

# Demonic Surrealism in Bucharest: Black Magic, Gothicism, and Nihilism in Gherasim Luca's *The Passive Vampire* (1941-45)

Will Atkin

You who, like a knife thrust,  
entered my cringing heart;  
you who, strong as a troop  
of demons, came, gaily adorned,

To my prostrate spirit,  
to make of it your bed and your kingdom;  
Wretch to who I am bound  
as the convict to his chain. . . .

- Charles Baudelaire, "Le Vampire," *Les Fleurs du mal* (1857)  
(transl. Carol Clark)

I sing scream stammer  
the light clothes of lead  
the harrowing burden of the vampire  
the desert white legs  
and the tall tapered black coffins  
which are so many reasons to live.

- Léo Malet, "Vie et survie du vampire" (1943) <sup>1</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> All translations in this article are by the author unless a published translation is cited.

That a new branch of the international surrealist community sprung up in Bucharest in the midst of the near-total meltdown of Romanian society during the Second World War is a fact which is as ripe for scholarly inquiry as for novelistic adaptation: the delectably gothic image of the artist or poet at work in a burning room and the affirmation of the old adage that adversity begets creativity.<sup>2</sup> The Romanian surrealist group, active during and immediately after the Second World War, is increasingly being recognized as a crucial counterpart to the surrealist movement in France. Brief as its existence was, and trying as its circumstances were, the Romanian surrealist group mounted an incredibly rich theoretical response to pre-war French surrealism, which it ultimately outgrew and diverged from on account of Romania's wartime isolation and unique historical circumstances. Drafted at the height of their activity, in the early years of the Second World War, the impassioned, delirious, macabre offerings of Gherasim Luca's book *Vampirul pasiv* (*The Passive Vampire*) constitute one of the principal markers of the Romanian group's innovation and idiosyncrasy.

The surrealist movement had found a platform in Romania relatively early on via the journal *Unu*, which featured the writings of André Breton, Paul Éluard, and Louis Aragon, and published the works of Yves Tanguy and other surrealist artists. The future Romanian surrealists Luca, Gellu Naum, Paul Păun, Virgil Teodorescu, and Dolfi Trost had all been avid readers of *Unu*, and subsequently established their own avant-garde journal, *Alge*. After hearing first-hand of the French surrealists from fellow Romanian Victor Brauner, who had joined the French group in 1933, Luca and Naum eventually decided to follow his lead and move to Paris. They arrived in the winter of 1938, and over the ensuing months they met various members of the group, including Breton. Their time in France was ultimately short-lived, and they returned to Bucharest in the autumn of 1939 at the outset of the Second World War.

Luca's arrest at the Romanian border on his return journey to Bucharest was an early indication of an altogether different environment that awaited him in his native city. Luca was arrested for being Jewish, and was only released on account of his status as a war orphan (his father had died during the First World War).<sup>3</sup>

---

<sup>2</sup> The early gestation of ideas towards this article benefited from discussions with Gavin Parkinson and Krzysztof Fijalkowski, and its final presentation is indebted to the feedback and recommendations of the anonymous reviewers of *Dada/Surrealism*. Research towards this article was supported by funding from the Arts and Humanities Research Council, and its development for publication has been supported by funding from the Leverhulme Trust.

<sup>3</sup> For more detail on this incident, see Răileanu *Gherasim Luca* 96.



Figure 1: Unknown Photographer, *Members of the Iron Guard marching along Piața Revoluției*, 1940. © Mary Evans / Sueddeutsche Zeitung Photo.

Though not directly implicated in ground warfare, wartime Romania was anything but a safe place to be at the turn of the 1940s. A year after Luca's return, in September 1940, Ion Antonescu rose to dictatorial prominence, and the violently anti-Semitic, right-wing political faction known as the Iron Guard achieved mainstream authority in an uneasy alliance with the new leader (fig. 1). This coalition, which quickly pledged its allegiance to Nazi Germany and the Axis powers (fig. 2), created an extremely hostile environment for Romanian Jews like Luca. Known Jews were routinely harassed and assaulted in public, and in the numerous pogroms launched against Jewish communities people were raped, tortured, and murdered, with many businesses and synagogues looted or destroyed.

In the wake of the war, Luca wrote to Brauner of his nerves being left in an "unbearable state", describing how he suffered from "the blackest anxiety" after living through these horrors (Brauner 216). His private comments intimate the genuine peril that he experienced during the war, at a time when his very existence hung in the balance. Allan Graubard has commented that "[a]s a Jew and a surrealist, the strikes against [Luca] were immanent. If caught, he would have faced execution or virtual enslavement in a work gang or a concentration camp" (46).



Figure 2: Unknown Photographer, *The War Ministry in Bucharest decorated with portraits of Adolf Hitler, King Michael I, Ion Antonescu and Benito Mussolini*, 1941. © Mary Evans / SZ Photo / Scherl.

John Galbraith Simmons has described this period of Luca's life as a phase of "suspended animation"; such was the immanence of disaster or death (103). And yet, against all odds, the war marked one of the most productive periods of Luca's career. Among a whole catalogue of other now little-known texts, he wrote *The Passive Vampire*, *The Praying Mantis Appraised*, *The Inventor of Love*, *The Dead Death*, *I Roam the Impossible*, and *Dialectics of the Dialectic* (all published in 1945), which have collectively become the most celebrated literary works of Romanian surrealism. Throughout these texts there are continued references to demons, Satan, and black magic, which combine with Luca's evolving reflections on the surrealist object.

*The Passive Vampire* is the earliest and arguably the richest of these texts. Though not published until 1945, it was completed by November 1941, and Luca's writing of the book spanned what was undoubtedly the most violent period in Bucharest's wartime history — bearing witness to the Legionnaire's Rebellion of January 1941, when the Iron Guard's political suppression by Antonescu boiled over into three days of rampant violence. The barbaric, unchecked nature of the Iron Guard's campaign of bloodshed and slaughter had led to Antonescu's forcible dissolution of the group by the middle of January 1941. But as the Iron Guard's reign was in its death throes, enraged by Antonescu's restrictions, the group launched a mass riot and pogrom that plunged Bucharest into mayhem between the 21st and 23<sup>rd</sup> January. Along with 30 soldiers loyal to Antonescu, 125 Jews were murdered in total, and as many as 1,360 Jews are estimated to have been directly

affected by the violence and plundering. The violence of the rebellion was extreme. One group of Jews was abducted by members of the Iron Guard and taken to a local slaughterhouse, where they were tortured and hung from meat hooks. Amidst the carnage, four synagogues were set ablaze.

Even after the Iron Guard had been disbanded by Antonescu in 1941, Jews were still not safe from persecution. Only five months after the Legionnaire's Rebellion one of the worst pogroms of the entire war was carried out at Antonescu's command in Iași, in June 1941, in which many thousands of Jews were murdered. The systematic extermination of Romania's Jewish population continued at the hands of Antonescu's troops and German forces throughout the course of the war (Ioanid 51-59, 86). While the real terror of this period of Romanian history is not explicitly manifest in *The Passive Vampire* as literal historical detail, it permeates numerous passages of the book in their residual atmospheres of violence, despair, and tension.

Despite these dire circumstances, Luca remained steadfastly committed to his surrealist researches throughout this period and regarded *The Passive Vampire* as a direct extension of the movement's investigations of the 1930s. It was, more specifically, the surrealist object to which Luca remained attached and committed. In the midst of widespread poverty, stagnant local industry, and the threat of persecution at the hands of the local authorities, the surrealist object apparently presented itself to the Romanian surrealists as a form of artistic output that could transgress the immediate circumstances of the conflict. Ever since the *objet trouvé* had entered the frame, the surrealist object had become synonymous with the kind of cheap trinkets and oddities that could be bought in a flea market or a bric-à-brac shop: precisely the kinds of items that remained unaffected by the harsh conditions of the war. By implication of this co-existence with everyday things, the surrealist object was also unassuming and nearly imperceptible to the prying authorities who might otherwise have recognized Luca's artistic practice as non-conformist. Krzysztof Fijalkowski has described Luca and the wider Bucharest surrealist group of Gellu Naum, Paul Păun, Virgil Teodorescu, and Dolfi Trost as having been consigned to strict "clandestinity" during the war period, and the object was in these terms the perfect cover for their surrealist activities ("Ghérasim Luca").<sup>4</sup> In this light, the continued relevance of the surrealist object in the murderous streets of wartime Bucharest should perhaps not be so surprising. What is surprising, however, and indeed entirely novel in surrealist discourse on the object, is the supernatural role the object came to play for Luca as a vessel of black magic and demonic communion.

*The Passive Vampire's* multivalent aspects as, in Petre Răileanu's words, a "treatise of demonology" and "protocol of magic" single it out as unique within

---

<sup>4</sup> All quotations from this essay are taken from the original English manuscript, courtesy of Krzysztof Fijalkowski. Consequently, all references to this text within this article are not paginated. The published French translation of this text is listed at the end of the article.

the surrealist literary canon (“Le vampire passif”).<sup>5</sup> This article seeks to outline the conceptual genesis and revolutionary basis of the book’s prevailing themes of black magic, Gothicism, and nihilism. Building upon the rich and growing body of scholarship on Luca and the Romanian surrealists, the article’s discussion ultimately strives to capture the singular and distinct theoretical position that the group arrived at during the Second World War, which is framed here in terms of a “Demonic Surrealism”.

### **Familiar and Unfamiliar Terrain in *The Passive Vampire***

*The Passive Vampire* was finished on 18 November 1941, and we can infer that the events Luca refers to had taken place within a year or so of its completion (Fijalkowski, “From Sorcery to Silence” 626). In both format and content, *The Passive Vampire* was closely aligned with the established tradition of surrealist literature as it existed by the close of the 1930s. Having originally been written in Romanian as *Vampirul pasiv*, Luca then translated the text into French, published as *Le vampire passif*, thereby connecting it to the rich tradition of Francophone surrealist literature. As Răileanu notes, “remaining connected to French surrealism and to the international movement it had generated, by means of the French language, was for the Bucharest group a condition necessary to its existence” (“Le vampire passif”). The text itself follows a loosely autobiographical, narrative format, which Fijalkowski has compared to the “theoretical-autobiographical testimonies” given by Breton in *Nadja* (1928), *The Communicating Vessels* (1932), and *Mad Love* (1937) (Fijalkowski, “From Sorcery” 626). Moreover, the book was illustrated with black and white photographic plates (photographs taken by Théodore Brauner, Victor’s brother), which were arranged in a format that was also closely reminiscent of those seminal works by Breton.

*The Passive Vampire* is divided into two sections: the first half of the text is wholly devoted to a theoretical analysis of the object under the heading “The Objectively Offered Object”; and the object remains ever-present in the narrative which ensues in the second half of the text, which takes the main title, “The Passive Vampire.” Over the course of the book, Luca gives an ostensibly paranoid autobiographical account of a series of auspicious events and seemingly predetermined relationships in his social life which all revolved around the central figure of the object. These episodes are threaded together by interconnected themes of erotic desire, “objective chance,” and magic. Luca’s gathering of these particular themes around the object already had a strong precedent in surrealist literature. At the time Luca had his last direct contact with the surrealist group in Paris, in 1939, the most prominent theoretical commentary on the surrealist object

---

<sup>5</sup> All quotations from this essay are taken from its online iteration, which is listed and linked at the end of this article. Consequently, all references to this text within this article are not paginated.

was Breton's *Mad Love* (1937), in which he had been similarly concerned with desire's mysterious influence over everyday events. In terms that are already close to Luca's flat acceptance of magic, Breton's account of the *objet trouvé* in *Mad Love* was tantamount to a vindication of the pseudo-psychoanalytical, pseudo-supernatural mechanism of predestination manifest in the principle of objective chance according to which, through a theoretical inversion of coincidence, worldly events are determined in an entirely unsolicited, uncontrollable manner by hitherto unacknowledged, unconscious desires (the psychic life of the individual thereby having a fundamental, determining influence upon the shape of the world, rather than merely being superfluous to their environment). Breton's presentation of objective chance in *Mad Love* might be regarded as the point of departure for the magical influences Luca outlines in *The Passive Vampire*, but distorted in such a way that the object itself becomes privy, in Luca's account, to these hidden pathways of desire (explained further on). As in *Mad Love*, many of the objects in *The Passive Vampire* are stumbled upon in the streets, in flea markets, or in junk shops. At one point, for example, Luca relays his discovery of a discarded wooden spool on the streets of Paris (*Passive Vampire* 41) in an episode closely analogous to Breton's famous discovery of a wooden spoon in the Saint-Ouen flea market in *Mad Love* (28-38).

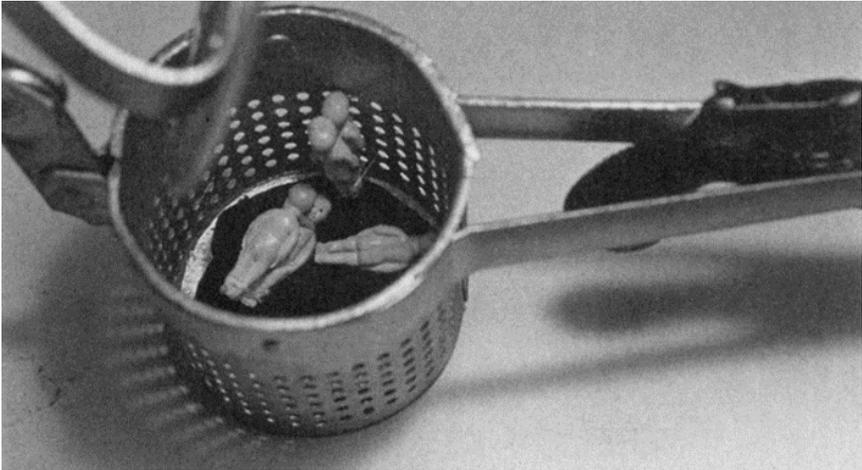


Figure 3: Gherasim Luca, *The Statue of the Libido*, photographed by Théodore Brauner, c.1941-45, as published in *Le vampire passif* (Les Éditions de l'oubli, 1945). Image courtesy of Twisted Spoon Press. © ADAGP, Paris and DACS, London 2022. © Micheline Catti-Ghérasim Luca.

Directly inspired by *Mad Love*, Luca's objects in *The Passive Vampire* are closely bound up in the politics of objective chance: manifesting a network of mysterious references and signals that announce the powerful influence of unconscious desire

over his daily life. In one of the most captivating passages of the text, for example, Luca relays how three object assemblages that he made on 9 November 1940 (each compiled from found materials) corresponded to his unconscious desire to experience an earthquake (that he later endured that night at 4 A.M.) (*Passive Vampire* 56). Writing after the event, he realizes that the figurines of “sodomised children” contained in the object *The Statue of the Libido* (fig. 3) were predestined to “mak[e] love, on their own or in pairs” under the force of the “supreme rocking” of the earthquake (65-66). Similarly, he suggests that the object *The “No”* (no surviving image) had anticipated the earth’s motions in the way in which its loose components of a ball bearing on a porcelain plate seemed to welcome such a rocking movement, like the arm of a seismometer. The third object, *The Ideal Phantom* (fig. 4), not only “belonged” to the earthquake on account of the symbolic release-action of its spring-loaded rod, which corresponded to the pent-up energy of the quake, but also on account of its title (65). Through a series of twisting references, Luca cryptically explains how this object and the earthquake had interacted via the intermediary figure of “G.” (his friend the poet Gellu Naum), who — being Luca’s intended recipient of *The Ideal Phantom*, and bygone witness to Luca declaring two years earlier that he desired to experience a “major catastrophe” — arrived unannounced at his door half an hour after the quake “like a phantom,” thereby reawakening the memory of his longstanding desire for a catastrophe, and at that very moment receiving *The Ideal Phantom* from him in what manifested itself as an “ideal” alignment of the earthquake, the objects, and their historic conversation (59-61).

Following Breton’s definition of objective chance in *Mad Love* as “the form making manifest the exterior necessity which traces its path in the human unconscious” (23), in *The Passive Vampire* Luca similarly observed how objective chance produced events that corresponded (or indeed responded) to unconscious desires. Yet just as Breton’s account in *Mad Love* intimated the possibility of supernatural forces being at work in the encounter with the object, Luca also presented the object in terms that afforded it with a providential aura and a magical determinism beyond the pale of rational explanation. Bound up within Luca’s account of the physical attributes and actions of *The Statue of the Libido*, *The “No”*, and *The Ideal Phantom*, for example, there is also a clear sense that some kind of spell-casting mechanism had inadvertently been set in motion.

Although *The Passive Vampire* diligently traverses certain aspects of the conceptual debates from Breton’s writings, reaffirming several of the fundamental tenets of his theory through fresh analogies and anecdotes, it also presents certain new developments. The most noticeable difference between Breton’s and Luca’s works lies with their respective tones. Fijalkowski has commented that “while the *trouaille* as annunciation and crystallization of love remained in Breton’s eyes (in *Mad Love*, for example) a predominantly benevolent apparition, for Luca the object might also be found to have assumed control” (Fijalkowski “Sorcery to Silence” 634).

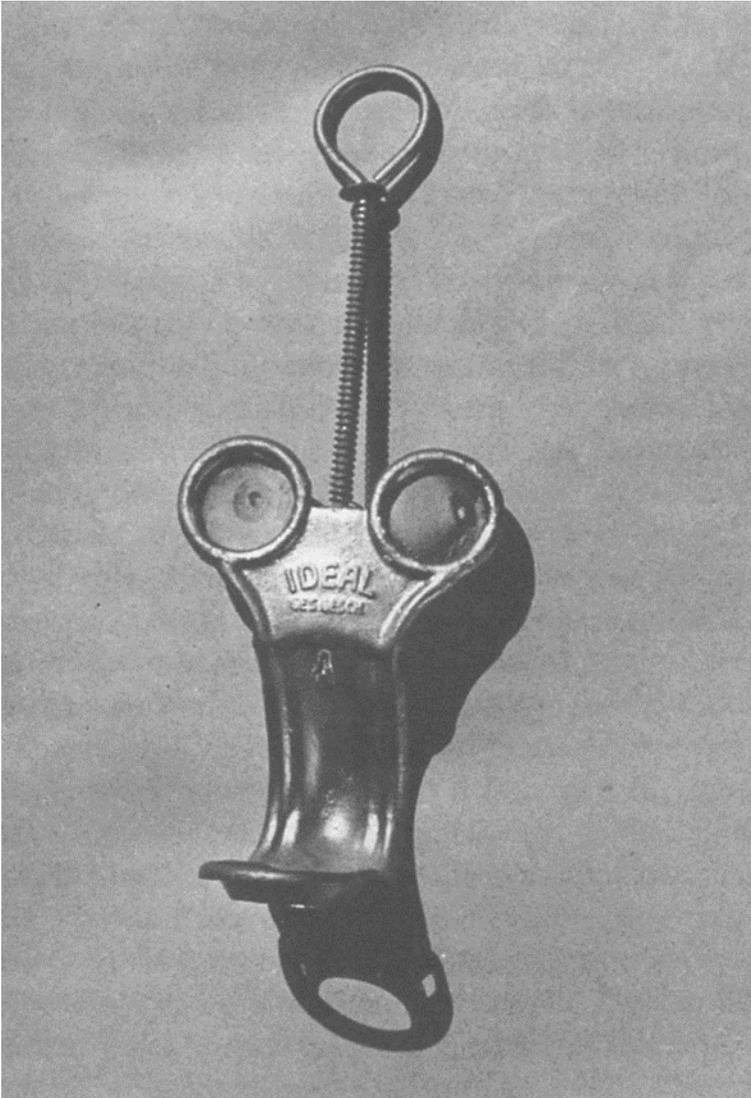


Figure 4: Gherasim Luca, *The Ideal Phantom*, photographed by Théodore Brauner, c.1941-45, as published in *Le vampire passif* (Les Éditions de l'oubli, 1945). Image courtesy of Twisted Spoon Press. © ADAGP, Paris and DACS, London 2022. © Micheline Catti-Ghérasim Luca.

And we might add to this that while for Breton the object represented a positive, self-affirming experience — “in the sense that it frees the individual from paralyzing affective scruples” (32) (by revealing and releasing the distractive pressures of repressed thoughts in the unconscious) — for Luca it represented something much more volatile and dangerous, with potentially damaging consequences for its

bearer. To him, the object did not promise a fortuitous encounter in the vein of the Holy-Grail-like discoveries made by Breton and Alberto Giacometti in *Mad Love*. By contrast, Luca produced a far more ominous picture of a life lived under the sign of the object in *The Passive Vampire*, infused with the explosive atmosphere of wartime Bucharest.

Luca's foreboding opening to the second half of the text vividly captures the combination of awe and dread that the object and its powers inspired in him:

Objects, these mysterious suits of armour beneath which desire awaits us, nocturnal and laid bare, these snares made of velvet, of bronze, of gossamer that we throw at ourselves with each step we take; hunter and prey in the shadows of the forests, at once forest, poacher, and woodcutter, that woodcutter killed at the foot of a tree and covered with his own beard smelling of incense, of well-being, and of the that's-not-possible. (*Passive Vampire* 71)

In this passage, as in so many others throughout *The Passive Vampire*, Luca appears to be obliquely alluding to the all-enveloping violence of the war. Meanwhile, he manages to evoke the madness of the conflict through his dizzying, exhaustive chains of analogy, which often strangle the narrative apparatus of the book and cast the reader into a helpless state of disorientation.

Whilst fascist rule held dictatorial sway over Luca's existence, stripping him of his autonomous powers of control in very real terms, within the bounds of the book *objects* becomes the arbiters of his actions. In a comparable feat of domination, objects comprise so many mysterious material coordinates of his social life, which appear to exercise total control over its events.

### **Bewitchment and Black Magic in *The Passive Vampire***

There is a magical mechanism at work in many of the objects Luca discusses, whereby their preparation and physical manipulation yields a sorcerous efficacy. The magical operations and effects of individual objects that populate *The Passive Vampire* are far too intricate and numerous to allow for their comprehensive summary here.<sup>6</sup> Yet it remains possible to trace black magic as an overriding theme of the book, and to convey a sense of its unique conceptual treatment.

The theme of black magic is given perhaps its most vivid expression in the second section of *The Passive Vampire*, in an unillustrated passage that describes the activities of a certain "lyric-magician," who must surely represent Luca himself. Here the text converges on the two fundamental models of sorcery. At the start of the passage, Luca describes his ritualistic practice of collecting "little bits of nail clippings, single hairs found on a dress, linen with the fresh smell of sweat, mistakes, interrupted images, fragments of dreams . . . [and] incomprehensible

---

<sup>6</sup> See, for example, Luca's extended discussion of specific objects (37-38, 41-47).

gestures" from his "beloved" (103). Meanwhile, in the "darkest corner" of his room, "the lyric-magician looks at a wax-figure through dark-ringed eyes" (103-04):

[T]he wax doll, through which he sends the faint trace of marsh alongside the trace of a thin vein, awaits the tender caress and the skilful torture. Several miles away the beloved feels her flesh riven with desires or torn by a wild atrocity, a hand in a velvet glove sliding a sperm of silk or sulphur down her thighs. At the hour of the cockcrow, when night hangs over the city by a single thread, the lyric-magician closes his four-bladed knife and restores a black torpor to the room around him, like a field leaning against a shoulder. Behind him, the image of the beloved, who hasn't lost a single drop of her blood, intoxicated by the echo of distant flesh . . . (104)

As the scene slips between Luca in the first person, his work as the lyric-magician, and the figure of his beloved, the actions described are unmistakably recognizable as rituals based upon principles of sympathetic magic. In the first instance, the notion of controlling his beloved through physical remnants, including exuviae such as hair and nails, follows an established model of "contagious magic". As defined by the anthropologist J. G. Frazer in *The Golden Bough* (published and expanded across multiple editions 1890-1915), his pioneering study on magical belief and practice that was well-known to the surrealists, contagious magic "rests on the assumption that things which have once been conjoined remain ever after, even when disjoined from each other, in sympathetic relation, such that whatever is done to the one affects the other in like manner" (48). Frazer goes on to explain here how this effect is often worked upon humans via "severed portions" of their body such as "teeth, hair and nails," in terms which shine a new light on Luca's own perverse collecting practice.

Further to this, the parallel occurrence of the lyric-magician's "skilful torture" of his wax effigy and his beloved feeling her "flesh riven with desires or torn by a wild atrocity" resonates with the concept of "imitative", or "homeopathic magic." Frazer describes imitative magic as being founded upon the notion that "by imitating the desired effect you can produce it" (1). And once again, Frazer's account closely aligns with the actions of this episode from *The Passive Vampire* in its description of the imitative method's application towards people:

Perhaps the most familiar example of homeopathic or imitative magic is the practice of making a magical image of the person whom the magician desires to injure. By cutting, stabbing, or otherwise injuring the image he believes that he inflicts a corresponding injury upon his enemy whom the image represents. . . . (3)

Frazer even cites wax as one the most common materials used in this practice (4-10). In these terms, the correlation between the lyric-magician's torture of his wax

doll and the riven flesh of his beloved (who seems to experience some kind of corresponding *erotic* torture) appears to be something carefully engineered via these sanctioned principles of magical manipulation. Frazer considered how these “two main logical fallacies,” the principles of contagion and imitation, govern all magical activity (1). Yet their sinister applications in this episode of *The Passive Vampire* invokes them more specifically within the frame of black magic. Indeed, the lyric-magician’s sadistic activities of torturing the soul of his beloved via her exuviae and her image clearly resonate with black magic in its most basic sense as ritual aiming “to do harm” (E. A. Wallis Budge, qtd. in Frazer 6), the kind of arousal Luca’s magician invokes being of a decidedly macabre, tainted nature.

In the wider context of *The Passive Vampire*, Luca’s obsessive treatment of this theme would seem to present him grappling with black magic as a conduit of control, as a means of regaining influence over his life. On closer inspection, however, what at first appears to be a purposeful invocation of sorcery in fact represents something far more chaotic. As Răileanu has commented, the text ultimately represents “a treatise of black magic which obscures more than it illuminates” (Gherasim Luca 128).

The sorcery of the lyric-magician, which at first seems so deliberate and decisive in light of its resemblances to contagious and imitative models of magic, only arises as an unspecified possibility. The manner in which Luca describes the lyric-magician’s actions in the third person renders the episode distant and obscure, as though he is not privy to the secrets underpinning such sorcery. And his vivid, lyrical prose — “the faint trace of marsh alongside the trace of a thin vein” — clouds the passage with oneiric imagery that blurs and distorts the case for any kind of magical causal nexus in reality, thus distancing the episode from the more candid discussion of case studies in the overtly theoretical opening section of the book (104).

At no point does Luca intimate any kind of mastery of the object’s magical powers, or claim an ability to wield them towards determined ends. Instead, he characterizes his experiences of black magic as a series of accidental rather than calculated invocations:

I was taking part in a ritual with massive magical import but whose contents remained beyond my grasp. My gestures may have been those of an initiate; I carried out the slightest details as though I understood why, but only I knew how terrified I was of the precipice between the determinant and the determined, and how strange, mysterious, and dark my own movements seemed to me. (132)

At one point, Luca asks rhetorically: “What magic formula was being acted out? What secret was trying to pierce through this hallucinatory and hermetic language?” (133). Throughout *The Passive Vampire*, black magic and sorcery are figured as “latent powers considered as possibilities”, as Luca himself reasons in his caption to the object featured on the book’s cover (fig. 5) (73). In perceiving

magic and sorcery as spheres that are categorically beyond his grasp, Luca surrenders himself to the untold powers of these objects; in these terms, black magic becomes symbolic of life's many mysterious and malevolent conspiracies within Luca's writings.

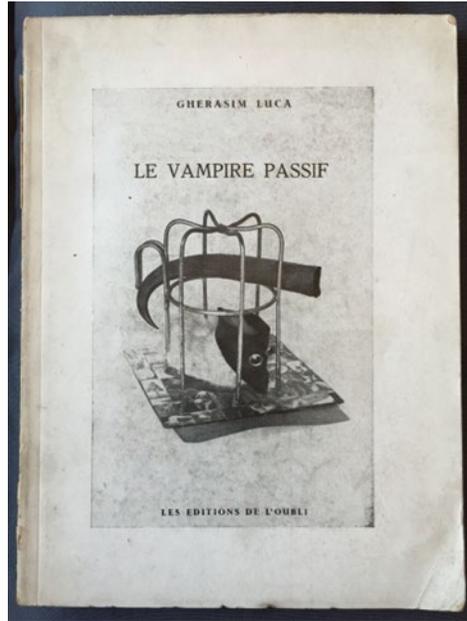


Figure 5: Gherasim Luca, *Latent Powers Considered as Possibilities*, photographed by Théodore Brauner, c.1941-45, as published in *Le vampire passif* (Les Éditions de l'Oubli, 1945). Collections of the National Galleries of Scotland. © ADAGP, Paris and DACS, London 2022. © Micheline Catti-Ghérasim Luca.

In *The Passive Vampire*, as throughout Luca's written works, black magic is idiosyncratically redefined as a manipulative atmosphere, an air of unappeasable suspense, which typified his chaotic experience of wartime Bucharest.

### **The Gothic World of *The Passive Vampire***

The chaotic events of Luca's life were not straightforwardly the unwitting outcome of objective chance and the "mysterious," "hallucinatory" mechanisms of magic. He describes the objects that haunt *The Passive Vampire* and other works as "phantoms," likening them to the legendary demons, the "incubus" and the "succubus," under whose power they reside (81-82, 47). Such figures imbue the book with a prominent gothic dimension, within which objects wield the malevolent influences of the collective forces of evil. In its central subjects and events, Luca's text mines the rich vein of Gothic literature with which the surrealist

movement had ingratiated itself over the preceding decades. Bram Stoker's *Dracula* (1897) is a perhaps inevitable point of reference for Luca's portrayal of the vampire. Luca's repeated references to pacts with Satan recall the central theme of Matthew Gregory Lewis's early gothic novel, *The Monk* (1796), while the sinister figure of Melmoth, from Charles Mathurin's *Melmoth the Wanderer* (1820), also seems to sit closely behind the book's evil emissaries. Another notable source of inspiration is J.-K. Huysmans's latter-day gothic novel *The Damned* (1891), which explores the satanic cults of nineteenth-century Paris, and which Luca cites in the second section of the book.

Even as he was writing the events of his recent life into *The Passive Vampire*, Luca seems to have envisaged himself moving through the deathly halls of some underworld. Throughout the text, he repeatedly returns to an image of the city as a hellish landscape, stalked by the devil in his various guises. At several points in the text, Luca addresses the devil with a crazed passion:

The dreamer, the lover, the revolutionary are all unknowingly committing demonic acts. For, whatever your name: Sammael, Phiton, Asmodeus, Lucifer, Belial, Beelzebub, Satan, we shall only recognize you, O Demon, in our valid actions and ideas. (93)

And similarly elsewhere:

Young demon, I can hear your legendary laugh smash into the four horizons and the four dimensions. Each blow struck by your outburst, like a corroded pearl, sets in motion an unknown mechanism buried in the living vaults of humanity as though in a bath of blood. (94)

Over the course of the book, these recurring references combine into a disturbing picture of a life "completely given over to the Demon", and Luca declares this allegiance through numerous references to his blood pacts with Satan (95).

Alongside Satan, the events of *The Passive Vampire* are also stalked by the terrifying figure of the vampire, from whom the book takes its title, and whose activities run uncomfortably close to Luca's autobiographical narrative:

At another operating table, by the window whose open curtains let in the rays of moonlight, stands the handsome, silent vampire. In evening dress, his lips glued to a bared neck like a bird, now he resembles a flautist playing pulses of blood on living instruments. At slightly increasing intervals the drops flow from the instrument to his lips. (87-88)

This passage, like many others, recalls the atmosphere and events of the experimental Gothic novel *The Songs of Maldoror*, written and published by Isidore Ducasse under the pseudonym Le Comte de Lautréamont in 1868 and 1869, which became arguably the single most influential piece of literature upon the genesis of

the surrealist movement after Philippe Soupault's rediscovery of the text in 1917.<sup>7</sup> In the First Song is a scene in which the figure of Maldoror — who is evil incarnate — looms at the door of a happy family before the scene descends into torturous abandon and murder. In their terrified protestations the family recall that Maldoror's surname was rumored to be "*vampire*," and it is as a vampire that Maldoror signs off at the end of the First Song, by assuring the reader that they "have a friend in [him] the vampire" (52, 64). As with Lautréamont's portrayal of Maldoror, there is considerable slippage in *The Passive Vampire* between the vampire's activities as a narrated character and his primacy as conscious author of the text. On account of this proximity, as with his encounters with Satan, Luca is openly sympathetic towards the vampire, and shares in his sadistic compulsions.

Luca cites Lautréamont at several points in the book, and borrows from *Maldoror* in both style and content (*Passive Vampire* 82, 130). Luca's formulation of evil, and his chaotic, self-effacing narrative, are heavily indebted to the genre-less, shifting pages of *Maldoror*, where eroticism, violence, and laughter cohabit the same image, where each plot lead is a dead end, each passage obliterates the last, and each line is a snare that ties itself into incoherence. Just like *Maldoror*, *The Passive Vampire* is comprised of formless scenes shrouded in relentlessly mutating chains of metaphor, and structureless passages condemned to a stammering inarticulation. Luca's writing mirrors here what Breton observed in *Maldoror* as a writing that tests and expands "the limits within which words can enter into rapport with words, and things with things[,] . . . the language of Lautréamont [being] at once a dissolvent and a germinative plasma" (Breton, "Anthology" 194). There are other, more subtle but no less deliberate allusions to Lautréamont's masterpiece buried in the text. Luca's passing reference to the figure of "the Creator," for example, vividly recalls the escapades of Maldoror, whose adventures and exploits are continually pitted against those of his nemesis, the Creator, who is the pivot around which he wages his campaign of evil (*Passive Vampire* 90). Fijalkowski has suggested that *The Passive Vampire's* "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" ("Luca the Absolute" 17). However, there are a number of more contemporary appropriations of the vampire legend that may have had a bearing on Luca's casting of the "passive vampire."

Luca's conflated image of the vampire as demon *and* criminal seems to fit closely with certain popular stereotypes of the vampire from the 1920s and 1930s. Fijalkowski has pointed elsewhere to the case of the "Vampire of Düsseldorf" (real name Peter Kürten), who committed a series of gruesome murders in the city in

---

<sup>7</sup> Belated fears of legal repercussions, owing to the scandalous nature of the text, caused the book's Belgian publishers to halt distribution of the already printed text. The printed copies of the completed book would not be distributed until 1874, after Ducasse's death, when another publisher acquired the stock.

the late 1920s and early 1930s. The Vampire earned his nickname on account of his claim to have drunk the blood of some of his victims, which he gleefully reported with sadistic satisfaction; his subsequent interviews with Karl Berg eventually informed Berg's famous book of 1945, *The Sadist*. As Fijalkowksi has noted, this complex public figure — whose exploits were internationally reported (the Ripper murders of their day) — emerges as a likely point of reference for Luca's exaggerated characterization of the vampire as both legendary folkloric monster and violent criminal ("Ghérasim Luca").

The manner in which Luca plays upon the vampire as a manipulative figure who has invaded his unconscious harks back to Stoker's seminal portrayal of the vampire in *Dracula*. At the very least, Luca would have been familiar with *Nosferatu*, the internationally acclaimed 1922 film adaptation of Stoker's novel, which took its title from a Romanian term for vampire (*Dracula* itself being loosely based on traditional Eastern-European folklore). He would have been aware of Breton's reference to *Nosferatu* in *The Communicating Vessels*, where he described and analyzed his encounter with a "Nosferatu necktie" in a dream of 26 August 1931 (*Communicating Vessels* 25, 37-42). He may even have been aware of Yves Tanguy's "vampiric" object, *De l'autre côté du pont* (1936), which referenced the famous caption from the film: "[w]hen he was on the other side of the bridge, the phantoms came to meet him" (a line which Breton had also discussed in *The Communicating Vessels*).

*Nosferatu* was responsible for popularizing Stoker's image of vampire-induced somnambulism in its iconic scenes of Greta Schröder playing the character Ellen, sleepwalking with outstretched arms at the whim of the vampire. Vampiric somnambulism is a key theme in Stoker's novel, and Luca's interactions with the figure of the vampire seem to revolve around a similar idea of somnambulism: "I close my eyes, as active as a vampire, I open them within myself, as passive as a vampire, and between the blood that arrives, the blood that leaves, and the blood already inside me there occurs an exchange of images like an engagement of daggers" (*Passive Vampire* 83). Here as elsewhere, somnambulism appears to be the mode by which Luca's mind is suddenly bent to the vampire's thoughts, as though in telepathic "exchange."

Over the course of *The Passive Vampire*, this image of the domineering vampire merges with the figure of Satan as a fellow "Lord of misrule," where both jointly represent the spirit of the phantom-objects that took hold of Luca's life during the war (90). At first glance, this haunted world of demons and vampires would seem to mirror Luca's contemporary experience of Bucharest and the hellish reign of Romanian fascism. As Simmons notes, it stands to reason that Luca's writing of this period inevitably reflects "the disciplined madness of the immediate world around him in the early 1940s" (109). On the surface, these gothic references might appear to serve merely as a metaphorical outlet for expressing the evil atmosphere of the unravelling city. But on closer inspection, Luca's outward allegiance to these arbiters of evil — validated at several points in the book through his blood pacts

with them — speaks of something else entirely, something verging on a faith, or even hope, in the power of these demons.

As Luca's wartime writings collectively attest, there came a point at which he actively welcomed the presence of these evil characters in his life, and even began to relish the risk of his own annihilation. Rather than merely marking a passive fatalism and a cheap resignation to the dangers that faced him, Luca's wartime revelry in death and destruction in fact represents a novel repurposing of surrealist theory towards the most absolute kind of nihilism.

### **Reality's Eternal Diversion**

Everything must be reinvented, nothing exists  
anymore in the whole world.

Gherasim Luca, *The Inventor of Love* (1945)

In his wartime writings, Luca outlined his ambition to reach what he termed a "non-Oedipal position of knowledge," an anti-epistemological position which could be defined only according to its oppositionality to all established precepts and defined schools of thought ("I Roam the Impossible" 34).<sup>8</sup> To achieve this non-Oedipal condition, Luca conceived of a train of thought in which everything

must first be retained and then negated in dialectic mode, a revolutionary mode of thinking, always rejecting with indignation any attempt at being imprisoned inside a certitude, no matter how fascinating it may be. Because I will never stop confusing the sense of life with the sense of love, the definitive superimposition of the love of Oedipus causes me to desperately negate the unbearable character of the absolute it contains, the most direct consequence of my fierce negation, of this imperious negation of the negation. ("I Roam the Impossible" 35)

This task of dialectical negation would become the defining principle of Luca's wartime writing. His model of a dialectic left to play out to its own entropic self-destruction represents a much more extreme version of surrealism's pre-existing recourse to dialectics. From its origins, the surrealist movement was heavily invested in dialectical theory. Inspired by Hegel's conception of dialectical negation as the autonomous self-criticism and self-development of an idea or action, the dialectic quickly came to constitute a kind of shorthand justification for the necessity of surrealism as a vital counterpoint to modernity's naturalized sense of reality (as manifest at the interstices of rational consciousness and a state-sanctioned code of morality and behavioral norms founded upon capitalism, religion, and scientific empiricism). In the "Second Manifesto of Surrealism" of

---

<sup>8</sup> For more detail on this see Toma, "Gilles Deleuze/Gherasim Luca."

1929, which Breton had written after re-reading Hegel in Brittany in the summer of 1929, he declared that the movement's sole aspiration was to dialectically collapse certain debilitating "antinomies" constraining modern civilization: namely "life and death, the real and the imagined, past and future, the communicable and the incommunicable, high and low" (123). Here he also remarked that "it seems impossible to me to assign any limitations — economic limitations, for instance — to the exercise of a thought finally made tractable to negation, and to the negation of negation" (140). In this brief comment, Breton perceived the logical fallacy of regarding dialectics as a finite process of reasoning, dialectical thought in fact being infinite in the scope of its possible negative counter-positioning once preconceived goals are removed. Jonathan P. Eburne has summarized how, from the 1920s onwards, the surrealists appreciated dialectical negation "as something other than a logical formula or a world-historical pattern," as something which much more fundamentally encapsulated "the dynamic functioning of consciousness in its relationship to the world" by capturing its habitual "restlessness" ("Heraclitus" 21-22). This distinction was of central importance to the Romanian surrealists' re-conception of surrealism and its dialectical basis.

Building upon Breton's observation from the "Second Manifesto," the Romanian surrealists enthusiastically broke the bounds of Hegelian dialectics by refusing to place limits on negation, ignoring dialectical negation's conventional role in the service of *progressive development* within the Hegelian system. This theoretical position was clarified in the theoretical text *Dialectics of the Dialectic*, which Luca co-wrote with Trost and published in 1945, and which Fijalkowski describes as being "the closest one might come to the manifesto of the surrealist group of Bucharest" ("Ghérasim Luca"). Here Luca and Trost hypothesized that in order for surrealism to be "continually revolutionary" it had to occupy "a dialectical position of permanent *negation and of the negation of negation*" (35). Only through such relentless negation, they argue, can surrealism exist, as it necessarily should, in "continual opposition to the whole world and to itself" (36). To this effect, they go on to list their outright rejection of the great epistemological scaffolds of history, memory, nature, and human biology, which collectively represented the foundational ordering systems of modern society. Instead they explain that their taste for negation draws them to the principles of objective chance, love, and eroticism, which they perceived to be life-shattering, singularly incomprehensible phenomena, continually resisting and transgressing "all established order" (36-37).

Luca defined this principle of relentless negation in terms of a demonic impulse, referring in *Dialectics of the Dialectic* to his "demonic taste for negation" (36) and referring elsewhere in his wartime writing to "that demonic dialectic to which my thought process is so faithfully fixed" ("I Roam" 34). To Luca's mind, demons embodied the destructive spirit of negation that he recognized to be the essence of surrealism's revolutionary message, and it is within the context of this

equation between demons and negation that his longstanding loyalty to these evil overlords begins to crystallize into a theoretically motivated position. Satan's reputation as the demonic antithesis to love, life, and light encouraged Luca to conceive of him and his minions as the symbolic figureheads of this dialectical overhauling of the world.

Satan, or more specifically Lucifer, had also carried great conceptual significance among the circle of the Collège de sociologie, the niche school of sociological research into the sacred spearheaded by Georges Bataille, 1937-39. Although it is unclear whether Luca had any direct contact with the group during his time in Paris in 1938-39, their interpretation of Lucifer is nevertheless strongly resonant with Luca's interpretation of Satan. As Roger Caillois subsequently explained in an interview in 1970, several decades after his involvement in the Collège, Lucifer had represented for them the only "truly effective rebel" (144). But more than that, Lucifer had also symbolized the triumph of magic over religion. "Magic is a theurgical act that forces the supernatural powers to obey," he explains, "whereas religion essentially entails submitting to God" (144). In the context of this antinomy between magic and religion, Lucifer's status as the fallen angel who had renounced God's dominion rendered him a potent sign of the subversive forces of magic for the Collège group. In parallel terms, Luca's consistent conflation of black magic with the work of the devil seems to similarly uphold Satan's reputation as the ancestral inventor of magic. In this capacity, Satan's presence as overlord of Luca's life in *The Passive Vampire* and elsewhere is altogether less mysterious. Indeed, in this light, the "satanic energy" of Luca's work is refigured as a source of supernatural salvation (Fijalkowski, "From Sorcery to Silence" 634); the figure of the devil turning into liberator, the "nocturnal" figure of the vampire becoming "luminous" (Răileanu "Le vampire passif").

As Dominique Carlat notes, Luca's "carnavalesque" dialectical framework ultimately reveals death to be nothing but "the imposed limit to the projection of the dialectical method on the natural processes" (101, 109). Luca explains this liberating dialectical loophole in an essay entitled "The Dead Death":

The distension of this necessary death which must not traumatically contradict life and which must resolve it in the sense of an uninterrupted negation in which reciprocity and causal reversal must be possible, the distension of this objective death as a retort to my objective life . . . forces me today to traverse a terrain of desolation without margins, of moral catalepsy taken to the point of theoretical void and insoluble despair of a macabre and revolutionary kind. . . (50)

Over the course of the essay, Luca documents and analyzes five of his own successive and apparently real suicide attempts. As Fijalkowski has commented, the text (and its title) posed the dialectical negation of the negation as a solution that could "transform [death] into a place of liberty and endless desire"

("Ghérasim Luca"). He thereby conceives of his demonic dialectic as a means to "'short-circuit' natural process and face the economy of death," where the negation of nature necessarily negated death (Carlat 109). By implication, through a similarly drastic dialectical rerouting, Satan — lord of death and destruction — becomes emblematic of the very possibility of denying death as a definitive, vacuous end.

In place of the established, mainstream discourses of natural science and history, Luca and Trost describe their wide-ranging theoretical stakes in non-Euclidean Geometry, the fourth dimension, Brownian motion, quantum space-time, and homeopathy — all ground-breaking concepts which had each in their own way significantly disrupted the *status quo* of scientific rationalism ("Dialectics" 40). Yet above all, as they affirmed in "Dialectics of the Dialectic," they were invested in "the crushing and malignant materialism of black magic" (41). In another text from 1945, they pronounced a similar set of non- or anti-rational theoretical interests in the catalogue to their exhibition, *Presentation de graphies colorées, de cubomanies et d'objets* (7-28 January 1945), and "black magic" once again featured prominently in this list:

We are in agreement with delirious inventions, tears, somnambulism, the real functioning of thought, the elixir of long life, the transformation of quantity into quality, the concrete, the absurd, the negation of negation, desire, hysteria, furs, black magic, the delirium of interpretation, the dialectic of the dialectic, the fourth dimension, simulacra, flames, vice, objective chance, manias, mystery, black humour, cryptesthesia, scientific materialism and spots of blood.

The privileged status of black magic among the Bucharest surrealists was clearly not in question by 1945. Indeed, black magic comprised an essential theoretical component of Romanian surrealism writ large. Via Luca's and Trost's writings, the concept of black magic was itself dialectically expanded, shifting from a term that referred to an archaic set of prescriptive magical formulae into a term which stood for the group's dynamic principle of revolutionary regeneration. Negatively weighted in both its "black" and "magical" aspects — which associated it with evil and destruction, alterity and occultation (the cancellation of light) — the term "black magic" became shorthand for Luca and Trost's maxim of the negation of the negation. This exploded definition finally offers an explanatory key to Luca's bewildering "black-magical" encounters with the object in *The Passive Vampire*, *The Praying Mantis Appraised*, and *The Inventor of Love*, which all in fact had more far-reaching, revolutionary implications.

## A Revolutionary Nihilism

No one before these visionaries and augurs perceived how destitution — not only social but architectonic, the poverty of interiors, enslaved and enslaving objects — can be suddenly transformed into revolutionary nihilism.

- Walter Benjamin, "Surrealism: The Last Snapshot of the European Intelligentsia" (1929)

The object had long since held a reputation within surrealism as a vital vessel for subverting reality; targeted precisely because of its reputation as the objective bedrock of empirical science and rational order. In the writings of Walter Benjamin, the surrealist object was ascribed a more distinctly revolutionary force and role, being raised to the plain of political history. It was specifically the *objet trouvé*, found and salvaged from the stream of everyday life, that Benjamin was concerned with here. As he had theorized in an essay from 1929, Breton

was the first to perceive the revolutionary energies that appear in the "outmoded", in the first iron constructions, the first factory buildings, the earliest photos, the objects that have begun to be extinct, grand pianos, the dresses of five years ago, fashionable restaurants when the vogue has begun to ebb from them. The relation of these things to revolution — no one can have a more exact concept of it than these authors. (229)

In Benjamin's analysis, the surrealists' elevation of such objects as curios served to enshrine their outmodedness as a tangible fact, a fact that in turn demonstrated and activated the revolutionary course of history, intimating the inevitability of the future's radical divergence from the present and therein revealing the actual possibilities for revolutionary change. Benjamin famously conceived of this revolutionary lesson as a facet of his theory of "*profane illumination*," and described the surrealists' attitude to retrograde material culture as a form of "revolutionary nihilism" (227-29). While at one level the objects of *The Passive Vampire* and Luca's other works of the 1940s fully align with Benjamin's theory, as outmoded things found entire or compositions made from found materials, they also push and extend the nihilistic power Benjamin assigned to the object.

One of the most significant departures Luca made from the surrealists' earlier experiments with found objects was bestowing them with figurative form. The most noticeable difference between Luca's objects and those that fill the pages of Breton's *L'amour fou*, for example, was the way in which the theoretical *demonization* of objects in Luca's writing was requited with the object's *physical animation* in his working practice. In *The Passive Vampire*, Luca's objects take a variety of anthropomorphic forms, from the more straightforward examples of

dolls to limbed hybrids and humanoid ephemera. Similarly, in the text “I Roam the Impossible,” the illustrated objects announce their alternative, “black-magical” existence through a dramatic *animism* variously brought to life by taking on plant-like, insectoid, and serpentine forms (figs. 6-10).

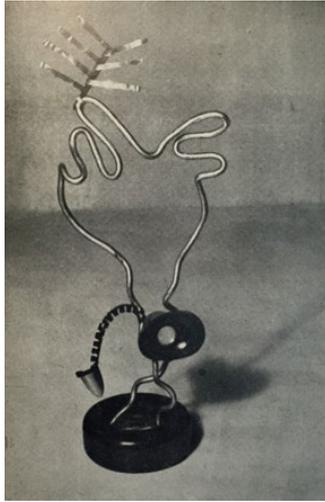


Figure 6: Unknown Photographer, *Object 'I'*, c.1944, as published in *Inventatorul Iubirii* (Editura Negația Negației, 1945). Collections of the British Library, London. © Micheline Catti-Ghérasim Luca.

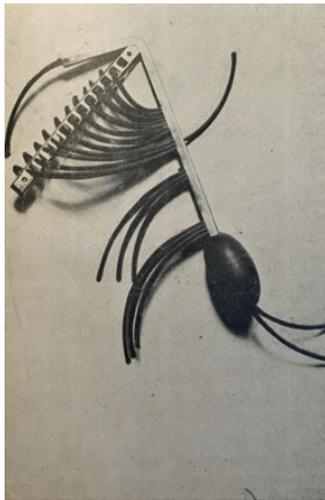


Figure 7: Unknown Photographer, *Object 'II'*, c.1944, as published in *Inventatorul Iubirii* (Editura Negația Negației, 1945). Collections of the British Library, London. © Micheline Catti-Ghérasim Luca.

The objects of “I Roam the Impossible” were supposedly gifts from a female acquaintance, which Luca claims he had received a few days before he began writing the text (34). As Fijalkowski observes, however, these objects’ affinity with those pictured in *The Passive Vampire* — all small-scale, multi-media assemblages, hallmarked by an intricate composition and a sleek finish — suggests that they were more likely to have been made by Luca’s own hand (“Poésie sans langue” 29). The animistic aura of these objects — so perfectly captured in the atmospheric photographs of “I Roam the Impossible” — imbues them with an embodied reserve of agency that grants them an air of self-possession, and which makes them appear all the more defiant in the face of their conventionally designated values and roles. In this animistic capacity, these objects veer away from the revelatory historical illuminations Benjamin attributed to the surrealists’ earlier *objets trouvés*, and stand instead as unintelligible ciphers that deny any interpretation through their monstrous brute presence and which appear always on the brink of a shapeshifting movement. In their categorical deviancy, Luca’s objects are physically invested with the demonic energy of negation that he attributed to them in his writings. They give palpable form to the “inexpressible delirium” the Romanian surrealists propagated through their nihilistic mantra of negation (“Dialectics of the Dialectic” 36).

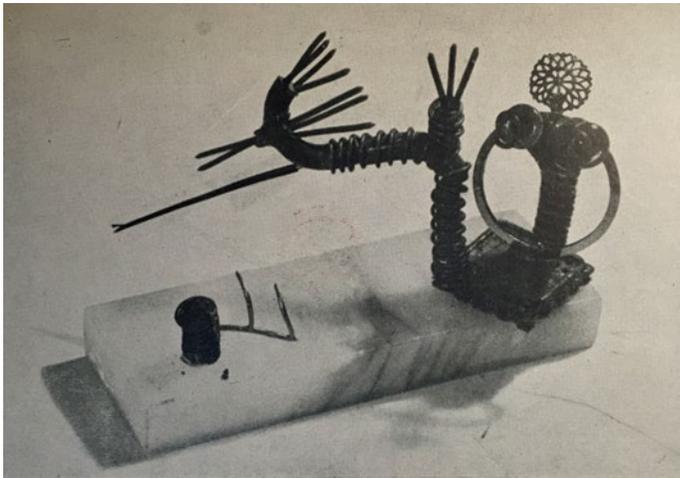


Figure 8: Unknown Photographer, *Object 'III'*, c.1944, as published in *Inventatorul Iubirii* (Editura Negația Negației, 1945). Collections of the British Library, London. © Micheline Catti-Ghérasim Luca.

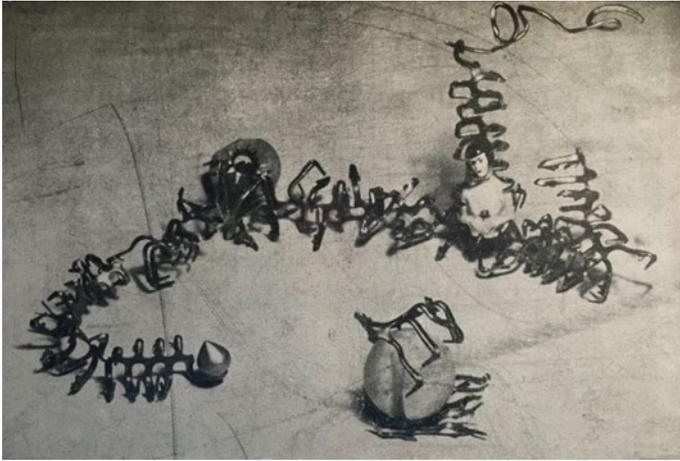


Figure 9: Unknown Photographer, *Object 'TV'*, c.1944, as published in *Inventatorul Iubirii* (Editura Negația Negației, 1945). Collections of the British Library, London. © Micheline Catti-Ghérasim Luca.

Up until 1944 there had been consistent allied bombing of Romania on account of its status as the main fuel supplier to the German military. After Antonescu was overthrown in 1944, the tables were turned, and the bombing continued for a further year at the hands of the Nazis. Throughout this period, Luca was subjected to forced labor as a street cleaner, and there is a strong probability that many of his objects were constructed from the debris of the many bombing raids over Bucharest (Fijalkowski “La poésie sans langue” 30). Rising out of the ashes of war in this manner, these objects can be seen to set in motion a remarkable chain of negations: born of the physical negation of the history and culture of Bucharest, destroyed in the most dramatic fashion by explosion and immolation, they proceeded to negate the limits of their own death by assuming a demonic afterlife, an afterlife in which they continued to radiate this negative influence through their disruptive black-magical presence in the lives of Luca and the Romanian surrealists.

The manner in which Luca consistently intimated the object’s demonic agency ultimately gave it the breathing space to escape servility to the manifest conditions of wartime Bucharest. The anthropomorphized objects of *The Passive Vampire* and the hybrid objects of “I Roam the Impossible” were thereby animated as rogue beings, which both endorsed and enforced the compulsion to “demonic” theoretical deviancy which Luca sought to live by (“I Roam” 34). As Luca writes in the closing paragraphs of “I Roam the Impossible,” he regarded these objects as “the most secret expression of [his] thought processes”: their “brute form” defying translation, and emitting — by an “aphrodisiac” contagion — the airs of “presentiment” and “systematic evasion” that defined his intellectual life (39).



Figure 10: Unknown Photographer, *Object 'V'*, c.1944, as published in *Inventatorul Iubirii* (Editura Negația Negației, 1945). Collections of the British Library, London. © Micheline Catti-Ghérasim Luca.

## Demonology of the Object

Răileanu has discussed a contemporary theory of the object that arose in the work of Naum under the name of “The Demonology of the Object” (*Gherasim Luca* 108). Naum had actually conceived of this phrase as the title for a proposed article in a never-realized issue of the French journal *Minotaure*, a special issue on the surrealist object that was drawn up by Breton but abandoned at the outbreak of the Second World War. Naum’s theory would not find proper expression until 1945, when this theory of demonology was finally penned in his text *Medium*:

In effect, the staggering persistence of the aggressiveness of the object, the avidly succubus character of gloves, of hats, of chairs, of glasses . . . the vampiric lycanthropy of a moneybox in the form of an animal or the simple lycanthropy of a candelabra-owl-serpent . . . the parasitic larvae of handkerchiefs or boats that take in water like mistletoe, the finger of hands, [and] the chimneys on houses reveal profusely, with a superb demonstrative tenacity this demonic aspect of the object, in light of which the most innocent connection finds itself tainted with the vast colours of evil. (qtd. in Răileanu, *Gherasim Luca* 109)<sup>9</sup>

---

<sup>9</sup> My trans. of Răileanu’s French trans.

As Răileanu explains, this demonology of objects — also variously designated as vampirism and lycanthropy — refers to their analogical duplicity and their ability to bond with (vampirism) and metamorphose into (lycanthropy) different things (108). He observes that we are clearly in the same demonic territory as *The Passive Vampire* here, yet rightly insists that “the most important [thing] is not to establish chronological primacy but to note the fluid which circulates between the texts of the two Romanian surrealists” (109).

The consistency between Naum’s and Luca’s common attribution of “demonic” powers to the object is striking, and speaks to the strength and radical originality of the Romanian surrealists’ theoretical position. Indeed, by the war’s end, the Romanian group had almost completely repurposed surrealism to fit the world-ending moment in which they found themselves, by reconfiguring the object as a site of destruction, bewilderment, and unhinging, which cultivated revolutionary nihilism through its crazed, uncategorisable presence:

To gaze at the object and everything that surrounds me as if our pupils were filled with dynamite, to gaze in order to destroy and become bewildered, in order to become unhinged, in order to become systematically intoxicated and insane, brings us closer to the mystery of the inner and outer world, this permanent complicity with the destructive forces of evil being the most certain guaranty of my objectivity, (“I Roam” 40-41)

In these terms, the group’s black-magical objects ultimately stood as so many sentinels overseeing their satanic pact with life. It comes as little surprise to discover that the satanic blood pacts that Luca repeatedly discusses in *The Passive Vampire* were not merely for narrative effect, but that one of his objects — the anthropomorphic vial known as *Black Love* (fig. 11) — physically contains one such pact. Bound to Luca’s person by blood, caught somewhere between guardian and jailer, *Black Love* is emblematic of the role that objects played in the lives of the Romanian surrealists during the war: as the guarantors of a black-magical contract that manifested itself as a nihilistic refusal of “all forms, all categories, all acts, all plans, all laws” (*Passive Vampire* 89), but which also carried within it the liberating prophecy, that “[a]nything can occur in this world without a past, without points of reference, without knows.” (“Inventor of Love” 20)

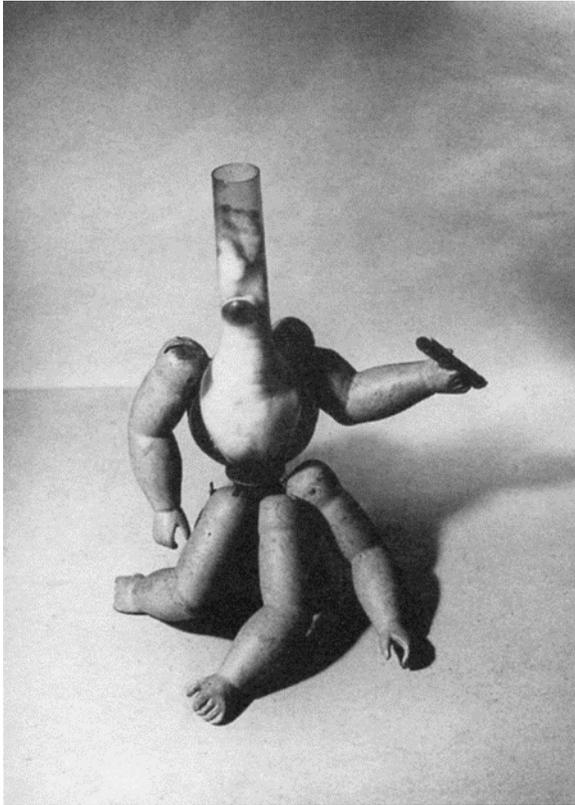


Figure 11: Gherasim Luca, *Black Love*, photographed by Théodore Brauner, c.1941-45, as published in *Le vampire passif* (Les Éditions de l'oubli, 1945). Image courtesy of Twisted Spoon Press. © ADAGP, Paris and DACS, London 2022. © Micheline Catti-Ghérasim Luca.

### The Vitality of the Gothic

In his 1937 essay “Nonnational Boundaries of Surrealism,” Breton argues that “the [birth of the] gothic genre must be regarded as symptomatic of the great social upheaval that shook Europe at the end of the eighteenth century” (15). Taking stock of the revolutionary historical context of the 1790s (the era of Radcliffe’s *Mysteries of Udolpho* and Lewis’s *The Monk*), Breton suggested the gothic novel was subconsciously oriented around “the expression of confused emotions oscillating between nostalgia and terror” and the heightened psychological “struggle” between “Eros” and “the death instinct” such as the individual can only experience in periods of crisis (14). If, as Neil Matheson has suggested, the Gothic’s original appeal to the surrealists was born out, according to Breton’s own reasoning, as an *aesthetics of crisis* for that generation condemned to “the carnage

of the First World War," then the resurgence of Gothic themes and characters in the wartime works of Gherasim Luca might perhaps seem inevitable (5).

However, Luca's recourse to the Gothic was much more deliberated than a simple reclamation of demons and vampires as symbols of subversion or parodic tropes of chaos to the ends of political protest. In writing *The Passive Vampire*, Luca trawled the genre of Gothic fiction in order to recover more specific lessons about the phenomenological significance of eroticism and violence as revolutionary principles.

Throughout the book, Luca approaches erotic desire as a truth that escapes and obliterates all social norms and institutionalized values. In the latter portion of the book, after his bewildering amorous liaison with the figure of Déline, Luca describes eroticism's unsettling power:

Like a distant echo I could sense that the events I had participated in over these last few days went far beyond what one had hitherto understood by the concept of love. I could not tell which part of it was love and which part magic. . . . What were the contradictory forces that had appeared on that unremarkable afternoon, what phenomenon with its almost chemical precision was burning within me with no regard for my person? What mystery of chance was trying to reveal itself? What set of desires had appeared just then, like a pack of wolves, in the universe? (128)

In the erotic traps set by his black-magical objects, and through the alluring presence of Déline as femme fatale (reminiscent of Lewis's Matilda in *The Monk*), Luca approaches desire as a conspiratorial, disorienting, and destructive energy. In outlining desire's spontaneous, impassioned and fundamentally capricious gaze, he presents love's essentially ruinous force.

As Eburne attests, the surrealists had long since regarded violent crime as "a phenomenon of the marvellous, characterised by the discrepancies and excesses it brought to light" (*Surrealism* 1-2). In the most abstract terms possible, violence engages reality like the hand of a collagist, bringing about abrupt and unexpected ends by force of severance and manifesting surprising and unexpected possibilities through the improvised reconstruction of events that must ensue in its wake. This is violence's essential value in Luca's wartime writing: its chance-beset, marvelous emanation. This accounts for the persistent presence of violence in the narrative and referential scaffold of *The Passive Vampire*, from the delicate, surgical violence of the vampire to the brutal infanticide of the medieval sadist Gilles de Rais (*Passive Vampire* 96-99). It is important to stress, however, that *The Passive Vampire* does not represent merely a sensational celebration of violence, but rather a forced engagement with it as an objective fact that constituted one of the defining features of Luca's wartime existence. Facing violence as one of the most salient aspects of his historical situation, Luca sought to harness its disruptive energies as a facet of his demonic surrealism.

Not content to settle for a merely fictional representation of eroticism and of violence, in *The Passive Vampire* Luca sought to translate these Gothic principles into a lived philosophy, a feat he accomplished through his singular reinvention of the surrealist object. Throughout the book, it is the objects Luca encounters that carry the vital energies of eroticism and violence by consistently arousing and frustrating him as fetishes and by assaulting and buffeting him like weapons. In his emphatically *autobiographical* testimonies of his encounters with these demonic objects, Luca transmutes the Gothic world of tragic love and gruesome horror into a way of life that represents an entirely novel adaptation of the surrealist movement's revolutionary principles.

Given over to the interminable deviations of Luca's "demonic dialectic", the rubble-strewn streets of Bucharest came to represent a space of absolute possibility: a lycanthropic city, "a world where", as Răileanu remarks, "the Possible replaces the Real" (Răileanu, "vampire passif"). In this restless landscape, "[c]rossed night and day by an infinite series of ever more provocative, ever more precious and devouring negations" ("Dialectics of the Dialectic" 41), Luca and the Romanian surrealists ultimately discovered a "total, infernal freedom" (*Passive Vampire* 133). Such was surrealism in its demonic orientation: a frantic city cast under the sign of "Lucifer, Belial, Beelzebub, Satan," corralled into vast dialectical storms (93).

### Works Cited

- Benjamin, Walter. "Surrealism: The Last Snapshot of the European Intelligentsia." *One Way Street and Other Writings*, translated by Edmund Jephcott & Kingsley Shorter, NLB, 1979, pp. 225-39.
- Brauner, Victor. *Victor Brauner, écrits et correspondances 1938-1948*. Edited by Camille Morando & Sylvie Patry, Centre Pompidou, 2005.
- Breton, André. "Anthology of Black Humour (excerpts)." *What is Surrealism?: Selected Writings*, edited by Franklin Rosemont, Pluto Press, 1978, pp. 188-96.
- . *The Communicating Vessels*. Translated by Mary Ann Caws, U of Nebraska P, 1990.
- . *Mad Love*. Translated by Mary Ann Caws, U of Nebraska P, 1988.
- . "Nonnational Boundaries of Surrealism." *Free Rein*, translated by Michel Parmentier and Jacqueline d'Amboise, U of Nebraska P, 1995, pp. 7-18.
- . "Second Manifesto of Surrealism." *Manifestoes of Surrealism*. Translated by Richard Seaver and Helen R. Lane, U of Michigan P, 1972, pp. 117-94.
- Caillois, Roger. "Interview with Gilles Lapouge." *The Edge of Surrealism: A Roger Caillois Reader*, translated by Claudine Frank and Camille Naish, edited by Claudine Frank, Duke UP, 2003, pp. 141-146.
- Carlat, Dominique. *Gherasim Luca l'intempestif*. José Corti, 1998.

- Eburne, Jonathan P. "Heraclitus, Hegel, and Dialectical Understanding." *Surrealism: Key Concepts*, edited by Krzysztof Fijalkowski and Michael Richardson, Routledge, 2016, pp. 19-35.
- . *Surrealism and the Art of Crime*. Cornell UP, 2008.
- Fijalkowski, Krzysztof. "From Sorcery to Silence: The Objects of Ghérasim Luca." *The Modern Language Review*, vol. 88, no. 3, July 1993, pp. 625-38.
- . "Ghérasim Luca: 'Le désir désiré'." *"Infra-noir", un et multiple: Une groupe surréaliste entre Bucarest et Paris, 1945-1947*, edited by Monique Yaari, Peter Lang, 2014, pp. 47-99.
- . "Luca the Absolute." *The Passive Vampire*, Twisted Spoon Press, 2008, pp. 11-22.
- . "La poésie sans langue: Ghérasim Luca, Visual Poet." *Hyperion: On the Future of Aesthetics*, vol. 7, no. 3, fall 2013, pp. 6-44.
- Frazer, James George. *The Golden Bough: Aftermath*. Macmillan, 1913.
- Graubard, Allan. "Reading Luca, Reading Me." *Hyperion: On the Future of Aesthetics*, vol. 7, no. 3, fall 2013, pp. 45-51.
- Ioanid, Radu. *The Holocaust in Romania: The Destruction of Jews and Gypsies Under the Antonescu Regime, 1940-44*. Ivan R. Dee, 2000.
- Lautréamont, Comte de. *Maldoror and Poems*. Translated by Paul Knight, Penguin, 1978.
- Luca, Gherasim. "The Dead Death." *The Inventor of Love & Other Writings*, translated by Julian and Laura Semilian, Black Widow Press, 2009, pp. 42-61.
- . "The Inventor of Love." *The Inventor of Love & Other Writings*, translated by Julian and Laura Semilian, Black Widow Press, 2009, pp. 17-32.
- . "I Roam the Impossible." *The Inventor of Love & Other Writings*, translated by Julian and Laura Semilian, Black Widow Press, 2009, pp. 33-41.
- . *The Passive Vampire*. Translated by Krzysztof Fijalkowski, Twisted Spoon Press, 2008.
- Luca, Gherasim, and D. Trost. "Dialectics of the Dialectic: A Message Addressed to the International Surrealist Movement." *Surrealism Against the Current: Tracts and Declarations*, translated by Michael Richardson and Krzysztof Fijalkowski, Pluto Press, 2001, pp. 32-41.
- . *Dialectique de la dialectique*. Surréalisme, 1945.
- . *Presentation de graphies colorées, de cubomanies et d'objets*. Independenta, 1945.
- Matheson, Neil. *Surrealism and the Gothic: Castles of the Interior*. Routledge, 2018.
- Răileanu, Petre. *Gherasim Luca*. Oxus, 2004.
- . "Le vampire passif, un nouvel ordre poétique du monde." *Le vampire Passif/Vampirul pasiv*, Vinea, 2016, pp. 393-437. <https://petre-raileanu.fr/le-vampire-passif-un-nouvel-ordre-poetique-du-monde/>.

Simmons, John Galbraith. "Circumstances of Invention: Notes on Some Early Texts." *Hyperion: On the Future of Aesthetics*, vol. 7, no. 3, Autumn 2013, pp. 100-11.

Toma, Iulian. *Gherasim Luca ou l'intransigeante passion d'être*. Honoré Champion, 2012.

———. "Gilles Deleuze/Gherasim Luca: The Paradoxical Encounter between 'Anti-Oedipus' and 'Non-Oedipus'." *Dada/Surrealism*, no. 20, 2015, pp. 1-11. <https://doi.org/10.17077/0084-9537.1302>.

Copyright © 2023 Will Atkin