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Monique Yaari, ed., *“Infra-noir”, un et multiple. Un groupe surréaliste entre Bucarest et Paris, 1945-1947*. Berne: Peter Lang, 2014. 404 pp. Illustrations, appendix, bibliography, and index. \$73.95 U.S. (pb). ISBN 978-3-0343-1762-7.

Review by Cosana Eram, University of the Pacific.

The historical avant-garde was an international community localized in multiple geographical areas, each with its own story, sometimes yet to be told. *“Infra-noir”, un et multiple* is the first volume entirely dedicated to the Bucharest surrealist group, whose narrative interweaves innovative conceptualization, unique artistic experimentation, bilingualism, and immigration. The coordinator of this anthology of critical texts and primary readings, Monique Yaari, professor at Pennsylvania State University, recently directed an issue of *Dada/ Surrealism* devoted to Romanian avant-garde and wrote about the topic in both French and English.[1] Apart from Yaari’s informed introduction and article, together with five other astute theoretical contributions of variable lengths (three approximately fifty pages each), the book contains a remarkable section of facsimile documents from the 1945-1947 period.

Gherasim Luca, Gellu Naum, Paul Păun, Virgil Teodorescu, and Dolfi Trost, all active within Romanian avant-garde circles before World War II, created and produced literary and visual works, as well as exhibitions as a distinct collective entity, which they named The Romanian surrealist group. Its existence *de facto*, including break-ups and disagreements, can roughly be circumscribed to the years 1941-1947. The coordinator’s choice was to focus on their most productive years and to analyze three out of the five authors, Luca, Paon (Păun), and Trost, who individually continued their creative pursuits abroad. Borrowing the latter’s phrase in a letter to Breton, Yaari prefers the name “the Surrealist group of Bucharest” or “the Bucharest surrealist group”, in an attempt to make clear its cosmopolitan aspirations, as well as its common stand against pernicious nationalism or hostility to ethnicity.[2]

In an intentional connection to French surrealism, the practice of bilingualism was key for these artists, who perceived it as a necessary condition of their existence. According to Monique Yaari, French as the language of the Romanian intellectual elite allowed them to communicate with their peers in Paris and reach a wider audience. However, bilingualism was also a source of discord. At least one of them, Gellu Naum, opposed it with an almost mystical attachment to the mother tongue, Romanian. Yet, according to another source, Naum acknowledged that the other members of the group benefited from having their texts translated. Ultimately, they all ended up mastering French.[3] As a side note, it is possible that Naidine Krainic, Trost’s friend of Turkish origin naturalized in France, extensively helped them, although more research is needed regarding her role as muse, liaison, and translator for the group. In fact, Monique Yaari confirms that, according to their published and unpublished works, Paon and Trost systematically and permanently alternated between Romanian and French. In turn, Gherasim Luca comfortably adopted the new idiom and developed a style that earned him the reputation of the “greatest French language poet” in an environment overloaded with masterpieces and experiments.[4]

As we learn in the introduction, the history of the group reveals dramatic aspects. During the time Romania was part of the Axis Powers, a series of laws that undermined various human rights were passed, such as the severe discrimination of Jewish citizens. Within the Surrealist group, three authors were Jewish and all five were leftists. Consequently, apart from Gellu Naum who was drafted, the others were forced into clandestinity. Lacking the opportunity to correspond with their friends abroad, trapped in the south of France waiting for an American visa (which some, such as Jacques Hérold and Victor Brauner, would never obtain) and unable to publish, the members of the group found refuge in covert creative activity.

At the end of World War II, freedom was regained temporarily in Romania. This partial and fleeting state before the installment of the communist regime and the Stalinist cultural policies allowed the surrealists in Bucharest to break their silence for a short while. At an accelerated pace, they self-published books and *plaquettes* at the Infra-Noir printing house and organized an eponymous exhibition, although the echoes of their work were weak. Due to Brauner's intervention, André Breton included the group's collective short text in French, *Le Sable Nocturne*, in the catalogue of the 1947 international surrealist exhibition in Paris. But the Romanian world was changing and remained outside such artistic circles. According to their letters, the surrealists in Bucharest felt isolated, marginal, and geographically unlucky. Their biography registers desperate moments: they all made an attempt to cross the Western border in the winter of 1947-1948, were caught and demanded asylum in Israel, which was initially refused. Luca and Trost finally were able to leave Romania for Israel in 1950, and in 1952 they reached Paris, the home of all intellectual and poetic affinities. In the end, the three authors in the present volume, referred to as "*la trinité*" in Biro and Passron's *Dictionnaire du surréalisme*, lived and died abroad.[5] With minor name spelling changes, Ghérasim Luca stayed in Paris and dedicated himself to poetry and art; D. Trost went to the United States (New York and Chicago); and Paul Paon, who practiced medicine in Romania and kept his artistic activities secret, left in 1961 for Haifa, Israel. Yaari details their activity, the fall-out between Luca and Trost over unclear ideological reasons (with Paon as the occasional, unsuccessful mediator), and individual trajectories. She emphasizes the ethos of friendship that supported their political positions, choices of linguistic/visual pursuits, and international aspirations. Each of the essays in the volume analyzes one or another of the aforementioned aspects.

The first essay by Jonathan P. Eburne, "Comme une érosion unique': les provocations d'*Infra-noir*," discusses the 1946 exhibition which reunited the visual work of Trost, Păun, and Luca, and its catalogue, *L'Infra-Noir: préliminaires à une intervention sur-thaumaturgique dans la conquête du désirable*, which consecrated the representative concept for the group. Eburne contends that its members adopted the practice of "obscurity" with all its connotations, from shadow to hermeticism and negation, as a directive for their aesthetic and political theories. The *Infra-Noir* catalogue is a surrealist object in itself that features no reproduction of works and provides no reference to the organization of the exhibition. Instead, it brings to the fore the experimental practices of the visual and written works of the group, such as new ways of relating to objects, viewed as vibrant, magnetic realities, and an ideological intentionality based on the unity among poetry, love, and revolution. Eburne makes a close reading of a text by Luca from 1947, *Le Secret du vide et du plein*. A critique and parody of Louis Aragon's 1931 poem, "Front Rouge," it takes the shape of an incantatory poem only to turn the rhetoric of the Soviet agitprop-techniques praised by the latter into a glossolalia, revealing stereotypes and clichés.

The second essay is devoted to Ghérasim Luca (born Salman Locker), the most famous member of the group today. Krzysztof Fijalkowski, who translated *The Passive Vampire* into English and has written about Luca before, offers an ambitious bio-bibliographic overview of Luca's work with a focus on his artistic treatment of objects, anti-oedipal theory, language games, and cubomanias. Fijalkowski emphasizes Luca's interest in language games and his "non-oedipal theory" (p. 65). As described in *Inventatorul iubirii*, this philosophical, poetic, and symbolic system allows escape from the castrating tutelage of all fatality inscribed in human destiny because of biological or familial heredity. Luca symbolically detests the "tyranny of oedipal relations" (p. 69) and refuses his predetermined fate, from

birth to death. The manifesto, *La Dialectique de la dialectique*, which he wrote in collaboration with Trost, pleads for a different world order by making an appeal for surrealism to be in a state of permanent change and revolutionary development (“the desire to desire,” hence the essay’s title). In terms of visual innovation, Ghérasim Luca’s art of cubomanias, which apparently resembles the art of the collage, is a key example of his non-oedipal theories as an implicit critique of the supposed objectivity of the world through the destruction of its structural integrity by means of the negation of the negation. In other words, opposite aspects, such as difference/conflict, inside/outside, limit/center, connection/rupture, are already present altogether. Fijalkowski shows that the rigid format of the cubomanias and the indistinguishable nature of their components mark a clear break with the usual practices of the collage.

The problem of knowledge via image was one of the main preoccupations of the surrealist group of Bucharest. Françoise Nicol, the author of the third essay, “Trost ou ‘le plaisir du flotter’...,” examines the theoretical status of the image in the artist’s drawings and establishes comparisons between him and other surrealists, particularly Max Ernst. Trost takes advantage of painting, notes Nicol, in order to explore automatism and objective hazard always with a penchant for madness, love, and eros. Like the other artists discussed in this anthology, Trost lived under the terror of history in a country that he called a “une terre de malheur et de castration” (p. 102). A philosophy graduate, he was preoccupied with Freudian psychoanalysis, which he critiqued in the name of the regressive elements harbored in the diurnal residues still visible in dreams. Nicol notes that *Le Plaisir de flotter: rêves et délires*, Trost’s contribution to the *Infra-Noir* exhibition, and his theoretical text, *Le même du même*, are to be read together as two facets of the same artistic enterprise. *Le Plaisir de flotter* is made up of a series of dreamlike sequences, which evolve into one another and are interceded by scenes of hypnosis. Nicol defines it as an “obscure and contradictory text that martyrizes its readers” (p. 115) but nevertheless takes up the challenge to decipher it, like a cryptographer devoted to her cause. Describing it as a dream-theater with characters that are but simple elusive silhouettes, she pinpoints that eroticism is its leitmotif and interpretive key. Through this interpretive lens, phallic objects, dismembered bodies, the gaze as vehicle of desire, violent movements suggesting arousal, and all sorts of fetishisms reveal themselves as elements that crystallize Trost’s vision.

The fourth essay has a monographic character and focuses on Paul Paon (born as Zaharia Herșcovici) and his triple contribution to the life of the group in Bucharest as painter, poet, and friend. Monique Yaari gives detailed biographical references and background information in order to better portray this mysterious artist who left Romania for Israel a decade after his friends. His poems between 1945 and 1947 read between the lines as his intellectual autobiography. They allude to the historical context of communism that forced a difficult choice between political engagement and artistic activity (praxis vs. poesis). According to Paon, love, poetry, and revolution, the well-known surrealist means to transform the world, were replaced with a “black, conspiring silence” (p. 158) that would paradoxically manifest itself in the loquacious creative idiom of the Bucharest group. Displaying his personal interest in Paracelsus, Paon’s verbal and visual works are permeated by the usual surrealist fascination for alchemy, psychoanalysis, and sexuality. His mixed-media technique, termed “*lovaj*,” by means of a vegetable pun that hints at “love,” is an aesthetic of the fragment(ary) characterized by the placing of three fantasmatic images on a white paper in order to establish among them a formal relation based on the rules of hazard. While he did not engage in theoretical pronouncements like his peers, Paon visually adopted a mode of drawing that is a form of abstract automatism, aligned to surrealist artistic practices.

In the fifth, concise essay, Régine Mihal-Friedman makes an analysis of the Italian film *Malombra* (1942), which was the inspiration for one of the most beautiful collective texts of the Bucharest surrealist group called *Éloge de Malombra: cerne de l’amour absolu*. Starting from the assumption that surrealism always entertained a privileged relation with cinema and providing relevant examples, Friedman gradually unveils the poetic architecture of this prose poem based on lyrical fragments, theoretical statements, and *détournements* from the movie, in itself an accomplished example of the short-lived cinematic style called “calligraphist.” Soldati’s film attracted the group through themes such as the

occult, revolt against authority, and absolute love. In these terms, Mihal-Friedman interprets the text as a visual ready-made and a linguistic *cadavre exquis* at the same time.

The final chapter takes its cue from *Sable nocturne*, a performance meant to represent the contribution of the group in Bucharest to the 1947 International Surrealist Exhibition in Paris. Jacqueline Chénieux-Gendron brings to the fore its marginality in the economy of the event only to highlight its potential importance. Apart from the Romanians Hérold and Brauner, none of the members of the surrealist group of Bucharest were invited to be part of the exhibition. Would the reason be the subtle critique of the surrealist revolutionary methods expressed in their written exchanges with Breton? The author of the article does not venture to answer, but contends that, while absent from the exhibition but present in the catalogue titled *Le Surréalisme en 1947*, the last collective gesture of the Bucharest-based group remains a “*point aveuglé*” for Breton and the other organizers (p. 219). *Sable nocturne* is a game (actually played, as attested in Paon’s writings) that takes place in a dark hall full of erotic forms and *objets fétiches* where the players are supposed to advance blindly in order to explore and be surprised by this “aphrodisiac concreteness” (p. 373). Chénieux-Gendron defines the short four-page description made for the catalogue as an *ars poetica* that contains images of a special inventive force lost in the fluidity of the possible.

After six theoretical *tours de force*, the second part of the volume offers unmediated access to all the manifestoes, theoretical texts, visual works, and correspondence belonging to the artists in Bucharest between 1945 and 1947. Showcasing the most important contributions of the group to surrealist aesthetic practices creates the exhilarating effect of a long overdue, important exhibition.

LIST OF ESSAYS

Monique Yaari, “Introduction: un et multiple au fil du temps”

Jonathan P. Eburne, “‘Comme une érosion unique’: les provocations d’*Infra-noir*”

Krzysztof Fijalkowski, “Ghérasim Luca: ‘le désir désiré’”

Françoise Nicol, “Trost ou le ‘plaisir de flotter’...”

Monique Yaari, “Paul Paon ou le ‘hurle-silence’”

Régine-Mihal Friedman, “Pré-texte à texte: *Malombra* (1942) et son *Éloge* (1947)”

Jacqueline Chénieux-Gendron, “Le Sable nocturne’: point aveugle du livre *Le Surréalisme en 1947*”

NOTES

[1] Monique Yaari and Timothy Shipe, “From Dada to Infra-noir: Dada, Surrealism, and Romania,” *Dada/Surrealism* 20/1(2015), <http://ir.uiowa.edu/dadasur/vol20/iss1/1/>, consulted 28 August 2016. See also Monique Yaari, “Le groupe surréaliste de Bucarest entre Paris et Bruxelles, 1945-1947: une page d’histoire,” *Synergies Canada* 3(2011), <http://synergies.lib.uoguelph.ca/article/view/1468>, consulted 20 August 2016; and Monique Yaari, “The Surrealist Group of Bucharest: Collective Works, 1945-1947” in Anne Quinney, ed., *Paris-Bucharest, Bucharest-Paris, Francophone Writers from Romania* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2012), pp. 95-136.

[2] In an earlier article, she calls it The Romanian Surrealist Group “S.” See Monique Yaari, “Paul Paon’s Sur-surreal Chimera,” *Utopian Studies* 5/1(1994): 108-127.

[3] Rémy Laville, *Gellu Naum. Poète roumain au château des aveugles* (Paris: Editions L'Harmattan, 1994), p. 78.

[4] Gilles Deleuze et Claire Parnet, *Dialogues* (Paris: Flammarion, 1977), pp. 11, 27.

[5] Adam Biro and René Passeron, *Dictionnaire général du Surréalisme et de ses environs* (Frobourg: Office du Livre, 1982).

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