HYPERION

On the future of aesthetics

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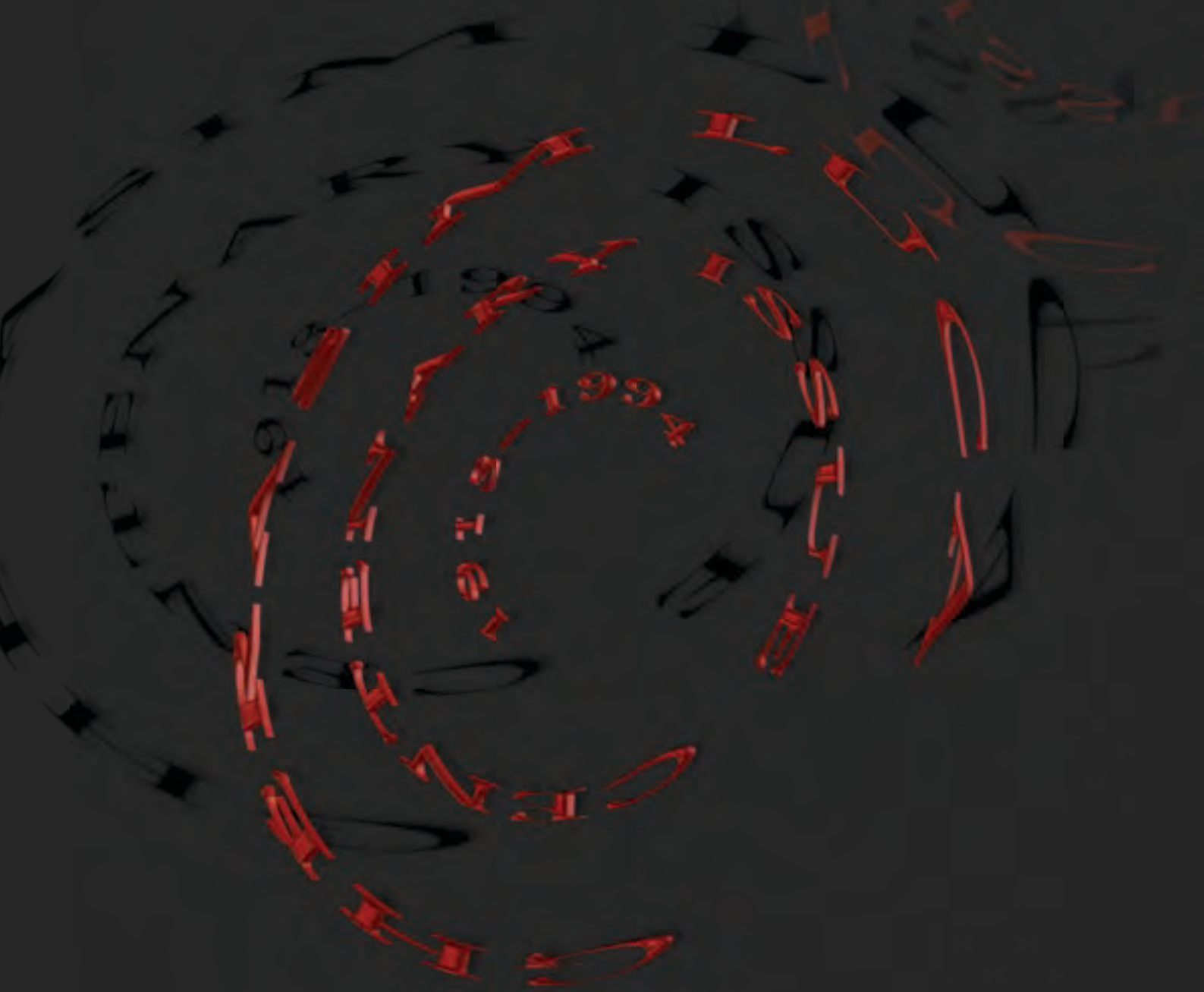

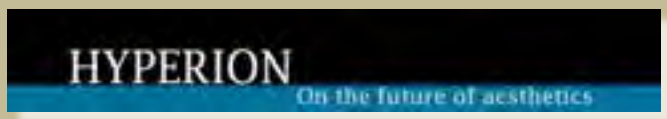

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Ghérasim Luca Centenary Issue
1913 – 1994

GUEST EDITOR'S NOTE

Ghérasim Luca is a singular presence. Whether considered in surrealist, avant-garde, or other circles, his poems, objects, theoretical texts, collages, drawings and performances resonate. Ever provocative then, when he first began to create them in the early 1940s to his death in 1994, little has changed now. For those of us who engage Luca, his is a sensibility that compels.

This issue of *Hyperion* elaborates on that engagement, both critically and creatively. Discussion of Luca's history, significance, complexity, affiliations and currency also includes contemporary work inspired by Luca. It is our contribution to the greater attention that Luca deserves.

Allan Graubard

New York

September 2013

Criticism and creation live in permanent symbiosis. Criticism feeds on poems and novels, but at the same time it is the water, bread, and air of creation. In the past, the "body of doctrine" was made up of closed systems: Dante was nourished by theology and Góngora by mythology. Modernity represents the rule of criticism: not a system, but the negation and the confrontation of all systems. Criticism has been the staple nourishment of all modern artists, from Baudelaire to Kafka, from Leopardi to the Russian Futurists. It has also become a form of creation: the work in the end becomes a celebration of negation ("Un coup de dés") or a negation of the work itself (*Nadja*). … Criticism as a method of creation, negation as a metaphysic and a rhetoric. … Creation is criticism and criticism creation. — Octavio Paz

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Ghérasim Luca: Dialectics and Ghost Stories

Jon Graham

William Blake, *Satan* (after Fuseli), ca. 1790

"Ghosts will be common and accessible, and there will no longer be any need for that pretentious ritual of trance séances for mediumistic phenomena to occur: in a world where mediumistic qualities will be commonplace, unconscious projections will occur naturally like a slip of the tongue."[1]

In his book, *The Passive Vampire*, Gherasim Luca describes how a language of black magic, bordering on dream and humanity's primordial tongue, formed a connection between him and André Breton. Knowing the profound influence

[1] Gherasim Luca, *The Passive Vampire* (Prague: Twisted Spoon Press, 2008).

Breton's books had on Luca's early activities can offer insight into how his works move ghost-like through Luca's own work, especially *The Passive Vampire*, which its English translator Krzysztof Fijalkowski astutely defines as an objectively offered object to the French surrealist.[2] This kind of object, the antithesis of the gift, was proposed by Luca as the means of activating a hitherto unconscious relationship between the giver and the recipient, whose selection is rigorously reflected in the symbolic nature of the object. These objects are the material concretions of relationships that "even an elementary interpretation would reveal to be as subversive, strange, and revealing as those of dreams."

Breton's *Nadja* opens with its author pondering the troubling ramifications implied in a popular French saying: *dis-moi qui tu hantes, je te dirai qui tu es* [tell me who you haunt, I will tell you who you are]. Idiomatically speaking, "haunting" here simply means "hanging with," but with his characteristic grasp of the deeper allusions present in what falls casually and unthinkingly from the mouths of others, Breton notes how this common catchphrase, when taken literally, tended to establish between certain individuals and himself "relations that are stranger, more inescapable, and more disturbing than I intended." "Such a phrase," he went on to say, "means much more than it says and makes me, still alive, assume the role of a ghost, obviously alluding to what I must have ceased to be in order to be who I am."

But where Breton counseled his reader that the word haunt meant more than he intended, Luca, who replaced his birth name Solomon Locker with a name he read in an obituary for an archimandrite of Mount Athos, seems to have taken haunting as his watchword. In *Theater of the Mouth* he calls the ghost the axis of the human being: one that has been divided into two corpses, as if reiterating what he said some 40 years earlier in *The Dead Death* to offer solutions to those ideational cul-de-sacs in which causes and effects are prevented from exchanging destinies among themselves. Luca counters human

[2] *The Passive Vampire* cites *Nadja* directly, and Luca's discussion of the law of objective chance — in this extended "dream conversation" with Breton — flows directly out of *Mad Love*.

biology with its cellular axioms rejected in *Dialectics of the Dialectic* as fatally leading to death, with multiple phantom personas that can maintain the necessary ambivalent tension between life and its contradiction.

For Luca, thought is not made in the mouth so much as staged in the theater of the mouth. The explosion of the self into selves accompanies his explosion of the word into ceaseless recombination of its meaning, which mirror the convulsive transformation of his own identity through the dueling lenses of Eros and Thanatos. Harnessing the fierce currents created by this accelerated dialectical dynamic would provide the aphrodisiac equivalent to a paroxysm necessary to sustain the newly invented forms of passion to replace the absurdity of "objective love."

Perhaps his phantomantic doubles arise from a state similar to the one Joë Bosquet described in a letter to Ferdinad Alquié: "What would you say if I told you that I sometimes deliriously feel that I am thought?" This echoes Luca when he says: "I always had the impression of being thought like Rimbaud and Lautréamont, but it never occurred to me that this other that thinks me could step out of myself and appear before me in as tangible and concrete a way as any other external object." This not only rejects the proprietary relationship between a man and his thought, much like Michel Leiris scorning the notion that language's purpose was to facilitate communication, but also seems to imply that when the individual is soluble in his thought, he creates doppelgangers that take their turn at the helm of consciousness.

In his book, *André Breton and the Basic Concepts of Surrealism*, Michel Carrouges noted: "Feeling like you are a ghost is a mental phenomenon that possesses an extremely concrete meaning. It indicates the extent to which one can feel like a stranger to oneself, to become disoriented in his normal ego awareness and be dragged down into subterranean layers of the mind, threatened by remote grumblings that rise from the underground lava of the mental labyrinth. The outside world begins to be shaken by the early symptoms of a seism of unknown nature. The individual then detects a vast framework

within of words, images, and thoughts he does not know, and in the interference of his ego and the world, he sees a subtle network of premonitions and magic coincidences. His own mind becomes the field of projections from dark powers."

Luca's development could be seen as paralleling the evolution of the ghost in Western culture from the corporeal form in which it was perceived in pre-Christian societies to the transparent incorporeal form given it by theologians as part of the process dematerializing pagan beliefs that threatened Christian hegemony (with the same corrosive skepticism that is emblematic of the orthodox partisans of modern scientism). His ghostly double first materialized in the form of these objectively offered objects, then transformed into that of his kleptobjects before finally assuming a less tangible form in a freely mutating language. It was as if in order to truly master the negation of the negation he had to assume the persona of a ghost trapped between life and death — a multi-dimensional death more in keeping with the dialectical leaps that gave structure to his thought, which he recast in spectral projections that have discarded their chains and groans for echoes, slips of the tongue, stammering, stuttering…

Fixed, mechanical absolute opposition in which a revenant whose fury never abandons him swaps instants of sadistic recess with those of a morbid passivity when the somnambulist holds sway. The stage is thus set for a revalorization of death in the form of the beloved whose appeal is never far from a promiscuous horror: "I caress your ectoplasm as I would a shark." Luca's relentless energy finds purchase on dialectical currents that offer an otherwise unobtainable access to the mind's deepest contents where "the most staggering aspects of love" can be discovered or invented, and where he confronts his "constant dialectical despair before love."

Like a ghost living off the disruptive power of Eros, Luca goes on: "I can't see what I might do with my persona, so frozen with desperation, if I didn't place it face-to-face with death, because only death can express its

obscurantist and fatal death, the real death that consumes me, that permeates me, that obscures me to the point of disappearance." To negate the negation of the death he identifies as the Absolute General Paralytic, Luca counters with a dead death that gives birth to a series of imaginary ghosts, each with its own suicide note. Luca identifies the unacceptable human condition as a death that is a dialectical dead end, a cul-de-sac in which his dialectical double that is constantly recombining with its host to create new amorous equations and a suicidal synthesis that calls the basic assumptions of the identity principle into question — countering conventional dichotomies with perpetually insoluble bisexual tendencies.

"Oralizing" himself in a verbal flow that shifted from stammering to a controlled skid, his poetry became a brand new avatar of the phonetic kabbalah, in which the breakneck pace of shifting meanings belied any notion of immutability; a transmentalism (to borrow a term coined by the Czech surrealist group) that denied and replaced the transcendental impulse in which love and death become inseparable thanks to Luca's constant dialectical despair, a despair that has three, four, five pairs of legs, phantomatic appendages of a *de raison d'etre*.

In *The Passive Vampire*, an anguished Luca emerging from a state of delirious interpretation that had dragged on for two full days, observes: "I do not know what part of it is magic and what part of it is love, I know neither the place where meet nor the place where separate these two terrible nuances of black, but I do know that the lover must be doubled by a magician, in order to be able to approach, without being terrified, these sublime deformations of darkness." Through deconstruction of the erotic circularity imposed by Oedipus in tandem with his dissatisfaction with death's non-dialectical finality, Luca not only sought that supreme point described by Breton in the *Second Manifesto*, but demanded it be inundated by the rivers of Heraclitus.

"Watch out," Roger Caillois warned the readers of his *Myth and Man*, "by playing a ghost, you become one!" Far from feeling any anxiety at this prospect, Gherasim Luca was counting on it.

Jon Graham, "Gherasim Luca: Dialectics and Ghost Stories"
Hyperion: On the Future of Aesthetics, Vol. VII, No. 3 (fall 2013) 0–5.

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La poésie sans langue: Ghérasim Luca, Visual Poet

Krzysztof Fijalkowski

Ghérasim Luca, *Passionément*, 1944

That it has taken the best part of twenty years since Ghérasim Luca's death for his reputation as a major figure of twentieth-century poetry (and one still uncommonly relevant to the twenty-first) finally to reach beyond the borders of his adopted home in France is no doubt unsurprising. Hermetic, simultaneously scattered and strategic, frequently defying translation, in perpetual emi-

gration from 'literature,' his writings are the epitome of work destined to resist assimilation.[1] But just as this extraordinary body of material is being discovered by new audiences, it emerges that there is another, even less familiar side to Luca's activity, one that complicates our understanding of him further and that places him among the vanguard not only of the fields of writing and performance, but also of visual practice: his engagement with graphic expression, with images, objects, collage, drawing and text-image relationships, along with his sustained collaboration with artists, all point to Luca's significant but until now largely unexplored contribution to the plastic arts.[2] The aim of what follows below is to give a first overview of this activity, with the intention of arguing that this 'artistic' practice (for want of a better word, since as we shall see next the notion of art could be a problematic one for him), as well as its interchanges with his writing, is a whole other area that needs acknowledging in any effective understanding of Luca's significance.

"It is always difficult for me to express myself in a visual language," Luca would observe.[3] While we might note that difficulty — along with long silences, fertile absences and secret correspondences — are the very stuff of Luca's work, and suspect an innate reticence to promote himself to the rank of those artists he frequented and admired, this statement goes hand in hand with Luca's reluctance to situate himself explicitly as an artist as well as a writer. While he seems never to have referred to himself publicly as an artist, there

[1] Even his name refuses to be administrated. Born Salman Locker in 1913, the poet borrowed the name Gherasim Luca (the acute accent on the 'e' adopted only after his permanent move to France in 1952) from a newspaper account of a visiting archimandrite, on the occasion of his first publication. But when later he came to formalize this change his name was recorded as 'Salman Gherasim Luca,' making 'Gherasim Luca' his surname — even if his friends, and subsequently most authors, refer just to 'Luca.' See Iulian Toma, *Gherasim Luca ou l'intransigeante passion d'être* (Paris: Honoré Champion, 2012) 31.

[2] Despite, as we shall see, Luca's participation in numerous exhibitions both during & after his lifetime, the relative obscurity of his visual practice compared to his written output is true even in the countries where his work is better known, France & Romania: very few publications, i.e., have focused on this aspect of his work, and the three major monographs devoted to the poet (Dominique Carlat, *Gherasim Luca l'intempestif* (Paris: José Corti, 1998); Petre Raileanu, *Gherasim Luca* (Paris: Oxus, 2004); Iulian Toma, op. cit) all devote only minor attention to it.

[3] Serge Bricianer, interview with Ghérasim Luca, reproduced in *Oiseau-Tempête*, No. 4 (1998) 32. The interview would seem to date from around the mid-1960s.

is also at least one early moment — in the midst of his participation in the Bucharest surrealist group, spanning the onset and aftermath of the Second World War — when the problem of artistic expression is explicitly addressed. Written with fellow group member Trost, the manifesto *Dialectique de la dialectique* of 1945 acted as a kind of distress signal sent to fellow surrealists scattered around the world by the recent catastrophe, but it also contained some blunt critiques of the ways in which its authors saw surrealism's engagement during the 1930s — a period that had seen the movement, despite its claims to revolutionary rigor, come close to courting popular and fashionable acceptance — turning into an easily-recuperable style through a series of repetitious techniques, particularly in the domain of art. In contrast, the Bucharest group would explore a range of explicitly anti-aesthetic (in Luca and Trost's words, "aplastic, objective, and entirely non-artistic")[4] visual practices, of which Luca would be a leading exponent.[5] Two exhibitions of this work, one in January 1945 featuring Trost and Luca alone, the other presented by the whole group (September–October 1946, an event initially intended as an international survey of surrealist art), indicated the group's willingness to extend its activity into visual fields. The group's contribution to the 1947 International Surrealist Exhibition in Paris on the other hand, in which one senses Luca's influence in particular, was significantly not artworks, but a text proposing a pitch-black room in which to encounter unknown objects.[6]

Following the demise of the group and Luca's departure from Bucharest in 1950, exhibitions would eventually form a significant strand of his pub-

[4] Gherasim Luca and Trost, *Dialectique de la Dialectique: Message addressé au mouvement surréaliste international* (Bucharest: Surréalisme, 1945) 27. This key text is available in translation as "Dialectics of the Dialectic," in Michael Richardson & Krzysztof Fijalkowski, eds, *Surrealism Against the Current: Tracts and Declarations* (London: Pluto, 2001) 32–41, though in an edited version that omits detail on this point.

[5] The Bucharest surrealist group were all predominantly writers, while the Romanian painters connected with them, Victor Brauner and Jacques Hérold, spent this period in France.

[6] Gherasim Luca, Gellu Naum, Paul Paun, Virgil Teodorescou, Trost, "Le Sable nocturne," in the catalogue *Le Surréalisme en 1947* (Paris, 1947) 56–58. See also the group's correspondence with André Breton in preparation for the exhibition, circa 1947, at: http://www.andrebreton.fr/fr/item/?GCOI=56600100524010#.

lic profile, but one that has scarcely been commented upon in any detail. In addition to an extensive bibliography and large numbers of electrifying public performances of his poetry, Luca continued to exhibit regularly, whether in group contexts (for example as part of the Phases movement, bringing together a large number of international artists, many of them close to surrealism), in collaboration with other artists or with solo shows across France. This activity was particularly marked from the 1960s onwards to the end of his life; posthumous exhibitions have continued to extend it to the present day, again for the most part in France.[7] Whilst many of these exhibitions showcased Luca's collage practice (the 'cubomanias' discussed in detail below) or his drawings, others explored a more complex interaction between text, publications, visual works and collaborations with other artists.

The Visual Text

Perhaps unsurprisingly for a participant in the adventure of surrealism and its vagabond inheritance,[8] one of the striking features of Luca's visual practice is the range of different levels and categories of activity it encompasses. As a result, and notwithstanding Luca's reputation as both an alchemist of language and an author of highly philosophical or theoretical poetic texts, one might argue that the visual impregnates his work at every turn. This can be seen, per-

[7] The definitive list of Luca's exhibition activity has yet to be drawn up and considered; the most extensive so far is found at the end of Iulian Toma's bibliography (op. cit.), which begins with the two Bucharest surrealist group shows followed by an exhibition in Tel Aviv with Mirabelle Dors and Paul Paun in December 1951 (information on all of these is scant), then a further 27 entries up to the year 2000. At least 20 of these are either solo or two-person shows (14 during his lifetime). A major exhibition covering the whole range of Luca's output toured three French venues in 2008–09 and was the occasion for a catalogue that remains the fullest published documentation to date of his visual work (*Cahiers de l'Abbaye Saint-Croix*, No. 110, special issue *Ghérasim Luca*, 2008), though it concentrates on only a few aspects of it.

[8] This is not the place for a discussion of Luca's relationship to surrealism, latent in the period of the 1930s, explicit in the 1940s, and then more complex from the 1950s onward, when he would describe himself as "surrealist in non-surrealism" (conversation with Micheline Catti, March 2013). For brevity and convenience, here I shall consider him as working within the broad wake of the surrealist adventure.

haps, at the most basic level of his careful supervision of the visual appearance of his printed texts. This is particularly true of those poems presented as *plaquettes* or loose sheets, a format already adopted by the Bucharest surrealists whose *Infra-Noir* series of publications consisted of publications made of a single double-sided sheet folded in four to produce a pamphlet that might almost be read as a kind of poster.[9] Luca's two contributions to this series, *Le secret du vide et du plein* and *Amphitrite* both featured a combination of a more formal short introductory essay, accompanied with an illustration, followed by the main poetic text.

Fig. 1. Gherasim Luca, pages from *Le secret du vide et du plein* (Bucharest: Infra-Noir, 1947). Private collection, Paris.

In the case of the former work, this text is an experiment with language, with the morphology of words and meanings and eventually the breakdown of the

[9] See the works by Luca, Trost, Paul Paun and Virgil Teodorescou made in the *Infra Noir* series in Bucharest, 1947, and reprinted in facsimile by La Maison de verre, Paris, in 1996. Several of Luca's later self-published pamphlets would play with the graphic format of the poster or leaflet, notably his playful but no doubt at least partly serious advertisement in 1960 for a new company 'Exactamo,' promising its customers the possibility of finding "the [mathematical] square of the word" and providing an "ontophonic" revelation of language (reproduced in *Cahiers de l'Abbaye Saint-Croix*, op. cit., p. 7).

verbal into pure typography, pure visual sound. This would be an experiment announcing the eventual direction of much of his post-war writings, and a contemporary, less well-known work *Niciodata destul* (*Never Enough*), in Romanian this time, offered an even more aggressive breakdown of language into visual-verbal components on a single, double-sided sheet of paper.[10] The actual typography of these works is unremarkable: sober, formal, using a traditional serif typeface, the poem is justified as expected to the left, titles and colophon are centered, and the results are far from the exuberant experiment, for example, of Dada publications despite the experimental nature of their texts.

A number of Luca's poems of the late 1950s and 1960s would adopt this type of format, deceptively simple in their appearance but presented with restrained care, and showing great attention to the balance between text and surrounding white space or to the placing and appeal of titles (as with his self-published poem-tract *La clef* of 1960, again on a single sheet which when folded over features just the title, in a style reminiscent of a bold nineteenth century woodblock font, occupying the full width of the paper). Later poems gathered in book-length collections often played with the space and movement of the words, with single lines of writing floating across otherwise empty pages, playful and variable intervals between lines or stanzas (suggesting pauses for reflection or hesitations pregnant with meaning), or changing positions and justifications of the text, making the simple turning of a page a game of discovery.

This interaction between the verbal and the visual could be just as important in Luca's personal correspondence (and we may note in passing that while his letters are often marked by a strong poetic sensibility, the epistolary register is also one that crops up at several points in his published works). Letters to friends from the 1940s, for example, could feature a complex play between handwriting, material support and image, as with a letter to Victor Brauner in August 1948 written in neat white script on brown card organized

[10] Gherasim Luca, *Niciodata destul* (Bucharest: Editura Suprarealistă Negația Negației, 1947).