

"I BELIEVE IN A SURREALISM OF THE FUTURE"

A Dialogue between
Petre RAILEANU and Sarane ALEXANDRIAN
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S. ALEXANDRIAN

is one of the important post-war personalities of surrealism. He was expelled from the surrealist movement in 1948 because he supported painters Matta and Victor Brauner in their conflict with André Breton. He is the author of an impressive body of work, 30 titles, including novels, essays, writings about art. Some of these: André Breton par lui-même, Ed. du Seuil, 1971, Le Surréalisme et le rêve, Gallimard, 1974, Histoire de la philosophie occulte, Seghers, 1983, (the Romanian version was published by the Humanitas Publishing House, 1994), Histoire de la littérature érotique, Seghers, 1989. He has published two albums about surrealist painter Victor Brauner: Victor Brauner L'Illuminateur, Cahiers de l'art, 1954, and Les dessins magiques de Victor Brauner, Denoël, 1965.

1. SURREALISM – IS IT UTOPIA?

Mr. Sarane Alexandrian, in your novel Les terres fortunées du songe (The Realms of the Dream), you build a universe, piece by piece: names of people, geography, names of places, everything is made up. Which reminds me of Grains et Issues (Grains and Bran), the book by Tristan Tzara, which I see as a negative utopia. Were the surrealists "utopia builders?" Is surrealism itself a utopia?

S.A.: Perhaps surrealism is a utopia, but I must tell you, I've always opposed the notion of utopia. Especially in my book *Le Socialisme romantique (Romantic Socialism)*, Seuil, 1979. There I was saying that Charles Fourier for instance, who is unanimously considered a utopian, even in academic circles, was nothing of the kind. For the very simple reason that all social ideas we apply today – the minimum wages, the social safety net, etc. – come from Fourier. He proposed these in 1803 to Bonaparte. So I don't see how we can talk about utopia, now that those ideas are put into practice. And there is something else we must notice about Fourier, his huge imagination effort to draw the contour of society in the next centuries. And nobody can say these ideas are not applicable. In my opinion, this notion of utopianism must be seriously dealt with in-depth. I proved in my book we are talking about that the ideas of the other Romantic socialists, such as the followers of Saint-Simon, for example, or the ideas of Etienne Cabet*, the author of *Journey to Icaria* and of the so-called "Icarian communism," all of these have been put into practice in the 20th century. Utopia is a literary genre, a novel showing the potential of a future society, but, in such novels there are always applicable ideas, too. My book *The Realms of the Dream*, which we started out from, is, obviously, a novel that includes ideas from Fourier, apart from fiction and even from poetic extravaganza. Like for instance in erotic relationships, because the female character has several men. This, too, is one of Fourier's great ideas: polygamy. In his view, polygamy is not only applied to men, but to women, too: men must have several women, women must have several men. A complex idea. I explained Fourier's view on love in an Italian publication about him, but in my novel I even applied this conception.

2. "CHANGER LA VIE" (TO CHANGE LIFE)

When I spoke about surrealism as utopia, I was thinking about the desire of the surrealists to change life.

S.A.: Yes, of course. Sure, "to change life" may look like utopia, because there are very many things that must be changed until we finally get to change life. A change not only in attitudes, but also in the social structures. But I'm telling you, it's always the same thing. Utopia means the prepon-

derance of the dream part. And the achievement of this preponderance of the dream is perhaps the basic purpose of human existence. That's why, to me, the word utopia has a pejorative meaning, something like "dreamers who are out of touch with reality." But the surrealists, like Fourier's followers, have proven to be deeply rooted in reality. The surrealists were the only ones who saw the real, who looked into its finest details. Breton in *Communication Vessels* or in *Nadja*, Aragon in *Le Paysan de Paris* (*The Peasant of Paris*) were able to see the finest details of reality, the way not even Zola succeeded in doing. Zola was developing systematically a "catalogue of observations," but he had no direct relationship with reality, the way the surrealists had.

3. VICTOR BRAUNER REJECTING THE EXPULSION OF MATTA...

In November 1947 you published a manifesto entitled Poetry and Objectivity, which made the Breton group unanimously admire you and which helped you move up to the position of spokesman for post-war surrealism. One year later, you were expelled from the movement. What were the circumstances of that expulsion?

S.A.: Those expulsions were part of surrealism. I was deeply involved at the time. I was considered another André Breton, because, at the time we are talking about, he was very active, even virulent in his outspoken positions. But unfortunately, I was "expelled." I put quotation marks on this word because we left of our own accord. It was one of those "family quarrels" which made surrealism incomprehensible to some literary critics. In fact, it all started with the expulsion of painter Matta for a reason that had to do with his personal life: he had an affair with the wife of painter Arshile Gorky. Gorky had just committed suicide in 1948 and it was possible to infer there could have been a connection between his suicide and his wife's affair with Matta, which is not true. Gorky was very ill, he was half paralyzed following a car accident, a fire had destroyed his studio and paintings, it was absolutely wrong to blame it on Matta. Victor Brauner didn't agree with the decision to expel Matta, I opposed it, too, and so did Pierre Mabille. And all this created a drama. Not my opposition, not that of Mabille, but Brauner's opposition. His refusal to endorse Matta's expulsion was regarded as a catastrophe, as a lack of solidarity with André Breton and Benjamin Péret, who had been his friends since before the war. Victor Brauner persisted in his refusal, I took his side, and when I saw there was no chance left for reconciliation, I left the movement with several friends, such as poets Alain Jouffroy, Stanislas Rodansky, Francis Bouvet and a few others. So this break

happened not because we were in disagreement with surrealism as an ideology, but because we didn't agree with this conception of a "group life", which made it mandatory for members to account for their personal life before the others. In their view, whoever was in question had to offer explanations to the others.

4. SURREALISM – "A REVOLUTIONARY POETIC PARTY"

Your answer allows me to pass on to my next question: surrealism has had several such expulsions. The movement worked like a secret society, a conspiratorial one, was André Breton the high patron, a dictator rather than a liberal? Do you see in the way surrealism "functioned" any similitude to the communist party or the directives issued by the Third Communist International?

S.A.: Absolutely. I wrote in my book *André Breton par lui-même*: the surrealist group functioned like a party. A poetic party. But a "revolutionary poetic party". So, inside, there were purges, there was something like a tribunal, the members had to engage in self-criticism, whoever didn't do it was expelled. As far as I was concerned, at that time I was 20, I believed these things were unacceptable. But, not heeding criticism and the fact that it was outmoded, such practice continued. The word "expelled" should be placed between inverted commas because in fact this had to do with members of the surrealist group that rebelled. They were expelled, but in fact they left the movement themselves. For instance, basically the same scenario was applied five years later when Jacques Herold, Patrick Waldberg, Marcel Jean, Henri Pastoureau were expelled. There was a tribunal that summoned you, you had to account for your attitude at a certain time or another, for what you said on that issue or another and if you didn't engage in self-criticism, you had to leave the movement. Later, after I was expelled, André Breton wrote to me, saying he was sorry I wasn't in surrealism anymore, that everything had been a matter of internal discipline. In fact, a great movement like surrealism, he said, has to have cohesion, its members couldn't be allowed to support opinions that were contrary to the general orientation of the movement. And that was perfectly true, we must admit it. But that's no longer valid when it's about literary opinions or secondary matters, or, even more, one's personal life, like in the case of Matta. So, it is a proven fact that the surrealist movement was the first, and I stress this, the first artistic movement that wished to function like a revolutionary poetic party.

5. 6. "VERY SHY TOLERANCE FOR ANARCHY"

When he wrote in 1945 the first history of surrealism, Maurice Nadeau said the ideological choice of surrealism was a "dead end." What do you think about this option?

S.A.: Maurice Nadeau was, I must say this in all sincerity, the greatest enemy of surrealism. In fact Breton considered him its most fervent opponent. Maurice Nadeau obstinately maintained that surrealism should have remained Trotsky-ite till the end of time. And that it shouldn't have moved away from that line. He teamed up with Pierre Naville, who was the representative of Trotskyism in France. Maurice Nadeau was unable to understand that surrealism equally rejected Trotskyism and Stalinism. This position had been clearly expressed in the manifesto called *Rupture inaugurale* (*Inaugural Break*), the first manifesto I worked on as a co-editor. With very shy tolerance for anarchy, this manifesto rejected all the dominant political parties of the time, and Maurice Nadeau felt this was unbearable. This is why in the magazines he published later, *Les Lettres nouvelles*, *La Quinzaine Littéraire*, he denigrated everything that was novelty in surrealism. This bias is regrettable, because it stopped him from seeing that surrealism was a movement undergoing a continuous evolution, even after the war. The great surrealist writers after the war, the poet Alain Jouffroy, Charles Duts, Stanislas Rodansky, a great poet, or Claude Tarnod, known to very few people, but I'll make him famous, or even Yves Bonnefoy, all these great poets have a very particular mentality which is a characteristic trait of my generation and which Maurice Nadeau didn't understand at all. His viewpoint, that surrealism was finished in 1947, is totally reactionary.

In your opinion, was surrealism compatible with the communist ideology or doctrine?

S.A.: I wish to say one thing. For a while I didn't see Jacques Herold, that I was still tied to by friendly feelings. Our relationship had gone sour because of that expulsion business we mentioned, he had signed for our expulsion in 1947, he had agreed to it. When we met again in 1980, he told me: Our error before the war is that we paid too much attention to politics. He had been, like everyone else, very much involved in all the political debates, but now, years later, he thought that had been an exaggeration. In fact all members experienced this "disease of the epoch." Even great men like André Gide, André Malraux got involved. Perhaps "communism" is not the appropriate term, but Marxism, namely Marx, Engels, Lenin, were authorities to them.

7. SURREALISM AND THE ESOTERICA

Mr. Sarane Alexandrian, among your many book, you wrote one entitled The History of the Occult Philosophy, which has recently been translated into Romanian, too. So you know this matter perfectly well: tell me, what were the relations between surrealism and what we call occult knowledge, the esoterica?

S.A.: These relations can be found, paradoxically, even as early as the *Second Surrealist Manifesto* (1929). In that manifesto, surrealism, continuing to affirm its fidelity to the theses of dialectic materialism – which made it an atheist, anti-idealistic movement – pays homage to Cornelius Agrippa, the grand master of the occult philosophy, the man who actually came up with the term occultism. The same manifesto says surrealism is strongly attached to the researches of the alchemists. Which was extremely remarkable. It was for the first time that a poetic and artistic movement identified with the alchemists. Not even Romanticism or symbolism ever claimed such a preoccupation. After the *Second Manifesto*, these esoteric thoughts became permanent. Physician Pierre Mabilie was the theoretician of that tendency and he was a close friend of Victor Brauner's, he took care of the painter when he lost his eye. Pierre Mabilie, who was a professor at the School of Anthropology and a remarkable surgeon, was totally infused with the "great magic". This term had been used by Eliphas Lévi, the founder of modern occultism. Mabilie wrote remarkable texts, like for instance *Egrégories ou la vie des civilisations* (1938, republished by Sagittaire, 1977), or "La Conscience lumineuse," an article published in 1937 in the *Minotaure* magazine and then published again in a book with the same title, and many others, where he has demonstrated that the concept of "high magic" is compatible with science.

8. A CONTRADICTIONARY APPROACH: LAUTRÉAMONT, FREUD AND MARX

Mr. Sarane Alexandrian, Freud, namely psychoanalysis, the esoterica and Marx, namely Marxism, didn't they contradict each other?

S.A.: The more they contradicted each other the more extraordinary the attempt to synthesize them. Jacques Baron said, if I remember correctly, that the names of Lautréamont, Freud and Marx were joined together for the first time in surrealist magazines and texts. This joining was extraordinary. And since we've spoken about utopias, Marx was much more utopian than Fourier, but he was appreciated by the surrealists for his idea of transforming the world. And this is exactly what happened, the world was changed by Marx's ideas, for the worse, but at that time people thought this change

would be for the better. Freud brought in the depth and potential of the unconscious; and Lautréamont was the metaphor, the poetic audacity pushed to the extreme. So, this contradictory approach you signal sought to achieve a synthesis. It wasn't a melting pot. The purpose of this synthesis was to prove an idea: that poetic creation had to work on several planes.

9. VICTOR BRAUNER, THE INITIATED

You wrote two books about the painter Victor Brauner, you knew him very well. What was he like in everyday life? Was he still marked by the event of 1938 when he lost his eye after painting for years paintings that foresaw this? Did Victor Brauner think he was initiated?

S.A.: Victor Brauner was an absolutely wonderful man. Wonderful in human relations. All those who have met him and knew him closely, the most diverse people you could think of, painters or writers like Jean Paulhan, René Char, one of Brauner's closest friends, they were all charmed by his attitude, a mixture of humor and basic anxiety. Because this is important, Victor Brauner was always anxious, he felt threatened all the time in his physical being. And, until 1954-1956, every day, Victor Brauner didn't know where his next meal was coming from. He had a tragic life. Then, suddenly, everything changed. But Victor Brauner, ever since I first met him, was an example not only of a modern painter, who associates the boldest liberties of the painting technique with permanent innovation, but he was also an example of a creator of poetry, of a writer. He even said that every artist had to develop a "personal mythology." As he did. I confess in some of my novels – you mentioned *The Realms of the Dream* – I'm strongly influenced by Victor Brauner. These novels move like some of his paintings, where there is a sacred element – like in his wax paintings, for instance. Victor Brauner was a close friend. I wrote the opening speech 20 years ago for the first retrospective show dedicated to Victor Brauner at Place Vendôme, at the René Drouin Gallery, which attracted a very large audience. But, unfortunately, very little was sold, the way it happened to Max Ernst, at the same time. We were "accomplices in creation", that was our relationship, you can put it that way, and I admired him beyond painting, as well.

10. 11. GHERASIM LUCA: "THE DECOMPOSITION OF LANGUAGE"

How would you define the personality of Gherasim Luca, another close friend of yours?

S.A.: Gherasim Luca was, if I can put it that way, a “spiritual cousin” of Victor Brauner. My first encounter with him was by way of his texts. He was in Bucharest and he sent me everything he had published, because at the time I was the secretary of the surrealist “Central” in Paris. So, I got all the texts printed in Bucharest by Editions de l’Oubli, such as *The Passive Vampire*, *The Inventor of Love* in the Romanian language, a book that Gherasim Luca translated into French just before his death, and a collection of “cubomania”. I was absolutely charmed, and his poem *Passionément* (*Passionately*) impressed me very deeply. Then came 1952. I remember this as if it was yesterday. I was in Victor Brauner’s studio, which had used to belong to Douanier-Rousseau, and I met Luca there. He had just arrived from Romania, after incredible adventures, he had gone via Israel, to be able to reach Paris. He was happy to find me, because, despite the distance that had separated us, he still considered me one of his companions. And it was there that he read to us one of the texts that later made up the book entitled *Héros-Limite*. I was again intensely impressed by the way he worked with the language, by that de-composition of the language which revealed an unprecedented capacity for analogies. Nobody, not even Tristan Tzara had ever done anything of this scope. Tzara went very far in his texts of *Monsieur Antipyrine*, but Luca was even bolder in his approach.

The comparison you make between the two poets reminds me of an assertion by Tristan Tzara: “La pensée se fait dans la bouche” (Thought is done in the mouth), which seems to be very appropriate for the apparently spontaneous aspect of Gherasim Luca’s creation.

S.A.: That’s true, it goes perfectly well with Luca’s work. But, more than Tzara, Luca used the so-called “phonetic kabbala,” or “the language of birds,” a mysterious language. I even remember that once, I was in Victor Brauner’s studio, and Luca said in connection with this unique language experiment: “I’ll go even further, I’ll go beyond the borders of imbecility.” Which meant Luca used in his texts phenomena like aphasia and the language of the mentally retarded. Luca worked up to exhaustion on language. For this reason, in fact, the poet Henri Michaud admired him very much.

12. 13. “POETS HAVE NO PLACE IN SOCIETY ANYMORE” (Gherasim Luca)

What do you think of Gherasim Luca’s suicide?

S.A.: His death gave me a terrible shock. I made the speech at the Père Lachaise Cemetery, where he was incinerated, which gave me the opportunity to talk about the importance of Gherasim Luca’s personality. But what seems to me even more dramatic is what his wife revealed, she told me Luca was afraid of water. This came from his childhood, because his brother got

drowned. And he jumped into the Seine river. I feel this is a sign of maximum despair. In the letter he left behind, he said poets had no place in this world anymore. I don't know if that letter will ever be published, but it's a pathetic testimony. And, speaking of his death, I wish to say more people attended the funeral of Gherasim Luca than that of Baudelaire. According to some contemporaries, 20 people came to Baudelaire's funeral, while the hall of the Père Lachaise crematorium, where Luca was incinerated, was packed. This means Luca had a large audience in France, much more so than other poets. To me, Gherasim Luca is an essential poet of the modern world, of the avant-garde, a poet whose work will endure.

*I'm tempted to consider his death the prolongation of a poetic program, which was both poetic and existential. To him, Life and Poetry were inseparable. A program developed forty years before, when he described the five suicide attempts (in his book *The Dead Death*).*

S.A.: That's absolutely true. *The Dead Death* is, as you say, a text written in 1946. The striking fact is that he translated that book just before he killed himself. After the "five suicide attempts" described there, there it was, the sixth, the definitive one. Indeed, the striking thing with Luca is his continuity. Just like the language de-composition poems in *Le Chant de la carpe*, which are all included in the poem *Passionément*, written in 1945. This continuity is extraordinary, everything supports everything else, the parts are linked together. Luca is a gigantic poet.

14. "I DON'T FEEL I HAVE ANY NATIONALITY" (Sarane Alexandrian)

Mr. Sarane Alexandrian, you were born in Baghdad, two of your best companions in the surrealist adventure, Victor Brauner and Gherasim Luca we just mentioned, were Romanian. Is there a specific issue of the foreigner in the French culture?

S.A.: You see, I don't know what to say, because I don't feel I have any nationality. But I want to tell you something that struck me about Luca, Brauner and Jacques Herold, namely when they wrote to each other, they did it in French, they could have done it in Romanian. I was there only once when Luca and Brauner spoke Romanian, but they did this to say unimportant things. Otherwise, their entire artistic ideology, even their private secrets, everything was in French. Once somebody talked about Luca, saying he was a Romanian poet, and that made him angry. He used to say he wrote in French but he was a universal poet, neither Romanian, nor French. So, you see, I was born in Baghdad, I'm very proud of that, Baghdad was a great capital of the Orient, of the Baghdad Caliphate, but I'm a Parisian. When you live in Paris, you become Parisian. There is a special atmosphere

about Paris, which ties us down to the city. Luca himself was telling me, every time he came back from Brittany, where he went each summer on an island: of course, it was great, but in Paris there is a pulse in the air, a pulse that favors creation. So, you see, we are, first and foremost, Parisians.

15. "JACQUES HEROLD – A PEER OF THE GREAT SURREALIST PAINTERS"

What are your projects now?

S.A.: Oh, enormous. And speaking of Romanians, I'm just writing a book on Jacques Herold, an extraordinary painter, quite remarkable, but who is the least known of the surrealists. Because he was withdrawn, solitary, not an exhibitionist at all. His work is incomparably wealthy and then he had ties with writers like Georges Bataille, Julien Gracq, Francis Ponge, who admired him a great deal. I hope, before the end of this century, to manage to impose Jacques Herold the way he deserves to be known, as a very great painter, the peer of the greatest surrealist painters. Because Victor Brauner is now appreciated the way he deserves, but Jacques Herold hasn't had yet a grand exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art, which he fully deserves. If I reach this goal I'll be happy, because he's a painter that has to be very carefully considered and who has a brilliant future, anyway. Then, I'm writing a collection of short stories titled *Extraordinary Stories*. I'm writing a lot.

16. "I BELIEVE IN THE SURREALISM OF THE FUTURE"

Do you believe surrealism has a future?

S.A.: Yes, certainly. Of course I believe in the future of surrealism. And you know very well surrealism hasn't been replaced. Another movement, like situationism, which attempted to replace surrealism, has proven evanescent, it only lasted for a few years. Plus, there hasn't been any situationist cinema or theater, nothing like the surrealist cinema of Luis Bunuel. So, there has been nothing since surrealism. But I think a movement will emerge in the early 21st century, with its starting point in surrealism, the way surrealism, in its time, relied on Romanticism and symbolism. And I'm convinced that in this new movement my works will be an element of renewal. Because everything I write has its source in a future surrealism, not in the surrealism of the past. The past is magnificent, but as Yves Bonnefoy said in 1947, and his words are still valid today, the surrealism of the future is the truly important one.

17. ISIDORE ISOU AND LETTRISM

What do you think about lettrism, the movement initiated by Isidore Isou?

S.A.: I know lettrism very well, even more, at a certain time I even contested it, because Isidore Isou denied André Breton. But he did it for a purpose, as he himself admitted, those attacks created publicity for him. I contested Isidore Isou, but I'm still friends with his main collaborator, Gabriel Pommerand, however, I regret that now, at the end of the 20th century there is no Isidore Isou. Because he was an extraordinary man and, the important thing was he had ideas. Even if he was fuzzy, even if he denied surrealism for the sake of denial, he was still "an inventive man." And today there is nobody like that anymore. We are in 1994, there is still time for change, otherwise this century will end with a terrible lack of mighty writers. Of mighty creators.

I think we could end our dialogue with these words of yours. Thank you, Mr. Sarane Alexandrian.

*Translated
by Monica VOICULESCU*

NOTE

- * Etienne Cabet (1788-1856), communist theoretician, author of the utopia entitled *Voyage en Icarie*, 1842, a supporter of the omnipotent State. Several failed attempts to establish a colony according to his model in Texas and Illinois, 1849.

