THROUGH MILD MAZES

BRÎNDUŞA DRAGOMIR
Colegiul Național „Mihai Viteazul”, Bucureşti
brandusa_dragomir@yahoo.com

*Abstract***:** The present work approaches a new perspective in the interpretation of Gellu Naum’s poetry. A few fragments from the poem *The Animal-tree* reveal a number of alchemical allusions that unveil a hidden side of the surrealist discourse.

Key-words: Animal-tree, alchemy, maze, Surrealism.

«„I don’t know whether I am surrealist or not” – he told me once. „I don’t know what Surrealism is anymore, these days, when everybody seems to know what this means, it’s even «studied» in schools...! But I do know that I was born a Surrealist. I was destined for this. I would have met anywhere, anytime, other predestined of the kind. I would have recognised them in any circumstances. They would have looked differently, they would have done other things, they would have had other names, though I would have been able to recognise them, please believe me. And then, being a Surrealist nowadays is, in a way, the same thing as being a Surrealist in the 30s, but, it is, at the same time, completely different. And, last but not least, being a Surrealist at 77 is the same thing as being a Surrealist at 25, but *something else* as well. Anyway, what one should understand is that Surrealism is a way of life.” And he recognised this «way of life» at some of those who were called Surrealists, but also at the Surrealism bearers (the present, the past and of all times)...”»

Gellu Naum’s words are a part of a protective attitude against the alienation that the poet has always felt. Surrealism itself had become a constraining, limitative formula – a grid. Today the poet’s image overlaps Surrealism to such an extent that any reading process seems sentenced to strand on the shores of literary theory. Besides, his entire work is provided with a network o signals meant to guide and to perplex at the same time („the soluble map of some cry relics”). The poet says: „please believe that I am talking about something else” or „I argue that everything is something else too obvious to have / any shadow of clarity” or „ what is important is getting to the other side of gesticulation” or „We say what we say and this is always something else”, and this is not a gratuitous means of ambiguisation, but opening of certain valves that restore the circuit of meaning in the text. Somewhere else we read: „G.N.: It’s only that we are talking about literary movements, about groups... Anyway, speaking of them may even make us get rid of them... What is least interesting about those who were really Surrealists is exactly the fact that they were Surrealists...”. That who escapes the traps of theory enters „a region of total transparency”, „mild mazes”, walks into „chalky planes of dizziness and heat”, on „the other shore”, into the „circle with its centre everywhere”, on „the other side” – the frame of a heterotopic area, representative for the paradoxal relations of the subject with reality and intself – of affiliation and nonaffiliation, of connection and rupture. All these signs point to the necessity of finding a new way of interpreting, closer to the sprit of Gellu Naum’s poetry, this „something else” that appears as an element of disorder in so many of his poems, a *Ariadne's thread* linking the *face* and *surface*. An element that creates such an osmotic medium is alchemy. Gellu Naum’s links with alchemy have been discussed in many occasions and contexts but they have always been subordinated to the artistic process or to the Surrealist aesthetics and almost every time oriented towards the discourse and not the subject. However, Gellu Naum’s work unfolds, when re-read, a density of alchemical suggestions that justify the reversal of this relation. Alchemical language is not subdued to Surrealist rhetoric, but the Surrealist props serves the description of an alchemical experience.

One of the works that contain numerous alchemical symbols is the *Animal-tree*. The title itself uncovers the mirraculous essence of the poem. The dissolution of limitations, overlaping of plans, hybridisation of characters, fusion of dimensions and objects derive from a sensibility that

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circumscribes the exterior universe. The image evokes the Surrealist *convulsive beauty*, and bears, as well, the print of a main alchemical symbol – the Tree of *Materia Prima* with its bizarre representations of the contamination of worlds. The formula of the poem insinuates the homogenity of the poetic substance and apprises of the underground semantic coherence. The poem *Animal-tree* describes an initiatic journey that takes the aspect of a narrative scenario which has been explained through the attraction of the poet towards *set up*, through his taste for „enactment of epic-dramatic situations". This taste for *mise en scène* corresponds to the black humour typical for Gellu Naum, an autocritical conscience through which the subject takes distance from its own discourse, assuming the role of a spectator, by-stander that watches a „comedy of the visionariness". Black humour, set up, distance form an arsenal menat to secure the message from the deformation produced by convention and prejudices.

The poem opens with a text in which alchemical signs are insinuated right into the Surrealist perplexing aparatus and, there where one can depict Surrealist literary tropes, *something else* should be looked for. The first verses render journey preparations. The group of the travellers is polarized, as the journey itself would be – the group of „the others" oposes a unity that reveals a dual essence – „we". Between „we" and the the group that is embarking on the ferry-boat the subject mentains a protective distance, the relation with the others falls under convention. Their urge for the subject to put on „costumes" seems an invitation to conformity, uniformity and convention, and, at the same time, to self-betrayal – „we are paying". The subject exposes their formality by burlesque phrases, and their apparent joy is cancelled in the depth by sadness. „We" – an ambiguous formula at first, is decomposed in the end of the text in the two components of a couple, as the subject is attended by his beloved, marked by a singular form of the pronoun – „you". The couple keeps away, isolates itself, drawing itself „somewhere aside". The subject and its lady „lay crouching", as a suggestion of circular enclosure, of creating a paralel world and an order of their own, self-sufficient. This circular enclosure also signifies the reconstruction of a whole, the conjunction of the opposites. The image of the bird („Somewhere aside we lay crouching / under the bird...") is intimetely connected to the alchemical representations – either as a symbol of the volatile, or hinting to different stages of the alchemical process depending of the orientation of the flight. In Nicholas Flamel's *Book of Hieroglyphic Figures*, the wormth of the fire is compared with the „wormth of the Bird that starts to hatch very slowly". The lines seem to render through the play on words the materia prima locked into the hermetic oven „with that spine, with that widow (not even)". This first text of the poem sets the begining of the alchemical process in which the *animal-tree* has a crucial role. The subject with its double aspect – „we" – crosses the stages of the alchemical process together with the materia prima „the spine / the widow". The playful aspect of the lines „with the widow of the spine on the back" does not prevent us from reading it in a symbolical key, announcing a emptying process in order for a subsequent filling. The subject, being in a retractile movement opposes a multiple entity indicated through a third person plural pronoun „they", which is preparing for a „journey" and „party". While the subject transcendes the limitations („somewhere aside") and withdraws inside itself („we lay crouching") in a centripetal movement of returning to the unity of the center, the others are attracted by the world of multiplicity through a centrifugal movement, that recedes them from the unifying center („They were preparing the departure"), suggesting to the subject the emergence into the risible material by embracing the world of multiple forms („they were saying put on some costumes we are paying"). The preparations for the departure of the others continue, the emptying that the couple assumes is ballanced by excess, abundence made evident in the other's plan – „what a feast is prepared / on their breasts and terrace", indication of a quantitative proliferation, the „terrace" being an expression of openness, of alienation, of exhibitionism, of manifestation, in contrast to the „crouching" inside the space confined by the „bird", as a choice of isolation. While the departure of the ferry-boat continues, the journey of the couple has already begun at a subtle level, in music – „sing for me please the aria with 2x2 or 3x3". This line hints to the alchemical process through the symbolical values of numbers two and three – two as a number of the manifestation, of opositions, of contraries, and three designating the three phases of the alchemical process or of the three principles involved in the process: salt, sulfur and mercury, the

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equivalent of which are the body, the soul and the spirit. The text ends with a line indicating the proximity of a limit, "as long as there still were words". The couple is threatened by an exhaustion of possibilities of communication, or of the words that are able to manifest the other reality.

The second text of the poem introduces a new element in the series of significations – the first destination point and the route configuration – „the migrations towards mild mazes". The impersonal phrasing integrates the subject in a group of wanderers, of the initiated that manifest caution when approaching an occult area of reality, a mistery – „that banned thing", the exile standing for taboo or reminding about subconscious, or the *Materia Prima*, that are excluded from the visible, from direct access. However this secret is paradoxically „well-known", but it appears as „strange" (etymologically decoded from the Bulgarian „miraculous"). The access to miracle takes place veiledly, in solitude, which triggers the warning about breaking a vow – the vow of silence: „Generally it is not known whether it is good or not to talk about...". „Talking about..." opens the gate towards the other side. The maze is an image of the „regenerating mother earth's belly", the alchimists' „inferriorae terrae". The fact that the image of the labyrinth is consecutive to the journey is of great importance. In these areas articulate communication is replaced by „moans" pointing to the dissolution of the constrainig, limitative conscience, to the dissolution of conventions and canons.

The migration towards „mild mazes" is covert under the routine of daily existence, which aquires a ritualic aspect in relation to the „calendars" (which refere to another aspect of time, that appear "fallacious" to the profane eye) – „they make love", „they bake the bread", „they bind the blade bones", „we walk on the large boulevards". These common activities may also be decoded in alchemical key: *conjunctio* (conjugation), *cibatio* (nourishing), *sublimatio* (sublimation), *exaltatio* (elevation). These events stand for the essential gestures in alchemy – love as the only force capable of reconciling the opposites, the bread – the nourishment necessary to the alchemical child, binding the blade bones contains the suggestion of healing, of the regeneration of the wings symbolizing the sublimation. We can interpret in the same way the "walk on the great boulevards", superior ways of access to an invisible reality. The passing is associated with the act of "narration" ("telling to each other our grasshopper memories"), the voyage that takes place in space, is duplicated at temporal level, while the association with the grasshopper may bring into discussion the concrete aspect of the existence. However, the comparison with the "piles of cobs" involves the suggestion of the centre, of the reduction to essence and rejection of the masks, fact that generates the "nostalgia" of those prisoner to sterile convention indicated by the "creolin" and their "urban-rural language" evoking an inner Babylon. The "urban-rural language" seems an element for parade, put up, ostentatiously exhibited, although it is common, known, accepted, stereotype. The idea of the aggressiveness of the "urban-rural" language is enhanced in the next line – "with a tenacity capable of even more" that divulges the inclination towards any compromise. The marks of the space specific for the others eliminates all doubts concerning the associated meanings – all of them relating to constraint, limitation, enclosure – the "cradle", the "swimming pool", the "cage". New alchemical suggestions are brought into focus by the following lines.

Inside the Athanor, the couple of contraries, designated through the coagulating third person form of the personal pronoun – „we", has the anticipation of the next stage of the process. The „allmighty, victoriuos plants", the „vegetal world", „far away" have semantic links with the image of eternity and of the call of the origins. The vegetal world „sends post cards - fans" – a comforting perspective in the „total heat like a bed without memories without dreams only with a baldaquin" – direct suggestion of the alchimic oven in which the *opus* is performed. Participation to the unity is represented through the metamorphosis of „we" that is reduced to singular – „and we exist ourselves and everything is but one thing". The subject surrenders to the temptation of describing the „thing" – „a felt thing with bodice and light-yellow underskirt on coarse surfaces" – an unconventional representation of the feminin principle. The last image of the text is the image of the coincidence of the opposites rendered by the declaration of love – „and I am declaring my noblest feelings for you" „in a white amphora, in a tower", terms that are often used by the alchemists to refere to the hermetic oven, which is open and closed at the same time. The alchemical process

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opens the connections to the ilimited, to „areas of total transparency", of pure sprit, where the marks of the concrete, of time and space loose their sense. The implications of the sad parrot refere to the narrowness of vision of those that do not cross material boundaries, that do not include in the world's geography the invisible, undetermined areas – „a sad parrot is teaching me geography without nothing and nowhere".

The following text restores the connection with the whole through the repetition of the last line of the previous text – „without nothing and nowhere". The subject confesses his attachment for „a few risible things", but the tense of the verb *to love* introduces a distance between his present hypostasis indicating its transgression, which is followed by a new birth. The re-birth is followed by the entrance of the subject accompanied by Apolonios of Thyane into concrete. Appolonios is a controversed figure – as it is considered by some a second Pitagoras, others claim that he was a disciple that has been closer to Divinity than his master, thought wise or even saint, while condemned as magician or sorcerer; Vopiscus says: „Never among men, he writes, has it been seen someone more sacred, more respectable, and more divine than this being. He was the one that gave life to the dead. He had said and done amazing things, as we can convince ourselves reading the Greek books that described his life.") . The image of the birth is dual, in the sense of its projection in risible - „a receipt was released", while keeping contact with the concealed „echoes" – „no word about those echoes...". Entering the material involves oblivion – „they all knew and they forgot". The subject aims towards revealing the essence of things – „to put them in the ocean to show them for a fair price a drop of water". The successie births of the subject stand for different phases of the alchemical process – the seven stages of the *opus*. During these consecutive rebirths there appears a detail that seems meant to cofuse – the allusion to the „painting of the coat" – allusion to „the alchimist's paint": „The paint is the last measure of the transmutation of natural beings. It leads to the perfection of imperfect things." It is the incipient stage of the opus: the preparation of the materia prima and the separation of the two principles – „but you, my Cinderella, were going home / and the Animal-tree was being born for the seventh time."

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