei scrisori" 45) 'I don't know what you are doing, I don't know anything, I am trying to get by here alone and it is very dark. . . . It is frightful at the edge of the world, where I find myself.' He had a second debut, as it were, in 1968. During the 1960s, 70s and 80s, in Romania, Gellu Naum was THE European avant-garde. The historical avant-garde was not simply historical; it just *was* and it bore the name of Gellu Naum.

“A Pohet From Childhood and Melanc.” On Poetic Self-Fiction

“Mă opresc mereu la acele neînsemnate lucruri care sunt de natură a arunca o cât de mică rază de umbră asupra tuturor gesturilor, a tuturor întâmplărilor care-mi formează ceea ce aş putea numi viața mea” (*Opere 2*: 100-01) ‘I always ponder those insignificant things that are capable of throwing the tiniest ray of shadow on all gestures and all events that constitute what I could call my life,’ Gellu Naum writes in 1969. His poetry quite clearly relies, from a specific point (of bifurcation) onward, on an autobiographic pact. Perhaps this “point” was that grand text written in 1947 and published posthumously in 2002, *Calea Șearpelui*. During the 1930s the poet had been inventing characters – the incendiary traveler, Vasco da Gama – who took on his message, idiosyncrasies, repulsions, “passionate behaviors.” Of Vasco da Gama, for instance, it could be said that he is on a voyage (“pe un ocean de oase” ‘on an ocean of bones’), stopping at every port (“La docurile poetice se declama” (*Opere 1*: 203) ‘At poetic docks he would recite’) – otherwise, his travels are “hidoase și feerice” (*Opere 1*: 203) ‘hideous and enchanting!’ In the volumes to follow, starting with *Culoarul somnului* (Corridor of Sleep) (1944), the “characters” disappear; in the volumes starting with *Athanon* a strange narrator appears: ageless, visionary, “infantil adaptat, deci ostil” (*Opere 1*: 367) ‘well-adapted infantile, in other words, hostile’ and ironic in the pre-Socratic philosopher’s vein. His poetry is a continuous exchange between this narrator (poet) and immediate, surrounding (sur)realism in which remembered or almost-remembered pre-existence is also included, as is “domeniul presimțirilor” (*Opere 1*: 396) ‘the domain of premonition,’ a labyrinthine confession in which lyricism, humor, irony, and a specific esotericism (sometimes turned inside out) converge.

Who is the “narrator”? Brother to both the “incendiary traveler” and Vasco da Gama, travelers “fertilizați de drum” (*Opere 1*: 176) ‘fertilized by the road.’ Taken by “malincolie” ‘malincholy,’ he travels short and long roads to the sky, at one time on an ocean of bones, at other times with his dead friend Stelică crossing “prin cețurile de acolo” (*Opere 1*: 450) ‘beyond the fog,’ or simply travels “simplă călătorie / de la bine la rău de la rece la cald” (*Opere 1*: 194) ‘a short trip/ from good to bad from cold to hot’ (*Athanon & Other Poems* 57). “Vei lăsa ferestrele larg deschise ca să putem călători în timpul somnului” (*Opere 1*: 153) ‘You shall leave the windows wide open so we can travel while we sleep’ he says somewhere – because even in a dream traveling is possible. He travels alone or with companions, or “călătorisem ca un cer pe cer / într-o aglomerație de nedescris” (*Opere 1*: 394) ‘I traveled like sky on sky / into an indescribable crowd.’ At times the road is “subpământean” (*Opere 1*: 544) ‘underground,’ at others it leads through water – then there is “drumul fără încetare care ne străbate” (*Opere 1*: 552) ‘the endless road that passes through us.’ Otherwise, a lot happens during travels: “Pe drum / luasem numele de râu de nor de ceață și de ploaie / și asta istovește” (*Opere 1*: 267) ‘On the road / I took the name of river cloud fog and rain / and this is exhausting.’ When he is tired, he rests on a bench and then we learn that

“văzduhul s-a umplut de suflete și printre ele / sufletul meu mutat-s-a în trupul unui bătrân cu gabardină neagră și cu șapcă în carouri / și dus a fost cu el / și n-a rămas pe bancă / decât îmbrăcămintea mea de fildeș” ‘the air filled with souls and among them / my soul moved into the body of an old man with a black overcoat and checkered cap / and gone it was along with him / and all that was left on the bench / was my ivory garb.’ These last quotations come from a poem titled “(n)Aum pe bancă” ((n)Aum on the Bench) (*Opere* 1: 603).

And what else does he do, the TRAVELER? “Ei mă priveau oboșiți mă întrebau / ‘tu ce mai faci’ / le răspundeam cu o singură vorbă ‘auuuu’” (*Opere* 1: 640) ‘They were looking at me tired, were asking / “how are you” / I replied with a single word “ouuuch.”’ He observes “firescul descompus în zonele de dincolo” (*Opere* 1: 558) ‘the natural decomposing in the zones beyond’; in “un loc acolo” (*Opere* 1: 552) ‘a place over there’ (or somewhere) he goes about his “viață interior exterioară” ‘inner outer life’; he is “când disperat când fericit niciodată la mijloc” (*Opere* 1: 541) ‘at times desperate others happy never between’ (*Athamor & Other Poems* 75); or, simply, as he himself says, “Stau liniștit și mă gândesc la una și la alta / . . . aud / ecouri repetându-se din frunză în frunză” (*Opere* 1: 568) ‘I sit quietly and think of this or that / . . . I hear / echoes repeating themselves from leaf to leaf.’ He is “identic și felurit” (*Opere* 1: 558) ‘identical and different’ (to quote him yet again), abhors doubles, is “fluid,” passes (projects himself) through various things to which he serves as “an objective correlative” (the reverse of T.S. Eliot’s theory, for instance). While Empedocles’s theory fits him well, according to which the soul takes on all kinds of animal and plant forms, so does what Empedocles had said of himself: “Before now I was born a boy and a maid, a bush and a bird, and a dumb fish jumping out of the sea” (Diogenes 391). (“Firește veneam de departe Pe drum / luasem numele de râu de nor de ceață și de ploaie” (*Opere* 1: 267) ‘Naturally I was coming from far away On the road / I had taken the name of river cloud fog and rain,’ writes Gellu Naum in *Copacul-aminal*.) Included in this “autobiography” are not only the experiences of the one who observes (with a gaze other than the “thought-glance”!) the “surfaces” of the world, but also “the deeds” of that “orb scăpat din peșteră cu luciurile de ape cenușii / ale ochilor mâncând pâinea brodată a celui din Lăuntruul său” (*Opere* 1: 548) ‘blind man escaped from the cave with the shiny grey waters / of the eyes eating the embroidered bread of the one Inside him.’ He belongs to the clan of those who are trying “să transfere ceea ce ‘auzeau în minte’” (*Opere* 1: 437) ‘to transfer that which they heard in their mind.’

What else could we say about this lead character of a lacunary and thus mysterious “narrative”? That he is a “recalcitrant,” “Infantil adaptat și deci ostil” ‘well-adapted infantile, therefore hostile’ (*Opere* 1: 321) who refuses any “infiltrări a dresajului” (*Opere* 1: 441) ‘infiltrations of dressage’ and writes “ca să-și amintească lucruri uitate” ‘in order to remember forgotten things.’ That he is averse to “adevărul depresiv al tuturor” (*Opere* 2: 404) ‘the depressing truth of everyone’ (*Zenobia* 140). That he has visions and experiences bizarre states (prenatal, for example). Or that he feels that “cuvintele, de multă vreme nu mai

fraternizau" (*Opere* 1: 217) 'for a long time now words hadn't been fraternizing.' He believes that "e preferabil să arăți că viața nu e numai un șir de catastrofe pornografice" (*Opere* 1: 312) 'it's better to show that life is not merely a series of pornographic catastrophes' (*My Tired Father* 45) and much like Vasco he sees how esthetics continues to "mâncat biscuiții" (*Opere* 1: 127) 'eat its crackers,' how certain people read a book "de o sută de ani" 'for a hundred years,' and how the world "as such" is nothing but a "școală de corecție" 'reform school':

Eu am lipsit am să rămân repetent / am fost în nord am discutat chestiuni/
apoi în sud m-am culcat într-o pădure de iasomie / . . . Ei mă priveau cu
o tragică bucurie/ nu scoteau o vorbă ai fi zis că le pare și rău pentru mine
/ eu le spuneam în gând urâților conțopiștilor / atunci a intrat
Examinatorul purta pe umăr o rândunică de plumb / oh dacă ați ști ce
mi-a șoptit la ureche. (*Opere* 1: 513-14)

I skipped class and will be repeating my grade / I was up North talked
about some stuff / then down South I lay down in a forest of jasmine trees
. . . they watched me with tragic happiness / did not say a word you might
have thought they were sorry for me / in my mind I said to them you
scarecrows small clerks / then entered the Examiner bearing a lead
swallow on his shoulder / oh if you only knew what he whispered in my
ear.

He urges himself with irony "notează în carnet adorația" (*Opere* 1: 381) 'put down adoration in your notebook' and self-ironically he "maintains" several things ("susțin că totul e altceva prea evident ca să aibă o umbră de claritate . . . susțin toate acestea mișcat încoace și încolo de faptul că susțin" 'I maintain that everything is something else too obvious to have a shadow of clarity . . . I maintain all these moved to and fro by the fact that I do'). He warns that "Faptele trăite obligau la o nouă lectură" (*Opere* 1: 663) 'The facts of life compelled us to a new reading' (*Athanos & Other Poems* 87) or says, in passing: "salutări de la mine" (*Opere* 1: 351) 'greetings from me.' He has a friend, Stelică, and it matters not a bit that he had been long dead, "de mic copil" (*Opere* 1: 636) 'since we were small children.' Another friend, a painter, "mort / mă strigă (n-are importanță) . . . / ține sub braț cumplita carte scrisă în limba / pe care o vorbim în gând" (*Opere* 1: 462) 'dead / calls me (not important) . . . / holds under his arm the terrible book written in the language / we speak in our minds.' But then there are "prieteni mei cei mai buni / muzicieni sau poheți . . . / putem discuta despre gama pitagoreică sau despre transformarea *secundum quid* (substanțială)" (*Opere* 1: 273) 'my best friends / musicians or poets . . . / we can talk about Pythagorean tuning or about the (substantive) transformation of *secundum quid*,' then there is also "filozoful Bebe reîncarnatul" 'Bebe, the philosopher reincarnated,' who belongs to "generațiilor optime" 'the optimal generations.' He has a brother and three sisters ("Fratele meu cel mort și 3 surori mai mari au adormit / în jungla lor de ceață în natura lor / mai limpede și mai obscură totodată / îi strig și nu-mi răspund" (*Opere* 1: 672) 'My dead

brother and my 3 older sisters fell asleep / in their fog jungle in their nature / both clearer and more obscure / I call them and they don't respond') and a father, also long time dead, but again that does not matter: "fratele meu cel mare din sicriu mă pleznea peste scăfârlie/ 'marș de-învață jigodie' îmi spunea . . . / 'marș de învață' și mă pleznea peste ceafă / țipam ca din gură de șarpe venea tata murise și el mai de mult / 'ce aveți băieți' întreba era blând / 'e o jigodie' răspundea frate-meu 'asta e' / fugeam în grădină îi lăsam să discute" (*Opere* 1: 536) 'from the coffin my older brother struck me on the skull / "get out and study you cur" he said . . . / "get out and study" and he hit me on the back of the head / I screamed as if from a snake's mouth father came he had been dead a long time also / "what is the matter, boys" he asked gently / "he is a cur," my brother replied 'that's it' / I ran into the garden left them talking.' There is, too, an aunt "din județul Prahova poeta Elena Ohrida (fie-i țărană ușoară) / purta alunițe de catifea . . . / ea mă dădea în leagăn la marginea apei / purta o armă de vânătoare pentru orice eventualitate/ trecea o vulpe pac îmi făcea căciuliță / trecea mistrețul pac îmi făcea o pereche de ghete / până când a murit" (*Opere* 1: 487-88) 'from Prahova County, the poet Elena Ohrida (may she rest in peace) / who had velvet beauty marks . . . / she rocked me in my cradle on the bank of the river / and carried a hunting rifle just in case / a fox passed by bang she made me a hat / a boar passed by bang she made me a pair of shoes / till she died'). About his mother, several mothers, and about the Great-Mother he speaks often. Naturally, then "exista și una Zenobia supranumită refuzul falsei conștiințe /cmă ghemuiam lângă ea era poate singura fericire posibilă / era plăcut ne culcam cu oasele noastre îmbibate de amintirea unei străvechi adorații / cu ochii noștri lucioși înăuntru era o puternică adorație / filozofam prostii ne simțeam bine" (*Opere* 1: 380-381) 'there was also one Zenobia, nickname for the refusal of bad conscience / . . . I squatted next to her which was maybe the only possible happiness / it was nice we were lying down with our bones steeped in the memory of an ancient adoration / with our shiny eyes and inside there was a strong adoration / we philosophized about silly things and it felt good'. "Zenobia nu știe ce-i obscuritatea Susține că trăiește într-o încăpere de aer lângă o fereastră zăbreliată" (*Opere* 1:467) 'Zenobia does not know obscurity She maintains that she lives in a room of air near a barred window.' She "îmi ține amândouă mâinile pe inimă" (*Opere* 1: 468) 'holds both my hands on my heart' (*Athanor & Other Pohems* 84), she "ne iubea, ne refăcea" (*Opere* 1: 224) 'loved us, and remade us' and said "Între noi fie vorba suntem victimele imaginației celorlalți" (*Opere* 1:468) 'Just between the two of us we are victims of the other people's imagination' (*Athanor & Other Pohems* 85). But about their love, which is the source of strange and wonderful poetic events, we can learn from the novel – let me remind the reader that it is an autobiographical novel – *Zenobia*.

In the final analysis, what can be said about the central character of the (poetic) "epic" of Gellu Naum is that he is a poet – one who has a different view of poetry ("și regret domnule dar eu am altă părere despre pohem" (*Opere* 1: 282) 'and I regret to say, sir, that I have a different opinion about the pohem'), who ridicules

those with “pohetica lor glandă lacrimală” (*Opere* 1: 481) ‘a poetics of the lachrymal gland,’ but also those “domnii ne aleg poemele după panglicuțe ca pe curve” (*Opere* 1: 75) ‘gentlemen [who] pick our poems according to ribbons, as they do whores.’ He is at the same time ironic and mocking toward himself:

în dimineața asta mă simt definitiv compromis
în dimineața asta m-am trezit iar pohet
undeva pe o farfurie cu flori lângă sobă în coșul cu lemne

....

Recurg la tine Bettina te rog să mă înțelegi să mă speli pe ochi sunt
pohet
scriu fii atentă cu picusul
mă iscălesc pe texte amintire din ziua cutare și cutare
ceva mai încolo omul acela mai face un zid
clădește în el se închide în el și geme
eu fii atentă trebuie să-l scot
fiindcă mă strigă afară din cercul meu

În dimineața asta sunt pohet din copilărie și melanc (*Opere* 1:274)

this morning I feel I am definitely compromised
this morning I woke again a pohet
somewhere on a flowery plate near the stove in the log basket

....

I appeal to you Bettina please understand me and wash my eyes I am a
pohet
look I write with a ballpoint pen
I sign the texts in memory of the day when so and so
later on that man builds another wall
he builds inside himself he closes up inside and groans
listen I will have to pull him out
because they call me outside my circle

This morning I am a pohet from childhood and melanc

Or:

În rada portului X stau pe o scândură mă uit la vapoare
o poetă foarte grasă mă mângâie pe mână cu o mânuță grasă
zice că mă știe foarte bine că sunt aproape genial
că mi-a citit ultimele poeme într-o publicație olandeză
că l-a citit tot acolo și pe colegul meu Maria Rilke dar că nici nu se
compară
e cu totul altceva mă preferă
că dacă vreau îmi cumpără și prăjituri cu scortîșoară și mă ia la film
(*Opere* 1: 514)

In the bay surrounding the port of X I stand on a plank and watch the ships
a very fat poetess caresses my hand with her fat hands
she says she knows me very well and that I am a genius almost
that she read my recent work in a Dutch magazine
that she also read my colleague Maria Rilke but that there is no
comparison
he is something totally different she prefers me
that if I want she will buy me cinnamon cakes and take me to the
cinema

He is a relativist, profoundly lonely. He is moving with horror among disagreeable characters, such as the one who “mănâncă prăjituri și n-are dinți și se mânjește pe gură și ne invită să discutăm cu el despre poezie” (*Opere* 1: 288) ‘eats cake and has no teeth and smears his mouth and asks us to talk with him about poetry’ or the one who “auzea numai ce-i spunea motorășul plasat în ureche cu un șnur frumușel peste reverul hainei” (*Opere* 1: 350) ‘only heard what the small motor placed in his ear with a pretty thread over his lapel told him,’ and the one who “ține motorășul între dinți . . . spunea așa și pe dincolo” (*Opere* 1: 350) ‘was holding the small motor between his teeth . . . saying this and that.’

For that matter, he was also quite isolated as a poet. “Nu știu ce am dar uneori mă simt extrem de singur” (*Opere* 1: 307) ‘I don’t know what’s the matter with me but sometimes I feel utterly alone’ (*My Tired Father* 38), he confesses as a man, a poet who no longer finds understanding even from his closest friend:

am scris un poem în care spuneam cu totul altceva dar care exprima
exact sufletul și carnea mea jignite

și nu l-am citit nimănui ani de zile și într-o bună zi l-am citit unui prieten
pe care îl iubeam foarte mult și i l-am citit cum l-aș fi îmbrățișat fiindcă
era și el poet și el al dracului m-a ascultat în tăcere apoi mi-a vorbit
foarte elogios despre niște alte poeme de ale mele pe care spunea că le
admira și le numea subtile și le știa pe de rost. . . .

avea argumente estetice de gentleman (*Opere* 1: 284)

I wrote a poem in which I said something entirely different but which
expressed exactly my offended flesh and soul

and I did not read it to anyone for years and one day I read it to a friend
whom I loved very much and I read it to him as if I had embraced him
because he was a poet too and he damn him he listened quietly then
spoke to me ravingly about other poems of mine which he said he
admired and called them subtle and knew them by heart. . . .

he had esthetic arguments like a gentleman.

Although “melanc,” he has a sense of humor which he uses fully in his poems. The world is not made only of “vuiete și spaime” (*Opere* 1: 549) ‘loud noises and scares’ or “amplă seninătate” (*Opere* 1: 224) ‘ample serenity.’ “Acolo în orașul Haralambie se poartă mănuși cu stemă în partea de sus” (*Opere* 1: 386) ‘There in the town of Haralambie they wear gloves with a coat of arms on the top’; “bunica Mătăsoiu citește o carte de unul sătul până în gât care o zăpăcește de dimineața până seara” (*Opere* 1: 499) ‘Granny Mătăsoiu is reading a book by one who’s had enough and who confounds her from morning till night’; “Pasările rămase singure pornesc înapoi / bat în pământ și cer bere / ea vine singură și plânge: de ce plângi bere?” (*Opere* 1: 101) ‘the birds left behind start back / pound on the ground and ask for beer / she comes alone and cries: why do you cry, beer?’; “acolo la Hotel-Păduche, 15” (*Opere* 1: 75) ‘there, at the Head Lice Hotel, room 15’ no idea what goes on, some “vânzători de gazete cântau *Porumbițele înserării*” (*Opere* 1: 75) ‘newspaper sellers were singing *The Pigeons of Nightfall*,’ and “pentru selecționarea operelor de caligrafie se vota cu ajutorul unor cartonașe” (*Opere* 1: 298) ‘in selecting calligraphic works one voted with the aid of small pieces of cardboard’ (*My Tired Father* 24). Sometimes he mentions names, but cautiously, lest he gain a “relative” and his cultural (“cultural”) references are focused on minute detail from the works or biographies of those he mentions by name, rather than on their “system” of thinking. Oftentimes, the context is mocking or playful: “și Thales parcă nu-l știu eu sau chiar Hipocrat parcă nu-l știu eu vream să zâmbesc dacă așa erau evenimentele și ei îmi măsurau încă de pe atunci unghiul de deschidere al maxilarului din Milet sau vream să urlu . . . și eu n-aveam nimic comun cu ei ce pot avea comun cu niște atemporalii temporali sau cu un ipocrit ca Hipocrat” (*Opere* 1: 283) ‘and Thales don’t I know him or even Hippocrates don’t I know him I wanted to smile / if that is how events turned out and they were already measuring the angle of the opening of the jaws in Miletus or I wanted to scream . . . and I had nothing in common with some temporal atemporals or with a hypocrite like Hypocrates’; “eu copiam lista de rufe a lui Flamel” (*Opere* 1: 233) ‘I copied the clothes list of Flamel’; “Un kierkegaard cu șapcă o răpea pe doamna aceea” (*Opere* 1: 231) ‘a kirkegaard with a cap was kidnapping that lady’; “Încolo trai pe mine Citeam pe domnul Nietzsche / și contemplan adeseori planeta / aveam mâncarea în valiză / lângă notațiile despre tehnica non-acțiunii” (*Opere* 1: 461) ‘Otherwise living the good life I was reading Mr. Nietzsche / and was often contemplating the planet / had my food in my suitcase / next to the notes on the techniques of non-action’; “Heron din Alexandria își deapănă principiile / pe-un colț de masă mic într-o cutie de chibrituri / și totul e limpede și tu răsfoiești tratatul despre Vid” (*Opere* 1: 256) ‘Heron of Alexandria spins out his principles / on a corner of the small table between a box of matches / and everything is clear and you review the treatise on the Void’ (*Athamor & Other Pohems* 13); “Atunci tu fratele meu tu ginerică tu care umbli prin noi pe vârful picioarelor / tu Herpes Trismegistul născut cu tâmplele cărunte / ne faci semne să intrăm în baraca de scânduri / . . . să așteptăm acolo frenetica ultima noapte / aceea care ne păstrează

substanțele doveditoare” (*Opere* 1: 518) ‘Then you my brother you my little son-in-law you who walk among us on your tiptoes / you Herpes Trismegistus born with grey temples / you motion for us to enter the shack made of planks . . . to wait there for the last frantic night / the shack that keeps our substances of proof,’ etc. “pe când ceilalți se păraseau // sau își întâmpinau povara prostituându-se cu filozofii” (*Opere* 1: 558) ‘while others were leaving each other or met their burden by prostituting themselves with philosophers’; “Catastrofa rezultase din sfatul filozofilor” (*Opere* 1: 327) ‘the catastrophe was the result of the philosopher’s advice’ (*My Tired Father* 67).

Moreover, finding himself “între bine și rece între negru și clar între opac și lichid / între incert și salubru” (*Opere* 1: 271) ‘between good and cold between black and clear between opaque and liquid / between uncertainty and salubrity,’ he is preoccupied with, as any real poet would be, “muncile noastre crepusculare” (*Opere* 1: 271) ‘our crepuscular work’ related to “marile noastre repere dhagostea și moahtea” (*Opere* 1: 459) ‘our grand points of reference: lhave and dheath.’ He knows much about “marea magie a singurătății” ‘the great magic of loneliness’; he is looking for the bearers of “semnele lui insurgente” (*Opere* 1: 642) ‘signs of his insurgency’ (*Athanos & Other Poems* 65), practices acoustic-seeing; he is familiar with “obscurile plantații ale întâmplării” (*Opere* 1: 448) ‘the obscure plantations of chance,’ seeks to reinstate “repererele bațjocorite” (*Opere* 1: 445) ‘derided standards.’ “Cum vremea era socotită comună și vulgară / păreau firești asocierile comune și vulgare” (*Opere* 1: 436) ‘As the epoch was considered common and vulgar / associations common and vulgar appeared natural,’ only he does not partake in them.

He pays close attention to that “altul din fiecare” ‘other in everyone’ but also “cel mai îngropat din mine” ‘the one buried deep in me,’ that “curioasă nevoie de levitațiune, moștenită de la vreun strămoș războinic și pasăre” (*Opere* 1: 221) ‘curious need for levitation inherited from a warlike forbear and bird,’ also to the curious, but certain fact that “oricum o parte sau întregul nostru este de fapt fără sfârșit mișcându-se și dispărând” (*Opere* 1: 554) ‘anyway part or all of us is in fact endlessly moving and getting out of sight,’ and to so many other things that give pause. For example the idea of “aerul plin de suflete” (*Opere* 1: 566) ‘the air full of souls.’ He likes Miles Davis and Rotciv (Victor⁵) and has “the crazy audacity” to “recite poetry” even in areas where “specialists,” “professionals,” “educators” (who “te mănâncă” (*Opere* 2: 354) ‘eat you!’)⁶ abound. He also has some “theories” about life and death, poetry and “culthure” and he prefers the Masters of Ecstasy from the pub at the train station to the ones from books

oh și mai am câteva cărți mai bine le schimb cu altele la fel de cretine
mai bine le citesc noaptea sau mai bine le vând și cu banii

⁵ Victor Brauner.

⁶ See the verses that appear in the novel *Zenobia*.

mai bine mă duc la Bufetul Gării la Bombonică unde Maeștrii
Extazului
întinși pe bănci
ascultă respirația nevăzutei cirezi ce umblă pe cer
mai bine mă pierd acolo într-un Triunghi al Bermudelor printre borcane
cu flori
de câmp (*Opere* 1: 497)

oh and I have some books left, better change them to others just as
idiotic
better read them at night or better sell them and with the money
I better go to the Station Pub at Bombonică where the Masters
of Ecstasy
stretched out on benches
are listening to the breathing of the invisible herd moving in the sky
I better get lost there in a Bermuda Triangle among jars with
wild flowers.

Although he writes poetry, “pohemele mi s-au părut totdeauna îmbibate cu ceva care nu m-a interesat niciodată” (*Opere* 1: 440) ‘pohems always struck me as saturated with something that never interested me,’ even though “preferam bâiguielile inițiale nedestinate să devină poheme ... [pentru că ele] îmi descifrau un sens în afara oricărei infiltrări a dresajului” (*Opere* 1: 441) ‘I much preferred the initial stutterings not meant to become pohems because they created meaning outside any infiltration of dressage.’ For the rest, as an eternal Incendiary Traveler, but similar to “celui ce doarme în trezie” ‘the one who sleeps while awake,’ the poet just gets on with business, even if he does not know “denumirea straniei aprinderi pornită de la el pe negândite” (*Opere* 1: 587) ‘what to call the strange ignition started in him out of the blue.’ Would this “strange ignition” be called poetry? Is it, in the final analysis, “incendiary”?

Translated from the Romanian by
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