

**“HE IS MR. NAUM, A DISTINGUISHED POET, I AM
CERTAIN YOU HAVE HEARD OF HIM...”**

In the first pages of *Zenobia*, following surrealism’s good tradition of derealization, there is a scene in which “Mr. Naum”, invited to the house of a certain Mr. Sima, meets a girl (who he falls in love with at first sight). There are two other young men in the house (apart from a man, dead or asleep, lying on the table), who, when “Mr. Naum” is introduced, ask for further clarification on the identity of the newcomer (“Naum who?”); after a curse uttered in his mind, “Mr. Naum”, already madly in love with “that girl”, replies, “You can call me whatever you want, it doesn’t matter”¹.

The denotative summary of the sequence cannot be taken seriously by an emancipated reader, but it is a good indication for understanding the game of metamorphic instantiations, of the entity who, in Gellu Naum’s texts, designates himself as “I” – and who “would appear” to be writing. The current study tackles the opening of a space for reflection on the postural in Naum’s works, by examining the way in which the play between the real author, the textual author, the imaginary/ imagined writer and other figures from the discourse scene is (self) represented.

It is well known that, for Gellu Naum, surrealism was an exemplary way of life, not just a mode of discourse. Each stage of Gellu Naum’s creation reveals an author-actor, who defines himself through isomorphic postures, images and significant events, sprung from a substantial identity of the relations with the world and language – that immense internal unity of which the poet himself speaks in *Diminețile cu Domnișoara Pește* [*Mornings with Miss Fish*] comes from the idea of poetry understood as a way of life. The beliefs that guided the poetic life of Gellu Naum are founded on the first person as an enunciative postulate. The self *in-grained* in the text is, therefore, an invariant that crosses and modulates the poetic work in its becoming; the poetic spaces – featured in life or in super-life – are substantiated by the textures and dissolutions of the subject, by the anamorphoses and thematizations with an estheticizing reflex, becoming meta/ fictional landmarks. This is, naturally, also a consequence of some po(i)etic(pohetic!) options: the self must be *there*, because, in the spirit of a revolute Platonism which surrealism has in common with High Romanticism, it is, by mediumistic disposition, the receptacle of voices from ideal spheres. Practising a phenomenology from which other forms of knowledge are born beyond subjectivity, the self that allows itself to be uttered by the voices interpolated with

¹ Gellu Naum, *Zenobia*, in *Întrebătorul* [*The Inquirer*], București, Eminescu, 1996, p. 11.

the immediate order of the world becomes a sounding board of the cosmic unconscious. Therefore, the exophoric/ endophoric relations of the “void” “self” sign with other signs must be understood in terms of a *fuzzy* logic. *The self* means, in a wide semantic-symbolic range: The Concrete Author; the one who makes poetry; the one who “commits” poems [*poheme*] and novels [*homan*]²; the one who experiments, who systematically disrupts his rational existence, yielding to discordant pulsations; the one who sees and reads himself from the outside (“it would seem that I am writing”), the first reader of his own text, an ironist who takes himself aside; the one who, instituted in language, separates himself from his own persona, and reifies himself, representing himself as the “Other” and as “for the Other”; The Other, the phantom double of the self.

In this paper, the postural in Gellu Naum’s poetic work is problematized by reference to *Zenobia*, a text which “works” as an interpreter. *Zenobia* is, indisputably, the best po(i)etic definition of Gellu Naum: the enunciative posture, the structuring of signifiers in the matrix of the poetic narrative, the modulation of the scenario through recurring events, symbolically invested, the de-realized, de-psychologized instantiations – all these identity landmarks are unraveled in this 1985 text, with a (meta)/ (inter) fictional vocation; its thematic structures “quote”, even if incomplete or sublimated, all the texts of Gellu Naum, within the coordinates of a diffuse isotopism³ described by the poet himself as a parallel semantics.

A review of the procedures by which the self is themed in the work of Gellu Naum begins, naturally, with observations on the identity between the name that signs the texts and that of some textual instances, pseudo-donors-pseudo-actors. In terms of the “classical” narrative, we would speak of autodiegetic narration. Here, however, in this hybrid text, the representation of the self becomes a negative device, a travesty meant to create and increase an intrinsic ambiguity. In de-realizing poetic prose, rhythmically structured, with symbolically overdetermined events, the self has a polymorphic identity and fortuitous names. The mystifying strategy is emblematic of *Zenobia*, but it can also be found in other texts. For instance, in *Zenobia*, the (pseudo)autodiegetic narrator denounces the names given by others as arbitrary. Some examples are relevant: “He is Mr. Naum, a distinguished poet, I am sure you have heard of him, Mr. Sima thought it necessary to introduce me. Naum who? asked one of the young men. [...] *You can call me what you want, it doesn’t matter. Then I will call you Constantinescu*”⁴; “The

² Gellu Naum’s invented terms of “pohem” and “homan” are untranslatable. He added/ replaced the letter “h” in two Romanian words: poem [*poem*] and roman [*roman*]. Their equivalent plural form in English would therefore be different, while the pun would also lose its meaning upon translation, as it is based on the French use of the letter “h”.

³ Ion Pop, *Gellu Naum. Poezia contra literaturii* [*Gellu Naum. Poetry Against Literature*], Cluj-Napoca, Casa Cărții de Știință, 2001, p. 80.

⁴ Gellu Naum, *Zenobia*, in *Întrebătorul*, p. 11.

following events are different from the others, especially considering that *at that time my name was* Cornelius de Argint. Everyone called me Cornelius de Argint⁵, and it seemed so natural to me that I could not have answered to another name⁶; “Can I call you Mr. Albinos?” “*Call me whatever you want*, my companion whispered. You can even call me Ferdinand. It’s a name I’m often called, I don’t know why...” (emphasis added)⁷.

Ipse, the concrete self becomes, in language, *idem*, the fluctuating self, with multiple states⁸.

The tragic cleavage of the self and its consequences at the level of meaning mark the whole poetic path of Gellu Naum. The recurrent thematization of this separation and self-discovery is a symbolic axis of creation. A phrase from *Medium* is illustrative: “I know that I, *the other who is always me* (emphasis added) can only be found in the second of awakening⁹”. On the one hand, the self who assumes life in poetry separates itself from the one who records it, from the one who is captive in the textual net; the latter, who “commits” literature (poheme, rhomane / homane, etc.)¹⁰, is called a “pohet”. Through symbolic condensation, the grapheme h becomes the “unmistakable signature”¹¹ of Gellu Naum; h indexes the practice of literature, seen as enrolling in a coercive “cretinizing” system, infected with clichés: “I wrote a poem that makes us walk smoothly, look at everything in a frightening silence [...]. But let us not be mistaken: this is only the harrowing feeling that we have done nothing but poetry, that we have found only what is called beautiful, that we have solved only an aesthetic problem”¹².

In *Zenobia*, the constitutive status of the self is that of scission repeatedly staged:

I should have known from the very beginning, though, that I am defiling an area which, due to my structure and skills, allows itself to be transcribed, even quite vaguely, only through what I call “pohem”. I should not have forgotten that, otherwise, the temptation to describe it to some extent brings with it texts whose artisanal innocence has only one merit: that of placing me outside literature¹³.

⁵ “Cornelius de Argint” would be translated literally in English as “Silver Cornelius”.

⁶ Gellu Naum, *Cornelius de Argint* [*Silver Cornelius*], in *Întrebătorul*, p. 347.

⁷ Gellu Naum, *Poetizați, poetizați* [*Poeticize, poeticize*], in *Întrebătorul*, pp. 322-323.

⁸ See the definition of the binome *ipse/ idem* in Paul Ricoeur, *Soi-même comme un autre*, Paris, Seuil, 1990, or *Sinele ca un altul* [*Oneself as Another*]. Translated by Alina-Daniela Marinescu and Paul Marinescu, București, Spandugino, 2016

⁹ Gellu Naum, *Medium*, in *Întrebătorul*, p. 260

¹⁰ See note 2 above.

¹¹ Monica Lovinescu, *Est-etice Unde scurte IV* [*East-ethics/ Short Waves IV*], București, Humanitas, 1994, p. 203: “The exorcism of the letter h belongs to Gellu Naum, it is his unmistakable staple”. Priority of the process is given, as we know, to the “black angel” of surrealism, Jacques Vaché.

¹² Gellu Naum, *Medium*, in *Întrebătorul*, p. 238.

¹³ Gellu Naum, *Zenobia*, in *Întrebătorul*, p. 61.

The one who writes denounces writing as inauthentic: “When I evoke something, like that Bach on the doorstep, I feel like I’m starting to commit some kind of ‘homan’, and that appals me”¹⁴. The novel (“homan”) about to be produced exerts an irrepressible pull: “The physical mechanism of writing, which I had accepted for so long, penetrated my blood too deeply”¹⁵. However, the materiality of the written letter creates the possibility of “awakening” some pre-existing intuitions and knowledge, which are not allowed to be said, but only approximated:

As I am writing, because it looks like I’m writing, I regret the fact you don’t have the papers crammed into your fingers over the rain of black letters, I’m certain you would see Mr. Sima’s room with the table under the window overlooking the swamp and its dead man; and you would see us, each in our place, speaking in our mind or out loud; and you would understand that none of the states experienced so far are imagined, despite the fact that they all happened exactly as I relate them. Once here, I would advise you to pause for a moment and revise, lightly brushing over the pages with the tips of your ten fingers, with your eyes closed; once the words are relinquished, in the film of your own availability, you might find out the extremely important things which, no matter how much I would like to, are impossible for me to communicate. I would advise you, therefore, to practise this revision exercise whenever you are tempted by doubt as to the truth of my words; from where I stand, it makes no difference; you would be given the chance to enter only the place you think you find yourselves and so on...¹⁶.

The joined route of the writer and the reader is marked by mnemonic clues such as “please revise” or by recommendations such as “I would advise you to...”. The authorial instance declines the power that cultural tradition confers on it, retaining only the role of mediator towards a world that refuses immediate knowledge; the conditional regime of the discourse shows that the reader is faced with an open option; he/ she must take the creative initiative. The stakes of the text, the intrinsic condition for a successful reading (of the text and of the world), lie in what Claude Ollier calls the operative function.

The “dwelling” of the self by multiple instances is an interpretive premise verified throughout Gellu Naum’s poetic journey, from *Drumețul incendiar* [*The Incendiary Wanderer*] (1936) to *Discurs despre pietre* [*Discourse on Stones*] (2002). The identity of the self is aggregated through a multitude of staging instances, whose plenary significance is impossible to grasp, whose ambiguity is impossible to pinpoint.

In *Drumețui incendiar*¹⁷, the textual instances are gradually inserted in the text. The title of a poem, *Pot să-ți spun vorbe ca niște geamuri* [*I Can Tell You Words Like Windows*], asserts the self as an utterance; “I” is “melted” into “we” in *Vom*

¹⁴ *Ibidem*, p. 86.

¹⁵ *Ibidem*, p. 148.

¹⁶ *Ibidem*, pp. 14-15.

¹⁷ Gellu Naum, *Drumețul incendiar* [*The Incendiary Wanderer*], București, s.n., 1936.

sări afară din noi uimiți [*We will jump out of us in amazement*], so that subsequently the role of the enunciating subject is blurred, because the poetic energy is oriented towards the female phantasm. The object of desire claims the poem, it is a double of the poetic experience/ discourse: “and you will ask me to write a poem about your water lilies/ corpse” (*We will jump out of us in amazement*); “we will not take into consideration the demand and supply/ in these walks on the peculiar tarmac of the poem”) (*Ghetele lui Gheorghe Lazăr* [*Gheorghe Lazăr’s Boots*]). “We” can point, in an immediate decipherment, to the meeting between writer and reader, or, more subtly, in the spirit of mystical doctrines, to the state of a consciousness which is no longer that of a particular being, but above multiple possible individual manifestations: *unum ego sum, et multi in me*¹⁸.

In the eponymous series¹⁹, Vasco da Gama is sometimes the writer’s *alter ego*, sometimes a hybridized pseudo-being, the ambiguity being caused by the co-marking of the enunciating self and the name that presides over the adventure. In *Culoarul somnului* [*The Corridor of Sleep*], the I is hidden, again, in a generic “we”, an icon of the case; the adventure of knowledge is placed under the sign of the epistemic modifier “It seems to us...”. Thanks to the poetic experience, the subject and the object are connected into a new being in order not to leave each other. The gaze is the privileged instrument that marks the possession of otherness, and that elevates the common meanings up to poetic dignity: “I see you looking at yourself in the retinal mirror” (*Spune-mi dacă vrei o pasăre* [*Tell me if you want a bird*]; “you watch with an alga covering your eyes” (*Corsajul pierdut* [*Lost Buccaneering*])).

*Athanor*²⁰ assumes the experiences of the ego as a fundamental dimension. In the series *Precision of the Shadow* [*Exactitatea umbrei*], the reduplication of the uttering self seems to ensure the original integrity of meaning: “with two mouths I spoke and listened to myself”. On different occasions, the poetic subject repeats the experience of St. Francis, writing in an ironic key: “We, man and bird on two chairs,/ talk for a long time” (*Vulturi în vacanță* [*Eagles on Vacation*])). In another parodic disguise, the self is the onomatopoeic, consecrating by name the existence of things: “I say table bed storage” (*Mama lucrurilor* [*Mother of Things*])).

*Copacul-Animal*²¹ invests the self with the charged dignity of wisdom, a position from which it would guarantee the truths of the world: “I spoke to them like an educated prophet/ I give you my word, I said, I guarantee you” (*Când acostam la țărmul lor* [*When I Was Docking at Their Shore*]); “then I talk about the meaning and use of structure so that we can stay together for a while/ and you

¹⁸ B. Valentin, *Aurelia Occultam Philosophorum*, apud Éliphas Lévi, *Marele arcan sau ocultismul revelat* [*The Great Secret, or Occultism Unveiled*]. Translated by Maria Ivănescu, București, Antet, 1995, p. 215.

¹⁹ Gellu Naum, *Vasco da Gama*, București, s.n., 1940.

²⁰ Gellu Naum, *Athanor*, București, Editura pentru Literatură, 1968.

²¹ Gellu Naum, *Copacul-Animal* [*The Animal-Tree*], București, Eminescu, 1971.

listen to me deeply impressed by the vastness of my knowledge in certain areas where we don't give a damn" (*Gardienii memoriei sunt [The Guardians of Memory Are]*); "we, who weigh precisely the nature of the signifier" (*Între bine și rece [Between good and cold]*). The act of poetization, which necessarily takes possession of the uttering being ("this morning I woke up a poet again") teaches us about the meanings of the world, so it has a kerygmatic valence which is permanently emphasized ("I spoke to you clearly"/ "and I speak as clearly in the racket as I can"). A strategy to be found in *Zenobia* as well, reiterating the signals that require the reader's attention is in fact a form of resignification, especially since "clear speech" does not mean transitivity; just as the sacred is camouflaged in the profane, so language that carries the truth is enciphered, pointing out the dazzling account of the apodictic manifestations of transcendence – "I wrote a poem in which I said something else but which expressed my soul and flesh with precision" (*Pohem, in Partea cealaltă [The Other Side]*²²). A poem with a metatextual value, *Dubla cunoaștere a pietrei plate [The Double Knowledge of the Flat Stone]* (in *Fața și suprafața [Face and Surface]*²³), induces the same meaning: "We speak another language with the same voice/ beyond the destitute borders of the forehead/and fascinated by our own voices/ we support our massive utopia/ on everything that is always superfluous". Surreality (that magical point where opposites merge) is always announced, but never enounced, hiding beyond the tumult of words.

Post-1990 poems are characterized by a "hiding" of the uttering self, as if the self were simulating its foreboding death in fiction. The subject is "diluted" in a plural, significant gesture, because "we" means both "I" and "he/ she/ it", as well as "I" and "you (sg)/ you (pl)", because, as we also know from Lautréamont, poetry must be created by everyone, not by one. By communicating mediumistically with the surreal, the one endowed with *logos*, the inquirer, disturbs the order of the world: "we were sitting quietly, nothing was moving, not a leaf was shaking/ when one of us, asleep, murmured *but why*" (*Întrebătorul [The Inquirer]*, in *Malul albastru [The Blue Shore]*).

Another series of instantiations that semantically and symbolically fulfil the "self" sign – as observed previously – is the representation of the Other. Otherness takes various forms; depending on the anamorphic multiplications of the subject, it is a woman, a part of the self, a phantom double, a word, surreality. The fundamental paradox is that all these manifestations prolong the utterance, but none exhaust its possibilities.

At the beginning of the current study, we noted that *Zenobia* is the self-text that most felicitously implements this scenario of separation and self-discovery. In this

²² Gellu Naum, *Partea cealaltă [The Other Side]*, București, Eminescu, 1971.

²³ Gellu Naum, *Fața și suprafața, urmat de Malul albastru [Face and Surface, followed by The Blue Shore]*, București, Litera, 1994.

novel, the Self/ Other relationship is the semantic-symbolic axis of the text. The beginning of *Zenobia* affirms a multiple subject, inscribes the writer and the reader together in the text:

1. Too many things are required of **us**, and, given the equivocal mechanism of solicitation, too many words pile up to encompass them, to hide them in their useless and deceptive labyrinth – which is why, perhaps, in some places, *I will say what should not be said*; however, I am convinced that everyone will meditate more on the surplus, leaving aside the state in which they float, underneath, like an underwater swimmer, *for example* (emphasis added AB)²⁴.

Standing in the wake of a state of grace, the writer aspires to presentify it through language and to impress it on the reader. The word offers visibility to the subtle relations of the being with the world, transmutes the life inside it, participates in knowledge by its power to communicate what is secret, camouflaged, forbidden. Therefore, through this warning, the writer does not seek to impress an image on the potential reader (because any of the possible linguistic representations is only a form of compromise), but rather an *effect-meaning*. Bachelard ratifies the power of this endeavour asserting that poetry is always vocative, belonging to the order of *You* before belonging to the order of *This*²⁵.

The writer “slips” from the realm of utterance into the realm of events. “Mr. Naum”, the distinguished poet, *names* the girl he sees for the first time; the random name seems to be waiting for a being: “because I don’t know your name, I’ll call you Zenobia”²⁶. This onomaturgic event opens a syntactic path with two positions, marked [+ masculine] and [+ feminine], which will be joining in a dialectical game. It’s hard to believe that Zenobia is an ordinary girl. She comes from the swamps (“*she’s a wretch, I found her in the swamps, almost unconscious* (emphasis added) while I was coming here, I also kicked her a few times then so that she would remember me, I would have left her there to give up the ghost in the water, among the reeds”²⁷, she knows how to fly, she is silent and her silences speak of something already known for a long time, something impossible to put into words, usually felt as a reconciliation, as a total and quiet science.

The naming (the same as the one on the cover of the novel) and the blurring, the rarefaction of Zenobia’s corporality are interpretive milestones for the emancipated reader. It is clear that the character of Zenobia becomes both *a vector of fiction*, determining the narrative mechanism to advance, and *an instrument of self-representation* by which the text is contemplated and explained. The encounter with Zenobia, the separation from Zenobia, the rediscovery of Zenobia are core

²⁴ Gellu Naum, *Zenobia*, in *Întrebătorul*, p. 9.

²⁵ Gaston Bachelard, *L'eau et le rêves. Essai sur l'imagination de la matière*, Paris, Le Livre de Poche, 1993.

²⁶ Gellu Naum, *Zenobia*, in *Întrebătorul*, p. 12.

²⁷ *Ibidem*, p. 13.

events determining the understanding of the text as a scenario of the unfolding and restoration of the self. Zenobia could be anything: the abysmal, original self, a kind of otherness essential for the world to make sense, a phantasmagorical elaboration, the *anima* of a dreaming *animus*, a “mother of mothers”²⁸, the Spirit-Woman, THE GREAT BELOVED (author’s capitalization), a transfiguring agent, a ferment and an instrument of metamorphoses, a token of Desire, etc.

In the stasis of the conjunction with the subject, Zenobia is characterized by systematic complementary gestures: “she flew, glued to my shoulder”²⁹/ “she spoke with my shoulders, with my mouth, with my knees”³⁰/ “I recited for hours and Zenobia accompanied me only by drumming two fingers on a small drum made of a piece of leather found on the water”³¹ etc. The solidarity of the self who dreams of the phantom incarnation is recurrently marked by the phrases: “shoulder to shoulder”: “and I went out, shoulder to shoulder, in the field”³²/ “I greeted them from a distance, myself waving my right hand, Zenobia waving her left hand because my left shoulder was glued to her right shoulder”³³ etc.

After worming together (“I don’t know for how long”³⁴) in the hollow of a ditch/ a tree hollow/ an alveolus, the rupture between “Gellu” and Zenobia occurs:

...with my shoulder detached from Zenobia’s shoulder, I was restless, I didn’t trust myself anymore, I didn’t trust anything I saw, I wanted to cry, to say to Zenobia: “Can’t you see how miserable I am, in this darkness and in this filth? Where is the love of the world, where is your love? Don’t you see that stinking plastic you’re wearing is cold and you don’t even love me, because if you did, you would do something to end the nerves of reason and this distrust, you would save me from this hollow, we would sit like regular people, next to a heated radiator, we would climb the elevator or enter a bright store, I would buy Irish tobacco for my pipe, not like this, in this grime, with broken boots and wet frozen socks, don’t you see? I’m not good at anything, it occurred to me that I’m predestined and so on, and that you, what can I say, what the hell, maybe you are, I can’t tell, but I’m good for nothing, don’t you see?”³⁵.

The “urban” adventure separates them (Zenobia had always been absent, she said she had to work too), but the story of the two ends happily with the reunion with the girl, who was waiting “patiently, with her hands on her lap”³⁶, her hair bleached, in front of the hole, on a mound of dry reeds. Does reunion mean returning home, as in the Odyssey myth? Or is it the reunion between Orpheus and

²⁸ *Ibidem*, p. 120.

²⁹ *Ibidem*, p. 20.

³⁰ *Ibidem*, p. 21.

³¹ *Ibidem*, p. 20.

³² *Ibidem*.

³³ *Ibidem*, p. 22.

³⁴ *Ibidem*, p. 19.

³⁵ *Ibidem*, pp. 31-32.

³⁶ *Ibidem*, p. 232.

Eurydice? Is it the silence of the novice, of the ascetic who has reached the point of wonder? Is it the restoration of the original self? Is it impending death? Is it all of the above and more?

After reading Gellu Naum and examining postural variables throughout his work, a conclusion, an inevitably partial one, becomes relevant. We cannot separate understanding of Gellu Naum's work from its discursive basis of the first person. The intextuated self is not a contingent scaffolding, but the basis of an essential relationship of solidarity between the self and the world, the basis, ultimately, of any attempt at meaning and representation. But in the ideal surreality of poetic worlds, "I" is infinitely more than the sign of an utterance or a posture – it is, in fact, the sign pointing to the (interdiscursive) place where *coincidentia oppositorum* happens and the species finds its salvation.

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“HE IS MR. NAUM, A DISTINGUISHED POET, I AM CERTAIN YOU HAVE HEARD OF HIM...”

(Abstract)

My present study problematizes the postural variables in the writings of Gellu Naum, in an attempt to demonstrate that all his poetic texts are based on recursive enunciation schemata, rules of coding and thematic structures. The first person is the linguistic dimension where the poetic possible worlds are created and structured. The textual metamorphoses of “I” and the Other modulate all Surrealist practices; their multiple symbolic staging, followed along Naum’s poetic oeuvre, are emblemized by *Zenobia*, the (meta)/ (inter)poetic narrative.

Keywords: Gellu Naum, the postural, surrealism, *Zenobia*, meta/ interfiction.

„DÂNSUL E DOMNUL NAUM, E UN DISTINS POET, SUNT SIGUR(Ă!) CĂ AȚI AUZIT DE EL...”

(Rezumat)

Studiul de față problematizează variabilele posturale prezente în literatura lui Gellu Naum, încercând să demonstreze că textele sale poetice sunt bazate, în integralitatea lor, pe scheme enunțative recursive, reguli de codare și structuri tematice. Lumile poetice posibile sunt create și structurate în dimensiunea lingvistică a persoanei I. Metamorfozele textuale ale lui „Eu” și ale „Celuilalt” nuanțează orice practică suprarealistă; multiplele lor puneri simbolice în scenă, urmărite în opera poetică a lui Naum, sunt concretizate în *Zenobia*, narațiune (meta)/ (inter)poetică.

Cuvinte-cheie: Gellu Naum, postură, suprarealism, *Zenobia*, meta/ interficțiune.