

# The Manifest Beauty of Dreams: The Surrealist Imaginary in Paul Păun's *Marea palidă* \*

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“. . . white city flooded with adolescence”  
(*Plămânul sălbatec* 10)

In the frenetic and eccentric panorama of the Romanian avant-garde, Paul Păun's poetic and pictorial work had a singular and obscure fate, marked by the silence of an enigmatic, solitary, and discreet life. As Monique Yaari stated in a 1994 article, Păun's work prior to 1975 is little known outside Romania, and the only volume that appeared in 1975 in Israel, written in French – *La Rose parallèle* (Parallel Rose) – knew only a very limited circulation, having been produced and distributed “privately . . . without copyright, in the best situationist anarchist tradition.”<sup>1</sup> This situation made the poet's work appear, in the words of Yaari, twenty years ago, as a veritable “chimera” (“Paul Paon's Sur-surreal Chimera” 108) – although in her analysis the term is primarily used to describe a major trope in the poet's texts. In terms of recognition, things have been slowly evolving since the 1990s, and the present article aims at contributing to the rediscovery of this poet.

Paul Păun, pseudonym of Zaharia Herșcovici<sup>2</sup>, made his literary debut in 1931 in number 6 of the first series of the review *Alge* (Algae) edited by Aurel Baranga. Already signing under his pseudonym, the budding poet was then only 16 years

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\* The introductory pages of this article appeared in French as an introduction to the author's extended analysis of *Plămânul sălbatec* in *Philologica Jassyensis* 19 (2014): 83–95.

<sup>1</sup> A new edition of *La Rose parallèle* is forthcoming from Éditions Rafael de Surtis, France.

<sup>2</sup> Monique Yaari noted the complexity of pseudonyms in a study devoted to the Bucharest Surrealist Group: “also born in 1915, Zaharia Herșcovici, who officially changed his name to Zaharia Zaharia in 1945, had taken on since the 1930s the pseudonym Paul Păun, become, during the 1950s – early 1960s, Paul Paon and later Paul Paon Zaharia. But, to hide his identity while still in communist Romania, he sometimes signed Yvenez (an inversion of the French ‘venez-y’)” (“The Surrealist Group of Bucharest” 95). For other biographical references also see Yaari's “Paul Paon's Sur-surreal Chimera” 108-12 and her short biographical essay “Paul Păun.”

of age. He also contributed around this time to other avant-garde magazines, particularly to the pages of *unu* (One), edited by Sașa Pană, where he published in 1932 one of the most representative among his early poems, titled “Epitaf pentru omul-bou” (Epitaph for the Man-Ox). But Păun’s works from this first period found a fitting home in the irreverently humorous and exuberant ambiance of *Alge*.

*Alge* did not openly subscribe to an artistic program unless we consider that one is adumbrated in the ironic and telegraphic preface of the first issue proposing the “recipe”: “Subliniați subiectul cu o linie și predicatul cu două” (“Prefață”) ‘Underline the subject with one line, the predicate with two,’ which is what generations of school children were routinely instructed to do in grammar classes, and the long opening piece of the second issue titled “Strigăt” (Shout), brazen but also more somber, which concludes with: “Veniți la noi și veți auzi adevărata goarnă a veacului. Veniți la noi și veți simți aproape, adevărata diafragmă a celei mai viguroase vibrațiuni” ‘Come to us and you will hear the real bugle of the century. Come to us and you will feel close to the real diaphragm of the most vigorous vibration.’ The *algiști* (the group name referring to the authors who published in the magazine) promoted an embryonic “surrealism,” incendiary and iconoclastic, with a provocative, polemical, and aggressive tone. This was literary extremism – verbally both violent and delirious, but programmatically as yet unformed – shared by the contributors (including Aurel Baranga, Gherasim Luca, Sesto Pals, S. Perahim, and Mattis Teutsch<sup>3</sup>) and close to the virulent poetic experimentations of Geo Bogza, true mentor to the group.

Like the majority of the literary output of *Alge*, Paul Păun’s earliest pieces show a strong predilection for a bizarre, anarchic poetry in which the absurd is both created playfully and self-imposed almost lucidly. His earliest “proto-surrealist” attempts look today like artificial language games coupled with irony:

Balul sfânt a stat ca o vază pestriță  
tramvayul și-a digerat muștele lui bătrâne  
numai ghetetele parcului, îmbătate de var  
au umflat un câine  
și o fată măriță  
mărița nu cunoaște nici un bal care se sparge ca o vază  
câinele nu cunoaște nici un tramway care mănâncă muște  
câinele nu știe decât să muște

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<sup>3</sup> An example of the revolutionary spirit of the magazine led by Baranga is the presence of two children among the collaborators: Fredy Goldștein and Mielu Mizis. Starting with issue no. 5, Fredy Goldștein’s texts began appearing, their author presented by Gherasim Luca as a “visionary” who “vorbea cu îngerii” (“Fredy Goldștein”) ‘talked with the angels.’ From issue no. 6 on, drawings of Mielu Mizis are published; according to Gherasim Luca, the boy’s “linia . . . dulce și otrăvită” (“Mielu Mizis! Mielu Mizis!”) ‘sweet and poisonous lines’ leave in one’s blood an indecipherable enigma.

mărița nu știe decât să vază  
și ghetele parcului lovesc în măriță și în câine. ("Poemul altora")

The sacred ball stood like a speckled vase  
the tramway digested its old flies  
only the boots of the park, drunk on whitewash  
beat up a dog  
and a servant girl  
the servant girl knows no ball that breaks like a vase  
the dog knows no tramway that eats flies  
the dog knows only bites  
the servant girl knows only to gaze  
and the park's boots kick girl and dog.

From these minor experiments let us retain only the inflammatory tone; they were mechanisms made to shock "the bourgeois." The same incendiary spirit can be found in certain provocations in which Paul Păun took part along with other members of the group. I am referring to the publication between 1931 and 1932 of two reviews related to *Alge*, each in a single number: *Muci* (Snot) and *Pula* (the vulgar word for the male sex organ, with the subtitle "Organ Universal"). It seems that one of the two publications, most likely the second, had been sent to several prominent cultural personalities of the time, most notably to critic, historian, Academician, and politician Nicolae Iorga. This provocation was considered a scandalous attack on good morals, and the collaborators, accused of pornography, were sentenced to nine days in jail. As Yaari noted, the episode would be crucially important for their ideological development, because "this experience of freedom curtailed, together with the encounter, in prison, with representatives of the workers' movement, reinforced their political sensibilities, which were already anti-establishment and markedly to the Left" ("The Surrealist Group of Bucharest" 96-97).<sup>4</sup>

More important, though also short-lived, was Păun's collaboration in 1933 on the sole issue of the review edited by Geo Bogza, *Viața imediată* (Immediate Life) – the title probably a nod toward Paul Éluard's collection, *La Vie immédiate*, published in 1932 – and especially his co-authoring with Bogza, Luca, and Perahim the article titled "Poezia pe care vrem să o facem" (The Poetry We Want to Make) featured on the front page of *Viața imediată*. This piece constitutes a departure from the gratuitous games in *Alge*, and given its programmatic style, it amounts to a veritable manifesto. The four authors, by opposing a good portion of contemporaneous poetry that they consider "selfish and false," announce that they wish to start writing "O poezie a vieții adevărate, o poezie care să poată fi citită de

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<sup>4</sup> There exist at least two versions concerning the exact gesture that triggered this episode: the version by Sesto Pals, as recalled for the widow of Păun, in a letter from December 1995, and the Sașa Pană version (in *Născut în '02* 417-22); see Finkenthal (24).

o sută de mii de oameni” ‘A poetry of real life, a poetry that can be read by hundreds of thousands of people.’ Their criticism refers primarily to the contemporary currents in Romanian poetry, which they see as “abstract,” “intellectual,” “hermetic,” with little relationship to real life, and whose very existence constitutes “Un abuz de inconștiență, un anacronism și o fraudă” ‘An abuse of irresponsibility, an anachronism, and a fraud.’ Compared to these “knights of hermetic modernism,” the poet of “immediate life” must adopt an attitude of “permanent revolt,” the very existence of poetry being dependent on the degree of opposition to oppression. This discourse is of its time; it is dictated by pressing ethical motivations, as well as a desire for “engagement” (socio-political commitment), even though the young avant-garde poets overtly refused the “futile adventure” of humanitarian poetry.

For the signatories of the manifesto, “astrala poezie de cabinet” ‘the astral parlor poetry’ is no longer in keeping with the “taifun de tragedii” ‘typhoon of tragedies’ ravaging the continent, or with the ever thicker darkness enveloping Europe and the whole world. The following are the observations that shape their idea of poetry, as expressed in the manifesto:

Noi . . . vrem să facem o poezie a timpului nostru în care o imensă dramă a umanității se desfășoară. . . . Noi vrem să captăm în stare sălbatecă și vie, aceia ce face caracteristica tragică a acestui timp, emoția care ne sugrumă de beregată când ne știm contemporani cu milioane de oameni exasperați de mizerie și de nedreptate, când ceva grav se petrece în toată lumea. . . . Vrem să facem o poezie a timpului nostru care nu mai e timpul nevrozei colective și al setei fierbinți de viață. . . . Tăria unei uriașe tragedii colective a sfârșit sub un picior de lut măruntele lucruri care făceau preocuparea scriitorilor moderni de la sfârșitul războiului. . . . Noi vrem să rupem cu acest trecut de suavități și să-i dăm poeziei brânci în viață. Vrem să o lăsăm murdarită și fertilizată de viață. . . . Aceasta ne obligă să ne mai deosebim definitiv de tot ceia ce s’a făcut până acum la noi în materie de poezie, încă într’un punct: e în voința noastră categorică de a smulge poezia din cercul îngust al inițiaților. . . . Noi renunțăm la aceste privilegii și considerând poezia ca pe ceva care ține mai mult de lucrurile imediate ale vieții decât de experiențe secrete de laborator, vrem să facem o poezie pentru toți oamenii, pentru miile de oameni. Aceste mii de oameni care se pricep la atâtea lucruri extraordinare și deadreptul poetice, copaci și păduri în furtună, sau catastrofe, sau epidemii de foame, se vor pricepe și la poemul care va aduce în el tăria și frumusețea puternică a unei catastrofe. (Bogza et al. 1)

We want to make poetry of our time in which an immense drama of mankind is unfolding. . . . We want to capture, in its wild and living state, the tragic character of these times, the emotions that throttle us at the knowledge that we are contemporaries of millions of people exasperated

by misery and injustice, that something terrible is happening all over the world. . . . We want to create the poetry of our own time, no longer the time of collective neurosis or of a passionate thirst for life. . . . The power of a gigantic collective tragedy has smashed under its clay foot the minutiae that used to preoccupy modern writers at the end of the war. . . . We want a break with this past of suave concerns and to give poetry a jolt for life. We want to leave it sullied and fertilized with life. . . . Thus we find ourselves obliged to set ourselves clearly apart in one more respect from all that has been done here in the realm of poetry until now: we have the firm desire to wrest poetry away from the circle of the initiated. . . . We renounce such privileges and consider poetry to have much more to do with the immediate matters of life than with secret laboratory experiments; we want to make poetry for all people, for thousands and thousands of people. These thousands know so much about extraordinary and truly poetic things like trees and forests in the storm, or catastrophes, or famines; so they will also understand the poetry that will embody the power and immense beauty of a catastrophe.

This approach, that of a more elemental and spontaneous aesthetic, can also be gleaned from the individual pieces published in the review. Two poems by Paul Păun, "Poem de dimineață" (Morning Poem) and "Voi oameni picături de otrăvă" (You People Drops of Poison) illustrate this new tendency. The young poet distances himself from the aesthetic of the *Alge* group, adopting a more direct mode of expression, stripped of imagery. Although the review had a very short run, the experience of *Viața imediată* represented, for Paul Păun, a "catalytic" moment in the evolution of his early poetry because the principles of the manifesto, as Crohmălniceanu notes (161), marked his poetics and aesthetics up to *Plămânuțul sălbăteț* (The Wild Lung).

First printed in the journal *Azi* (Today) in 1938, accompanied by the announcement of an imminent publication in book form which indeed followed in 1939, *Plămânuțul sălbăteț* is Paul Păun's last published work before the official formation of the Bucharest surrealist group, of which he was a member along with Gherasim Luca, Gellu Naum, Virgil Teodorescu, and D[olfi] Trost.<sup>5</sup> This poem exhibits two different and seemingly contradictory types of poetry. On the one hand, there is an elemental, "immediate" poetics that expresses human drama and "solidaritatea mondială a suferinței" (34) 'the worldwide solidarity of suffering.'<sup>6</sup> On the other hand, there are the dizzying spells of coded and abyssal formulas

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<sup>5</sup> Written in free verse, the poem features thirty-three stanzas ranging from four to forty-eight lines. Its print run was of 500 copies.

<sup>6</sup> All citations to *Plămânuțul sălbăteț* are to the 1939 edition.

which, secretly drawn to the “manifest beauty of dreams,”<sup>7</sup> sing of “arborii fără rădăcină ai delirului” (8) ‘the rootless trees of delirium.’ This poetic heteromorphism could inform two distinct readings of the poem, which nevertheless cross and complement each other. For this reason, within the Romanian poetry of the time, *Plămânul sălbatec* constitutes a successful example of total poetry where action and dream, the levels of the ideological and the poetic, are simultaneously superimposed.

### *Marea palidă* Crossing Lethal Waters

Almost six years, dotted with enormous changes, elapsed between the publication of *Plămânul sălbatec* and the second long poem published in book form, *Marea palidă*, 1945 (translated as *La Mer pâle / The Pale Sea*, but known more recently as *La Grande pâle / The Great Pallor* (for which see note 19 below), where Paul Păun clearly makes profuse use of surrealist techniques.<sup>8</sup> On the one hand, an apocalyptic war that ravaged Europe, suggests Yaari (“The Surrealist Group of Bucharest” 128), left troubling traces in the deepest levels of the poem; on the other hand, the first group in Romania that overtly declared itself “surrealist” had been born. Both must have contributed to the genesis of the work. *Marea palidă* is situated in the delirious and convulsive atmosphere of the surrealist group formed in Bucharest in 1940, and whose activity remained clandestine until 1945.<sup>9</sup> *Marea palidă* is an entirely surrealist poem, and even if very little exegetic writing exists, perhaps because of its resistant hermeticism, I contend that this poem by Paul Păun, along with Gellu Naum’s *Culoarul somnului* (1944) (The Corridor of Sleep) and Virgil Teodorescu’s two 1945 collections, *Blănurile oceanelor* (The Furs of

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<sup>7</sup> The phrase is borrowed from Paul Păun, who in one of the two small *plaquettes* published in the *Infra-noir* series wrote: “D’èjà le rêve est là dans sa manifeste beauté et dans l’insaisissable mécanisme de décantage des images” (*Esprits animaux* 5) ‘Already the dream is present in its manifest beauty and in its elusive mechanism of decanting images.’

<sup>8</sup> Like *Plămânul sălbatec*, *Marea palidă* is also written in free verse, and consists of twenty-three stanzas featuring between four to twenty-four lines. It was printed in 200 numbered copies.

<sup>9</sup> For more on the activities of the Bucharest surrealist group see especially Pop, *Avangarda în literatura română* 292-324; Ivanovici 37-44; Morar, *Avatarurile suprarealismului românesc* 188-217; *Le Surréalisme roumain*; Morar, *Avangardismul românesc* 185-202; Pop, ed., *La Réhabilitation du rêve*. Monique Yaari’s thorough and well-documented mini-monograph (“The Surrealist Group of Bucharest”) as well as her more recent collective volume, “*Infra-noir*” *un et multiple*, focus primarily on theoretical texts, collective works and the volumes published in the *Infra-noir* series, all written mostly in French. Another recent presentation on the Surrealist Group is Michael Finkenthal’s “Note pentru o re-poziționare a ‘valului’ suprarealist din România.”

Oceans) and *Butelia de Leyda* (The Leyden Jar), together constitute the high point of Romanian surrealism.

These poetic works by Naum, Teodorescu, and Păun seem to be, on some level, undeniably related. They share a common stylistic air; a network of obsessive images, themes, and motifs traverses them, migrating from one poem to the next, metamorphosing and transmuting themselves in protean fashion, taking on new meanings. The reader seems to be faced with subterranean and mysterious ramifications of the same "Great Work." This "trifurcated," "telepathic," and coded isomorphism is a reflection of their shared spiritual and poetic background, their common vision of the world. It is indeed with Gellu Naum and Virgil Teodorescu that Paul Păun published the "theoretical" text titled *Critica mizeriei* (Critique of Misery/Miserable Critique)<sup>10</sup> in 1945 (although intellectual allegiances within the group did fluctuate and Păun would grow again closer to the other two group members). Here, the three poets aimed to "semnala activitatea unor serii de personaje a căror prezență întâmplătoare sau voită în marginea suprarealismului nu poate avea altă explicație decât dorința de a întârzia cât mai mult, de a compromite pe cât posibil, acest efort" (*Critica mizeriei* 3) 'signal the activity of a number of individuals whose casual or intentional presence on the margins of surrealism can only be due to their wish to delay and compromise this effort as long and as much as possible.' The effort to which they are referring is "suprarealismul în evoluția lui istorică: PERMANENTUL EFORT PENTRU ELIBERAREA EXPRESIEI UMANE SUB TOATE FORMELE EI, eliberare care nu poate fi concepută în afara eliberării totale a omului" 'surrealism in its historical evolution,' considered to be 'THE permanent effort at liberating human expression in all its forms, liberation that cannot be conceived outside mankind's total liberation.' From this perspective, *Marea palidă* would represent a literary attempt at creating, if not "total liberation," at least liberation on multiple planes, because

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<sup>10</sup> During the same year the other two members of the Bucharest surrealist group, Gherasim Luca and Trost, published *Dialectique de la dialectique: Message adressé au mouvement surréaliste international* ("Dialectics of the Dialectic: A Message Addressed to the International Surrealist Movement"). Several Romanian critics, referring to the criticism addressed to Luca and Trost in *Critica mizeriei* (6-7), see in this temporary separation a true schism within the surrealist group. On the contrary, Monique Yaari, who shows Păun's mediating role between the diverging forces animating the group, sees also a contiguity between the two works suggesting that "if one steps outside of the rift per se, however, a cumulative meaning emerges from the double gesture that consists of the parallel publication of *Dialectique de la dialectique* and *Critica mizeriei*: the endeavor to stake out a space for the group, away from everything that was despised at home, but also distinct from that which was admired abroad – in short, unique" ("The Surrealist Group of Bucharest" 106). The same contiguous spirit is revealed in the publications of the following two years, 1946-1947, which bring the five together again.

the tension from which the poem surges forth is multiple: poetic, existential, and erotic.

This long poem speaks of the liberation of poetic expression, the “effort” of words and images to surpass their “monovalent” meaning, break through their own limits – on the one hand, through the same kind of analogous connections which André Breton, following Pierre Reverdy, advocated ever since the first surrealist manifesto of 1924<sup>11</sup> and, on the other hand, through the dazzling appearance of automatism which Paul Păun would define in *Les Esprits animaux* (Animal Spirits), 1947, as a “*flèche ardente et spirale, éminemment objectivante, capable d’inventer en même temps le désir et son objet, confondus dans l’image qui est, littéralement, l’acte de leur amour*” (5) ‘ardent and spiriform arrow, eminently objectivizing, capable of inventing both desire and its object, merged in the poetic image, which is literally the act of their love-making.’ Fundamentally, this is an attempt to neutralize the specific obstacle that “empêche le nom et l’image d’un objet de définir l’état complet, l’action infiniment polyvalente du même objet dans la réalité énergétique de son existence matérielle” (4) ‘prevents the name and the image of an object to define its full state, the infinitely polyvalent action of that same object in the energetic reality of its material existence.’ Virgil Teodorescu is referring to the same exceedance in “De brațele aprinse sînt agățate două imense lămpi” (From Lit Arms Two Immense Lamps Are Hanging), an almost programmatic poem in *Blănurile oceanelor*, where he proclaims that “Obiectele vor căpăta pierduta lor semnificație / Agresiva revoluționara patină / Pe care o au în ele ca o trapă ascunsă” (*Blănurile oceanelor și alte poeme* 63) ‘Objects will regain their lost meaning / The aggressive revolutionary patina / That they hide inside like a trap door.’ Implicitly, the “noms” ‘names’ that designate objects in texts and the “images” that represent them visually would also have to recover these ‘lost meanings,’ capable of defining, according to Păun, the “état complet” ‘complete state’ of the same objects, their “action infiniment polyvalente” (*Esprits animaux* 4) ‘infinitely polyvalent action.’ The elusive mechanism of the alchemical decantation of images (and words), which in *Marea palidă* become projections of subconscious desires, leads to this “polyvalence” that is eminently metamorphic, aggressive, revolutionary, explosive, and can only emerge in “nocturnal life.” If “la vie diurne nous casse” ‘diurnal life breaks us,’ reestablishing “l’identité de chaque objet avec soi-même et sa fonction unique” ‘the identity of each object with itself and its unique function’ and proceeding “par contraction” (5) ‘by contraction,’ only “la vie nocturne” ‘nocturnal life’ can pulverize the identity of the object and the name, of the image and word, multiplying both to infinity, enhancing the multidimensionality of their meaning and proceeding in a centrifugal fashion, by expansion, not contraction.

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<sup>11</sup> Cf. Breton, *Manifestes du surréalisme* 31. In his theoretical reflections on the poetics of the image, Breton often returns to analogy and the analogical method; see *Signe ascendant* 7-13.



In *Marea palidă*, the liberation of expression is accomplished through experimentation with surrealist methods: analogy (“association . . . lointaine et juste” ‘distant and true . . . association’ and “ressemblance de rapports” ‘similarity of relationships’<sup>12</sup>), automatism and “hasard objectif” ‘objective chance’ (both favoring the emergence of the subconscious), the discoveries of the dream (which, for Păun, is the “invention continuelle de points de rencontre entre le désir et le possible” (*Esprits animaux* 5) ‘continuous invention of meeting points between desire and the possible’), the alchemical decantation of images (which are no longer a goal, but rather a means for achieving knowledge of a complete and total reality) and “nocturnal life.”

But *Marea palidă* does not simply propose the liberation of poetic expression; this poem also represents, at an even deeper level, the effort of unleashing the expression of the erotic, of all those obscure, magmatic, and enigmatic forces that preside over the most emblematic *coincidentia oppositorum* (conjunction of opposites), where masculine and feminine meet. Since the “Second Manifesto of Surrealism” (1930), the primary “motives” of the surrealist activity were, according to Breton, to overcome all antinomies, all intimate contradictions, and thus determine the point where “la vie et la mort, le réel et l’imaginaire, le passé et le futur, le communicable et l’incommunicable, le haut et le bas cessent d’être perçus contradictoirement” (*Manifestes du surréalisme* 72-73) ‘life and death, the real and the imagined, past and future, the communicable and the incommunicable, high and low, cease to be perceived as contradictions’ (*Manifestoes of Surrealism* 123). And yet, as other commentators have already suggested, despite the fact that in *Marea palidă* the liberation of libidinal and visceral forces is total, the definitive union of opposing principles fails. Unlike most French surrealists, Paul Păun does not write of “happy,” “positive,” “idyllic” love<sup>13</sup>; in the third decade of his life he does not exalt the happy and sunny side of erotic fulfillment, but rather the somber and solemn aspects of eroticism, “obsesia neîmplinirii erotice” (Morar, *Avatarurile* 235) ‘the obsession of erotic unfulfillment.’ As the adjective “pale” would suggest, if in Păun the sea – emblem of his erotic quest – is never happy, it is because its character derives neither from unity nor from possibility, but mostly from disintegration and “impossibility.” As a result, its deep waters are continually exposed to apocalyptic cataclysms and troubled by spectral visions. We are not presented with a poetics of the dream, but

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<sup>12</sup> These definitions of analogy originate with Pierre Reverdy (495).

<sup>13</sup> “L’amour, chez Breton, chez Éluard et, à un degré moindre chez Aragon, est un amour heureux. C’est un amour partagé, vivant, formateur, conciliateur et conciliant; c’est un amour positif et idyllique et non un amour-conflit” (Gauthier 157) ‘Love in Breton, Éluard, and to a lesser degree in Aragon, is a happy love. It is shared love, lively, formative, conciliatory and accommodating; it is a positive and idyllic love rather than a conflict-love.’ Let us note, though, that this vision of impossible and problematic love is characteristic particularly of this period in Păun’s life and the long poem *Marea palidă*, and may not apply to his entire *oeuvre*.

rather with a poetics of nightmares, if we consider valid Bachelard's definition of the nightmare as "la maladie du rêve" 'an unhealthy dream,' the disintegration, "la rupture et la désorganisation des forces oniriques, le mélange informe des matières oniriques élémentaires" (*L'Air et les songes* 254) '[that which] disrupts and distorts oneiric powers; . . . a poorly formed mixture of elemental oneiric substances' (*Air and Dreams* 223).

## The Solitary Voyage and the Magical-ritual Word

In the deep structures of the poem, below the lethal *nigredo*<sup>14</sup> of this disintegrating and disorganized material, formless, chaotic, and abstruse, the reader can also nevertheless discern certain themes and motifs that have polarized the surrealist imagination. In his study dedicated to the main avatars of surrealism in Romania, Ovidiu Morar reflects on the poetics of *Stimmung* (mood, atmosphere) that had already manifested itself in the visual arts in the metaphysical and hallucinated landscapes of Giorgio de Chirico and, based on the suggestions of Passeron and Sass, notes that "ați în poeme, cât și în textele narrative, un motiv omniprezent e cel al periplului solitar, fără țință, aproape întotdeauna nocturn, al autorului-protagonist printr-un oraș pustiu" (*Avatarurile* 55) 'in the poetry and the narrative texts of the surrealists an ever-present motif is that of the solitary, aimless nocturnal wandering of the author-protagonist, which, almost without exception, takes place across a deserted city.' During these "perambulations" in near sleep-walking state, the protagonist "întilnește . . . o femeie (sau poate Femeia), care de multe ori (cum se întâmplă, de pildă, în *Nadja* sau în prozele lui Gellu Naum) e o ființă stranie . . . ce a pierdut definitiv orice contact cu realitatea socială . . . , deschizându-se însă total comunicării cu alte lumi, paralele; ca atare, ea devine pentru protagonist un *medium* care-i va transmite mesaje secrete primite din acele universuri misterioase, inițiindu-l . . . în arcele lor magice" (*Avatarurile* 56) 'meets a woman (or perhaps Woman) who often (as is the case, for example, in [Breton's] *Nadja* or in Gellu Naum's prose pieces) is a strange creature . . . who has lost all contact with social reality . . . and is totally open to communicating with other, parallel worlds; which is the reason why, for the protagonist, she becomes a *medium* who will transmit secret messages from those mysterious other universes, thus initiating him . . . into their arcane magic.'

The motifs of the protagonist's solitary "perambulations" across a nocturnal and hallucinated space and of the fateful "encounter" with the woman are the irradiating centers of the first half of the poem, where Paul Păun – declaring in an almost ritual fashion that "Tu trebuie să apari la această întâlnire / ascunsă de

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<sup>14</sup> Editors' note: *Nigredo*: "the initial, black stage of the opus alchymicum in which the body of the impure metal, the matter for the Stone, or the old outmoded state of being is killed, putrefied and dissolved into the original substance of creation . . . in order that it may be renovated and reborn in a new form" (Abraham 135).

ploaia incertă a părului” ‘You must appear at this encounter / hidden by the uncertain rain of your hair’ – summons the woman while unveiling the ineluctable necessity of the encounter:

Port între buze viața unui ou  
și între pleoapele încă închise algele plânsului,  
numai pustiu cunoaște această teribilă ploaie  
trecând odată cu păsările prin oasele feței,  
numai pustiu cunoaște această zăpadă amară  
în fiecare palmă deschisă, în umerii rupti,  
în fiecare gură a inimii.

Port încă în degete fumul, cuțitul și floarea,  
pielea cadavrului dulce ca brațele nopții,  
fruntea lui de ciorap de mătase,  
baia umplută cu valuri de frunze  
unde mâinile lui atârnă în apele mării.

Nu am costum mai frumos, nopțile vara,  
port pielea lui transparentă pe umeri,  
cu zâmbetul scos peste o mască lichidă  
asemenea părului rezemat de o stâncă  
plimb corpul tău risipit în genunchii prăpastiei  
și pașii pe care îi pierd se continuă cu umbrele pașilor.

Port acum în mâini o lampă de flăcări,  
o corabie mică și un ochi de găină,  
urcat pe o pâine muiată în sângele tău  
spun încet numele focului  
spun numele morții atât de încet  
cât șarpele lacrimii pe pielea udă de lacrimi  
atât de încet cât numai forma lor făcută în gură și căzută în mâini,  
țin într-o mână forma numelui focului  
și în cealaltă mână forma numelui morții,  
urcat pe o pâine muiată în sângele tău  
privesc cum se ard reciproc aceste ciudate obiecte.

Tu trebuie să apari la această întâlnire  
ascunsă de ploaia incertă a părului,  
prin fața ochilor tăi trec păsările goale umplute cu apă  
de dimensiunea atleților,  
între tine și celelalte fluvii trec poduri de apă peste fluvii de apă,  
la marginea lui peisajul își topește încet  
ultimele pietre și lemne. (*Marea palidă* 11-12)

I carry between my lips the life of an egg  
and between my eyelids still closed the algae of tears  
only the desert knows this terrible rain  
passing with the birds through the bones of the face,  
only the desert knows this bitter snow  
in each open palm, in the broken shoulders,  
in each mouth of the heart.

I still carry in my fingers the smoke, the knife, and the flower,  
the skin of the cadaver sweet like the arms of night,  
its forehead of silk stocking,  
the bath filled with waves of leaves  
where its hands dangle in seawater.

I have no better garb, on summer nights  
than its transparent skin draped over my shoulders  
a smile poking through a liquid mask  
like hair leaning on a rock  
I walk your scattered body in the abyss's knees  
and my lost steps are followed by shadows of steps.

I now carry in my hands a lamp of flames,  
a small ship and a chicken's eye,  
perched on a bread loaf dipped in your blood  
I slowly utter the name of fire  
I utter the name of death as slowly  
as the snake of tears on skin wet from tears  
as slowly as their shape formed in my mouth and dripped to my hands,  
I hold in one hand the shape of the name of fire  
and in the other the shape of the name of death,  
perched on a bread loaf dipped in your blood  
I watch these strange objects burning each other.

You must appear at this encounter  
hid by the vague rain of your hair,  
in front of your eyes empty birds filled with water  
pass, the size of athletes,  
between you and other rivers pass bridges of water over rivers of water,  
the landscape is slowly melting, at its edges,  
its last stones and last wood.

In addition to the two motifs of "solitary perambulation" and "encounter," the reader can also discern in this long passage two opposing *isotopies* that were already noted by Ion Pop and Ovidiu Morar, the two critics who alone have attempted to offer an interpretation, albeit a synthetic and partial one, of *Marea*

*palidă* (*Avangarda* 339; *Avatarurile* 234). These two isotopies, which according to Pop and Morar structure the poem, derive from the dialectic of Eros/Thanatos. The first isotopy has to do with desire and life; it is revealed in the images of the "egg," "open palm," "mouth of the heart," "flower," "lamp of flames," and "name of fire." The second one, related to extinction and death, comprises distinctly dysphoric images such as the "algae of tears," "terrible rain," "bitter snow," "cadaver skin," "knees of the abyss," and "name of death." According to Morar, a profound ambivalence illustrating the concept of "convulsive beauty" characterizes the images and symbols of "the sea," "the algae," "your hair", "the rain," "the knife," "blood" which could be considered as thanatological and at the same time libidinal projections (234).

In the first isotopy, the image of the egg is particularly irradiant in my view. As Pop remarks, it is tied to "sugestia *germinației*,] a *genezei* cuvântului (discursului poetic) . . . ca univers totalizant, unificat sub imperiul obsesiei, al dorinței" (*Avangarda* 338-39) 'the suggestion of the *germination*, the *genesis* of the word (of poetic discourse) . . . seen as a totalizing universe, unified under the hold of obsession and desire.' "I carry between my lips the life of an egg" is a declaration quite different from the one in *Plămânuțul sălbatec*: "port pe [buze] o sămânță incendiară" (9) 'I carry on [my lips] . . . an incendiary seed.' In the 1939 poem, the "incendiary seed" was meant to purify the impure world by destroying it with fire. The reference to fire places this poem under the sign of the masculine element and of action ("întunecat plămân al răzvrătirii" (34) 'dark lung of revolt.' In *Marea palidă*, however, even if the poetic word is given the form of an "egg" that can regenerate, like a seed, it no longer possesses the vertical and virile violence of the fire. It lives a hidden, silent, primordial life, bearer of potential but precarious fecundity. The word no longer participates here in the heroic symbolism of fire, but instead it partakes in the intimate symbolism of the egg and water. The egg is not only "epifanie a creației" 'an epiphany of creation' (Ruști 306), but also an "enclosed germ"; similar to a grain, a scallop, a chrysalis, it contains a "protected," "hidden" being, immersed in the depth of its own mystery, and devoted to the accomplishment of a secret destiny.<sup>15</sup> The "word-egg" represents, thus, an "enclosed" word, as yet unrevealed, existing only in growth, a word placed under the sign of the aquatic feminine, as the very title of the poem signals – at least if we take "marea" to mean 'the sea' (although, as noted above, it can or should be read primarily as 'the great').<sup>16</sup> Surely, *Plămânuțul sălbatec* itself is structured around

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<sup>15</sup> On the symbolism of the "enclosed being" see Bachelard, *La Terre et les rêveries du repos* 182 and his *La Poétique de l'espace* 105-29.

<sup>16</sup> In his isotopic classification of images, Gilbert Durand includes the egg with the nocturnal symbols of the imaginary and highlights a profound isomorphism between the egg and other "containers/carriers" linked to femininity, such as the chalice or the maternal womb. For this reason, if we implicitly tie the egg to the aquatic universe, it will be via the link to femininity (Durand 288-293).

aquatic images like the “drowned city” (“oraș înecat” 11, 17), an image that returns in *Marea palidă* (“oraș inundat” (21) ‘inundated city’). This characteristic bears witness to the fact that water, along with air (present most notably as wind), has often been the structuring element of both Paul Păun’s poetic mythology and his lyrical *rêverie*. Nonetheless, only in the 1945 poem does the aquatic constellation turn into a veritable obsession, magnetizing the poet’s imagination with its evil spells and becoming the primordial substance of his universe.

In the long passage quoted above, woman, spectrally radiating from the center of this fluidized cosmos, is summoned in the fourth stanza. The ritual solemnity polarizing this evocation is not simply provoked by the objects that the poet carries and that receive magical significance, as Ion Pop had suggested in his analysis (“the egg,” “the knife,” “the flower,” “a lamp of flames,” “the ship,” “the chicken’s eye”) (*Avangarda* 339). In my view, the sense of the ritual also results from the particular structure of the stanzas, which appear to carry a secret order, an architecture where the majority of verses refer back to other verses in concentric fashion. In the third stanza, between the third and penultimate verse, there is total correspondence: “perched on a bread loaf dipped in your blood”; the fourth and fifth verse (“I slowly utter the name of fire / I utter the name of death as slowly”) refer to the fourth and third verse counting from the end: “I hold in one hand the shape of the name of the fire / and in the other the shape of the name of death.” Then finally, at the center of the stanza, concentrically enclosed by the other lines, the irradiating core, the key to the ritual spell appears: “as the snake of tears on skin wet from tears / as slowly as their shape formed in my mouth and dripped to my hands.” In the image of the “shape formed in the mouth” converge “the shape of the name of fire” and “the shape of the name of death” that the poet will carry separately in his hands, but both of which were created in the mouth, merged together. Woman is thus summoned by a magical utterance where fire (Eros) and death penetrate each other, becoming one. They no longer are dialectical opposites, but burning each other, they converge into a single flaming effigy. The vertiginous energy that spurts from the encounter where woman “must” appear, will irradiate hence forward the entire “journey” of the poet.

## A Poetics of Dangerous Spaces

Contradictory, centrifugal and centripetal movements will characterize this journey. We witness cyclical acts of coming together and acts of separation between self and the object of desire. From this perspective, the poem can be divided into five major sections that correspond to different segments of the spatio-temporal progression. The first part, as we have seen, describes the first “ambulation” through a hallucinated landscape – whose “Stymphalian”<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> Alluding to Lake Stymphalis, where man-eating birds are shot by Hercules’ arrows as his sixth labor, and to Bachelard’s coinage “stymphaliser” (*L’Eau et les rêves* 137).

dimension is expressed through images of terrible rain, of birds that pierce the bones of the face, bitter snow, and the magical-ritual evocation of the woman. The second part of the poem is dominated by the major theme of the impossibility of contact, which is rendered concrete through the many obstacles that are interposed between poet and woman, preventing all communication. First, the bodies of the two lovers (if lovers they are) undergo a delirious metamorphosis. This is the projection of a fantasy of physical extension: “tu lași să îți crească din șolduri un val de albuș, de filamente spumoase, / eu las să îmi crească, în largul salon, douăzeci și una de unghii sordide” (13) ‘from your hips you let grow a wave of egg white, of frothy filaments / in the large living room I let grow [my] twenty-one sordid nails.’ The almost erotic nature of these metamorphoses could favor communication between man and woman, but an insurmountable barrier appears instantly, signaled by the adversative conjunction:

Și totuși între noi e un voal ciuruit,  
e o baltă superbă  
crescută din ceea ce cade din noi, aburi sau fluturi  
care ne continuă, care se urcă pe noi într-un mod incestuos,  
asfixiant. . . .  
Între noi e un voal inflamabil  
făcut din carnea noastră prăfuită de vise  
el acoperă lacuri și munți și o pădure făcută din păsări,  
el intră, prelungit cu o fină dantelă, în gura animalelor sălbatice,  
el moaie o mână întregă în sexul pădurilor. (13)

And yet between us there is a veil riddled with holes,  
a superb slough  
grown from what falls from us, vapors or butterflies  
that continues us, climbs up over us incestuously,  
asphyxiating. . . .  
Between us there is an inflammable veil  
made from our flesh dusted with dreams,  
it covers lakes and mountains and a forest made of birds,  
it enters, extended by a fine lace, the mouth of wild animals,  
it dips a whole hand in the sex of the forests.

The origin of this obstacle is, in fact, situated in the abyssal depths of their psyche and their flesh. This nightmarish,<sup>18</sup> aggressive, and ambiguously sexualized object

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<sup>18</sup> This veil “full of holes” and “inflammable” appears on the one hand to possess the hallucinated, persistent, aggressive and hermaphroditic demonic character of the objects (“slough” made from vapors and butterflies that “climb up over us,” “incestuous” and “asphyxiating,” it “covers” lakes and mountains, it is “extended” and it “enters” the mouth of animals), a character which Gellu Naum in *Medium* (1945) poetically defined as

– the “veil riddled with holes” and “flammable” – is defined, first, by an *in praesentia* metaphor like the “slough” formed from “what falls from us” extending the protagonists in “vapors or butterflies,” all secret references to the world of the psyche. Then the poet states that this veil is made of their very flesh, covered in a dust of dreams.

In the third section of the poem the poet wanders through “purgatorial” territory which manifests in spectacular fashion the unconscious projections of everything that separates him from the woman: “Eu calc uneori prin aceste ținuturi / după ce de pe umeri îmi cade pelerina făcută din oase” (14) ‘I sometimes set foot in these parts / after the cape made of bones falls off my shoulders.’ The obstacle here becomes the landscape, a “dangerous” land, to use a term favored by Breton, with a topography shaped by anxiety and bearing several characteristics of surrealist iconography: confusion between the living and non-living matter (“înăuntrul obiectelor, organele plutesc” ‘inside, the objects, the organs float’); absurd reversals of elements (“în aer o barcă se leagănă” ‘a boat is rocking in the air’); the explanation of a natural event in enigmatic fashion, by way of a “mechanical” cause (“curge zăpada din suluri de sticlă, din lentile topite” ‘snow flows from glass rolls, from liquefied lenses’); unusual translocation of exterior macro-reality into interior micro-reality by “Gulliver-izing” the former (“în ochi, . . . , aleea de nori și după ei ploaia” ‘in the eyes . . . a lane of clouds and behind them the rain’); transferring to the outside objects that belong to the private space

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“ephiatism” (122) ‘nightmarish state.’ Naum chose this term both because it is the Greek word, εφιάλτε, for the incubus and succubus, and because of its hermaphrodite character. The poet proposed a typological distinction within “ephiatic” beings: a permanent, vampirical state as distinct from an exuberant, werewolfish state; he also provided a list of “ephiatic” (nightmarish) objects: “Într-adevăr, persistența halucinantă a agresivității obiectului, caracterul avid succub al mănușilor, al pălăriilor, al scaunelor, al paharelor, vampirismul tocilelor, al aparatelor fotografice care sug imaginile, al sobelor, licantropismul vampiric al unei pușculițe în formă de animal sau simplu al unui candelabru-bufniță-șarpe, felinele care ne sug umbra cu un vampirism calm, confortul asfixiant al plăpumilor grele care ne apasă pieptul ca cea mai pură succubă, jocul lucid al caselor care-și închid porțile după noi, licantropismul funcțional al foarfecelor . . . mâinile înăbușitoare ale unui guler tare, larvizmul parazitărilor al batistelor sau al vapoarelor care se prind de ape ca cel mai pur vâsc, prezența degetelor la mâini, a coșurilor la case relevă . . . acest aspect demonic al obiectului” (*Medium* 120-21). ‘Indeed, the hallucinatory persistence of the aggression of the object, the avidly succubus-like character of gloves, hats, chairs, glasses, the vampirical nature of grindstones, cameras that suck images, or stoves, the vampirical lycanthropy of a piggy bank, or the simple lycanthropy of a chandelier-owl-snake, the street lamps that suck up our shadow calmly, vampirically, the asphyxiating comfort of heavy bed covers that press against our chest like the purest succubus, the conscious games of houses that close their doors as soon as we enter, the functional lycanthropy of scissors . . . the suffocating hands of a stiff collar, the parasitic larva-state of handkerchiefs or of the mists that attach themselves to water like the purest of mistletoes, the presence of fingers on hands, of chimneys on houses betray . . . this demonic aspect of objects.’



("pe o alee de ample, sfâșiate fotolii" 'in an alley of ample, ripped armchairs'). The scenery is chromatically dominated by white and the poet solemnly declares: "Eu calc uneori prin aceste ținuturi / mai alb decât ele, decât cenușa lor, decât setea, / mai alb decât setea și decât potopul"; "tu ești atât de albă, departe" (14-15) 'I sometimes set foot in these parts / being whiter than they are, than their ashes, than thirst / whiter than thirst and than the flood'; 'you are so white, far away.' It is my contention that this is not a "diurnal" white, which would signify candor, innocence, purity, but rather a "nocturnal" white, spectral and apocalyptic in nature. The "paleness" that figures in the title reverberates in an amplified manner in the images that suggest first a diffuse whiteness, and then a mineral transparency, an immaterial, diaphanous state (bones, snow, lenses, and clouds).

This universe, immersed in whiteness, appears to be prey to a hallucinated metamorphosis, as objects are situated outside of normal reality. Space takes on an irrational aspect; it exists according to mysterious and parallel laws that are impossible to understand. The reversal of elements engenders a hybridity that is strictly tied to the protean behavior of matter, to a continuous transmutation of matter's consistency as it evolves from a "soft" to "hard" and from a "hard" to "liquid" state. We notice, for instance, that the poet no longer wears "the skin of the cadaver" because it has morphed into a "cape of bones, of bottles" then "a cape of stagnant water" (14). In the unusual dislocation of the clouds, which, for Bachelard, "comptent parmi les 'objets poétiques' les plus oniriques" (*L'Air et les songes* 212) 'are numbered among the most oneiric of "poetic things"' (*Air and Dreams* 185), and implicitly in the imprint of the sky in the eyes – "în ochi, până în fund, aleea de nori și după ei ploaia" (14) 'in the eyes, all the way back, a lane of clouds and behind them the rain' – we can also discern an intertextual echoing of Magritte's *Le Faux Miroir* (*The False Mirror*, 1935). Not knowing if Paul Păun was familiar with this painting, we also don't know whether the motivation behind this dislocation was the same for the poet and the painter. But an isomorphism between these images can be established. As in the case of Magritte, here too the eye is no longer the traditional "mirror of the soul," but a "false mirror" that, by reflecting the exterior world, no longer allows access to the subject's interiority. This inner life is concealed; it becomes enigmatic and secret. What is more: the eye presented by Păun also possesses a center of darkness. If, in the case of Magritte, the eye is embodied in the "black sun" of the pupil, in the case of Păun, it is represented by rain, an apocalyptically "white" rain that destroys: "ploaia mâinilor spărgând o fereastră" (14) 'the rain of hands breaking a window.'

A potentially explicit reference to the poetics of Giorgio de Chirico<sup>19</sup> can be noted in the mysterious and troubling transfer to the external, public space of

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<sup>19</sup> It ought to be noted that this motif is widespread among the surrealists; let us mention Salvador Dalí in particular. See for example *Composition surréaliste avec personnages invisibles* (*Surrealist Composition with Invisible Figures*, 1936), or *Banlieue de la ville paranoïaque-critique*:

furniture and objects that belong to the internal, private space of the home: "pe o alee de... fotolii" (14) 'along a pathway of . . . armchairs.' The motif of spatial disorientation, of the alienation of the interior within the exterior, of loss of internal identity, this identity now confronted with a reality other than the self's, becomes an obsession in Păun's works. This motif returns when he represents the woman as "absent," buried in lace "în mijlocul odăii adusă în câmpie" (15) 'in the middle of the room brought into the fields' with "a wax armchair," "a coat rack," "a carpet made of hair," and "a lamp" (15-16). Then the image returns yet again in the last section of the poem, where the landscape is totally devastated, and in comparison with de Chirico, takes on even more anxiety:

Pe câmp se întind acum foarte multe paturi  
de fier și cu pernele, cearceafurile atârând între ele bătute de vânt,  
a plecat toată lumea  
sau eu trebuie să dorm în toate aceste schelete.  
La spate e fumul,  
de jur împrejur, sufocant, peisajul topit  
răsufală adânc, se oprește, răsufală,  
e un teren de duel  
în care sunt singur  
și unde trebuie să cadă cineva la o oră precisă. (20-21)

On the fields now lie very many beds  
of iron and the pillows, the sheets are hanging between them, blowing  
in the wind,  
everyone has left  
or I have to sleep in all these skeletons.  
At the back, smoke,  
all around, suffocating, the melting landscape  
breathes deeply, stops, breathes,  
it is a duel ground  
upon which I am alone  
and where someone must fall at a specific time.

In this passage, the deep motivation for spatial disorientation cannot be the same as the one discussed in Ovidiu Morar's study (*Avatarurile* 235). Here, it is not "the obsession of erotic unfulfillment" that provokes and guides the appearance of objects in a totally unusual context. In agreement with Monique Yaari's hypothesis that the poem (published on 15 May 1945) may also, or primarily, be an evocation of the catastrophe of World War II ("The Surrealist Group of Bucharest" 128), I propose that the motif of the disorientation of objects belongs at the same time to a personal poetics of "modern ruins." The "melting" landscape,

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*Après-midi sur la lisière de l'histoire européenne* (*Suburb of a Paranoiac-Critical Town: Afternoon on the Outskirts of European History*, 1936).

the skeletons of the beds, the sheets and pillows blown by the wind, the duel ground where sooner or later someone must die, the wreckage of a long storm (“resturi rămase după o lungă furtună” (20)), the ravaged field (“o câmpie spartă în mici bucățele” (20)), the woman’s hair like a wall demolished by artillery shells (“un zid dărâmat de salve de gloanțe” (21)) – all evoke in front of our eyes the imposing ruins of “post-war modernity,” the disastrous and ossified representations of Max Ernst’s *Europe After the Rain* (1940-1942), more than the alienated and metaphysical landscapes of de Chirico. It is thus possible to reread the motif through the lens of a historical isotopy.<sup>20</sup>

### **Between *Perpetuum Mobile* and *Rigor Mortis*: Feminine Constellations and the Metamorphoses of Desire**

While the poet is wandering amidst the ruins of modernity, the woman becomes more and more distant as well as absent, even if some of her gestures show a latent erotic aggression. The poet confesses: “Ascunsă de atâtea ori, / . . . între tine și palmele care tremură întinse / animalele cad la pământ umplute cu cârpe, / . . . Eu trebuie să trec printre aceste animale / înarmat până-n dinți cu cuțițe, cu foarfeci / și câteva lupe immense” (*Marea palidă* 15) ‘You were hidden so many times, / . . . between you and the shaking extended palms / the animals fall to the ground filled with rags, / . . . I have to pass among these animals / armed to the teeth with knives and scissors / and a few immense magnifying glasses.’ The motif of the elusive woman and her latent erotic aggression also returns obsessively in poems from the 1940s of Gellu Naum and Virgil Teodorescu, revealing a shared vision of eroticism that transfigures and the presence of an occult cartography of the “imaginary” in the works of the surrealist group of Bucharest. It is, then, appropriate to turn now to a discussion of the feminine constellation in Păun’s work.

The figure of woman in Păun’s work possesses a deep symbolic stratification. First, she is linked to water, in particular to “sad” and “Stymphalian” water, of whose entirely feminine nature Păun expresses here a fatal premonition – an image to which I shall return in my analysis of the last section of the poem. At the same time, woman appears as an earthly creature as a result of a vegetal

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<sup>20</sup> This historical isotopy of *Marea palidă*, first suggested by Monique Yaari and according to which the entire poem can be read as an evocation of a historical catastrophe, notably that brought about by World War II (“The Surrealist Group” 128), has never been picked up, clarified or analyzed by Romanian commentators. Nonetheless, this historical (and thanatological) isotopy may be even more relevant and fundamental to the understanding of this poem than the erotic one. What could validate this interpretation is information received by Monique Yaari (see Yaari, ed., p. 8 n17), namely, the recent discovery, in manuscript form, of a French version of *Marea palidă* by Paul Păun himself, dated 1942, which bears the title *La Grande pâle*, rather than *La Mer pâle* (“mare” in Romanian having the double sense of both “great” and “sea”). As Yaari notes, if the love isotopy matches the title, the historical (and thanatological) isotopy lends itself to it even more.

metamorphosis also seen in *Plămâmul sălbatec*. In the 1939 poem, woman is the object of the poet's erotic aggression; he wants to feed on her belly's "oat fields" and gnaw "the roots hidden in her ankles" (*Plămâmul sălbatec* 14). In *Marea palidă*, the figure of woman is distant, absent, beautiful, quiet, she has a smile "of sleep" (15) and is "înconjurată de somn" (21) 'surrounded by sleep'; above all, she is slowly swaying on the "stem" sprouted from her belly, her fingers "de plante agățătoare tăiate din rădăcină" "creeping plants cut at the roots" (16). These bizarre metamorphoses, these crossings between different ontological levels – human and vegetal – belong to a specifically surrealist *milieu* as evidenced by numerous works by Paul Delvaux (*La Naissance du jour* (*Birth of Day*, 1937); *L'Appel de la nuit* (*The Call of the Night*, 1938); *La Ville endormie* (*The Sleeping City*, 1938); *L'Homme de la rue* (*Man from the Street*, 1940)); Salvador Dalí (*Femme à tête de rose* (*Woman with Head of Rose*, 1935), *Singularitats* (*Singularities*, 1936)); or Dorothea Tanning (*Birthday* (1942)); or, in the realm of poetry, exemplified by many a line from Breton's "L'Union libre" ("Ma femme à la chevelure de feu de bois") ("Free Union" ('My woman with her forest-fire hair')), where woman has "doigts de foin coupé," "aisselle de martre et de fênes," "mollets de moelle de sureau," "cou d'orge imperlé," "seins de spectres de rose sous la rosée," "sexe de glaïeul," "sexe d'algue," "yeux de savane" (*Clair de terre* 95) 'fingers of new-mown hay,' 'armpits of marten and beechnuts,' 'calves of elder tree pith,' 'pearl barley neck,' 'breasts of the specter of the rose beneath the dew,' 'gladiolus sex' and 'sex of seaweed,' 'savannah eyes' (*Earthlight* 83-85).<sup>21</sup>

In the case of Păun, the images of "roots hidden in the ankles" and the "stem" sprung from the belly do not simply suggest the half-human, half-plant concretion of the plant- and tree-woman; they also have an implicit mediating role. Woman, situated between earth and water, is placed definitively at the boundaries of three realms. She is rooted in the dark, meandering, subterranean underworld. On earth, she appears to the poet illuminated by a white and apocalyptic light, "mai seacă decât cavitatea orbitei albită de soare" (*Marea palidă* 13) 'drier than the cavity of an eye socket bleached by the sun,' lost among the wreckage of modernity, hidden by "a plaster wall" where insects and spiders crawl. But she can also rise to the skies in a tree-like verticality, "surrounded by the vapor of nebulae" (*Marea palidă* 21; *Plămâmul sălbatec* 13). Her vegetal appendages confer woman her "staying power" and her "piercing power" embodied in the image of the root, which according to Bachelard is nothing but "le mort vivant" 'living dead,' a life that "est un long sommeil, une mort alanguie, lente" (*La Terre* 290-91) 'is a long sleep, a slow, languid death.' Woman in Păun, rooted in the soil, appears to partake of the

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<sup>21</sup> A good analysis of the different incarnations of vegetal-woman (flower-woman, fruit-woman, tree-woman) is provided by Gauthier (98-158).

same dark life, to participate in the same vegetal sleep,<sup>22</sup> a slow and languid death, which in the end renders woman irrevocably elusive. From this perspective, she reminds us profoundly of the woman that haunted Paul Delvaux's paintings.<sup>23</sup>

In the paintings of the Belgian surrealist, just as in the works of Păun, the vegetal transformation is associated with motifs of waiting, distance, absence, somnolence, the *rigor mortis* of a statue (in the case of Păun, *rigor mortis* is manifested in the image of the glass statue and the doll). In my reading, the parallel presence and the superposition of these motifs lend themselves in both Păun and Delvaux to an implicit appearance of a subconscious complex, or perhaps the manifestation of an emerging myth: that of Daphne. While other critics have not yet picked up on this complex,<sup>24</sup> in my view it can explain the sense of distance and vegetable metamorphosis of woman. In his study of Daphne, Yves Giraud offers three readings of the myth, of which two work equally well for both Păun and Delvaux. In these two interpretations, the Daphne myth embodies "la représentation du tragique de l'existence humaine, lancée à la poursuite d'un bien qui toujours se dérobe" 'the representation of the tragedy of human existence in its pursuit of an object that always slips away' and at the same time "la 'parabole' de la métamorphose du désir, qui passe des formes sensibles, matérielles, de la beauté extérieure imparfaite et de l'attrait sensuel qu'elles suscitent à une essence immatérielle" ("Daphné" 392) 'the "parable" for the metamorphosis of desire . . . moving away from tangible, material forms, imperfect external beauty and the sensual attraction that it arouses to an immaterial essence' ("Daphne" 283-84). However, in the case of Păun, the Daphne complex becomes more complicated because in the deeper layers of the poem there is a modification of the original myth. If, on the one hand, woman represents in effect this "metamorphosis of desire" that becomes more and more disembodied and is always "elusive," as she

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<sup>22</sup> In *Plămânul sălbatec* women are pictured "cu haine de mătase curgătoare" 'with clothes of flowing silk,' "cu umblețul . . . somnoros" 'with [a] sleep-like walk,' "cu buzele mate" 'with matte lips' (13).

<sup>23</sup> Morar, in reflecting on the barrier that separates poet and woman, alludes to a possible isomorphy with Delvaux's poetics of the feminine, but does not offer a more detailed analysis (*Avatarurile* 235).

<sup>24</sup> Gauthier gives the following explanation of the frigid immobility of women in Delvaux: "C'est en ce qu'elles font corps avec la nature, . . . qu'elles se mêlent au lierre et aux arbres que les femmes de Delvaux sont figées dans une immobilité de pierre" (105) 'It is in that they become one with nature, . . . in that they mingle with the ivy and the trees, that the women in Delvaux are frozen in a stone-like immobility.' Jean Libis, in reflecting on the representations of Leonor Fini, Paul Delvaux and Dorothea Tanning, in regards to this same half-vegetable coalescence, sees in this transformation "la métaphore d'un processus d'hermaphrodisation," a "métamorphose . . . [qui] semble attenter à l'identité sexuelle des personnages" (187) 'a metaphor for a process of hermaphroditization' a 'metamorphosis ... [that] appears 'to violate the characters' sexual identity.'

hides and settles into her own distance, on the other hand, she sometimes manifests not just the desire to establish an erotic communication with the poet (at one point, she shows him her leg and breast) but also a latent aggression: “cu degete de plante agățătoare tăiate din rădăcină / îmi intri în ochi ca în două castele pustii / din care fantomele fug de frica incendiului, / privirile tale se opresc pe panica inimii” (*Marea palidă* 16) ‘with fingers of creeping plants cut at the roots / you enter my eyes like two deserted castles / from which ghosts flee for fear of fire / your glances rest on the panic of the heart.’

The motifs of the aggression of creeping plants, of the “deserted castles” and of the “ghosts” that “flee for fear of fire” reveal an adaptation and updating of the gothic,<sup>25</sup> which also inflects the writings of the other Romanian surrealists, and does so perhaps in an even more profound, dark, and fertile manner than in the work of Aragon or Breton. The meaning of these nightmarish visions can be detected in a latent, unconscious terror of the union of the flesh, of “the fire” of Eros. If the object of the quest is elusive, it is also because, fundamentally, this dynamic of distancing and dissimulation represents the projection of an unconscious desire of the poet. It is perhaps for this reason that in the fourth section of the poem the contact, rendered momentarily possible, is nevertheless a bearer of death, bringing about the troubling reification of the woman’s body and causing her spectral turn.

Here, the eyes of the woman are open wide “cu mult peste marginea lor” ‘way beyond their edges,’ reminding us of the first scene in *Un Chien andalou* (1929), Dalí and Buñuel’s short film which has left more obvious traces in the work of other poets in the Bucharest surrealist group (for example, Teodorescu). Here the scene is less violent: with the help of a “soft” comb, the poet disentangles from the eyes of the woman “animalele galbene de hibernare” (*Marea palidă* 17) ‘animals yellow from hibernation.’ It is right after this mysterious contact that the body of woman withers, is engulfed by darkness, becomes “Stymphalic” and is transformed into an inert object. Now she smells like a “cal despicat” ‘disemboweled horse,’ “o sală de morgă” ‘a mortuary’; her hair transforms into a much heavier and darker water: “o baltă de păr” ‘a slough of hair.’ The reification of the body is revealed in the comparison “în timp ce pe brațe / atât de alb și de clar, / țin corpul tău cât o linguriță” ‘while in my arms / so clear and white / I hold your body the size of a

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<sup>25</sup> As Henri Béhar and Michel Carassou have noted in regards to the repetition of themes and obsessive motifs in Breton, Aragon, and other surrealist poets (crystal, castle, mannequins, mirrors, etc.), “la poétique des ruines, à laquelle ils cherchent un prolongement au XXe siècle, s’accompagne chez ces rêveurs invétérés d’un retour en force des fantômes et des êtres de la nuit, sous leur forme la plus séduisante” (388) ‘the poetics of ruins, which they seek to extend into the twentieth-century, is coupled in the case of these inveterate dreamers with a return, in force, of ghosts and other night creatures in their most seductive forms.’ The two critics assimilate to these female night creatures Aragon’s “Succubi” and Breton’s Mélusine (389-90). Cf. Ion Pop, *Gellu Naum* (52-53).

teaspoon,' and especially in the *in absentia* metaphors: "Pun jos acest obiect, acest minim cadavru" 'I put down this object, this minimal cadaver.' The reified woman is annihilated; she is transformed into a cadaver and an object, an object affected by a phantasy of dismemberment: "în fața oglinzii atârnată-n copac / tai de pe os un obraz / de o grație cam demodată / și unul care e o cutie de lemn / parfumat cu mătase. Pun jos aceste rudimentare obiecte. . . ." (17) 'in front of the mirror hanging from the tree / I cut from the bone a face / whose grace is quite old-fashioned / and another that is a wooden box / perfumed with silk. I put down these rudimentary objects. . . .' Woman's spectral turn reaches its climax here. Did not Salvador Dalí state that "la femme spectrale sera la femme démontable" 'spectral woman will be a woman that can be taken apart' and that "la femme deviendra spectrale par la désarticulation et la déformation de son anatomie" (*Oui* 236) 'woman will become spectral by way of the disassembly and deformation of her anatomy'?

All there is left to do is to preside over a surrealist burial which, despite its enigmatic absurdity, perhaps contains a second meaning. The poet places next to the woman "22 obiecte" 'objects,' which he defines as "obiecte de pompe funebre cu penele negre" 'funereal objects of black plumage.' The list is heterogeneous ("stâlpi si pahare, / pereții de piele, de sticlă în odăi" 'pillars and glasses, / walls made of skin, made of glass in the rooms,' "osul de pește, / batista, briceagul și 30 de lei" 'the fishbone, kerchief, penknife, and 30 lei' etc.), and appears to have no significance in itself (18). And yet, if the poet defines these items as "funereal objects," it is because in his intention they take on a magical-ritual and funereal value. The adversative conjunction introducing the new obstacles between the poet and the woman-- "și totuși între noi e un fulg îmbrăcat în călău / un cadavru cât o mică păpușă – / fără nici o explicație" (19) 'and yet between us there is a plume dressed as executioner / a cadaver the size of a small doll – / without any explanation' reveals that the burial could also have the secret and ritualistic role of reuniting poet and woman, the feminine and the masculine principle. Reintegration fails yet again because between man and woman a doll appears. The doll is, fundamentally, an artificial, inert, and reified simulacrum of woman, its double-shadow more disturbing than the statue's, because in its cadaver-like immobility the doll gives an even more powerful illusion of being alive.

In the poem's last section, the wandering takes place in a still more hallucinated and anamorphic landscape than what we have seen earlier, when we analyzed the motif of spatial disorientation. In this landscape the elements are violently disrupted and are represented during an apocalyptic transition from solid to liquid state. Now the poet with "the lost veil" of the woman's hair still flowing through his fingers ("cu voalul rătăcit din părul tău plutind între degete") is surrounded by "gaping abysses": "în jurul meu prăpastiile și arborii moi / întind între ei o gumă fierbinte, o pastă filantă / pe care cresc arbori, în care se cască abisuri, pe care cresc arbori și așa mai departe" (19-20) 'around me the precipices and limp trees / stretch among them hot rubber, a thready paste / on which trees grow, in which abysses gape, on which trees grow and so on.' As we have seen, a

vision of mineral ossification is superimposed upon this molten, liquefied landscape (“resturi rămase după o lungă furtună” ‘the wreckage of a long storm,’ “cioburi de sticlă” ‘glass debris’ left of the woman’s body, “the skeletons” of the beds). In this antithetical space which is on the one hand reminiscent of the catastrophic and mineralized visions of Max Ernst (*Europe After the Rain*) and on the other hand of Dalí’s liquefied landscapes, woman appears for one last time: “înconjurată de aburul nebuloaselor” ‘surrounded by the vapors of nebulae,’ in her eyes “ploaia dinaintea dimineții” ‘the rain from before daybreak,’ her hair like “un zid dărâmat de salve de gloanțe” ‘a wall ripped by bullets.’ The poet passes her by like a “pale-lipped” sleepwalker, addressing his last words to her. In their apparent hermeticism, these words probably contain one of the keys to interpreting the whole poem:

Așa, în orașul inundat până dincolo de marile oceane,  
pașii tăi curg în tăcere lângă o singură floare în flăcări,  
miști buzele, buzele ca două păpuși perpetuum mobile  
una de culoarea cerului, cu miros de ceasornic, cealaltă  
de culoarea pământului pe care îl lași gol  
absolut gol de orice prezență umană. (21)

Thus, in the city flooded to the other side of the great oceans  
your steps flow silently past a single flower in flames,  
you move your lips, lips like two *perpetuum mobile* dolls,  
one the color of the sky, the scent of clocks,<sup>26</sup> the other  
the color of the earth that you leave empty  
absolutely empty of any human presence.

The vision of liquid fusion is total. The city is “flooded,” the woman’s steps “flow.” Just as Bachelard saw a “Heraclitean” quality in the “dripping” state of Dalí’s clocks located in a viscous time-space, could we not detect a sort of temporal becoming in the landscape flowing by in Păun? Woman, who shines in “the pale sea,”<sup>27</sup> and whose steps “flow” through a molten landscape, intimately participates in aquatic nature and thus becomes the most disturbing face of this Heraclitus-like behavior of matter. This matter is flowing inexorably toward its own demise. If woman, desired and passionately sought after, is at the same time distant and hidden (as shown by the implicit Daphne complex), it is because the poet subconsciously perceives her lethal, Heraclitus-like effect that she bears inside her like a mark. Woman thus coincides with the face of a becoming turned toward death. If the Eros/Thanatos dialectic, as the unity of opposites, manifests itself in woman, it is because she embodies both the object of desire and Thanatos, the latter represented by the lethargic becoming of the waters that bring death.

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<sup>26</sup> Editors’ note: “ceasornic” can mean either “clock” or “passion flower.”

<sup>27</sup> Unless, of course, she is “the great pale one.”



From this perspective, the abstruse comparison “lips like two *perpetuum mobile* dolls” becomes less cryptic. Woman does not embody the Eros/Thanatos dialectic strictly; she also manifests the unity of opposites between immobility (the *rigor mortis* of the doll) and the eternal movement of the waters. This unity of opposites appears in the second half of the comparison, the “two *perpetuum mobile* dolls.” Certainly, these dolls could be considered automatons, but I prefer to think that they are oxymoronic creatures: to the idea of inertia, typical for dolls, an antithetical “perpetual motion,” a Heraclitean πάντα ῥεῖ is added. Whether she is a creature intended for perpetual change or a doll frozen in her glacial *rigor mortis*, woman always appears to represent the image of extinction, which in turn takes on the form of Heraclitean movement (the perpetual motion) or that of petrification (the doll). In fact one of the two lips/dolls is of “the color of sky” and has “the smell of clocks” – clocks that mark the becoming and keep track of the “steps” before death; while the other lip/doll is “the color of the earth,” mineral, inert earth – the earth that woman “leave(s) absolutely empty of all human presence.”

### From “Fluid” Rhythm to “Hypnagogic” Rhetoric

To complete my interpretive journey, I would like to take a closer look at certain stylistic aspects of Paul Păun’s poetry, in particular *Marea palidă*, whose symbolic stratification is reflected in its semantics and its rhetoric as well. Păun’s dream images are always fluid; liquid worlds extend from one line into the next. In my view, the aquatic nature of the poem resides just as much in the technique of the verse as it does in the specific employment of rhetorical figures that favor this perpetual shifting of the images.

In one of his texts dedicated to the theory of the image, André Breton states that metaphors and comparisons “constituent le véhicule interchangeable de la pensée analogique” ‘constitute the interchangeable vehicle for analogical thinking’ and that “si la première offre des ressources de fulgurance, la seconde . . . présente de considérables avantages de *suspension*. . . . [A]uprès de celles-ci les autres ‘figures’ que persiste à énumérer la rhétorique sont absolument dépourvues d’intérêt” (*Signe ascendant* 10) ‘if the former holds the potential to dazzle, the latter . . . presents considerable advantages of *suspension*. . . . [N]ext to these, the other ‘figures’ that rhetoric insists on enumerating are absolutely devoid of interest.’ For Breton, only the metaphor and simile trigger “le déclic analogique” ‘the analogic click’; “le mot le plus exaltant” ‘the most exalting word’ on hand is “le mot COMME” ‘the word LIKE’ because through it “l’imagination humaine donne sa mesure” ‘human imagination comes into its fullest.’ As we have seen, metaphors, both *in absentia* and *in praesentia*, as well as similes, are dotted all through Păun’s two poems, often producing an “analogic click” in all its dazzling strength. Nevertheless, I think there are other stylistic figures that favor the emergence of analogic relationships in these poems. I am referring to the rhetorical figures of

repetition: anaphoras – markedly present in Păun's poem and also characterizing the surrealist poetry of Naum and Teodorescu – as well as anadiplosis and concatenation.

An anaphora is “the repetition of the same first word in successive phrases, clauses, or sentences” (Dupriez, *Dictionary* 39); it is primarily a “technique of coordination and replacement allowing for, and even emphasizing, juxtaposition”<sup>28</sup>; appearing as a repetition, it is characterized by a mechanism of “adjonction . . . répétitive” (Groupe µ 134) ‘repetitive addition.’ According to Bernard Dupriez, the anaphora is also “a natural means . . . of creating accumulations of analogical, antithetical, or heterogeneous elements” (39). In Păun's poems the reader notes repetitions of words or phrases at the beginning of stanzas: “Port între buze viața unui ou. . . . Port încă în degete fumul, cuțitul și floarea. . . . Port acum în mâini o lampă de flăcări” (*Marea palidă* 11-13) ‘I carry between my lips the life of an egg . . . I still carry in my fingers the smoke, the knife, and the flower. . . . I now carry in my hands a lamp of flames’; “Pun jos acest obiect, acest minim cadavru. . . . Pun jos aceste rudimentare obiecte” (17) ‘I put down this object, this minimal cadaver. . . . I put down these rudimentary objects’; but also at the start of verses: “plin de vântul alb al nebuniei, / plin de lamele de săbii ale munților / plin de răsuflarea miilor de oameni / plin de pumni, / plin de furtună” (*Plămânuț sălbatec* 3) ‘full of the white wind of madness, / full of the mountains’ sword blades / full of the breath of thousands of people / full of fists, / full of storm’ (*Plămânuț sălbatec* 3); or: “mai alb decât ele, decât cenușa lor, decât setea, / mai alb decât setea și decât potopul, / mai alb decât fruntea. . . .” (*Marea palidă* 14) ‘whiter than they are, than their ashes, their thirst, / whiter than thirst and flood, / whiter than the forehead. . . .’

Let me also highlight other, albeit more rare, figures of repetition. An anadiplosis consists of the repetition “at the start of a sentence” or verse “of a word from the preceding sentence or verse, as a linking element” (Dupriez, *Gradus* 44)<sup>29</sup>: “alături de buze păstrezi un pahar neatins, / paharul din gura mea. . . .” (*Marea palidă* 16) ‘close to your lips you keep a glass untouched, / the glass from my mouth. . . .’ Concatenation appears when at least two successive anadiploses appear (Dupriez 108): “privirile tale se opresc pe panica inimii / inima mea privește atentă ca o pasăre, / pasărea din mâinile tale moare încet” (*Marea palidă* 16) ‘your glances rest on the panic of the heart / my heart is watching attentively like a bird, / the bird in your hands is dying slowly.’ Finally, let me remark upon an even rarer stylistic figure, epanadiplosis: the repetition at the end of a line of the first word of the same line (163): “și pașii pe care îi pierd se continuă cu umbrele pașilor” (*Marea palidă* 12) ‘and the steps I lose are followed by the shadows of steps.’

The figures of repetition create a rigorous, symmetrical, one might even say “scientific” discourse in which certain ideas must be stressed and confirmed with

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<sup>28</sup> Gérald Antoine, *La Coordination en français*, qtd. in Dupriez 39.

<sup>29</sup> Translation ours.

clarity and insistence, in distinct contrast to the nature of surrealist poetry. The anarchic analogy of the images, coupled with the rigor of this symmetrical structure, generates a considerable shock, provoking, at least in my view, the excitement any reader must feel when reading an authentically surrealist piece of writing. But the deployment of these figures of repetition can also denote grandiloquence and formality; let us consider the language of the Bible, for example. Indeed, in the case of Păun as well one can detect a ritual solemnity, though devoid of any religious overtones. I contend that this ritualistic formality that permeates Păun's poetic language has above all a "hypnagogic" function. The figures of repetition, anaphoras particularly, suggest obsession and at the same time they become "incantations," magical formulae that induce in the reader a fluid state of mind similar to a hypnotic trance. In addition to this obsessive and hypnagogic function that is deeply tied to the fluid and aquatic rhythm of the poems themselves (and thus also to the thematic constellations of water), I would note one last function, also analogic in nature. As stated above, according to Dupriez's definitions, the anaphora is a rhetorical figure that can lead to a "baroque" accumulation of analogical images. Similarly, the other figures highlighted, although rarer, also favor, I argue, automatism and the emergence of analogy. Anadiplosis and concatenation allow poetic images to spring forth from each other centrifugally. Flowing from one verse to another in "liquid" fashion, they embed into the poetic discourse an uninterrupted unconscious flux, amplifying the effect of analogic, automatic associations.

Let me conclude by suggesting that in the work of Păun, beyond the chaotic *nigredo* of a bizarre, magmatic, and antithetical poetic material, the thematic constellation of water engenders a homogeneity that is stylistically reflected in its fluid rhythm and hypnagogic rhetoric. This creative process, which favors the alchemical decantation of deeply layered images and the passage from chaos to matter – from the "hell of objects" to the secondary order of poetic discourse and the abysmal creation of the poem – reveals for the reader, as the poet himself had declared, that "toute transmutation est possible, là où ne sont que les cases d'un seul air. . . ." (*Esprits animaux* 5) 'any transmutation is possible wherever all spaces are made of the same air. . . .'

Translated from the French by Irma Giannetti

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