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**DANGEROUS TERRITORY. THE
AVANT-GARDE AND OCCULTISM IN
CENTRAL EUROPE**

Let us start with a reminder: in the foundational 1924 *Manifesto of Surrealism*, André Breton announced the idea of surreality – the space in the borderland between the dream and wakefulness, whose status would be expressed in the recontextualisation of the elements of reality until that moment subject to the habits of logic, now liberated from the will of a rational subject. This departure from predictability and automatism is referred to as ‘what the occultists call *dangerous territory*’.¹ This space is described as dangerous precisely because it was to elude the laws of logic and everyday habits of the individual, and consequently to threaten the domination of man. As Breton further writes, besieged by objects, the subject triggers his fear response, which in the realm of daily existence constitutes an obstacle, but is in fact invaluable, as it restores the hope for ‘a dark presence’ or ‘the desired suddenness’² of images.

All these categories, referring together to the dark side of the personality, unconscious powers, and such internal or external stimuli, point to the issue central in the reflection of surrealists, i.e., that of the marvellous – derived in part from the writings of Sigmund Freud, in part directly from literature (from Lautréamont to Poe). However, the marvellous is conceived of here at once in a very broad and a very narrow manner. On the one hand, it evokes all that does not yield to systematisation and circumvents all principles, while, on the other, it rather concretely explores the arcana of black magic, which comprises demonological, alchemical and esoteric motifs. Waiting for the revolution in the bourgeoisie here and now, surrealists – some intuitively, others equipped with specialist knowledge, even confronting the latter with practice – take risky measures, which nonetheless offer attractive answers to the questions of the possibility of individual self-realisation in a world consumed by capitalism and deluded by civilisational progress.

It is by no mere accident that occultists have been invoked here. On the one hand, they are a household name for overthrowing the tyranny of reason, which many avant-gardists – particularly of dadaist and surrealist provenance – perceive as the epitome of triviality of human existence, inhibited by the censoring and castrating forces of family and public responsibilities. They conjure up a secular worship of sorts, one that is both strongly ideological and ideologically subversive, which results in their fitting the bill of the patrons for this peculiar paradox of surrealism, which may be defined as the coexistence of *serio* and *buffo* elements in every segment of the surrealist theory and practice. On the other hand, they provide an inexhaustible source of props, activities and rituals – obviously strongly symbolic ones, obscure for casual observers (hence, assuming a certain elitist *modus operandi*), and yet

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- 1 A. Breton, *Manifesto of Surrealism*, transl. by R. Seaver and H.R. Lane, in idem, *Manifestoes of Surrealism*, Ann Arbor (MI): University of Michigan Press, 1969, 45.
 - 2 Ibid. 46.

aimed at revolutionising the daily life, of everyone and for good, rooted in such an egalitarianism.

Naturally, the ground had been prepared by the 'dark' traditions ingrained in both cultures. We are right in regarding Prague as the European centre of occultism, the place from which golems and dybbuks evolved, while man, also here, started to be stripped of his Cartesian heritage and went on to replace his rational foundations for irrational instability. We know these tropes well from the works of Gustav Meyrink and Franz Kafka – there was, after all, a reason to the avant-garde's involvement with black magic, namely, its roots reaching back to decadence and modernism – but indeed also from the oeuvre of Ladislav Klíma, and later, for instance, Michal Ajvaz, whose images of Komodo dragons invading petit bourgeois Prague combined elements of the grotesque and references to the magical practices of identity changes and demons possessing the bodies of innocent people. In fact, the entire tradition of Czech post-war surrealism would be based on this humorous and oneiric dichotomy. It shall be manifested in the bizarre poems by Vratislav Effenberger, and later, say, in the works of Petr Král, and we still have the opportunity to witness this phenomenon in the line of the *Analogon* journal. Lastly, suffice it to mention the filmography of Jan Švankmajer, rife with Faustian and sombre references, while at the same time based on objects as carriers of meanings and characters *sensu stricto*. What we mean here is not only the director's penchant for the convention and technical features of stop-motion animation, but the conviction that objects transformed by man into fetishes gain autonomy which can hardly be reined in and that they satisfy their cravings through completely oblivious (or perfectly aware, yet helpless against the sovereignty of things) people.

Even the inter-war Czech avant-garde, though nominally devoted to constructivism and poetistic faith in the harmony of life and art, would at times reveal inspirations reaching somewhat beyond the framework of Karel Teige's manifestoes. Then again, the latter, when poetism had evolved into another phase, came to more willingly seek the underlay of rationality, and – encapsulating the first stage of the surrealist revolution, which he had been actively involved in – he spoke of 'flowing in and identifying with the world and humanity of a higher phase', of 'the true kingdom of freedom' and the meanings 'from underneath the surface of things'³ as its ultimate goals. Indeed, without looking far, already in the painting of Toyen (Marie Čermínová) in the 1920s and the 1930s, one can easily recognise the influence of supernatural matter. One needs but take

3 K. Teige, 'Dziesięć lat surrealizmu', transl. to Polish by H. Marciniak, in *Głuchy brudnopis. Antologia manifestów awangard Europy Środkowej*, J. Kornhauser, K. Siewior (eds.), Kraków: WUJ, 2014, 152.

a glance at the canonical manifestoes of artificialism, the Czech avant-garde movement attempting to drive a wedge between constructivism and surrealism. Its originators, Jindřich Štyrský and Toyen, emphasised that it were not the actions on the reality – be it processed and re-contextualised – that determined the power of the image. When they claimed that ‘artificialism introduces a reverse perspective. While leaving the reality be, it strives for the maximum of imaginativeness’,⁴ they meant more than a mere departure from cubist patterns (even though they derived from its deconstructive groundwork an instrument for disassembling the instances of schematism in thinking about the object). What they were interested in was gaining an insight into the essence of the unconscious, although not in the surrealist, more ideologically and collectively driven, style. What was at stake here was rather a cycle of private introspections leading to the development of a sense that internal images emanate a mystical aura all around, provoking symbolic work.

The ‘abstract awareness of reality’ postulated here does not negate the existence of the outside world, but it abstains from cooperating there-with under the terms of rational control. What comes to the forefront in this concept are the self-replicating images – memories and internal models – whose domain becomes the ‘universal space that over-inflates the system’,⁵ emerging in place of real spaces. Thus, we have come very near to the ‘dangerous territory’ and quasi-esoteric metaphors straight out of Breton’s writings. Such an evolution can also be traced in the paintings by Toyen, often representing symbolic artefacts (inverted figures, isolated objects floating in a desolate landscape, and lastly, collage beings of ambiguous status, as in her famous *The Message of the Forest*, 1936), whose purpose remains unclear, with their potential functional characteristics becoming vague due to the shift in context. This kind of ‘semiophores’ – to use a notion developed by Krzysztof Pomian⁶ – though seemingly filling the emptiness, are at once its prerequisite. The wilderness of the ‘dangerous territory’ thus appears to be a dead-end. In a similar vein, one can also interpret many cycles of photographs by Štyrský, although in a lot of them dark undertones give way to the macabre inhabiting the borderland between pornography and something akin to a surrealist Gonzo reportage.

4 J. Štyrský, Toyen, ‘Artyficalizm’, transl. to Polish by H. Marciniak, in *Głuchy brudnopis...*, op. cit., 79.

5 Ibid. 80.

6 This is how Krzysztof Pomian refers to ‘objects which were of absolutely no use’, which represent the invisible and are beyond the influence of external stimuli, being, therefore, endowed with a special meaning. See K. Pomian, *Collectors and Curiosities. Paris and Venice, 1500–1800*, transl. by E. Wiles-Portier, Cambridge: Polity Press, 1990, 32.

The most important discovery made by Czech avant-gardists, one that would provide the foundation for the new world, was the conviction of a fluid – and lined with magical powers – identity of the object.⁷ Ambiguity is the cure for the ‘mad beast of habit’,⁸ as identified by Breton, against which the practice of exploring the said ‘dangerous territory’ is juxtaposed, the exploration during which monsters, until then asleep, awake. Vítězslav Nezval, a convert from poetism, wrote together with his colleagues about a vision of the future world in which ‘a tailor’s mannequin made of padding could perform a more violent scene in a love tragedy than an actor’, while a table ‘at one point assumes before our eyes the features of a bear, while on other occasion those of a billiard of creamy soufflés.’⁹ Meanwhile, Romanian avant-gardists sought the roots of the new character of objects and the fall of the subject mainly in dreaming – ‘the syphilis of the subconscious’,¹⁰ as labelled by Geo Bogza, one of the leaders of the early Bucharest surrealism of the 1930s. In his loud manifesto ‘The Rehabilitation of the Dream’ (1931), he presented the vision of the dream as a reality devouring and reducing the subject in favour of the transformed and vivified objects, born out of ‘the sense of having suddenly gained an insight into the essence of the world, when things lose their functionality.’¹¹ The metaphors of incessant transformations and place-switching compete against the passionate expression of bizarre states and phenomena: ‘the whole world is covered with jelly’,¹² the author declares, jelly through which the most unexpected beings try to break, leading to the emergence of the scenery of the ‘dangerous territory’.

Hence, the paradox of objects is based on many contradictory elements: objects are items, but they are also other beings, which are non-human, or human even, but no longer treated as subjects – ‘a man is rain embodied, while another a total hysteria with a hammer for a head’;¹³ seemingly, they are dead, but also alive, only to – a moment later – be dead again; they are material beings and atmospheric phenomena; they constitute an inexorable component of universal dreams and plans. In the manifestoes of the Czech avant-garde towards the end of the 1930s,

7 In this paragraph, I refer to the chapter ‘Przedmioty. Stoły-niedźwiedzie i ludzie-lejki – obiekty środkowoeuropejskich awangard’ from my book *Awangarda. Strajki, zakłócenia, deformacje*, Kraków: WUJ, 2017, 15–24.

8 A. Breton, *Manifesto of Surrealism*, op. cit., 45.

9 V. Nezval et al., ‘Surrealizm w Republice Czechosłowackiej – broszura’, transl. to Polish by H. Marciniak, in *Głuchy brudnopis...*, op. cit., 123–4.

10 G. Bogza, ‘Rehabilitacja snu’, transl. to Polish by J. Kornhauser, in *Głuchy brudnopis...*, op. cit., 498.

11 Ibid.

12 Ibid.

13 V. Nezval et al., ‘Surrealizm w Republice Czechosłowackiej...’, op. cit., 124.

this paradox of the fate of people being intertwined with that of objects reached sheerly apocalyptic proportions. Jindřich Štyrský developed his visions, not so much catastrophic as – first and foremost – absurd, of new hybrid beings: ‘A letter-man shall arise, a gnawed bone, a point, a shred, an altar, a ball, a staircase, a hook, a filling, a casket-man, a fife, a shoelace, a pebble, luggage, a block of myst, and a sediment-man’.¹⁴ On the one hand, rather obviously, Štyrský was busy fulfilling his surrealist mission of mixing the reality of the outside world with the realm of dreams and the nooks and crannies of the unconscious, on the other, however, he adds to these classic avant-garde reflections a pinch of poetic imagery forking into subsequent phrases: ‘Liquid creatures shall arise, made of cotton wool, of snakeskin, feathery tres, in shreds, beings wilting at the side, glued of words, carried by the wind, filled with ulcers, fed on ice, outlined beings, hollow beings, modelled out of snow, raw meat and sand’.¹⁵

What unites the artificialist belief in the power of roughly magical practices over the private psyche of the subject turns out to be the radically symbolical character of the object. All objects have magical power at their disposal, thus becoming semiophores in the newly-conjured up space. Much like in the painting *The Surrealist* (1947) by the Romanian painter Victor Brauner, who used motifs derived from the Kabbalah, tarot and black magic (Holy Grail, knife, fire, the symbol of infinity) in order to redefine the figure of the creator–experimenter. No longer a constructivist *bricoleur* nor a post-romantic bard, he now turns to magic. With a wand in his hand, he is trying to transport the objects before him into the realm of the surreal, thus performing the ‘final rites’ as a strong subject in order to subsequently dissolve into the void. The demonic figure who accompanies him – coalescing the identity traits of the subject with those of the object – appears to be the emissary from the world of the ‘dangerous territory’. He guards the eternal fire of the athanor, the alchemical furnace, in which the philosopher’s stone is created. The mysterious, dark and light setting in which the scene is presented brings to mind works by René Magritte (by the way, much like the ‘hollow inside’ characters in Toyen’s paintings), as an image of the borderland between the dream and wakefulness.

Being faithful to occultist motifs was to be the dominant feature of Brauner’s oeuvre over the years. The figures of the woman-mother, little short of hieroglyphic, that symbolise the incessant drive to animate all the surrounding space, and the hybrid human-animal figures presented

14 J. Štyrský, ‘Z wykładu na seminarium Jana Mukařovskiego w Pradze’, transl. to Polish by H. Marciniak, in *Głuchy brudnopis...*, op. cit., 163.

15 Ibid. 164.

with emblems of another reality (crescent moons, stars, chalices) suggest a veiled presence of mysterious powers in everyday practices. Interested in black magic already in the 1920s, Brauner introduced to its world Gherasim Luca and Gellu Naum, who were to become the main protagonists of surrealism in Romania in the following decades. Furthermore, and importantly, we do not speak here of copying the model surrealism from Parisian cafés, but of an attempt at constructing an entirely new theory based largely on the aforementioned collage of references to occultism and reflections on the emancipation of the object. All this, of course, occurred against the backdrop of Breton's thought presented in his *Manifesto of Surrealism* and *Second Manifesto of Surrealism*, with particular focus on his 1930s essays, including, i.a., 'The Crisis of the Object' (1936) which features the deliberation on 'the concealed state' of the object, its 'transformational abilities', and the vision of 'the most ambiguous associations'¹⁶ that link them.

The most important evolution of this aspect in the thought of Gellu Naum, a poet, writer and translator, the leader of the Romanian Surrealist Group during the 1940s, is the theory of the ephialtic object, developed on the pages of his essayist prose poem *Medium* (1945).¹⁷ It is in *Medium* that Naum postulates 'that the object be divested of all stultifying uniforms'.¹⁸ The call to liberate the object is a reflection of the emancipatory postulates recorded by Breton in 'The Crisis of the Object'. Such a manifestation of a life – until then hidden – is to occur 'on the verso of reality',¹⁹ to recall Breton's words, which Naum replaces with the phrase 'the theory of the other side'.²⁰ The surrealist space, much like Pomian's collection, is the venue of the encounter of the most varied objects hailing from diverse contexts. Gathered in one place, these heterogeneous objects acquire unexpected meanings. Naum opted for the formula of a catalogue in order to unify the status of all elements of the surreal: 'Oh, wonderful automata, great robots, extraordinary mechanical toys, monkeys that jump, birds that move, monstrously large bees, all with a single turn of a key'.²¹

At the same time, the focus of *Medium* is on the process of the total elimination of the subject. This follows the pattern of dominance of autonomous objects which replace man in line with the assumptions of 'precise deformation'. 'People have disappeared... It is not man that lives here, it is the shadow.'²² Naum's surreality is populated by phantoms, apparitions, mannequins and 'hallucinatory

16 A. Breton, 'Kryzys przedmiotu', transl. to Polish by A. Ważyk, in *Surrealizm. Teoria i praktyka literacka*, A. Ważyk (ed.), Warszawa: Czytelnik, 166.

17 I elaborate here on the notions outlined in my book: *Całkowita rewolucja. Status przedmiotów w poezji surrealizmu*, Kraków: WUJ, 2015.

18 G. Naum, *Medium*, București: Editura Modernă, 1945, 139.

19 A. Breton, *Manifesto of Surrealism...*, op. cit., 44.

20 Ibid. 86. G. Naum refers here also to romantic oneirism, among other things, via numerous references to the oeuvre of Gérard de Nerval.

21 Ibid. 148.

22 Ibid. 78–9.

figures', which 'are more real, more alive'²³ than people. In a way, they are reminiscent of the immobilised characters in the paintings of Paul Delvaux and Giorgio de Chirico, some concealing 'an internal life'²⁴ within. Another emancipated being that wanders through the 'dangerous territory' is the vampire, a common element of Naum's and Luca's theories. In *Medium*, it symbolises the demonic aspect of objects and their striving to establish mutually 'bloodthirsty' interactions. Referred to as 'a ready-made object', it evokes associations with the type of surrealist objects featured in Breton's writings; above all, however, it points to the occultist sources of Naum's theory, as it is related to the belief in blood-thirsty character of animate objects and their demonic nature.

The demonic or vampiric disposition of objects may be manifested in various ways. As an example, Naum uses a knife, 'which, besides customarily cutting bread or a beefsteak, rather tactlessly cuts a piece of our finger off'.²⁵ He goes on to enumerate other phenomena from the borderland between the dream and wakefulness, such as: 'the hallucinatory persistence of the object's aggression, lustful character of gloves, hats, chairs, wine glasses, the vampirism of stiletto heels, furnaces, photographic cameras which suck images out, the vampiric lycanthropy of an animal-shaped moneybox, or simply that of a serpent-owl-candle holder, lanterns that suck our shadows from us in a quietly vampiric vein, ... a brilliant game played by the houses that close their doors to us'.²⁶

The animate and metamorphic dimension of objects that 'possess other objects' is emphasised by the 'demonic nature' of the disturbing 'ephiatic object'. Naum defines 'ephiaticism' as 'interchangeable hermaphroditic demonicity of the object', which combines within a single being the esoteric figures of incubi and succubi, 'malicious demons of nightmares'.²⁷ Alchemic and demonological aspects of Naum's oeuvre are indicated in this context by Alistair Blyth,²⁸ among others. Here, too – rather

23 Ibid. 90.

24 As indicated, among others, by O. Morar, *Avatarurile suprarealismului românesc*, Bucureşti: Editura Univers, 2003, 201.

25 G. Naum, *Medium*, op. cit., 129.

26 Ibid.

27 Ibid. 130. The ephiatic object refers to the notion of *ephiates*, meaning an apparition, a nightmare, particularly one associated with anxiety. A person subject to such a nightmare senses the presence of an evil spirit, either an incubus (male) or a succubus (female). The demon visits a sleeping person, brutally seduces her or him, and then sucks all their energy and takes over their souls.

28 See A. Blyth, 'Suprarealul ca infra-real', in G. Naum, *Vasco da Gama și alte poheme / Vasco da Gama and other pohems*, Bucureşti: Editura Humanitas, 2007, 14.

significantly – we come across a simile between space and a work-filled athanor; also the metaphors related to the ‘dangerous territory’ emerge here as a reference to the desolate spaces, subject to incessant transformations.²⁹

What is important is that the principles of ‘precise deformation’ in action – understood here in demonological terms and presented by Naum as the key to the metamorphosis process of the status of objects – result in the emergence of human-animal, human-abstract and human-object hybrids, such as ‘vampires’, ‘werewolves’, and other ephialtic objects of any sort. At work here, as rudiments, are the remains of a human figure appropriated and used by other objects, but also in collages comprising several heterogeneous objects (here we could class the said ‘serpent-owl-candle holder’). In fact, Naum presented his own typology of ephialtic objects, developing a classification based on the ‘level of aggressiveness’ of objects. ‘Restrained ephialtism’ (*efialtism reținut*) would thus include such ‘simple’ objects as ‘a book that bites our fingers or stings our eyes; a window which overlooks another window; a coffin; a closed button, etc.’³⁰ Meanwhile, ‘exuberant ephialtism’ (*efialtism exuberant*) would refer, above all, to the aforementioned lycanthropic beings, ‘to a greater or lesser extent reminiscent of animals’,³¹ albeit losing nothing of their ‘demonic, vampiric and sexual power’. One cannot fail to observe that all ephialtic beings are subject to animisation or anthropomorphism, and possess a significant ‘metaphoric potential’, understood as a pursuit to establish interactions with other objects and transform the surreal. Naum described ephialtism as ‘hermaphroditic demonicity of the object’, which combines various figures of malicious demons within a single being.

In Naum’s oeuvre, it is the process of devouring that becomes the poetic carrier of the theory of the ephialtic object. The latter takes the form of an endless orgy of transformations, with desires serving as its catalysts. The lustful nature of ephialtic objects results in ordinary images being replaced with the new ‘off-putting, unnerving, mysterious images, which change the face of the universe’.³² Meanwhile, Ion Pop points out the fact that unconscious desires manifest themselves already in the process of constructing the object, which is acted on by objective chance: ‘With much interest, Gellu Naum observes the process of object transformation in an accidental clash with the force of desire. On the one hand, the desire ceaselessly seeks matter it could put on as its attire, on the other, it is the object caught up in the accident that searches for human desires’.³³ Alluding

29 It is worth mentioning that G. Naum’s 1968 book of poetry was titled *Athanor*.

30 G. Naum, *Medium*, op. cit., 130.

31 Ibid. 131.

32 Ibid. 135.

33 I. Pop, *Avangarda în literatura română*, București: Editura Minerva, 1990, 310.

to Breton's typology of surrealist objects, Blyth aptly compares man to 'an object found' in a surrealist space: 'Instead of a static object, governed by the consciousness of the knowing subject, what emerges is a liberated, active object that devours the observer. Thus, man becomes a surrealist object found in the dark, limitless world of demonically animated objects seeking their prey'.³⁴ Therefore, in Naum's poems, objects are no longer intermediaries or carriers of human desires – instead, they are the holders of their own desires.

In the case of Gherasim Luca, an author of prose and poetry works, graphic artist and theorist of surrealism, what matters most are the inspirations with demonological thought featured in the prose-essay *The Passive Vampire* (1945).³⁵ Among scholars and critics, the book is considered to be the most complete expression of the creative power of Romanian surrealism. First of all, because it was intended as an interdisciplinary undertaking, combining elements of a manifesto, a programmatic essay, and a prose poem, additionally weaving into its oneiric framework certain autobiographical motifs. Secondly, it is a testimony of its time, a priceless document which reflects all the crucial issues of the Romanian Surrealist Group, established in 1940, whereas the sombre Bucharest of the early 1940s serves as the backdrop for the story. Thirdly, and, perhaps, most importantly, Luca's book should be regarded – 'in the surrealist vein' – as an original concept, a transmedial phenomenon, deconstructing the language and genre structure with a whiff of a dadaist act, exploding in a gush of extraordinary images, associations, wordplays.

According to Petre Răileanu, the most distinguished expert on Gherasim Luca's oeuvre, the editor and commentator of his writings, in the author's literary output, *The Passive Vampire* is 'the first overtly and completely surrealist text' in which 'poetry, dream and magic are thrown into a world of metamorphoses and transmutations. Time passes in a non-linear manner, unrestrained wanderings into the future and the past occur unimpeded, as though in the vacuum of space. The possible replaces the real'.³⁶ The doctrine of surrealism, granting unconscious desires and reflexes an advantage over the rational subject, is provided with an additional weapon in *The Passive Vampire* – that of the autonomisation of the

34 A. Blyth, 'Suprarealul ca infra-real', op. cit., 14.

35 I addressed the issue, among others, in my text: 'Pipety pełne mleka biernych wampirów. Gherasim Luca i świat demonicznych obiektów', in Gh. Luca, *Bierny wampir*, transl. to Polish by J. Kornhauser, Mikołów: Instytut Mikołowski im. R. Wojaczka, 2018, 143–62. [English translation of Luca's work: Gh. Luca, *The Passive Vampire*, transl. by K. Fijałkowski, Prague: Twisted Spoon Press, 2008].

36 P. Răileanu, 'Ontopoetyka albo głos transsurrealizmu', transl. to Polish by N. Chwaja, *Literatura na Świecie*, 1–2 (2016): 266.

object, given in the book the form of a sequence of images with objects liberated from the control of reason as their protagonists. By virtue of a mediumistic activity, they not only advance to the rank of fetishes, but, first and foremost, they receive a new nature, opposite to the original one.

The eponymous vampire, shifting from one image to another, instead of blood sucks milk, whereas human characters are subjected to the power of demonic objects. References to occultism and satanism, the reevaluation of Biblical verses and intertextual references according with the logic of dream may result in the reader feeling trapped. The lack of any unequivocal points of reference, stemming from the challenge to the primacy of either fictionality or non-fictionality, leads interpretations astray. After all, *The Passive Vampire* is neither an apology of loosening of the senses, nor an anti-religious treatise, nor a stream of consciousness akin to the automatic writing postulated by the French surrealists. The book's claim to being a masterpiece of the Romanian avant-garde is rather due to the fact that it is a little of all these things, and at the same time a complete negation of them all. Owing to the totality of Luca's undertaking – on the one hand, founded on intermedial principles, while on the other, on the suspension of the distinction between the reality of the outside world and the internal world – *The Passive Vampire* can be perceived as a harbinger of many neo avant-garde actions of the post-war period, exploring the borderlands between aesthetics and utility, autobiography and fantasy, strong subjectiveness and the anthropomorphism of objects.

Luca's inspiration originated from the contact with the milieu of Parisian surrealist he had in the years 1939–1940. The young author, having published his first literary attempts in an anarchistic Bucharest-based journal *Algae* and a dozen or so poems in the press, was met with a warm reception in Paris on the part of the group centred around André Breton, which had already been joined by his friends from Bucharest: Gellu Naum and Victor Brauner. It is then that he became fascinated with occultism, promoted by Brauner, and read a series of texts on the history of alchemy and demonism. His focus on the semi-magical figure of the vampire – a being constantly crossing from the dream reality to the outside world, meandering between life and death, and at the same time associated with the realm of appetites and desires, an impossible love and murderous instincts – may serve as the best proof here. After all, the surrealists' interest in quasi-human objects (dolls, mannequins) and not-completely-humans-though-somewhat-humans-still (doubles, incarnations, media, demons, the living dead) went hand in hand with at once thanatological and erotic associations implied by the figure of the vampire.

Object-wise, the most important idea developed by Ghersim Luca was that of the 'object objectively offered' (OOO), the magical powers of

which were the subject of studies by Gérard Durozoi,³⁷ and Agnieszka Taborska,³⁸ and most of all by Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari.³⁹ Ovidiu Morar further indicated the notion of ‘cubomania’ and the model referred to as ‘the object constructed remotely via the medium’, resulting from an ‘erotic mediumistic intervention’, which had the effect akin to ‘a chemical aphrodisiac, that could be complemented by the hallucinogenic properties of intoxicants’.⁴⁰ What these concepts share is the willingness to challenge the opposition of the relation between ‘the external’ and ‘the internal’, and to revolutionarily overcome the complexes making it impossible for man to gain freedom ‘in all its forms’,⁴¹ as Breton would put it. The deepest complex which, according to Luca, encompasses all other ones and particularly exacerbates the enslavement of the subject is the Oedipus complex. Hence, the common denominator of the objects developed and discussed by Luca: their dialectical, revolutionary, ‘non-oedipal’ (*non-œdipien*) character, manifested in the destruction of habits and the initiation of new interpersonal relations.

The notion of the OOO is given an exhaustive treatment in the *Passive Vampire* and adapted for the purposes of an artistic intervention in the prose part of the work. The latter is preceded by an essay in which Luca discusses in detail the idea of constructing and putting into circulation objects-fetishes, reminiscent of taboo items, fetishes or totems. The formula of the OOO entails the realisation of materially existing items, elaborated by Breton in ‘The Crisis of the Object’, while before that by Salvador Dalí in his concept of ‘items serving symbolic functions’, and offering them to selected persons. It is worth noting that in the first part of Luca’s manifesto there is a clear reference to the idea of the author of *Nadja* (while to *Nadja* itself – in the prose part). The considerations and commentaries featured in *The Crisis of the Object*, like the one presented in the following passage: ‘When I suggested that the objects dreamt about be fabricated and circulated, that they be given a concrete being, in spite of the extraordinary form these could take, I considered it to be more of a means than an end... However, far more important than the

37 G. Durozoi, *History of the Surrealist Movement*, transl. by A. Anderson, Chicago (IL) – London: University of Chicago Press, 2002, 446–9.

38 A. Taborska, *Spiskowcy wyobraźni. Surrealizm*, Gdańsk: słowo/obraz terytoria, 2007, 24, 199–200.

39 G. Deleuze, F. Guattari, ‘Balance Sheet – Program for Desiring-Machines’, transl. by R. Hurley, *Semiotexte(e)*, 3, vol. II (1977): 135.

40 Gh. Luca, D. Trost, ‘Prezentacja kolorowych grafii, kubomanii i obiektów’, transl. to Polish J. Kornhauser, in *Głuchy brudnopis...*, op. cit., 524.

41 A. Breton, *Second Manifesto of Surrealism*, transl. by R. Seaver and H.R. Lane, in idem, *Manifestoes...*, op. cit., 151.

production of such objects, the goal I was striving for was to reify the dream activity, making it a part of reality'⁴² – are reflected and complemented in the notion of the 'object objectively offered'. Its characteristic feature appears to be the author's persuasion of being able to enter into an extra-rational dialogue with objects, which could thus overcome their static character and liberate their oneiric nature, doubling their status in the realm of the real. Consequently, the object gains autonomy and becomes an independent being. Somewhat contrary to the surrealist doctrine of the found object, the decisive role in the process of constructing an object is assumed by the subject, be it a character (narrator) in a prose poem, or an actual producer of the installations described and photographed in the text.

Already in the opening sentence – admittedly, one featuring Breton's suggestion of 'objects dreamt about' – there is also a reference to the 'experience of an obsessive and delirious contact with certain objects', which occurs by way of their encounter or production. Luca's concept presupposes granting autonomy to the object through the subjectification of its status and providing it with 'magical' or 'demonic' character – there are references to resisting censorial inclinations of reality, finding 'its identity in the apparition of phantoms'⁴³ and aggressive tendencies of the phantom-object. The encounter of the object (with the object) may thus suggest an ontological equivalence of the subject and the object. Thus, Breton's 'putting objects into circulation' is consistently complemented.

The apparent opposition on the grounds of surrealist physics between the imaginary and the material is reflected in the challenged antinomy between the internal (i.e., associated with dreams and desires) and the external (the physical). According to Luca, the notion of the OOO meets Breton's postulates the most completely. In the essay part, the majority of the objects analysed by the narrator constitute collages made up of at least two elements. The catalog of these objects gives them an air of poetry and expressiveness. In the new context, they take on a new life. It is also indicated by the mysterious object names, such as the title 'passive vampire' (in fact, a hybrid of several dolls and various sized figures), or the 'latent powers considered as possibilities' (that is, an object reminiscent of a furry animal with button eyes, closed in a cage with a goat horn). Referring to Breton's typology of surrealist objects, all these 'objects objectively offered' must be acknowledged as 'items of oneiric provenance, solidified desires', even though they exist as physical items and are composed as collages composed of utility items.

42 A. Breton, 'Kryzys przedmiotu...', op. cit., 164.

43 Gh. Luca, *The Passive Vampire...*, op. cit., 81.

In the second part of the work, the essay is replaced by a prose poem, in which the objects, having been newly brought to life, serve as the fabric for constructing the surrealist space in the text. The constructor, thus far controlling the process of manufacturing items, is reduced to the status of an observer of the world ruled by his own inventions. Subjected to animisation and anthropomorphism, objects are referred to as ‘philosopher’s stones that discover, transform, hallucinate, communicate our screaming’. Lost among animated objects, the narrator fears, or perhaps expects internally that he is to participate in a game of transformations, in which commonplace objects morph into human figures: ‘it’s with *pleasure* that I’ll confuse the chair with a mediaeval knight, the shoe with the wan marquise who is slipping it on. I’ll walk into the next room arm in arm with the object.’⁴⁴ The objects undergo incessant transmutation, further increasing the observer’s disorientation. The protagonist, overwhelmed by their new identities, confesses: ‘Now I could eat a piano, shoot a table, inhale a staircase. All the extremities of my body have orifices out of which come the skeletons of the piano, the table, the staircase, and for the very first time these ordinary – and therefore non-existent – objects can exist.’⁴⁵

We need to remember that these oneiric objects originate in the subconscious as objectifications of specific desires. Critics, among them Petre Răileanu, like to emphasise the erotic dimension of *The Passive Vampire*. Indeed, while the introduction and a major part of the prose poem problematise the category of the object, providing an account of its endless evolution, in the final passages, the prose poem alters its fleeting, at times absurdly bizarre tone into a vehement and profound, sorrowful plaint of an impossible love. Rather unexpectedly, Luca gives priority – as noted by Răileanu – ‘to love-passion, love-madness, love-fetish, love explored in its deepest and most secret reaches.... There is one destination, the absolute of love.’⁴⁶

Moving between the poetics of a pathos-filled hymn and incantations typical for black magic, the narrator-protagonist – initially involved in the production of items and observation of their becoming autonomous – loses sight of this fetish in favour of another one: that of a living woman, who, nevertheless, proves equally unattainable as the animate objects threatening man. Desires, earlier confined within the collage-objects, strive to liberate themselves through the process of offering, and elicit the acquiescence of the mysterious Déline. But paying the demons off proves to no avail. Even evil powers and lustful activity of – so far

44 Ibid. 75.

45 Ibid. 83.

46 P. Răileanu, ‘Ontopoetyka albo głos transsurrealizmu’, op. cit., 267.

inanimate – objects cannot humanise the object of desire. The spectral nature of the loved woman and the desires that cannot be fulfilled constitute the punishment levied on those who parley with objects, granting them totemic powers.

Constant status negotiations between the objects invested with demonic power and the dysfunctional subject is bound to lead to a disaster. In *The Passive Vampire*, this disaster has many faces – ranging from losing control over the creative process, through physical degradation, to an altercation with the system. The most significant, however, is the defeat suffered in the confrontation with one's desires, which in the new reality – or rather what was left of any reality after the suppressed has returned – become autonomous and no longer belong to any anthropocentric order. In this sense, the protagonist falls prey to his own deceit: wishing to win the favour of the mysterious powers and ensure an adequate – as Freud would put it – libidinal cast (Déline being treated here as a paragon of femininity) – he loses the ability to shape his own fate. Ceding to the objects which used to depend upon him the power to attract and seduce Déline, he succumbs to masturbatory visions as though in the oneiric sur-reality of the 'dangerous territory'.

Let us end by returning to the 'dangerous territory' and black magic in everyday life. In his famous essay, initiating the activity of Group 42, titled 'The World We Live In', Jindřich Chalupecký introduced an extremely intriguing device of equating the utter mundanity of human existence with the mysterious sphere of the unconscious. Only in such a symbiosis, as he claimed, could the actual creative work take place. To live means to 'return man to the mystery, the chaos'⁴⁷ and leave oneself to the mercy of things, which are 'obstinate, hard and evil',⁴⁸ but due to their operation in the magical and mythical context, they are able to reinvigorate man's imagination. Once again, what occurs here is a revolution towards the irrational, in which the key role is played by objects, changing their materiality into the potentiality of demonic beings – unpredictable and directed against the 'mad beast of habit'. Writing in a similar vein, Geo Bogza announced 'the boiling of unexpected things'⁴⁹ in a chaotic cosmos, and Romanian surrealists in their numerous manifestoes, for instance, in 'Nocturnal Sand', provided a description of the ritual of 'understanding through misunderstanding'.⁵⁰ Owing to the latter, the group of 'surautomatic objects' was

47 J. Chalupecký, 'Świat, w którym żyjemy', transl. to Polish by H. Marciniak, in *Gluchy brudnopis...*, op. cit., 177.

48 Ibid. 178.

49 G. Bogza, 'Rehabilitacja snu', op. cit., 501.

50 Gh. Luca et al., 'Noctny piasek', transl. to Polish by J. Kornhauser, in *Gluchy brudnopis...*, op. cit., 566.

established, including ‘the totally unknown, hallucinatory locks’,⁵¹ but also one may use the body as a portal to another reality – analogous to ours, but existing in our unconsciousness. All these examples clearly refer to the foundations of the Surrealist doctrine, reduced in the essay by Gherasim Luca and Dolfi Trost to the table: ‘we accept / we reject’. The main positions among the accepted notions are given to ‘discoveries resulting from madness’,⁵² somnambulism, real operation of thoughts, black magic, and mana. It is hardly surprising, considering that mediumism – both in Luca’s and Naum’s version – was to constitute the main form of contact with the surreal. Central European surrealists were able to develop such a technique of dealing with the sediments of rationalism which, in an act of rejection of everything associated with the boredom and predictability of the bourgeoisie, posits the primacy of chaotic matter, trying to break through to the proto-language and the proto-image all the way to the discovery of completely purified space-time. And, as Štyrský wrote: ‘it will be the era of slow mixing of the air, the water, the earth, and the fire; the era of a dreamt synthesis of lyrical and artistic beauty. Animals will cross-breed at will, without any supervision of biologists new unicorns will rise, as well as mammalian beetles, mythical sheep, and creatures made up of swords, needles, and daggers.’⁵³

51 Ibid. 568.

52 Gh. Luca, D. Trost, ‘Prezentacja kolorowych grafii...’, op. cit., 521.

53 J. Štyrský, ‘Z wykładu na seminarium...’, op. cit., 163.

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Abstract:

The paper aims to present the influences of occultism on the development of the Central European avant-garde, particularly the surrealism of the 1930s and the 1940s. On the one hand, the occultists endorsed the rebellion against the tyranny of reason, which for many avant-gardists embodied the triviality of human life, blocked by the censoring forces of family and public duties. On the other hand, they constituted an inexhaustible source of props, activities, and rituals. Both aspects were extremely important both for the representatives of Czech artificialism (Toyen, and Štyrský), and Surrealism (Teige, Nezval); however, they gained particular importance in the theories and practice of Romanian surrealists: Victor Brauner, and, above all, Gherasim Luca and Gelu Naum. The crucial elements of the occultist thought here are the mysterious figures (vampires, media), as well as objects rendered independent from the control of reason. The space through which these processed beings endowed with a new status are able to reach consciousness is the paper's eponymous 'dangerous territory', as described by Breton, which became the metaphor (merely a metaphor?) for the alliance of the proto-language with the proto-image.

Keywords:

**Luca, Naum, surrealism,
theory of the object,
surreality**

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