Gherasim Luca: Creating the No Man's Language

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INTRODUCTION

OUBLIE TA LANGUE MATERNELLE
SOIS ETRANGER A LA LANGUE
D'ADOPTION ÉTRANGÈRE
SEULE
LA
NO MAN'S LANGUE

[forget your mother tongue | be a stranger to the foreign adopted language | only | the | no man's language]

—Gherasim Luca

What is the no man's language? In a 1962 notebook, the Surrealist writer Gherasim Luca expressed his estrangement from both Romanian, his maternal tongue, and French, his adopted language, seeking a departure from intelligible language entirely. Born Zolman Locker in Bucharest in 1913, Luca began his career in Romania. His family were Ashkenazi Jews, and in addition to Romanian, he spoke Yiddish, German, and French. At a young age, he established his literary credentials as a founder of the Romanian Surrealist movement. But, as fascism and antisemitism took root in Romania, Luca was forced to abandon his native tongue. Harassed and captured while trying to leave the country, he was finally able to escape in 1952 to Israel, where he lived for a short period of time before moving to Paris. There, he wrote his most prominent prose, poetry, and theory (primarily non-oedipal theory) in French. But, even up through his death in 1994, Luca refused to embrace the French

language or nationality. Having spent forty years in France without official papers, Luca was evicted from his Parisian apartment. Unable to cope, he committed suicide by jumping into the Seine. Luca had spent his whole life as an "apatrid," or a stateless person, belonging to no language, nation, or society, which reflects in his art.

Throughout his work, Luca devotes himself to the idea of not belonging or conforming, choosing to rebel against popular theories and reject conventions of writing. A revolutionary, he pioneers his own "no man's language" through several methods that I will examine throughout this paper. My primary aim is to elucidate Luca's methods for attacking oedipal thought. It is important to note that trademarks of the Surrealist movement, such as Freudian hermeneutics and a compulsion with the Oedipus complex, are noticeably absent from Luca's prose and poetry. Instead, he is preoccupied with finding a solution to the Oedipus complex. He believed it was possible to surpass it through the development of non-oedipal thought, which he broadly defined as "revolutionary thought," whether it was personal or political. Hence, within the scope of this paper, I focus both on his denial of Freudian concepts in relation to the personal--one's psyche--and his rejection of fixed frameworks in relation to the political--oedipal society. Furthermore, I examine how Luca's non-oedipal thought allows him to reach reflections about language often missed by his peers. More concretely, I analyze his critique of language as first as a means of intrapersonal communication and then as an effective social system. Lastly, I conclude with an assessment of Luca's identity as a Jewish artist and writer and a commentary on the weaponization of language - or lack thereof - in relation to society, politics, and humanity. Looking at his work through this lens, Luca's motivation to develop such a language - the no man's language - that was not bound by any of those elements ultimately becomes evident.

I. Luca's Objectively Offered Objects: Examining "The Passive Vampire"

As much a theorist as a writer, Luca questions the factors for which he holds responsible for the standardization of the oedipal psyche: the fixation on a maternal image that harbors the promise of the free expression of desire versus the castration complex and its relation to patriarchy. In his exploration of this question, Luca states in his 1945 novel The Passive Vampire:

I refuse all forms, all categories, all acts, all plans, all laws, all your castrating scents. I eat, breathe, drink, think, rejects, dress myself and move aphrodisiacally. I keep every cell of my being in a state of permanent excitation, excited and exciting at the same time, the zones traversing my being are genital and pregenital, erotic and criminal, black, ferocious, satanic.

According to Freud, the mother is the first love object of a child, who is born out of the maternal desire for a phallus. French psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan expands on Freud's theory, arguing that a child will even seduce the mother by becoming the object of her desire - the imaginary phallus. The Oedipus complex involves letting go of one's identification with the imaginary

phallus and instead, due to the threat of castration, repressing one's libido, or sexual drive. Evidently rejecting all forms of chastity, Luca seeks a liberation of the spirit against the censorship of libido, choosing to identify himself with all things erotic. He presents himself as aphrodisiacal as a means of openly expressing desire. Moreover, he rejects the threat of castration--associated with the Freudian image of a father or patriarch--through his refusal to obey laws or tyrannical social constraints or hold a fixed identity. He even proclaims that "he killed [his father] before he died," in order to liberate himself from a social/familial prison to a greater extent. Thus, it is through his profuse expressions of sexuality that Luca transforms "The Passive Vampire" into a unique manifesto against oedipal structuring.

Furthermore, "The Passive Vampire" is Luca's first attempt at conducting a theoretical reflection on language as a means of communication. A mix of personal confession and manifesto-esque theory, "The Passive Vampire" occupies the space left previously by Salvador Dali's objets a fonctionnement symbolique and Andre Breton's Nadja through its exploration of several "objectively offered objects." Luca more specifically proposes an erotica of objects, inserting provocative photographs of his assemblages within the work. As seen below, many of the objects provide blatantly sexual and even violent visuals of the human body through the disfigurement of dolls. It becomes evident that eroticism permeates most everything in Luca's world - a testament to his revolution against the limits of the Oedipus complex.



Image courtesy of Twisted Spoon Press

Figure 1: The Letter L

However, under further examination, "The Passive Vampire" stands to be more than just a manifesto, but rather an exploration of and reflection on language as well. Luca employs a heterogenous mode of writing, from distinct lack of narrative and dialogic style to passages of prose juxtaposed between equations and photographs of assemblages. Notably, it is his handmade assemblages that come to be the most meaningful in his examination of language as a method of communication. While his objectively offered objects are often made with a certain person in mind, Luca does not consider them gifts but rather explains that "an object can be used as a vehicle for

sentimental or intellectual exchanges, and can become a qualitative description that can only be interpreted like a rebus." Examining Figure 1, The Letter L was created for Andre Breton, a French poet and surrealist theorist whom Luca greatly admired but had never gotten the chance to know more intimately. Luca covered the female doll, who he originally named Nadja after the titular character of Breton's Nadja, in riddles cut from an old almanac, leaving words speckled all over its torso and leg. Then, he further transformed the piece through the addition of another doll's head, which he stabbed with razors and fixed between the first doll's legs.

According to scholar and author Krzysztof Fijalkowski, each piece of paper on the doll represented a correspondence Luca would have liked to have with Breton; as such, the object becomes a physical symbol of what he wants to communicate to Breton and his desire to deepen his relationship with Breton. Luca wishes to profoundly know Breton, who he idolizes and often draws inspiration from, yet he is unable to converse with him. Turning the doll into a mechanism of communication instead, "l'objet trouvé pour être offert commence à murmurer entre moi et Breton une langue magique et noire, si près du rêve et d'une langue fondamentale" [the object...whispers between (Luca) and Breton a magic and black language, so close to the dream and a fundamental language]. Thus, the object transcends materialism; it is able to transmit unspoken messages and desires when words fail, raising the question: then, what is the purpose of language?

Musing on the futility of language as we know it, Luca proceeds to offer a solution to this query. He writes, "I would propose the discovery of a new language that genuinely expresses the psychic phenomena which resemble, but are not identical to, dreams. In this language that I am unable to find, the ancient antinomies, beginning with that of good and evil, will be resolved for the meanwhile at the individual level." Faced with a language that has no purpose and that he deems ineffective, Luca pursues a new language, one that can describe surreal realms, manifest and liberate desire, and even illuminate the nature of human reality and the universe. From this pursuit arose his objectively offered objects--"those philosopher's stones that discover, transform, hallucinate, communicate our screaming" --as a pictorial "no man's language." Altogether, "The Passive Vampire," with its erotic objects, creates a universe where the projection of a conscience manifests a total opposition to language and society.

II. Luca's Prodigal Stutter: Interpreting "Niciodată Destul" and "Passionnément"

Throughout the 1940s, Luca dedicated himself not only to writing poetry to serve as a vehicle for non-oedipal thought, but also to cultivating a new style that allowed him to further question the efficacy of language. Poems like "Niciodată destul" and "Passionnément"

utilize unique iterative techniques: the repetition of the same word or the same group of words, the modulation of one or more phonemes, and the distortion of the voice with a stuttering effect. These techniques infuse double meanings in nearly every word, which becomes fragmented and cast in a subversive light. Luca contorts language in order to release its anti-oedipal references. For instance, the poem "Niciodată destul" is based on the word proporțional (proportional), which is broken down and rearticulated into other phrases. Let us examine the following excerpt:

propopopopoporpor proporporporți
proporțiporți porțiproporporți pro
porpopor poporpopor
proporțisorți proposorți proposorți
prea mulți morți
prea multe torțe propoforțe prea
multe propoforțe
propropropormor promoprotozor
mori în zori proton...
proporproton care ton protonpropro
toni care toni
porpor por în cor rog por pentru
popor
propor rog popor să mori...
asta propun propropropopun un porc
de popor proportional.

From "prea mulți morți, prea multe torțe" [too many dead, too many torches] to "rog popor să mori" [I beg you people to die] to "un porc de popor proportional" [a nation of proportional pigs], Luca widely references nationalism and the brutality of war as an instrument of authority throughout the poem. The cutting of the word "proportional" acts as a literal mechanism of castration, yet it gives life to new words with new meanings. Through this castration, Luca allows for the emergence of the concepts of nation and authority, ironically undermining the Oedipus complex - where the lack of being cut off provides the ultimate authority. As one of his earlier poems, "Niciodată destul" serves as only a brief glimpse into Luca's revolt against society and authority, but his anti-oedipal ethos becomes more explicit in his more famous French poem, "Passionnément."

At the syntactic level of "Passionnément," Luca focuses on deliberate phonetic lapsus, repetition, alliteration, and paronomasia, which infuses his writing with a playful energy, mirroring the natural unconscious flow of desire and passion for which the poem is titled. At key moments, anti-patriarchal and anti-papal motifs appear as provocative urges to "pissez sur / le pape sur papa" [piss on / the pope on your papa] and "pissez sur la pipe du papa du pape pissez en masse" [pee over the Pope, pee over the pipe of papa of the pope pee in mass]. Thus, he is revolting against the castrating authority of the father, whose representation in social authority manifests in the leader of the Catholic Church--the Pope. Luca continues his contestation of authority by refuting the very idea of nation through his exhortations to "minez vos nations" and "crachez sur vos nations"

[undermine your nations, spit on your nations], inciting readers to challenge society itself as an oedipal institution.

Furthermore, from the oedipal identification with father rises the superego, which according to French psychoanalyst Jacque Lacan's interpretation of the Freudian model of the psyche is considered the part of oneself that restricts sexual desire. To counteract this censorship of the superego, Luca showcases his taboo and erotic desires, freely exclaiming "ne dominez pas vos passions" [do not dominate your passions] and finalizing his poem with the potent declaration "Je t'aime passionnément" [I love you passionately]. This poem, through its clever decomposition and recombination of words, reflects an attempt of liberation from the Family, the Church, and the State, ultimately reaching an ostentatious display of desire.

Through his exploration of linguistic and syntactic disorder in his stutter poetry, Luca rejects societal convention in order to expose the mechanisms of individuation. His poetry goes to the limit of language: from overflowing to babbling, to ending in an outcry. Physical, even obscene, it takes shape from the reader's mouth: a poetry of broken sounds. In "Niciodată destul," Luca stammers over the same few syllables of the word proportional yet is unable to say it until he utters his very last word. Similarly, in "Passionnément," starting from the first three letters "pas" and after 104 stuttering verses, the poet finally manages to pronounce the phrase "je t'aime passio passionnément." As the fragments are repeated over and over, the reader is subjected to a sort of secondhand embarrassment, as if hearing someone stammer nonsensically for hours on end. A great admirer of Luca's stutter poetry, French Philosopher Gilles Deleuze, commented keenly on nature of this stammering: "Non pas être bègue sans parole, mais être bègue de langage lui-même" [not to stammer in one's speech, but to stammer in language itself], aptly reflecting its asyntactic awkwardness to the reader. However, this is exactly Luca's intended effect. The stutter poetry is meant to feel uncomfortable and even wrong; it is meant to defy known aesthetic norms.

By liquidating the functions of language, Luca creates something untranslatable, something that belongs to no language, once again harkening to the "no man's language." Deleuze considers this "prodigal stutter" one of the greatest achievements of French Contemporary poetry, as it displays the inadequacies of language as a system. In deconstructing words, Luca commits a violent act against language itself. Like the Father, the Church, and the State, Language too is a convention upheld by society, and the only way to recover vitality and to identify oneself is to destroy this system.

COMMENTARY & CONCLUSION

Ultimately, Luca demonstrates how defiance against the system unlocks

true freedom of expression and more profound communication. As a self-styled "alienjew," the poet witnessed first hand how Hitlerism's appropriation and manipulation of language created a one "true" or "pure" identity and dehumanized those who did not belong. Since language is the most fundamental political and social system, Nazi leadership put into place laws and procedures that aimed to regulate language in order to establish control over every facet of life. They stifled speech and writing that were not "Aryan" enough--essentially, anything too unconventional according to societal custom. Hitlerism as an ideology was able to permeate throughout Europe, which resulted in widespread religious and cultural purification, especially under Ion Antonescu's rule of Romania, as experienced by Luca.

Antonescu's antisemitic policies enacted a state-sanctioned genocide that killed as many as 400,000 people. Under the pretext of protecting Jews from potential attacks on the German armies, Jews were forcibly relocated from Bucharest to concentration camps and ghettos in rural areas. Following the arrival of Nazis in Romania in October 1940, Luca was sent to the Polygon Cotroceni concentration camp, forced to perform grueling labor including digging trenches and retrieving corpses.This trauma shaped Luca's art and writing, as he came face to face with the atrocities of war, the dangers of authority, and the institution of language. At its core, his Jewish background greatly informed his interest in non-oedipal thought: his "revolutionary thought." He was an outsider, religiously and culturally, which he harnessed in order to critique fixed identity. In the face of tremendous oppression, Luca had the perspective and the motivation to create a no-man's language. In a later manuscript, he comments, "Fundamentally and even legally, I am stateless out of necessity. Neither my past language nor my present one justify to my eyes (after Auschwitz) belonging to a national heritage." Having witnessed first-hand how the conventions of oedipal society and language were used to eradicate his own people, Luca refuses to allow the process to repeat.

He does not simply reject one language for another, but instead dedicates his whole life and oeuvre to social, political, and linguistic revolt. Because of his acute awareness of the link between language, society, and identity, he sought to create a language that was not tethered by any of those factors, but would rather release man from his bondage, whether through objectively offered objects or stuttering sounds. Through his application of anti-oedipal thought and dismantling of language in both "The Passive Vampire" and his stutter poetry, Luca succeeds in creating an artistic and linguistic system that belongs to nobody, but simultaneously belongs to everybody. Via the pursuit of such a no man's language, Luca sets out to subvert the authority that instituted language assumes, offers all of us a way to think post-monolingually.

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