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Article 10

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

Perahim

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Perahim

Édouard Jaguer¹

Youth, Genesis

To anyone lamenting the quite remarkable “hole” in the middle of Perahim’s biography, the painter replies that in his eyes, the essential fact is that he came through it in one piece. . . .²

By contrast, his attitude is quite different toward the preceding decade, 1930-1940, a period that still holds meaning for him and with which he remains associated, in spite of the rather minimal importance he places on the *thread* of his biography. To a great extent, his work remains the product of a certain Bucharestian context of the 1930s which included (not always together or at the same time) Victor Brauner, Jacques Hérold, Gherasim Luca, as well as others such as Stephan Roll, Geo Bogza, Sașa Pană, M. Blecher, Gellu Naum, and Paul Păun, who were little known in Paris but who also played an indisputable role in the evolution of forms and ideas in that part of Europe. They formed “circles,” sometimes concentric, sometimes overlapping, but circles that were very attentive to the echoes of Paris, Berlin, Prague, and Moscow. For these groups of individuals, the term “avant-garde” seems too fluid, too vague – for they knew perfectly well what they did not want – and the term “surrealism” seems too

¹ Editors’ note: Jaguer’s introduction to Jules Perahim’s 1990 *Arcane 17* album (simply titled *Perahim*) ranges across pages 5 to 40, covering the painter’s entire biography and output up to that date. The excerpt we publish here (7-20) discusses the period in Perahim’s trajectory that corresponds to the historical focus of our journal. Édouard Jaguer (1924-2006) was a French poet, artist, and critic, with strong affinities for surrealism and vast interests in the areas of art and literature across multiple cultures. In particular, he was the founder of the influential journal *Phases*. We are grateful to Pierre Boulay and Gilles Petitclerc for permission to publish this excerpt, and to Marina Vanci-Perahim for permission to reproduce Perahim’s works. For an account of the most comprehensive recent retrospective of the painter’s work, on the occasion of his 2015 centennial, see the exhibition catalogue, *Perahim: La Parade sauvage* (Musées de la Ville de Strasbourg). See also Marina Vanci-Perahim’s important contribution to the 2014 Perahim centennial issue (no. 3) of *Caietele avangardei*.

² Editors’ note: The period referred to here, and again at the end of this excerpt, spans the years 1940-1969: self exile in the forties, then return after the war to communist Romania, where, in a climate dominated by socialist realism, Perahim would focus mainly on stage design, graphic arts, book illustration, and mural painting, alongside editorial and pedagogical activities.

specific, in that they were not yet a *surrealist group* in the same sense as the group associated with André Breton in Paris between 1924 and 1966, for example (or the groups associated with Nezval and Karel Teige in Prague from 1934-1938, or Nougé and Magritte in Brussels, etc.). Indeed, such a group did not form in Bucharest until 1939, and Perahim was not part of it. In fact, we should stress that at no point in his life – or succession of lives – did Perahim claim the label of “surrealist” for himself or his work. Nevertheless, the early phase of Perahim’s work did bear the mark of what might be called “pre-surrealism” in Romania, and later on, his trajectory would continually cross that of surrealist circles, which is where his only intellectual and affective friendships always lay and still do.

Thus, if we wish to take a *sensitive* approach to Perahim’s contribution to painting in the last sixty years, we must intermittently shine our lantern (now a swiveling projector) on the spiritual and formal environment in which his contribution began to take shape during the 1930s. This is not so simple, especially given that, while the names and work of Constantin Brancusi, Tristan Tzara, Eugene Ionesco, Victor Brauner, Jacques Hérold, and Gherasim Luca are well known in Paris today, this is not the case for other Romanian artists who spent no time or too short a time there to even begin to penetrate the remarkable armor protecting the “French public” from excessive curiosity. For while Paris and France may have distinguished themselves through their impressive capacity for hospitality and tolerance toward foreign artists who chose to live there, rare was the desire to extend a hand to those who were unable to leave their country of origin for whatever reason (usually “independently of their will” with respect to Germany from 1933 to 1945, Spain from 1939 to at least 1950, and the Eastern European countries after 1946).³

Urmuz and Blecher, two now-legendary tragic and humorous figures, dominated with their strangeness the landscape of this “terra incognita” of Romanian avant-garde and were fully representative of the peculiar atmosphere of confusion and anguish embodied by that country’s adventure of the modern spirit; it is thus appropriate to include them in our wanderings through Perahim’s

³ A comprehensive study on surrealism and its fringes in Romania, comparable to that of José Vovelle or Marcel Marien for Belgium or Petr Kral for Czechoslovakia, for example, does not exist. Or rather, such a study has unfortunately not yet found a publisher, for it does exist in the form of a doctoral thesis: “Concept de modernisme et d’avant-garde dans l’art roumain entre les deux guerres.” (The Concept of Modernism and the Avant-Garde in Romanian Art between the Wars), and its author is none other than Marina Vanci, Perahim’s wife. I have sometimes used it as a reference and have drawn quotes by Urmuz, Blecher, and Geo Bogza from it. The interested reader can consult excerpts of this remarkable study in the second issue of *Phases* (May 1970) and *Opus International* 19-20 (October 1970), which also include poems by Gellu Naum and other authors mentioned here, as well as illustrations. [Editors’ note: This situation is of course changing currently: see Pop 2006, Yaari 2014, and the present volume.]

work. Urmuz, a clerk at the appeals court in Bucharest (and fully aware of the absurdity and futility of his functions) was born in 1883 and would end his own life forty years later. His first writings, which date from 1913-1914, were for a long time known only through oral transmission. They presaged the works of Michaux and Ionesco,⁴ as well as the mechanical delirium of Duchamp and Picabia. Marina Vanci wrote that Urmuz “was the only one in Romania to show a premonitory intuition regarding the absurdity of the machine civilization” at a time when, on the contrary, “even the most advanced minds among his contemporaries demanded an acceleration of the country’s industrial development.”

Urmuz’s world, a veritable “written painting,” overflowed with hybrid creatures, man-plants that grew in the Botanical Gardens, men and improbable furniture-animals (bringing to mind the superb “wolf-table” by Victor Brauner), man-machines moving by pedaling at the piano in nightmarish spaces, suburbs made of “long connecting tubes of which only one end can be found.” Inside houses, reception rooms were filled with spigots and walls had to be “measured with compasses” so that they wouldn’t “shrink by chance.”

The “principle of uncertainty” regarding the true nature of the space that surrounds us, the real consistency of the “terrain” upon which our life is constructed, and the traps that punctuate it (the same principle that would eventually infuse many paintings by Brauner and Hérold as well as Perahim, albeit in very different ways) was already wholly present, defined and *undefined*, in Urmuz’s work: and we understand that the entire Romanian avant-garde must have drawn much of its impetus from the writings of this singular poet, who should one day be considered on a par with Jarry, Cravan, and Roussel.

To gain insight into Perahim’s personal approach as a painter, relative to Urmuz, and into their often difficult (cautious, distrusting) relationship with the space “outside,” we need only consider a painting like *Closed System - Ready-to-Wear* (1972) to realize the degree to which Perahim was haunted by the idea of surviving “honestly” in a space in which there was no guarantee of benevolence. In this painting, this feeling is communicated through the strange shells with which beings, very likely human, must disguise themselves to be able to circulate with impunity in a *potentially* hostile space.

⁴ Ionesco, who paid tribute to Urmuz in the January 1965 issue of *Lettres nouvelles*. But the author of *La Cantatrice chauve* (The Bald Soprano) also penned the first critique of Perahim’s painting to appear in print, in *România literară* (Literary Romania) 11 (30 April 1932). It makes piquant reading fifty-eight years later: “This young artist . . . is possessed by a miraculous and dynamic fantasy. But his imagination shows indisputable sexual obsessions. Freud would have seen in it the desire to liberate himself from them and bring his desires to light in his consciousness by means of expression that shatter all conventions. Perahim is the victim of a surrealism already outdated for quite some time and which is spreading in Romania among the funny and ignorant young members of the *Unu* group.” Amusing, isn’t it?

What would happen to these “exiles of the inside,” veritable hermit crabs, if they dared to leave their diving suit-home? For their habitations are open or rather, appropriately *pierced*; a series of orifices allow for the appendages necessary for movement, nutrition, and perpetuating the species. But they are open in such a way that one wonders if real prisons might not be preferable. At least then, the “space of the inside” (to borrow Michaux’s term) would be absolutely distinct from that of the outside. But there is nothing of the sort here: the same ambiguity regarding notions of servitude and freedom weigh as heavily inside as outside. Even internal freedom only exists *conditionally*. We muse on these cosmonauts, prisoners of their grotesque outfit, on threat of death (and on ourselves as cosmonauts on our own planet, sometimes even while unaware of it. Long ago, I remember seeing a sign in the window of a sign painter on boulevard Voltaire that read: “Do not enter. Survivors will be prosecuted.”

Industrial Mania, dating from 1971 and one of Perahim’s “darkest” canvasses, also echoes Urmuzian phantasmagorias, this time, in the form of tubular structures reducing the being’s movement to a crawl. In a rocky seascape, the sky is criss-crossed by parallel oil pipes that form a block above the horizon. While some see in it a purely circumstantial denunciation – the monopolizing of parts of the Côte d’Azur by technological insanity, for instance – what is really at stake is the expression of a more fundamental, ontological asphyxiation: the sense of *suffocation* that each of us may have experienced at that moment in life when our feeling that “we do not belong to the world” meets the sad realization that *the world does not belong to us*. To return to this “environmental” reading (reductive, but possible) of some of Perahim’s paintings, the world is not or is no longer just about the shells, fish, butterflies, and cormorans exalted by Perahim, perhaps to compensate. Birds no longer need to go all the way to Peru to die. They die in Ouessant, too. There is no way out of oil spills in Chernobyl or Seveso, rather, we can only really find solutions within ourselves. Unable to “unblock” society, we will need, in painting as elsewhere, great *bursts* of laughter to open up the horizon. In spite of the alarming symptoms that surround us, Perahim will always find means of escape.

“We are among those few for whom the accident of our appearance in this existence is not a good deal, for whom anxiety and the revolt against the Universe and ourselves cannot be exchanged for the currency of any system offering to integrate us.”

Geo Bogza, “A Profession of Faith for the *Alge* Group,”

Unu 35, May 1931.⁵

Toward the end of the 1920s, Romanian society stood at a very different impasse. In such a society, socially conservative and in the process of “developing” economically, though essentially rural, painters and poets who no longer claimed to be “modernist” ten years after Dada but still intended to explode the ambient absurdity with constant salvos of denunciation, could only be seen as bad boys by the “dominant class” and its lackeys – or hooligans, in the case of Luca, Perahim and their friends, who, in light of their extreme youth, needed to be “disciplined.” It is between the ages of ten and fifteen (from 1924 to 1929) that Perahim formed friendships with several future companions in his poetic adventure: Gherasim Luca, Paul Păun, Aurel Baranga, and Sesto Pals. Granted, the vicissitudes of life and often political differences have altered these friendships or changed their course. Yet the precocious nature of these relationships is unusual enough to be highlighted, as friendships decisive in the genesis of a body of work tend generally to develop a bit later. In this sense, the earliest contacts among the future collaborators of the *Alge* (Algae) team can be compared to those experienced by the “phrères simplistes” at the lycée in Reims, René Daumal, Roger Gilbert-Lecomte, and Roger Vailland, who would later form the group *Le Grand Jeu*. As such, when the journal *Alge* published its first issue on 13 September 1930, none of its founders was yet twenty years of age. Perahim, who at the time was producing his first drawings, was the youngest at only sixteen-and-a-half (another “birth”

⁵ Editors’ note: This is of course a secondary translation, from the French. The original Romanian reads: “Dar sîntem cîțiva pentru cari accidentul apariției în această existență nu înseamnă o afacere, nedumerirea și revolta față [sic] de Univers și față de noi înșine nu o vom schimba pe moneda niciunui sistem care s’ar oferi să ne integreze.” See the translation of Bogza’s text directly from the original in the documents section of this issue; there this passage is rendered: “There are some of us, however, for whom the accident of being-poets in this existence is not just another business. Our revolt, our bewilderment at the Universe and at ourselves, we will not exchange for the currency of any system wishing to integrate us.”

that we will greet with only one hand, as if we were carrying a satchel with the other).⁶ It is at this point that he began to go by the name of Perahim.⁷

Alge, which lasted for a total of ten issues in two series (the second one, in 1933, consisting of three issues in a larger format), clearly outdid its older sister, the review *Unu*, through its more “radical,” frenetic and anarchistic positions. Published by Sașa Pană, *Unu* had represented the apex of the “oppositional” avant-garde since 1928. (Before that, there had been *75 HP*, *Punct*, and *Integral*.) Still, the two journals had friendly, even excellent, relations. All the writers at *Alge* contributed to *Unu*, and Perahim’s first published drawing appeared there (August 1930).

In the meantime (1928-1929), our young artist had forced himself to take “a few lessons in drawing and oil painting” from Costin Petrescu, an academic painter who was pleased with the ease with which his student assimilated the secrets of the profession. It was short-lived enthusiasm: one day, Perahim was bold enough to show his “master” some “free practice drawing” that he had just completed. Horrified, the wretched professor then showed this unworthy disciple something else: the door.

The publication of *Alge* was interrupted in 1931-1932,⁸ a hiatus the group used to publish two inflammatory supplements carrying aggressively provocative titles. *Muci* (Snot), with its impertinent subtitle, was sent, with ironic intent, to a prominent figure known for his obtuse political conservatism, and provoked an outcry in Romanian polite society. A court trial and imprisonment of the young people responsible immediately followed distribution of the abominable publications.⁹ Photos of Luca, Perahim, and other contributors to the review were

⁶ Editors’ note: Jaguer refers here to the multiple ‘births’ of Perahim, discussed in greater detail in other sections of the text: the *Alge* ‘birth’ being preceded, of course, by the artist’s biological birth, and followed, in 1969, by Perahim’s leaving Romania and soon starting a new life in Paris. (Strictly speaking, the youngest member of the *Alge* group, born in September 1915, would be Păun, but he started contributing texts to *Alge* only from July 1931 onward.)

⁷ Editors’ note: The name “Perahim,” which means “flowers’ in Hebrew, is a loose transposition of the painter’s family name, Bloomfeld (“field of flowers”), which he complemented for a while with the initial of a never spelled-out first name, ‘S,’ for the Hebrew ‘sadéh’ (field). See, in the catalogue accompanying the painter’s centennial exhibition, Marina Vanci-Perahim’s interview with curator Estelle Pietrzyk, “Un diamant caché sous des feuilles,” p. 130. The interview provides an overarching account of the artist’s life and work.

⁸ Editors’ note: The interruption lasted 19 months (from August 1931 through February 1933).

⁹ Editors’ note: The subtitle of *Muci* (published in February 1932) read: “Pentru că nu purtăm fuduliile în tabacheră ne intitulăm Grupul Mucoșilor” (Because we are not carrying our testicles in a cigarette case, we shall call ourselves the Snot-nosed Kids). While accounts

published in the press, which presented them as dangerous criminals, revolutionaries, and pornographers to boot, all the while whispering that they were *Jews*. The Romanian bourgeois state thus figured as a precursor: in Denmark, similar judicial action would not be taken against the painter Wilhelm Freddie, also supposedly guilty of pornography, until 1937. We must not forget the existence of an imbecilic Europe in the early 1930s, or its “dumb and mean” face – in Paris, small extreme right groups called “Jeunesses patriotes” ‘Patriotic Youths’ sacked “Studio 28,” where *L’Âge d’or* had been shown, and slashed canvasses by Max Ernst and Dalí, before fully coming into their own during the “belle époque” of the Nazi occupation; for the game is never completely won with respect to the extreme right or the extreme left.

Such is the context in which Perahim's first drawings appeared, for the most part strictly “automatic” and sometimes semi-abstract, but some of them quite subversive, or concerned with more specific societal issues that would sporadically lead the artist to pure political caricature, while also giving his fantasies the tormented and sometimes lascivious form they called for.

We know that a certain period (1938-1940) in Victor Brauner's painting is often referred to as his “chimera period,” in which people and ghostly felines undergo troubling transformations to become efflorescent, crystalline, etc. When Perahim arrived in Paris, certain poorly informed minds rushed to call him Brauner's “follower” because he too painted “chimeras” and included kabbalist and alchemist symbols in his works. But they were mistaking the effect for the cause: both artists drew on the same sources, both men frequented the same neighborhoods and the same friends, and were connected to the same spaces during roughly the same time. Apart from that, there was nothing more than Perahim's strong admiration for Brauner's work. But if Perahim had “imitated” everything he admired, he would not have had time even to breathe. His “personal” chimeras actually showed up in his work very early on. Several of his first canvasses painted in 1931 and 1933, three of which were reproduced in *Alge* and *Unu*, demonstrate this irrefutably.

differ as to what exactly was sent to one or more prominent conservative figures, all state that additional incriminating materials were found and seized during a search (including the first of the two inflammatory supplements, published in October 1931 but not meant for sale, whose title, *Pula*, was the vulgar name of the male sexual organ). The pranksters' trial took place in July 1933; their jail sentence was ultimately reduced to 9 days. A rare copy of *Muci* can be consulted at the Bibliothèque Kandinsky, Centre Pompidou: <http://bibliothequekandinsky.centrepompidou.fr/clientBookline/service/reference.asp?INSTANCE=INCIPIO&OUTPUT=PORTAL&DOCID=0473722&DOCBASE=CGPP>



Figure 1: [Perahim], *Femeia numărul doi* (Femme 2) (Woman Number Two) [1931].
Lost (reproduced from *Unu* 5.45 (May 1932)).
© Perahim/ADAGP by permission of the artist's estate.
Rights in all of Perahim's works are held by Marina Vanci-Perahim.

The term "lyrical materialization" fits well with the first of them, titled *Woman Number Two*¹⁰ (1931) (fig. 1): in a hall (of an enshrouded cathedral or a castle in the Carpathian Mountains?) whose proportions seem to be vast, judging from the

¹⁰ Editors' note: The author gives all titles of works by Perahim in French. We give these titles here in English; in the captions, we provide the original Romanian titles, followed by Jaguer's French titles and English translations. Rights in all of Perahim's works are held by Marina Vanci-Perahim.

vanishing lines in the floor drawn in perspective, pillars rise to heights beyond the top edge of the canvas. Two spirals of smoke curl around the colonnade and grow increasingly opaque as they dip toward the ground, where they are transformed into a corporeal phenomenon, not exactly a feminine body but rather a configuration whose substance evokes the “ectoplasms” dear to spiritualists. This is the first in a long line of Perahim's chimeras still seen in his work today. Curiously, these first paintings by Perahim emit the same “bewitching” quality as young Arthur Harfaux's photomontages, created at the time of *Le Grand Jeu*, “où apparaissent dans une pénombre mystérieuse des combinaisons de fragments humains” ‘where combinations of human fragments appear in a mysterious twilight.’¹¹



Figure 2: [Perahim], *Vis de fată tânără* (Rêve d'une jeune fille) (Young Girl's Dream), [1932], oil on canvas (68 x 54 cm) Galleria Nazionale d'Arte Moderna, Rome (gift of Arturo Schwarz). © Perahim/ADAGP by permission of the artist's estate and Ministero dei Beni delle Attività Culturali e del Turismo.

¹¹ Maurice Henry, “Arthur Harfaux,” in *Phases*, 4, N.S. 1974.

Grass at Dawn (1931), reproduced in *Alge* in 1933, militates in its own way for greater autonomy for human appendages. Here, the figures are reduced to combinations of fingers – the part for the whole – vaguely evoking the language of deaf-mutes – the most appropriate, no doubt, if the horizon is to “speak” to us.

In *Young Girl's Dream* (1932) (fig. 2), the bottom half of a young girl's body is suspended in the air while falling out of bed, as if being sucked into the corolla of her skirt: her head, which is not visible, seems to have been replaced by a sort of pistil. Figures often appear upside down in Perahim's work. In this particular case, the composition is very similar to canvases by Toyen, such as *Relâche* (1943). The atmosphere emanating from it, “nocturnal, lit from below,” also recalls Remedios Varo.



Figure 3: [Perahim], *Un plop traversează marea* (Un peuplier traverse la mer) (A Poplar Crosses the Sea) [1932], oil on canvas (65 x 50 cm). Private collection, on loan to Musée d'Art Moderne et Contemporain de Strasbourg. Photograph by M. Bertola. © Perahim/ADAGP by permission of the artist's estate.

A Poplar Crosses the Sea (1932) (fig. 3), in which the canoe resembles a crescent moon, holds our attention in another way, through its position, historically, between Böcklin and Dalí. Indeed Dalí's favorite tree, the cypress, appears in his work only a bit later, and curiously, in relation to the cypress-rowboat combination, in *Appearance on Rosas Beach* in 1934. Furthermore, neither Perahim nor Dalí ever concealed the influence that Böcklin's *L'Île des morts* (Island of the Dead) had on them. We could therefore say that Perahim's cypress, on this crescent moon, came from Böcklin and anticipates Dalí.

In 1932, Perahim held his first personal show of drawings and paintings in Bucharest at the "English Passage" [Pasajul Englez] Salon. His friends, Sesto Pals and Gherasim Luca among others, presented his exhibition in *Unu*.

"Ô vous qui êtes mes frères parce que j'ai des ennemis!"
'Oh you who are my brothers because I have enemies!'

—Benjamin Péret

Between 1932 and 1939, Perahim completed a number of paintings that perfectly express the continuity, the unity that he felt between *research* (purely speculative, in the semi-scientific sense of the word, meant to understand his personal poetic obsessions on the deepest level) and a possible *militant aim* of his work, directly in the tradition of Georges Grosz, Otto Dix, and John Heartfield in Germany, for example.

The Machine Gun of 1932 portrays a person, his face covered with a scarlet mask, standing in front of an embankment and carrying what looks like a heavy, giant stone forearm, like something pulled from a statue. In the combined shadows of the man and his burden projected on the grass of the embankment, we see the silhouette of a machine gun. This theme reappeared often, with increasing complexity, through the years, the arm and hand changing into firearms or the firearms becoming organic extensions of people's arms or sometimes legs, thus reducing the human figures to the role of gun carriage. Even the poster for *Phases*, Perahim's 1974 exhibition at the Museum of Ixelles, presented intrigued residents of Brussels with a figure floating in air, an unlikely amalgam of hands, legs, revolvers and other toys, one of them serving as a crutch, the other as this being's "muzzle." Does that mean we are claiming that in the mid-1970s, painting had to be an armed attack, indeed, a guerilla operation? Not at all. On the other hand, in 1974, just as forty years earlier, artistic creation could take on the role of "legitimate defense" against multiple aggressions by various "powers," upon which modern mass media conferred the status of "strike force," formidable in ways very different from the modest pre-1940 propaganda machines, whether Nazi or Stalinist.

In 1933, the year Hitler and his gang took power in Germany, the rising fascist threat in Europe became evident to all lucid minds in Europe, of which there were,

alas, but few. In Romania, the most reactionary forces rose to power and imposed a state of siege and censorship of the press. "Le pays se divise en deux camps opposés, de droite et de gauche" 'The country is splitting into two opposing camps of right and left,' wrote Marina Vanci. "Au milieu, c'est de plus en plus le vide" 'In the middle, there is increasingly only a void.' Indeed, there were 300,000 unemployed in the country and labor strikes multiplied, despite the ruthless repression. As for the clerical hierarchy of the various confessions, they fully supported the most retrograde pressure groups.



Figure 4: Perahim, *Profilul unei morale* (Profile d'une morale) (Profile of a Moral Code) [1934], oil on cardboard (50 x 49 cm). Private collection. Photograph by M. Bertola. © Perahim/ADAGP by permission of the artist's estate.

It is this hierarchy that Perahim would try to attack head on in *Profile of a Moral Code* (1934) (fig. 4). Like targets in a shooting gallery, busts of a priest, a rabbi, a minister, and a "pope" (Eastern Orthodoxy being the dominant religion in

Romania) line up side by side. The synthesis of caricature and painting attains a kind of perfection here: indeed, if deforming the traits fully achieves its purpose, which is to deride the targeted subject and make it as odious as possible, the composition's resolutely "modern" arrangement on the page, the perfect modeling of the vestimentary attributes, the hair, and even the "crudely hewn" faces clearly demonstrate that Perahim had no intention of abdicating his pictorial privileges. This vengeful caricature is at the same time an excellent "metaphysical" canvas; only here, the mannequin-like figures are coming out of the crevices of their sacristies, not a dressmaker's workshop in Ferrari, as in the paintings of De Chirico and Carra.



Figure 5: [Perahim], *Joc de tată vitreg* (Jeu de beau-père) (Stepfather's Game) [1934], oil on canvas (32.2 x 41 cm). Private collection. Photograph by M. Bertola.
© Perahim/ADAGP by permission of the artist's estate.

However, just as it is better to find favor with the good Lord than his saints, as the saying goes, it is better to take on the top leader of the clerics first if one expects no grace from this fine gang, but rather only the greatest calamity. Perahim will fill us with joy by going after "our-father-who-art-in-heaven" in *Stepfather's Game* (1934) (fig. 5). Seated comfortably on a "stylish" cloud, the wicked stepfather in question sports an expression simultaneously defiant, hypocritical, salacious, and

drunken, as if carved into a wooden beam. Winking, he aims at the earth of humanity a machine gun of a polish and perfection to incite jealousy in the most accomplished gang leaders. In light of recent events and the current wave of fundamentalisms, I would say that these two paintings are still completely relevant in 1990.

Along different lines, *Before the Storm* of 1939, which was in some ways Perahim's pictorial testament before he had to resign himself to leaving Romania, is also a painting that expresses the anguish and pessimism of the leftist intelligentsia of that country. In a landscape where several houses standing in the distance evoke an "island of the dead" and the sky is the color of clay, a donkey tries in vain to find its pasture. The animal is the color of the soil, and its coat seems to be made of mud that is ready to peel off. This is a world from which hope has disappeared, where the horizon is heavy with danger, but no one knows exactly when this "storm" will erupt or what form it will take. The donkey (dried out, here, rather than rotted) and the island of the dead are themes favored by Dalí in his early years, but as for the profound tone in this painting, it evokes less Dalí than Richard Oelze with his most famous canvas titled *Expectative* (Waiting), of 1935; but Oelze was German, and in Germany, hope had been eclipsed sooner than in Romania.

How to Show What Is Hidden?

In his preface to the catalogue of Perahim's first retrospective exhibition in Paris (1971), Alain Jouffroy noted the different questions being raised by the act of painting in our time: "How do we highlight what escapes us? How to show what is hidden? How to make visible that which history, by its movement and its contradictions, makes invisible?" In his view, Perahim responds "all the better in that he acts as if there were no response. That is to say, he responds with *riddles*." Of his approach to the hidden, stealthy as a wolf (or werewolf), his sense of the riddle tending to replace (in this case) a "sense of history" that escapes us, assuming it exists, we can detect an early manifestation in *The Anti-prophet* (fig. 6), a work dating from 1930. The subject of this painting is a human bust rising from the ground, arms crossed over its chest – a bust of flesh, not stone – with a large hand in place of the head pointing its index finger toward the sky. A closer look reveals that this canvas is, in its extreme simplicity, a modern representation of the Sphinx. However, the archetype is not only renewed, it is reversed; for the negative and somewhat "abstentionist" attitude of the figure seems to indicate that, not content with not answering questions and remaining faithful in this way to the ancestral tradition, this new sphinx with its new ways will push its reluctance to the point of no longer even asking the lost traveler any questions. The perfect anti-prophet, it predicts nothing, prophesies nothing, proclaims no Decalogue, and no psalms flow from its beard, which, in any case, is as smooth as the palm of the hand. A passive but living statue of the great *black* silence, it is

content to *block the way*. We can no longer expect anything from sphinxes or prophets; for questions and answers, we can no longer depend on anyone but ourselves. We can no longer count on anyone but ourselves to be oracles.



Figure 6: [Perahim], *Dumnezeu trăiește din mila mea* (L'Anti-prophète) (God Abides in My Mercy / The Anti-prophet), [1932]. Lost (reproduced from *Unu* 5.49 (Nov. 1932)). © Perahim/ADAGP by permission of the artist's estate.

This essential painting, among Perahim's early works, contains and summarizes diverse elements: hybridization of forms, resulting in a type of simple montage, in the first degree (between the bust and the hand, without any addition of elements foreign to the human body; later on, this hybridization would become more and more "encompassing" in Perahim's work, gathering the most disparate elements into a single "ball"); humor, mostly dark, shifts and "disturbs" the lines and the forms, but in ways that seem here perfectly "natural." This formal distortion would also become more and more pronounced in his work, accompanied by an increasing stridency in color that reached its paroxysm in his canvasses of the 1970s-1980s; a certain anxiety, not free of "metaphysical" backgrounds, more sharpened than attenuated by the scene's slightly "Bocklinian" atmosphere: the cypress appearing, as always, in the melancholy landscape.

'The specters' visit must be carried out in normal fashion, through the door, they knocking politely and strangling politely.'

—M. Blecher

In Perahim's work, thematic cycles rigorously delimited in time do not exist. Quite the contrary: the various families of thematics intertwine and overlap, as if bearing the weight of a certain obsessional permanence. Thus we have the masculine figure suspended upside down corresponding to Arcane 12 in the Tarot deck (The Hanged Man), and to the Hebrew letter "Lamed" in Perahim's series dedicated to rewriting this alphabet in 1969 (for the drawings) and 1974 (for lithographs pulled from them). This figure appeared for the first time in 1932 in *Perfect Balance* (fig. 7): in a landscape of a plain infused with green and ochre tones, three cypresses are lined up in front of three rounded megalithic forms, like petrified clouds. Attached by the feet to the first tree, the figure of a body hangs upside down at a 45-degree angle, his head touching the ground. Farther back, two other trees are connected by a bar to the middle of which we see a second inverted figure, also attached by his foot, his head very near the ground. This acrobatic position already forms the "Lamed." We understand clearly that the trees' assigned function in this painting relates to a concern other than the anecdotal and picturesque one that led Dalí to multiply the cypresses in his early paintings.

That said, the deep impact of the first Dalí on the young Romanian painters and poets who were seeking their path at the time should not be minimized, either. Whatever aversion we might feel concerning their subsequent evolution, early Aragon, Tzara, and Dalí still retain their power of exaltation today for what they said, wrote, and painted; as such, their contribution retains its original importance. In 1930, for Romanians Brauner, Hérold, and Perahim, just as for the Canarian



Figure 7: [Perahim], *Echilibru perfect* (L'Équilibre parfait) (Perfect Balance), [1932], oil on canvas (65 x 50 cm.). Private collection. Photograph by M. Bertola. © Perahim/ADAGP by permission of the artist's estate.

Dominguez or the Danes Freddie and Bjerke-Petersen, it was Dalí who seemed to go the furthest in debasing sacred values and therefore appeared as an example to surpass (not simply to follow); an example apprehended with feverish enthusiasm, not rationally. One Romanian voice that movingly expressed this enthusiasm with respect to a personal quest was that of M. Blecher, whose portrait Perahim painted for Blecher's book titled *Adventures in Immediate Irrreality* (1936). Born in 1908, Blecher would die of a grave, incurable illness at the age of thirty, after spending the last ten years of his life practically immobilized by the disease.

While in France seeking medical care in 1933, he submitted one of his poems to *Le Surréalisme A.S.D.L.R* (no. 6). Let us listen to his voice “live,” as it reached Sașa Pană in a letter sent by Blecher in 1934:

“Ideally, for me, writing would be the literary transposition of the high tension released by Salvador Dalí’s painting. This is what I would like to attain, this kind of cold madness, perfectly legible and essential. It would produce explosions between the walls of the room, not far away, between chimeric and abstract continents.” Similarly, when from his isolation he wrote to his friend Pană, “For a long time, the unreality and the illogicality of daily life have not been vague problems of intellectual speculation for me; I am actually living this unreality and these bizarre events,” Blecher spoke for the whole of the young Romanian artists. This “handful of poets,” “like real vampires attacking fat consciences and rotten ideas,” “will suck the blood out of people’s complacency and fan the flames and the shadows in the closely held, most digestive and most moral illusions of humanity.”

During this time, Brauner and Hérold left Bucharest for Paris (in 1930), where each of them would join André Breton’s group individually: Brauner participated in the group’s activities until 1948 and Hérold until 1951. Then, Gherasim Luca and Gellu Naum also left for Paris, in 1938. Perahim planned to join his friends (in 1933, he had illustrated Luca’s first book *Roman de dragoste* (Love Novel)), but at that juncture he had received an offer to exhibit his work in Prague at the D38 Theater of director and composer E. F. Furian, who was a sort of Czech Piscator. Perahim did not hesitate to accept this opportunity to spend time in the Czech capital and make direct contact with the avant-garde milieus at the heart of Central Europe; it was Burian’s theater that had produced Breton and Soupault’s sketch, *Vous m’oubliez* (You Will Forget Me), among others. Besides, the atmosphere had become more and more suffocating for him in Bucharest. In 1936, his second personal exhibition, shown in Bucharest, then Brașov, with its particularly virulent content, had incurred the wrath of the Iron Guard, which demanded the destruction of the paintings and drawings exhibited. Leftist organizations had to post young militants at the exhibition locations to guard the paintings and prevent the vandals from executing their plan!

In Prague, Perahim developed a friendship with John Heartfield, the photomontagist who had been a member of the Club Dada in Berlin in 1919-1920, and a militant antifascist who had sought refuge in Czechoslovakia several years before. He also met, though only briefly, Nezval, Styrsky, Toyen, and their friends in the Czech surrealist group, formed in 1934. But he would never make it to Paris (where Luca and Naum would only stay a short time),¹² for the Romanian consulate in Prague, upon learning the background of this traveler, refused to grant him a visa to enter France and forced him to return to Romania.

¹² Editors’ note: From the winter of 1938 to the fall of 1939.

For his much-coveted new birth in Paris, Perahim would have to wait thirty more years. This would be his crossing of the desert – a vast and changing desert which from 1940 to 1968 would shunt him between Bucharest and Chişinău, from there to north of the Caucasus, then from Erevan to Moscow, from Moscow to Bucharest, and from Bucharest to Tel-Aviv, where he would remain only for the duration of an exhibition. At the end of all that: Paris whose southern doors opened directly onto Africa (especially by air).¹³

Translated from the French by Lynn E. Palermo

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¹³ Editors' note: Jaguer alludes here to Perahim's subsequent travels to Africa and the way in which they informed his painting, a topic he broaches next in this text.