

The Romanian Surrealism before the War

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Abstract: This approach points out the most significant aspects of the Romanian Surrealism between the Wars, starting with its poetics, and ending with its poetry, of which the main representatives are Ilarie Voronca, Geo Bogza, Gellu Naum, and Gherasim Luca. The mechanisms of the poetic discourse and the structures of the Surrealist imagery are analyzed in order to highlight the specificity and uniqueness of the Romanian Surrealism in the European context.

Key-words: *Surrealism, poetry, revolution, dream, libido.*

As we know, Surrealism was an avant-garde movement born in the late twenties, in France, under the strict guidance of André Breton (also called “the Pope of Surrealism”), and rapidly internationalized. Nevertheless, a common place is the fact that Surrealism was much influenced by Dadaism, a radical avant-garde movement in which a major role was played by the Romanian poet Tristan Tzara (who otherwise was to join the future French surrealists Breton, Aragon and Soupault, in 1919, and also was to write surrealist poetry after 1929, the most famous example being the poem *L’Homme approximatif* (*The Vague Man* – 1931). Meanwhile, Tzara remained in touch with the Romanian avant-garde, which considered him one of its major models. Here it is an extract from *The Vague Man* (my translation):

je parle de qui parle qui parle je suis seul
je ne suis qu'un petit bruit j'ai plusieurs
bruits en moi
un bruit glacé froissé au carrefour jeté
sur le trottoir humide
aux pieds des hommes pressés courant
avec leurs morts
autour de la mort qui étend ses bras
sur le cadran de l'heure seule vivante au soleil.

I speak about who speaks who speaks I am alone
I am nothing but a little noise I have several
noises in me
a ruffled noise frozen with the crossroads thrown
on the wet pavement
at the feet of the people in a hurry running
with their dead
around death which extends its arms
on the dial of the only hour alive under the sun

In Romania, Surrealism began to flourish after 1928, when the first surrealist group coagulated around the review *unu* (“one”) directed by the poet Sașa

Pană (among the most important contributors were the poets Ilarie Voronca, Geo Bogza, Stéphane Roll, Gherasim Luca, the painters Victor Brauner and Jacques Hérold, who were to join the Parisian group of André Breton soon after 1930, Max Hermann Maxy, and also the painter Jules Perahim, who came to settle in Paris long after the War, in 1969) (see the cover of the number called “one summery”, illustrated by Victor Brauner). Let us notice that the review was not called “surrealist”, but “of literary avant-garde”, and, although its director was in permanent contact with Breton and other French surrealists, whom he translated into Romanian and considered as models to a certain extent, his intention was not to imitate them, but to create an independent and original movement within the general stylistic framework of the international Surrealism. Otherwise, unlike Breton, Sașa Pană had no theoretical ambition, no intention to impose a doctrine in an authoritarian manner, he only tried to set a typical vanguard *modus vivendi*, which meant total emancipation of the spirit from all social constraints. Naturally, this *modus vivendi* also implied the observance of a severe moral code that excluded any compromise with the ethics and values of the bourgeois society. This is how one can explain the “excommunications” of those who were found guilty of having aspired to official consecration, to literary glory, a famous case being the exclusion of the poet Ilarie Voronca from the Romanian surrealist group, in 1931. The reason of this radical gesture was, as the poet Stéphane Roll (Gheorghe Dinu) pointed out in an article, the fact that Voronca had published “the last treasure of his song” (the volume *Incantations*) “for 40 lei at a bloated and mercenary publishing house” [Dinu, 1931] (the “National Culture” Publishing House), an inexcusable mistake to which the endeavours made by the poet to be accepted in the Society of Romanian Writers were added. (Of course, the model of this exclusion were the famous excommunications dictated by Breton, such as the case of Salvador Dalí, nicknamed with the ironical anagram “Avida Dollars”).

One of the first things we can notice in the case of surrealist poetry is the existence of an irreducible antinomy between *poetry* and *literature*¹, as the first was considered to be the pure expression of the being, while the second was perceived as an institutionalized (conventional) form, without any ontological value. Inspired by Verlaine’s famous verse: “Et tout le reste est littérature”, Paul Valéry had baptized in 1919 the review published by the future surrealists Aragon, Breton and Éluard *Littérature*, exactly with the opposite meaning of *anti-literature*. From that very moment, for surrealists there was but a single gender – lyric – and a single form of literary expression – poetry –, and this led to the configuration of a unique heterogeneous discourse that mingled the literary species in an amorphous continuum, expression of pure subjectivity. No matter if they produced poetry or criticism, if they wrote in verses or in prose, the surrealists expressed themselves in the same (poetical) manner, and their writing generally kept unchanged its fundamental rhetorical coordinates. The poetic discourse is made entirely of a

¹ “Poetry is the opposite of literature”, say Breton and Éluard in the collective essay *Notes sur la poésie* (1926).

series of strange images based on involuntary associations between distant, sometimes incongruous realities; therefore, it can be “watched” like a surrealist movie, as it has a visual, a pictorial character, perfect illustration of Horace’s principle “ut pictura poesis” (otherwise, it is notorious in the case of Surrealism the close relation between poetry and painting, so that many poets illustrated their volumes of poetry with related drawings or paintings).

Perhaps the most gifted poet of this first surrealist generation, Ilarie Voronca wrote a visual poetry based exclusively on luxuriant images coagulated at random, also called for this reason “imagist poetry”. Otherwise, Voronca had invented in 1924, together with the painter Victor Brauner, the so-called “painting-poetry”, a mixture between poetry and painting following the pattern of the Dadaist collage. His poetic images are born one from another without premeditation, almost automatically, depending exclusively on the poet’s momentary state of mind, like in the following example taken from the volume *Brățara nopților* (*Nights Bracelet* – 1929, my translation):

I threw the seine to catch fish of colors
The voice is transparent like an egg on the horizon
The box of thought hides in the bushes of the brain
The beaters of destiny banish it
And memory flows like the blood of a wounded deer
The jaws of the sky clenched on the pastry of light
And how white is the ribald blouse of the seas.

I capture all the images of the world under the crystal of my eyelid
I shake in my hands the spyglass of the moment
The continents wave in my look like the bandages of the nights
With my back towards the forehead of my chin
I gather the necklaces of the air from the unseen the snails of the sounds
I change my heart litmus in the test tube of the verse.

In 1933, Voronca decided to emigrate in France, following Brauner and Hérold’s example, who had left for Paris in 1930. Let us notice that Voronca, like Victor Brauner, Jacques Herold, Gherasim Luca, Paul Păun, Dolfi Trost, and others, was a Jew when the political context in Romania was not favorable to the Jews at all. In France, Voronca continued to write in French and became quite famous (during the War he was a member of the French Resistance), but soon after the War, in 1946, troubled by a sentimental crisis, he committed suicide after a short trip to Romania. Ironically, at that time he was writing a *Handbook of Perfect Happiness*.

The most extravagant member of the first Romanian surrealist group was Geo Bogza, a proletarian poet who published in the early thirties two scandalous volumes of poetry, *Jurnal de sex* (*Sex Diary* – 1929), and *Poemul Invectivă* (*The Invective Poem* – 1933), for which he was arrested and eventually sentenced to prison on grounds of obscenity. Bogza was one of the first poets who cultivated the “poem-reportage”, a prosaic poetry meant to contradict the bourgeois ethics, like in the following example taken from *The Invective Poem*, called *Outrageous Poem* (my translation):

One of my nights I made love with a maid
 All happened unexpectedly – and almost without my will
 It was somewhere in a filthy provincial town
 I was living at my old friend of childhood.

One evening I wandered alone on the streets – and when I returned,
 The maid was making the bed in my room
 She was a young blackish maid
 She said everybody in the house had gone for a walk
 She smiled
 And she passed by me countless times.

I was broken that night and I had no desire to make love
 But the maid was young
 I think she wasn't older than sixteen
 And as she was standing near the bed, as if waiting,
 I approached with a smile and asked her about her name.

She told me some name, Mary, I think
 I said it was beautiful, she pretended to be ashamed,
 I think it was close to midnight
 Through the open windows the mixed noise of the town was seeping in
 There, somewhere, were theatres, cinemas, splendid women and cars
 Here were only me and the maid;
 She didn't say anything, she only closed her eyes.

She was a short maid, almost squad
 And she smelled of sweat very bad.
 Oh, maid to whom I made love in a filthy provincial town
 When I was broken and your masters were not at home
 Maid whom I've never seen again
 Maid with your thighs with two red stripes made by the garters
 Maid with your belly smelling of onion and parsley
 Maid with your sex like an Eggplant food
 I write this poem about you
 To drive the bourgeois girls mad
 And scandalize their honorable parents
 Because although I have slept with them countless times
 I don't want to sing for them
 And I urinate in their powder boxes
 In their underclothes
 In their pianos
 And in all the other accessories that make their beauty.

After 1933, Geo Bogza pleaded for an engaged literature, and, like the majority of the surrealists, he became a member of the Romanian Communist Party. As a contributor to important left-wing reviews, he published reportages about the miserable life conditions of the workers in Romanian industry, and, as a correspondent of the newspaper *Lumea Românească* (*Romanian World*), he went to Spain in 1937 in order to write about the atrocities of the Civil War. For this reason

he was watched by the police after he had returned in Romania, and prevented from sustaining a conference on this subject in Bucharest, on the 1st of August 1937. Instead of the conference, Bogza published a series of articles called *The Tragedy of the Basque People*, in which he harshly criticized the cynical massacre of civil population in Bilbao and Guernica, as in the following fragment (my translation):

He was a child of a few palms only. Someone had taken him, had washed him, had given him a piece of bread. He was eating it, calmly answering the questions:

- Where are you from?
- From Guernica.
- Where is your mother?
- Dead.
- And your father?
- Dead.
- Don't you have an elder brother?
- Dead.

Was it a dialogue? Was it an interrogatory? No. It was a page of the present history of Spain, fallen into the hands of Franco, Mussolini and Hitler.

Among the surrealist painters, the case of Victor Brauner is doubtlessly extraordinary. After he had been brought into the Parisian surrealist circle by his friends Giacometti and Tanguy, in 1933, André Breton pretended to recognize in him the surrealist painter he had been expecting since the *Second Manifesto of Surrealism*, and he highly praised the works exhibited by Brauner at the Galerie Pierre in 1934. The strangest thing about this painter is the fact that, before losing an eye in an accident, in 1938, he had been obsessed in his creations by the mutilation of the eyes, so that he had painted several figures with horns coming out of their eyes or with eyes in their hands (see, for example, *The Last Journey*, 1937), and even a self-portrait with a plucked eye (1931). Another interesting detail of this story is the fact that in several paintings on this subject (such as *Mediterranean landscape*, 1932, or *Magic of the Seashore*, 1935) eye mutilation is associated with the letter D, which is the initial letter of Dominguez, the name of the person who accidentally plucked out Brauner's eye during a surrealist party (as a matter of fact, Oscar Dominguez was also a very gifted surrealist painter of Spanish origin). It seemed that Brauner had anticipated his accident many years before it happened, so that he was considered a visionary who transmitted mediumistic messages in his creations, that is, the perfect example of the surrealist artist.

Like Victor Brauner, the painter Jacques Hérold, born in the same Moldavian town, Piatra-Neamț, arrived in Paris in 1930, and entered the group of André Breton in 1934, but his artistic career developed independently. He also shared with Brauner the same preoccupation with magic and occultism, so that his creations seem to hide a dark secret which can be revealed only by esoteric practices. His first personal exhibition was in Paris, in 1947, and it was followed by other 30 all over the world, as his name became famous in the context of international Surrealism.

Another important surrealist review was *Alge* (Algae), which appeared in 2 series, in 1930 and 1933, with the contribution of the poets Gherasim Luca, Paul Păun, Aureliu Baranga, Sesto Pals, and of the painter Jules Perahim. Neither this publication was called “surrealist”, but “review of modern art”, although the manner of the poems published here had numerous common points with Surrealism, such as the incongruous associations, the shocking images, the rebellious spirit meant to vex the bourgeois, and also the so-called “pure psychic automatism”, which was searched in the speech of the retarded children, considered to be “visionary”. Out of the same rebellious spirit, the editors of *Alge* published in 1931 and 1932 two ephemeral reviews with scandalous titles, namely *Pula* (*Dick*) and *Muci* (*Snots*), which were sent to some important personalities of the time, such as Nicolae Iorga, who was the most notorious apostle of nationalism. In response, Iorga called the police to arrest “the gang of spoilers of writing”, and indeed they were arrested and imprisoned for several days with the accusation of “offence against decency”.

1933 was a crucial point in the evolution of the Romanian avant-garde, as the political context became increasingly hostile due to the rapid ascent of the extreme right. All surrealist reviews ceased to appear, and their contributors were thus forced to adopt a militant position in their articles published in the (also ephemeral) communist reviews. Nevertheless, the political engagement of almost all Romanian surrealists must be viewed as closely related to the surrealist project of radically changing the way of life in a future society. Breton himself sustained, in *Position politique du surréalisme* (1935), that “the authentic art of the present” had to be closely related to the “social revolutionary activity”, as its goal had to be the “ruin and destruction of the capitalist society”, and a propagandistic art was perfectly justified in a period of crisis, a model being the Russian poet Maiakovsky. Following the example of their French fellows, the Romanian surrealists openly sustained the Proletarian Revolution, and many of them even joined the Communist Party in a moment when its activity had been declared officially illegal. Socially frustrated because of class and racial discriminations (most of them were of Jewish origin or from proletarian families), their political option was probably perfectly justified at that moment, as the idea of an egalitarian society must have been, from their point of view, extremely seductive. In the articles published during the fourth decade in the left-wing reviews *Viața imediată* (*The Immediate Life*), *Cuvântul liber* (*The Free Word*), *Tânăra generație* (*The Young Generation*), *Umanitatea* (*Humanity*), *Reporter*, *Era nouă* (*The New Era*), *Fapta* (*Action*), *Meridian*, etc., the Romanian surrealists vehemently denounced the exploitation of the proletariat, the officially encouraged anti-Semitism, the fascist danger, and the increasingly threatening specter of the War, meanwhile sustaining the idea of an “engaged” (or “revolutionary”) literature. From this project emerged a series of specific genres, such as the “proletarian poetry”, the “proletarian novel”, and the “reportage poem”, but one may say that the idea of revolution animated the majority of literary creations published at that time by Geo Bogza, Gherasim Luca, Paul Păun,

Gellu Naum, Virgil Teodorescu, Stephane Roll, etc. Therefore, no wonder that the avant-garde was perceived from the very beginning as a dangerous enemy situated, according to Eugene Ionesco's definition, within the very citadel which, with the aid of occult external forces, it was mightily striving to demolish. That was the reason why the attacks against it were not confined to benign literary polemics, so that Geo Bogza, Gherasim Luca, Gellu Naum, Victor Brauner, Jules Perahim, Gheorghe Dinu, Saşa Pană, and others were watched and sometimes arrested for supposed subversive activities under the direct guidance of the Romanian Communist Party.

The problem of the writer's political engagement was issued for the first time in a manifesto entitled *The poetry we wish to write*, published by Geo Bogza, Gherasim Luca, Paul Paun and Jules Perahim in the unique number of the magazine *Viața imediată* (*The Immediate Life* – December 1933). In their opinion, poetry had to thoroughly reflect daily life, as its condition was “the opposition against oppression”, in other words, the social revolt. The new poetry had to be simple and aggressive, since it was addressed to the masses, whose class consciousness it was trying to awake. The theorist of this poetry, called “proletarian”, was Gherasim Luca in a series of articles published in 1935 in the left-wing review *Cuvântul liber* (*The Free Word*). In his opinion, tributary to Marxist ideology, the proletarian poetry (which was opposed to the “pure” poetry, considered to be in the service of the dominant class) had to reflect the deep contradictions within the bourgeois society, in other words, its motor had to be the class struggle. The poems published by Gherasim Luca and Paul Păun between 1933 and 1937 were a perfect illustration of this program, through their deliberate anti-aestheticism expressed by the most ostentatious prosaic style, shocking gestures and violence of speech. The poet appears here in the hypostasis of the proletarian who hates the bourgeois society; the main theme of the poems is, therefore, the class struggle, as the poem is built on an antithesis between the exploited and the exploiters, like in the following example taken from Gherasim Luca's poetry (*The Poem of the Gentle People*, my translation):

I know at last the infamy of the gentle people
I know those people with wet and round hands, ready to caress everybody
I know also their thin and smiling lips which always have one or two words of
pity, of caress
oh, thin and infamous lips, against which I should write all my poems
thin lips, smiling lips, made for touching the forehead, for saying a prayer
lips which kiss with piety the loaf of bread fallen from the table, and put it aside
for the servants from the kitchen
lips which kiss with a wet and noisy pity the cheeks like cloth for wiping the
boards of our children from schools, from orphanages
lips which kiss the body of Christ on the cross, the thin and fine fingers of a miss,
of a lady
their thin and expensive fingers like checks, likewars
your lips which declare wars, which preach love, philanthropy
lips with features of rod, of sword, of rope

lips from which our liberty and our snatch from the hot process of production
 hang like from a rope
 I confess here in front of the people and of your god
 that I am ready to bear with resignation and serenity all the infamies, all the
 crimes
 if you accept to remove from the vast repertory of your lips
 the smile – oh, your smile that intoxicates, that disarms my brothers
 my good and confident brothers
 beware, comrades, of the gentle people's godlike smile
 beware of them like of a disease which gets under your skin without seeing it
 beware of them like of an enemy who strikes you on your back
 beware of them like of a priest who speaks of happiness in the other world, of
 love for the neighbor
 they are gentle because they are full
 and full as they are they have all the time to feel pity also for those who have
 nothing to eat
 but they continue to be full
 and you continue to have nothing to eat

comrades,
 the robbers who break in the house at night to steal
 are just as dangerous, either if they are masked or with uncovered face
 their mask, their smile, their words of priest and god
 must be once for good unmasked

Gherasim Luca also published in 1937, in the same manner, a “proletarian” novel entitled *Fata morgana (Mirage)*, whose protagonist is a communist from Moldavia who performs conspiratorial actions under the guidance of the communist party (officially forbidden in 1924). The stake of the book was obviously not aesthetic but political, since it is almost unreadable, the plot is badly constructed, the action is incoherent, and the style can be considered anti-literary par excellence. Otherwise, the police opened the author a file tracking in which the novel was described as a guide to the clandestine activity of the communists, and therefore its sale was immediately prohibited.

Among the members of the surrealist group “Algae”, the case of the painter Jules Perahim is also very interesting. Following the example of Gherasim Luca and Paul Paun, he created in the thirties many paintings and drawings with political message, aiming to criticize the monarchy and the grounds of the capitalist regime in Romania. During the War he was forced to seek refuge in the Soviet Union, as he was in danger to be arrested and imprisoned or sent to a concentration camp as a communist Jew. In the Soviet Union he became one of the leaders of the Romanian Communist Party in exile, and after his return to Romania in 1944, he became a fervent supporter of the communist regime and a strong proponent of socialist realism (in the fifties he produced many works of art with propagandistic purpose). However, during the short period of liberalization started in the late sixties by Nicolae Ceausescu, in 1969, he left to France, where he

rediscovered Surrealism and gained international recognition as one of its most prominent figures.

Another surrealist poet who initially linked his literary work with the communist activity was Gellu Naum. Together with Gherasim Luca, Paul Paun and Virgil Teodorescu, Naum published in 1935, under the guidance of the communist party, a magazine called *Tânăra Generație* (*The Young Generation*), which was forbidden after only 2 appearances. The same year he was arrested because one night he wrote communist slogans on a wall, in Bucharest. In 1936 he published his first volume of poetry, entitled *Drumețul incendiar* (*The Incendiary Traveler*), which he pretended to have been inspired by Victor Brauner's paintings. The poems combine the surrealist technique of "automatic speech" with a subversive political content, as the protagonist is a typical anarchist who performs absurd actions in the spirit of the second surrealist manifesto, as in the following poem, entitled *A Centaur Raping the Trees of the Poem* (my translation):

It's a high school of art
to pick your brain like a nose
and drag from its depths the sad snots of the poem
it's a high philosophy to know
how to mix the eyes plates with the sunset
this can't be learned in a single day
and each pen is a voice.

But what are all these beside
the belly watching the bread with the purest love
beside the eye touching the silk thighs of the woman who refuses you
beside the tongue munching like a sparrow longing for a soup?
Comrades poets that's enough
enough have we tickled the belly of the earth
it belly dances with the moon
listening the bones of the coins like castanets
its nifty sex has charged the Mediterranean waters
on the Pacific tress iron lice are flowing
people say: Kultur or hunger
burning in blue fires Heine's brain
from the sun like from a riddled curtain hangs
the hymen of humanity
enough have we admired in great pictures
Mr. Ford's ass washed by the most suave perfumes
enough have we bashfully smelled the roses
wearing the soft boots of classical poetry
your love songs sound false
and under the powdered skin the hideous wrinkles of the old age appear

Enough! These are not the words of a head left with its amazement on the window

I alone will know to touch like Thomas the unreal wounds
of the Christs
I will be a centaur raping the trees of the poem

I will know to confuse the gentlest sex
with a sprinkler
and if necessary I will know to
light my tress from their ashes

Nevertheless, one must notice that the surrealist group founded by Gherasim Luca and Gellu Naum in 1940 refused to endorse the new “device of root-striking” (see Guy Scarpetta, *Praise to Cosmopolitism*), detaching itself from Stalinism and from the socialist realism imposed after 1947 as the only aesthetic formula officially accepted, and that was the reason why the group was forced to dissolve shortly after the establishment of the communist regime, in 1947. Otherwise, the texts published by its members during that period, many of them in French, were entirely apolitical at a moment when not to be politically engaged was considered, from the official point of view, an inexcusable heresy.

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