
Ghérasim Luca

THE PASSIVE VAMPIRE

WITH AN INTRODUCTION ON THE
OBJECTIVELY OFFERED OBJECT

a found portrait
and
seventeen illustrations

translated and introduced by Krzysztof Fijałkowski

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If the name Ghérasim Luca remains known only to a few (and almost to no one outside France and Romania) then it is tempting to believe that this is no more than his wish. Born of a disappearance — at the time of his first publication the writer chose his new name from an obituary notice — dedicating much of his work to conjuring the void at the heart of language and of existence itself, and consigned to a wilful absence in his chosen death, Luca's presence quickens like a magic cipher that appears and fades again before anyone can reread its handwriting.

On February 9, 1994, Luca wrote to his companion to tell her that he was going to throw himself into the Seine. An extraordinary text written in 1945, *La Mort morte* (Dead Death), had already announced the fragile dialectic between life and its negation: an account of five suicide attempts, each accompanied by a farewell note and an automatic text written during the act. Yet somehow death is the last thing one thinks of when reading through the small pile of incandescent books he left behind. That so much of Luca's writing invokes silence, disappearance, and absence would seem to suggest that he was searching for the

very means to cheat despair, for ways to reinvent love, language, the world and a poet's place in it.

More than a decade later, Luca's work seems increasingly precious, not only as a missing piece of the history of international surrealism – that of the Romanian Surrealist Group (1940-47) – and as a hidden precursor for several elements of contemporary thought (notably Deleuze and Guattari's *Anti-Oedipus*, prefigured over a quarter of a century earlier by Luca's "non-oedipal" theories), but also as a fixed marker for the questions asked today by those wishing to situate themselves in the continuing stream of a critical surrealist thought and against those demoralising currents with which the new century, too, is awash. Luca and Trost's *Dialectics of the Dialectic* (1945) addressed this question in a tone that confronted desperation with defiance:

The inexhaustible diversity of the means of cremation at the disposal of the enemies of the dialectical development of thought and of action, and the oceans of blood which bear witness to the current cessation of objective evolution, will never make us avert our eyes, even for a moment, from the red thread of Reality.

Dialectics of the Dialectic was the capital text (albeit a divisive one) for the Romanian Surrealist Group, whose core

comprised the writers Ghérasim Luca, Gellu Naum, Paul Paun, Virgil Teodorescu, and Dolfi Trușt, and with links to the painters Victor Brauner, Jacques Hérold, and Jules Pérahim. Formed in the wake of the outbreak of hostilities in 1939 but unable to publish or exhibit during the war years, which had already been preceded by a period of increasing censorship in Romania, the group nevertheless led an active covert existence, the direction it took both extending and giving a radical slant to the primarily French surrealism of the 1930s. As such, their activities suggested, for example, the confrontation between the poetic rigour of André Breton and the hysterical extremism of Salvador Dalí at a time when the Paris group itself had abandoned attempts to resolve these divergences. A distress call from a band of poets marooned in Eastern Europe, *Dialectics of the Dialectic* affirmed unshakeable fidelity to Breton, dialectical materialism, and objective chance while also having the temerity to warn the international movement of the dangers of becoming just another artistic style. It proposed instead a reinvention of the surrealist imagination: a critical approach to dreams, the eroticisation of the proletariat, the poetic appropriation of quantum physics, and the perpetual re-evaluation of surrealism through the negation of negation.

One senses that Luca was a key figure in these developments, and his own contributions to the group's direction were amongst the most interesting. As a teenager he had already been a member of the confrontational Alge group (1930-33), and with the Bucharest avant-garde becoming increasingly fascinated with surrealist ideas, Luca accompanied Naum to Paris in 1938 to establish contact with the French surrealists. On the declaration of war, the pair was obliged to return to Bucharest, but they were now committed to continuing surrealist activity, even in clandestine form.

Luca's writing of this period, often in French, alternates polemic with delirious narrative. *The Inventor of Love* from 1945 is an exposition of non-oedipal theory, advocating the paroxysm of love and sexuality as the means to overcome oedipal oppression. The shorter text *I Love You* (1942) reads like a detective's fingertip search of a bedroom, a single sentence capped with a question mark in which objects gradually impose themselves as the mirrors and the sorcerers of a lover lost amid the dust. Projects such as his "cubomania" collages, on the other hand, propose a graphic equivalent to this reinvention of the world by cutting an image into squares and reassembling them, as if once again the simplest theoretical techniques should be taken to their extreme conclusions.

Luca left Bucharest for Paris in 1952. While maintaining close contacts with associates of the Parisian surrealist group such as fellow Romanians Brauner and Sarane Alexandrian, he nevertheless chose to follow a more solitary, secretive path. His writing, now more clearly poetry rather than prose, became more spare and hermetic, following Raymond Roussel and Michel Leiris in pursuit of the hidden tracks of the French tongue through verbal games, stammerings, and the dismantling of words, as though to dissolve and recast the very elements of language and meaning:

elle est bien morte la mort
la mort folle la morphologie de la
la morphologie de la métamorphose de l'orgie
(*La Contre-création*, 1953)

Such untranslatable poems enlist a "verbal alchemy" to conjure up and celebrate the presence/absence of the loved one (*Aimée à jamais*), to confront the threat of nuclear catastrophe (*La Clef*), to question how to live in the face of the world's despair ("How to get out without leaving?" he asked), or to dialecticise the void of death (*Autres secrets du vide et du plein*). Compelling performances and recordings were made of some of these works; Gilles

Deleuze announced Luca as "the greatest French poet." With an intensity and seriousness that suggest that such poetry will eventually replace what today we call philosophy, Luca's words commanded the silencing of silence:

If it is true, as is claimed
that after death man continues
a phantom existence
I'll let you know

(La Mort morte, 1945)

The present volume, though it represents a mere fraction of Luca's earlier work, is considered central to his thought, not only as the culmination of his journey into surrealism throughout the 1930s, but as a substantially more elaborate and extended text than most of the writings by the Bucharest group of that period. Published in 1945 by the fictitious (and significantly named) Éditions de l'Oubli, supposedly in Paris – in fact, of course, in Bucharest – *Le Vampire passif* announced a print run of only 460 copies plus another 41 in a deluxe format. Though examples seem to have circulated with reasonable liberty in France during the following decade, its rarity until its reissue by José Corti in 2001 had made it something of a lost legend within

surrealist literature, rarely referred to and almost never seen other than in jealously guarded private libraries.

But despite its status as a singular, in places even delirious text, there is much in the tone and ideas of *The Passive Vampire* to situate it firmly within the traditions and canon of surrealist writing. Stylistic homages and direct references to Sade, Huysmans, or to clinical textbooks, for example, are consistent with the interests of French surrealist authors. And as the book progresses, its deranged logic, its lurching from a frantic cataloguing and collaging of irrational ingredients to a dispassionate, even scientific precision, and eventually to the transparent borrowings from unacknowledged sources, point to Lautréamont's *Chants de Maldoror* – perhaps the single most cherished text among the first generation of surrealists – as its black genie. Indeed, the appeal to the archetypal figure of the vampire probably owes more to the manic Gothic of *Maldoror* than to the currency of popular legends from Luca's part of Europe.

At the same time, however, *The Passive Vampire* is also a meditation on the writings of the French surrealists themselves, and in particular André Breton's, whose books such as *Mad Love*, *Communicating Vessels*, and *Nadja* (specifically referenced in these pages) stand as ghost readers for Luca's text. Its grave tone, its adoption of a first-person confessional

that insists on narrative as fact, however much *crédulity* is strained (I personally remain convinced that everything in this book did indeed happen); its meticulous accounts and dissections of the smallest events, supported with photographic evidence, and the pursuit of a love that might also be a form of haunting, all recall Breton's signature style, and it is to the absent poet that much of the book seems dedicated.

Of course, the recurring themes of an encounter between psychoanalysis, psychosis, and the object – explored in the form of a game of “Objectively Offered Objects,” which serves as a disorienting prologue to “The Passive Vampire” and then infects that text with its secret exchanges – would all appear familiar to readers of the French Surrealist Group's journal of the early 1930s, *Le Surréalisme au service de la Révolution*. In its pages Salvador Dali first masterminded the game of “Symbolically Functioning Objects”: fragile constructions of often everyday found items put together apparently at random by the game's participants and then subjected to analysis. The objects of *The Passive Vampire*, photographed by Théodore Brauner (brother of Victor), seem to have been lost or abandoned on Luca's emigration from Romania, but both their documentation and their scrupulous interpretation clearly situate them within

the category of the "surrealist object" that played such a prominent role in surrealism from the 1930s onwards.²

Just as Paris is a principal character of so many French surrealist texts, Bucharest is curiously present in *The Passive Vampire*. But the Bucharest of late 1941, when the book was first written, has a very different status for its author. Most obviously, it is a city under effective occupation, controlled by the pro-Nazi Iron Guard whose rise to power in autumn 1940 (the period when at least some of the action described in Luca's narrative took place, in particular a major earthquake) signalled a definitive end to the distinctive avant-garde activity of the already repressive 1930s. Luca's membership of that avant-garde (his writings had even earned him a brief spell in prison) and above all his status as a Jew, would have made his position doubly precarious in a city that herein feels poised on the brink of disaster. Luca, like all surrealists, hated any idea of national identity, but clearly he detested Bucharest and its inhabitants as well. Forced by the conflict to leave France, an expulsion he likely experienced as a kind of trauma, his heart nonetheless remained there; in February 1940 he wrote to Jacques Hérold that "not for a moment can I forget that I am no longer in Paris. It is my one obsession, and it sits well with my persecution mania."³

That Luca should be writing to a Romanian 'friend in French, as seems to have been standard practice among Romanian surrealist émigrés, is also significant. While French acted as *lingua franca* among intellectuals across much of Central and Eastern Europe in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the adoption of it by the Bucharest surrealists of the 1940s signals not only a deliberate abandoning of the "native" tongue, but that their intended audience remained above all the French Surrealist Group (even if the latter's dispersal on the four winds meant they would be in no position to hear these messages, let alone reply).

If in 1941 Luca is already writing letters to friends in French, it seems reasonable that his published texts, too, would be composed directly in the language rather than translated, and this poses several issues for the translator of *Le Vampire passif*. On the one hand, certain phrases feel a little stiff, their tone at times perhaps still stretching for the rhythm of the library of French books Luca must have had at his bedside (literally or figuratively, since he hints here at having to leave it behind in France) with a formality befitting the challenging stare one sees repeatedly in photographs of him. On the other, Luca's constructions tend to remain simple, unambiguous at the level of grammar even

when their implications are puzzling, or when they are piled pell-mell one on another. Words seem to be chosen and placed quite deliberately, sometimes in unusually long sentences, with a vocabulary of concrete expressions that includes, for instance, a number of unfamiliar medical or cabalistic terms: the poetry of Lautréamont's *Poésies*, not the allusive lyrical imagery of Paul Éluard, even when the book slides from description to mania and then into a frenzy of language. I have therefore chosen wherever possible to opt for the most direct, literal translations, respecting constructions and syntax, thinking that any shifts in form over the course of the book should be seen as both integral to the original and perfectly deliberate on the author's part.⁴

This translation has been a long time coming, a process started perhaps on the day in November 1988 when I first met Ghérasim Luca himself to talk about the events of this book that now seemed powerfully remote from its author and was to become something of an obsession for me. I could not, however, have brought it to fruition without the precious contributions of several people. Firstly, the help and advice of Guy Plandre, whose devoted knowledge of both Luca and his work, as well as whose corrections of early drafts of the translation have been invaluable. Howard Sidenberg's commitment to the project for

Twisted Spoon Press, and his patience with its pace, have been unfailing. Our grateful thanks, too, go to Fabienne Raphoz and Bertrand Fillaudeau at José Corti for their support and advice. Finally, though, the two individuals closest to Ghérasim Luca have lent this work their blessing, their guidance, and their singular experience: Micheline Cati in Paris and Antonia Rasicovici in Saint Louis, and it is to them that this translation is dedicated.

KRZYSZTOF HJALKOWSKI
2008

THE OBJECTIVELY OFFERED OBJECT



Ghèrasim Luca revealed by objective chance (found portrait)

My few experiences of an obsessional and delirious contact with certain objects – the determination of chance having inexorably led to their encounter or construction – have given me the opportunity to discover a new object of knowledge to add to the ranks of known objects (dream objects, symbolically functioning objects, real and virtual, mobile and mute, phantom and ready-made objects),¹ a new objective possibility for resolving dialectically the conflict between interior and exterior worlds, an experiment the surrealist movement has made its *raison d'être* since the First Manifesto. A game with a pronounced megalomaniac character was the origin of my encounter with a new object projected by desire, one that threw a fascinating and terrible light on the internal life of humankind. The game, during which my friends and I discovered a symbolic form of expression with which to oppose a general persecution mania, consisted of a reciprocal bestowal of decorations, allowing us the

simultaneous pleasure of giving and of receiving, a pleasure which the inmate of the Central Psychiatric Hospital who had given us the idea for the game had achieved by the partial means of self-decoration. In creating these decorations, the first objectively offered object (O.O.O.) was produced. Naturally, the act of bestowing decorations and the limited psychic drives relating to it are of little importance compared to the limitless psychic motivations connected with the far-reaching act of giving. Using the decoration as a fixed point of departure, the offered object is able to blossom in all its dynamic and multiple complexity.

For a found or made object to be transformed into an offered object, and for it to be able to change its nature in line with the new relationships established in the interior life of the individual seeking a new balance between the internal and external, the pretext to this transformation must have an interpretative value that is, if not always negligible, at least very limited. The offering of an object might have as its setting the pretext of a decoration, or a celebration, or some other external and circumstantial accident, just as the manifest life of a dream uses diurnal remnants and random internal and external stimuli to provide the sleeper a framework of no interpretational value within which the action of the dream can unfold. All that is left

as the essential and determining element in the dream, as in the act of offering an object, is desire seeking fulfillment within this setting-pretext with a view to its hastening transformation into the desire's reality.

But this is not the only technical resemblance between the elaboration of a dream and the offered object. The creation of objects and their bestowal upon someone who has been rigorously selected through the symbolic nature of these objects establish between individuals relationships founded on an active collective unconscious, which until now only dreams have set in a workable mechanism common to us all. In turn poetry, which at a certain moment Lautréamont proposed in anticipation of this supremely lyrical phase,¹ brings the automatic structures of this mechanism within our grasp. The offered object allows the introduction of this active collective unconscious into conscious and direct relationships between individuals, relations that even an elementary interpretation would illuminate to be as subversive, strange, and revealing as those of dreams.

In today's society, the offered object bears no qualitative relation to the gift. The gift is an object that is bestowed only after having been stripped of its objective

¹ "Poetry should be made by all. Not by one."²

erotic character. Its emotive force is neutralised by its standardisation, which has allowed the bourgeoisie to thwart the differentiation of individual tendencies and thus offer one more argument in support of contemporary morality, which is presented as the only all-encompassing morality possible.* Flowers and chocolates have virtually become the calling cards of disinterested love and the paying of one's respects. The gift of a flower, which might be treated as a very powerful object of aphrodisiac knowledge, becomes within the confused and banal mechanism to which present society assigns it a neutralised, commonplace object in the world of external things. The analysis of the gift of a flower is impossible in most cases, since this choice comes from habit and a resigned submission to reality. Because offered objects deny this reality-obstacle, and oppose it in a conflict that favours desire, they are subject to the damaging discipline of censorship. The offered object retains the bizarre appearance of the dream image but, like dream images, it will not hide its latent and determining content from interpretative analysis.

A greater number of fortuitous encounters can be

* Bourgeois love, practised within idealised forms, runs from the useless engagement present in the useful and costly wedding gift via the two quantitative phases of the same sentimentalism.

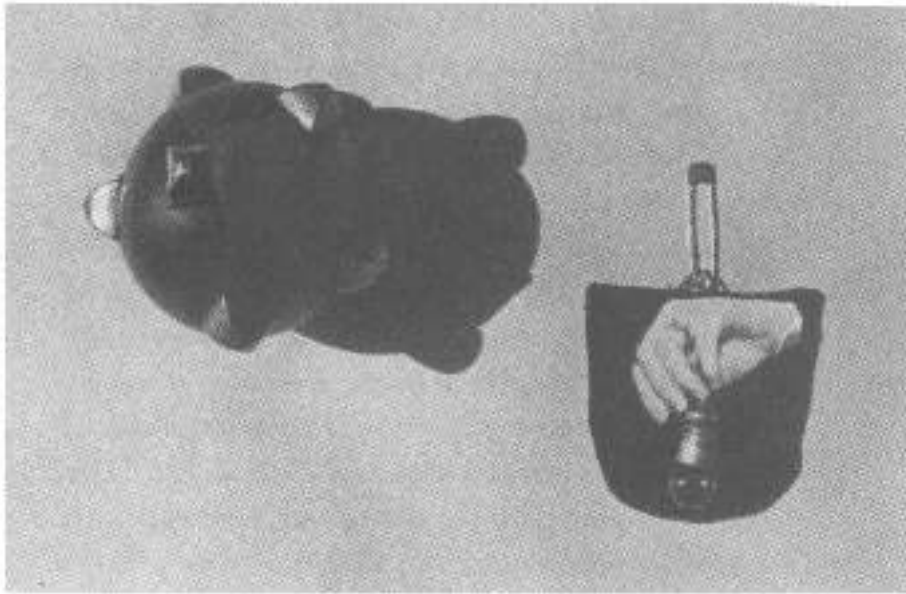


Fig. 1 Diurnal and Nocturnal Displacement

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