

*From Dada to Infra-noir: Dada, Surrealism, and
Romania*

Gilles Deleuze/Gherasim Luca: The Paradoxal Encounter between “Anti-Oedipus” and “Non- Oedipus”

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Gilles Deleuze/Gherasim Luca: The Paradoxal Encounter between “Anti-Oedipus” and “Non-Oedipus”

Iulian Toma

A Fragmented Image

Any reader in the least familiar with Gilles Deleuze's philosophical work will be able to list some writers whose literary production was the focus of his thinking over the years: Kafka, Proust, Artaud, Beckett, and so many others. Among all the names that may be evoked, that of the poet Gherasim Luca would probably not be the first to come to mind. This, despite the philosopher's own pronouncements, in which he claimed, not without some intended provocation, to consider Luca “le plus grand poète de langue française vivant” (*Abécédaire*) ‘the greatest French-speaking poet alive.’

A member of the Bucharest surrealist group in the 1940s who settled in Paris in the early fifties, Gherasim Luca published poetry collections and tracts, often working in collaboration with painters, and created visual works and poetic performances. He seems to have engendered in Deleuze a genuine fascination, which is reflected in their correspondence as well as in Deleuze's writings and public speeches.

The objective of this article is to examine a warm, intellectual exchange between the two, born of a shared fantasy, that of redefining desire outside of the oedipean model. Around 1972, at the time he was about to publish the first volume of *Capitalism and Schizophrenia* with Félix Guattari, Deleuze learned of the poetic work of a certain Gherasim Luca whose “non-oedipean” meditations captured his attention. From that point on, and until the end of his life¹, he never stopped reading Luca's work, following the course of his artistic activity or engaging the poet in dialogue. Very quickly, exchanges between Deleuze and Luca moved beyond the framework of key concepts in Freudian psychoanalysis, as the philosopher became increasingly fascinated with Luca's poetry, which he would frequently praise. In fact, it is this unconditional admiration for Luca's poetic work

¹ Gherasim Luca died in 1994, Deleuze in 1995.

by the philosopher that will be commonly retained as the principal marker of the meeting of these two minds.²

However, historians of literature cannot be content with merely recording sheer data. It is also their task to reconstruct circumstances, transformations, and changes in emphasis. The present article revolves around three questions that have been answered only partially until now. What circumstances led to the encounter between Deleuze and Gherasim Luca's poetry? More precisely, what does the philosopher's infatuation rest upon, or, in more concrete terms, what truth is affirmed in Deleuze's comparison of Luca's poetry with Kafka's and Beckett's works? Most importantly, why does Deleuze, who was at first drawn mostly to the "non-oedipian" dimension of Luca's work, never refer to this dimension after 1973, preferring to highlight instead the way Luca's poetic discourse causes the French language to *become minor*?³

This biographical, intellectual, and emotional proximity is not easy to grasp comprehensively, mainly because of the precariously few written traces it left. Although Gherasim Luca's name frequently appears in his writings, Deleuze never systematically revealed his personal reading and understanding of the work of an author who was, after all, almost unknown in France in the 1970s. We know that the two protagonists met⁴, that they sustained a written correspondence, that Deleuze attended and was fascinated with Luca's poetic recitals, and that Luca's poetry struck him in its singularity. We also know he felt a deep affinity to Luca's "non-oedipian" concept of psychic life. Yet, reading Deleuze's writings—either addressed to the poet or paying tribute to him—we are left with the strange impression that we have missed something essential. It is as if, over time, converging lines of thought clearly articulated by the philosopher had been dimming, a feeling of insularity and incompleteness taking their place, as if the wording supposed to crystalize his thinking affirmed an evidence that was not evident in the least.

On Stammering: The Emergence of a Concept

Anti-Oedipus (with Félix Guattari), *Dialogues* (with Claire Parnet), *Superpositions* (with Carmelo Bene), *Mille Plateaux* (with Félix Guattari), *Critique et Clinique*, and "Avenir de linguistique" are all titles that attest, through multiple references, to the high regard Deleuze had for Luca's poetry. In addition, there are the courses taught by the philosopher, as well as the television interview/documentary

² Often cited is the expression of admiration shared by Deleuze in a dialogue with Claire Parnet: "Gherasim Luca est un grand poète parmi les plus grands" (*Dialogues* 10) 'Gherasim Luca is a great poet among the greatest' (*Dialogues* II 4).

³ For the concept of "devenir-mineur" 'becoming-minor' see *Dialogues* 73 (*Dialogues* II 59).

⁴ According to Micheline Catti, Gherasim Luca's widow, who kindly shared with me this information, Deleuze came more than once to visit the poet.

"L'Abécédaire de Gilles Deleuze," produced by Pierre-André Boutang (1988-1989).

What is the origin of this endless praise for Gherasim Luca's poetry? It appears that when Deleuze cited his name alongside Kafka's and Beckett's, it was because in his eyes the "prodigieux bégaiement" (*Dialogues* 10) 'prodigious stammering' (*Dialogues II* 4) of Luca's poems had the power of revealing the very essence of style. Indeed, most of the instances in which Deleuze evokes Luca's poetic language are linked to discursive elaborations on the tension that, according to the philosopher, determines the relationship between *langue* and *parole* (language and speech, in Saussure's sense), most powerfully expressed through style. Let us recall his 1977 definition of "style":

C'est la propriété de ceux dont on dit d'habitude "ils n'ont pas de style." Ce n'est pas une structure signifiante, ni une organisation réfléchie, ni une inspiration spontanée, ni une orchestration, ni une petite musique. C'est un agencement, un agencement d'énonciation. Un style, c'est arriver à bégayer dans sa propre langue. C'est difficile parce qu'il faut qu'il y ait nécessité d'un tel bégaiement. Non pas être bègue dans sa parole, mais être bègue du langage lui-même. Être comme un étranger dans sa propre langue. (*Dialogues* 10)

It belongs to people of whom you normally say, "They have no style." This is not a signifying structure, nor a reflected organization, nor a spontaneous inspiration, nor an orchestration, nor a little piece of music. It is an assemblage, an assemblage of enunciation. A style is managing to stammer in one's own language. It is difficult, because there has to be a need for such stammering. Not being a stammerer in one's speech, but being a stammerer of language itself. Being like a foreigner in one's own language. (*Dialogues II* 4)

Thus envisioned, style, for Deleuze, is related to the concept of *devenir-minoritaire* (becoming-minor) as a process of self-affirmation within a given system, and as a realization of the fragility of this eccentric position. The key issue, then, is the authenticity of this positioning when faced with a dominant power: "non pas faire semblant, non pas faire ou imiter l'enfant, le fou, la femme, l'animal, le bègue ou l'étranger, mais devenir tout cela, pour inventer de nouvelles forces ou de nouvelles armes" (*Dialogues* 11) 'not pretending, not playing or imitating the child, the madman, the woman, the animal, the stammerer or the foreigner, but becoming all of these, in order to invent new forces or new weapons' (*Dialogues II* 5).

Based on Gherasim Luca's poetic experience, Deleuze forges the metaphor of "stammering," which he adapts to his system of thought. Thus, through a shift from production of sound to linguistic sign, a term that originally denotes a speech dysfunction takes on the meaning of a creative reappropriation of language. And it is the questioning of the status of *langue* itself as a system of signs, central to

Deleuze's philosophy, that emerges concurrently with the development of his reflections on style:

Faire bégayer la langue: est-ce possible sans la confondre avec la parole? Tout dépend plutôt de la manière dont on considère la langue: si l'on extrait celle-ci comme un système homogène en équilibre, ou proche de l'équilibre, défini par des termes et des rapports constants, il est évident que les déséquilibres ou les variations n'affecteront que les paroles. . . . Mais si le système apparaît en perpétuel déséquilibre, en bifurcation, avec des termes dont chacun parcourt à son tour une zone de variation continue, alors la langue elle-même se met à vibrer, à bégayer, sans se confondre pourtant avec la parole qui n'assume jamais qu'une position variable parmi d'autres ou ne prend qu'une direction. (*Critique et Clinique* 136)

Is it possible to make language stutter without confusing it with speech? Everything depends on the way we consider language. If we extract it like a homogeneous system in equilibrium, or close to equilibrium, defined by constant terms and relations, it is obvious that the disequilibriums and variations can only affect speech. . . . But if the system appears in perpetual disequilibrium or bifurcation, if each of its terms in turn passes through a zone of continuous variation, then the language itself will begin to vibrate or stutter, but without being confused with speech, which never assumes more than one variable position among others, or moves in more than one direction. (*Essays Critical and Clinical* 108)

The concept of *bégaiement de la langue* (language stammering or stuttering), which was inspired by the specific patterns of some of Gherasim Luca's poems—poems that proceed through repetitions and modulations of a same phonetic theme—allowed Deleuze to metaphorically illustrate his theorization of the sign as a fundamentally irreducible entity, both oscillating and regenerative. Thus, under the French philosopher's gaze, Gherasim Luca's poetry presents itself both as a source of conceptual inspiration⁵ and as an example of linguistic concretion of the tension posited between *langue* and *parole*.

The Stammerer and the Lame

As fascinated as he was by the singularity of Luca's poetic patterns, Deleuze still did not at any point refer to the surrealist origins of "stammering." As if a passive reader, he only retained the spectacle of an astounding disintegration and recomposition of terms and utterances without ever going to the source of its

⁵ Alain Badiou rightly stresses what he terms the "valeur occasionnelle" (28) 'adventitious value' (15) of the literary texts that attract Deleuze.

primary impulsion. Yet the principle that underlies this peculiar poetic practice is not entirely foreign to Deleuze; the same year as his *Anti-Oedipus* was published (1972), he discovered in an article by Sarane Alexandrian from *La Nouvelle Revue de psychanalyse* a mention that immediately attracted his attention: a *Premier manifeste non-oedipien* (First Non-Oedipean Manifesto) had been apparently written in the 1940s by Gherasim Luca, who at the time was a member of the Bucharest surrealist group. The existence of this manuscript not being attested, the philosopher hastened to read *Héros-limite*, Luca's most readily accessible publication in France at the time in terms of availability. The reading of this collection of texts, conceived by the poet between 1947 and 1952, only increased his curiosity, as he stated in a 1972 letter addressed to Luca:

Monsieur, j'ai lu récemment les textes de *Héros-limite*. Je suis enthousiasmé, très frappé de la force et de la nouveauté de vos textes. Je souhaite tout lire. Auriez-vous l'obligeance . . . de me dire quels sont vos textes depuis *Héros-limite* ? . . . Je viens de lire, dans *La Nouvelle revue de psychanalyse*, que vous aviez écrit avec Trost⁶ un "Premier manifeste non-oedipien": où a-t-il paru ? (Boyer and Ponsart 73)

Sir, I recently read the texts of *Héros-limite*. I am filled with enthusiasm, struck by the force and novelty of your writing. I wish to read everything. Would you be kind enough . . . to tell me what are your texts since *Héros-limite*? . . . I have just read in *La Nouvelle Revue de psychanalyse* that you had written, with Trost, a "First Non-Oedipean Manifesto": where was it published?

Soon afterwards, Deleuze read additional texts not only by Gherasim Luca, but also by other Bucharest surrealists, as the article "Bilan-programme pour machines désirantes" indicates, co-authored with Guattari and published in January 1973 in *Minuit*, then republished in an appendix in the second edition of *Anti-Oedipus*. This article includes references to Trost (*Vision dans le cristal*) and Gherasim Luca (*Le Vampire passif*). Guattari and Deleuze summarize in it the criticism brought forth by Trost with regard to the Freudian conception of oneiric life:

On trouve déjà chez Gherasim Luca et chez Trost, auteurs étrangement méconnus, une conception anti-œdipienne du rêve qui nous semble très belle. Trost reproche à Freud d'avoir négligé le contenu manifeste du rêve au profit d'une uniformité d'Œdipe, d'avoir raté le rêve comme machine de communication avec le monde extérieur, d'avoir soudé le rêve au souvenir plutôt qu'au délire, d'avoir monté une théorie du compromis qui ôte au rêve comme au symptôme leur portée révolutionnaire immanente. Il dénonce l'action des répresseurs ou régresseurs comme représentants des "éléments sociaux réactionnaires" qui s'introduisent

⁶ A poet, theorist, and artist, member of the surrealist group of Bucharest.

dans le rêve à la faveur des associations venues du préconscient et des souvenirs-écrans venus de la vie diurne. Or ces associations pas plus que ces souvenirs n'appartiennent au rêve, c'est même pourquoi le rêve est forcé de les traiter symboliquement. N'en doutons pas, Œdipe existe, les associations sont toujours œdipiennes, mais précisément parce que le mécanisme dont elles dépendent est le même que celui d'Œdipe. Aussi, pour retrouver la pensée du rêve, qui ne fait qu'un avec la pensée diurne en tant qu'elles subissent toutes deux l'action de répresseurs distincts, il faut précisément briser les associations. (*L'Anti-Œdipe* 473-74)

In the work of Gherasim Luca and Trost, two—oddly enough—little known authors, we can already find an anti-oedipal conception of the dream that seems to us very beautiful. Trost reproaches Freud for having neglected the manifest character of the dream in order to maintain the consistency of the Oedipus model, for having overlooked the dream's potential as a machine with which to communicate with the external world, for having connected the dream to memory rather than to delirium, and for having devised a theory of compromise that strips the dream, as well as the symptom, of their immanent revolutionary thrust. Trost denounces the actions of the repressors and regressors as "reactionary social elements" who insinuate themselves into the dream through associations originating in the preconscious and through screen-memories originating in diurnal life. But in fact neither these associations nor these memories are intrinsic to the dream *per se*, and this is why the dream is forced to treat them symbolically. Let us make no mistake: Oedipus exists, and the associations are indeed always oedipal, but this is precisely because the mechanism that governs them is the same as that of Oedipus. Consequently, in order to recover the thought in the dream, which is one with the diurnal thought since they are both subjected to the action of distinct repressors, these associations must, precisely, be broken.

The Bucharest surrealists' efforts to discover forms of expression resistant to oedipal symbolism were not unknown to Deleuze. On the contrary, he devoted his maximum attention to Trost's experiments. Indeed, Trost, in order to uncouple desire from repression and lack, attempts in *Vision dans le cristal* to place desire in relation to chance occurrences—that is, to external factors:

Trost propose . . . une espèce de *cut-up* à la Burroughs, qui consiste à mettre un fragment de rêve en rapport avec un passage *quelconque* d'un manuel de pathologie sexuelle. Coupure qui réanime le rêve et l'intensifie, au lieu de l'interpréter. . . . pour faire émerger le désir dans son caractère non biographique et non mémoriel, au-delà ou en-deçà de ses prédéterminations œdipiennes. (*L'Anti-Œdipe* 474)

Trost proposes . . . a kind of *cut-up* reminiscent of Burroughs, by establishing a relationship between a dream fragment and a randomly chosen passage in a textbook of sexual pathology. This revives the dream and intensifies it, instead of interpreting it, . . . so as to bring to the fore desire in its non-biographical and non-mnemonic dimensions, beyond or beneath its oedipal predeterminations.

This same dissociative principle, labeled “non-oedipean” by Gherasim Luca, also governs the different techniques of textual structuring that are at work in his poems, among them the “bégaiement” (stammer) that so captivated Deleuze. In the same manner as Trost, Gherasim Luca instituted a mechanism of meaning production that associates the subject’s discourse to manifestations of chance. Namely, the subject assigns an active role to the sound signifier to the detriment of the signified within the textual sequence. Thus, words come together in a movement that makes symbolic interpretation inoperable, since their association no longer falls entirely under the responsibility of the enunciating subject. Broken by interventions of chance in the form of phonetic magnetism, the subconscious flow becomes, to use a word dear to Luca, “méconnaissable” (unrecognizable).

C’est avec une flûte
c’est avec le flux fluet de la flûte
que le fou oui c’est avec un fouet mou
que le fou foule et affole la mort . . . (*Héros-Limite* 61)

It’s with a flute
with the flimsy flux of the flute
that the madman yes with a limp lash
that the madman lashes and slashes death.

The aspiration to conquer anguish, to “affoler la mort” ‘drive death mad’ or ‘crush’ it in order to escape the pressure of the superego, is very present in these verses—metatextual notation moreover becoming a constant in Luca’s poetry. At the same time, the lexical carom generated by the repetition of phonemes [f] [l] [u] and [y] is there to signify that the process of decanting desire can only be achieved by giving free rein to vocables going adrift.

This summary presentation of Gherasim Luca’s poetic thinking is no doubt too schematic, but its only goal is to make manifest what is fundamentally at stake in his poetry: challenging the notion of desire as lack. I am thus getting to the original goal of this article, namely, to highlight the paradoxical nature of Deleuze’s reading. While it testifies to genuine enthusiasm for the originality of Luca’s poetry, at no time does it initiate a conceptual dialogue with the “non-oedipean” or dissociative principles that account for his idiosyncratic modes of textualization. It is as if the philosopher’s initial interest for Luca’s “theoretical” writings remained surprisingly short-lived, and even more so since the question

of overcoming anguish and placing lack between parentheses is stated more or less explicitly in many of his poetic texts.

Certainly, it is not philosophy's role to examine literary products in their singularity. We can nevertheless wonder why Deleuze keeps silent about the conceptual work upon which Luca's poetry rests and which is not unrelated to his own critical position toward Freudian psychoanalysis. It is no less true that Gherasim Luca also never expressed an opinion about Deleuze's *Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, limiting himself, according to Micheline Catti,⁷ to pointing out that "Non-Oedipus and Anti-Oedipus" are two "very different" things. This terse statement appears much less surprising, however, if we consider the poet's extreme metadiscursive discretion, which precluded any personal comment about his own linguistic practices. Still, by setting apart these two concepts, what may he have meant to suggest? Perhaps that Anti-Oedipus supposes a simple attempt at a conceptual redefinition of *desire* that would no longer involve *lack*, while his own non-oedipean reflection is articulated around a poetic project aiming to rediscover desire through the destructuring of those language forms that are liable to render opaque the potentialities of desire? In other words, did he want to mark the distance that separates the poetic *act*, in the strongest sense of the word, from the passive character of any theoretical work? This may be possible, but the fact remains: nowhere in his works of the 1970s and 1980s did Gherasim Luca let himself slide into discursive elaborations regarding his poetic principles.

Yet how should we explain Deleuze's silence about the multiple "non-oedipean" references that are strewn throughout Luca's poems? And, in particular, how should we account for the fact that Deleuze, who so accurately identified the phenomenon of *variation* on a given phonetic theme as the fundamental pattern of Gherasim Luca's poetic discourse, never related it to the principle of "negation of negation" which the poet considered to be the very impetus for the act of *reinventing desire*?⁸ In response to these questions, only a few hypotheses can be offered. One cannot exclude, for instance, that Deleuze might have minimized the impact of non-oedipean principles (formulated by Gherasim

⁷ I quote here a fragment of a conversation in which she kindly responded to my query regarding Gherasim Luca and Deleuze, who had met thanks to Alain Petit, first cousin of the later.

⁸ The concept of desire in the work of Gherasim Luca, desire as perpetual invention, does in some ways point toward the "désir-production" (desire as production) later postulated by Deleuze and Guattari. Luca sees the existence of instinctual drives as a pure dynamics, an uninterrupted flow of libidinal energy devoid of precise destination. The defining characteristic of the *désir-invention* would be to tend incessantly toward new objects, to never be one with itself, to redefine itself constantly. In this perspective, desire has no anchoring, no predetermination. Understood as external to the workings of anguish, and the nostalgia of the prenatal world being unknown to it, this drive is not directed toward satisfaction or fulfillment, as would the feeling of a lack.

Luca in the 1940s⁹) upon the latter's subsequent poetic works, inasmuch as he couldn't have had access to some of the programmatic texts, those written in Romanian.¹⁰ We may also hypothesize that the discovery of Luca's poetry might have prompted a shift in focus, the philosopher having identified in this very singular *parole* (speech or way of expression) a revealing example of a *mineur* (minor) use of language.¹¹ Whatever the reasons, the fact is that at no point did Deleuze attempt to place the two concepts face to face, whereas at first sight everything points to their similarity.

Gherasim Luca's Force

To this potential dialogue with Luca's work, Deleuze substitutes laudatory rhetoric about the inexpressible force of Luca's language, when he does not simply interpret it within his own philosophy of the sign and of language. In the few letters he sent the poet during the 1970s and 1980s, he constantly expressed his stunned admiration for the poet's creation:

Vous donnez à la poésie une vie, une force, une rigueur qui n'a d'égale que chez les plus grands poètes. Vous êtes de ceux-là. J'éprouve pour votre génie une admiration et un respect qui font que chaque fois que je vous entends ou vous lis, c'est une découverte absolue. . . . Je suis de plus en plus frappé par la puissance d'une "logique" singulière qui meut chaque poème, dans votre œuvre. (Letter, 4 March 1989, in Boyer and Ponsart 76)

You give poetry a life, a force, a rigor that is only equaled by the greatest poets. You are one of them. I feel for your genius an admiration and a respect that make each time I hear or read you an absolute discovery. . . . I am struck, more and more, by the power of a singular "logic" that moves each poem, in your works.

It is possible to surmise that the emotional impact of Gherasim Luca's poetry may in fact explain Deleuze's refusal to elucidate its charm intellectually, as he implied

⁹ Notably in *Dialectique de la dialectique* (1945), *Inventatorul iubirii* (*L'Inventeur de l'amour*) (1945), *Moartea moartă* (*La Mort morte*) (1945), *Amphitrite* (February 1947), and *Le Secret du vide et du plein* (April 1947).

¹⁰ *L'Inventeur de l'amour suivi de La Mort morte* would be published, in Gherasim Luca's own translation, only in 1994.

¹¹ In Deleuze's linguistic thought, where language is envisioned as a relatively stable and homogenous system, the meaning of the word "mineur" 'minor' covers the entire spectrum of possible variations. The minor use of language supposes the ability to make it unstable, to "faire bégayer" 'make it stammer,' that is, to impose upon its "éléments . . . phonologiques, syntaxiques, sémantiques, le travail de la variation continue" (*Superpositions* 108) 'phonological, syntactic, semantic elements, the work of continual variation.'

in another letter: "J'ai déjà beaucoup à dire sur vos livres (hélas comment en serait-il autrement? je n'arrive pas à tuer le commentaire) mais ça m'intéresse moins en ce moment que l'émotion et l'admiration qu'ils me donnent, plus exactement qu'ils mettent en moi" (Boyer and Ponsart 74) 'I already have much to say about your books (alas, how else? I cannot kill commentary) but this is of less interest to me right now than the emotion and admiration that they cause me, more exactly that they place in me.'

But this emotional effect is not unrelated to the theatrical dimension of Luca's poetry. "Il lui est arrivé de faire des lectures publiques de ses poèmes; deux cents personnes, et pourtant c'était un événement . . . n'appartenant à aucune école ou mouvement" (*Dialogues* 10) 'He gave public readings of his poems in front of two hundred people; yet it was an event, an event belonging to no school or movement' (*Dialogues* II 4). It is in *Superpositions*, a work containing the philosopher's reflections on theater, that his intuition of what creates the force in Luca's poetry takes shape. "On n'a jamais atteint à une telle intensité dans la langue, à un tel usage intensif du langage. Une récitation publique de poèmes par Gherasim Luca est un événement théâtral complet et merveilleux" (*Superpositions* 108) 'Such an intensity in language, such an intense use of language, have never been reached before. Gherasim Luca giving a public performance of his own poems is a marvelous, complete theatrical event.' Renouncing his philosopher's stance, Deleuze adopts the attitude of a spectator passively submitting to the enchantment of the poetic discourse. His writings include a fluctuation in terms meant to designate the particular magnetism of Gherasim Luca's voice ("force," "power," "rigor," "intensity"), which may well attest to the inanity of any commentary, as Deleuze had postulated.

I shall conclude this article by restating that it was not my aim to interpret Gherasim Luca's poetry in the light of Deleuze's thought. My goal was only to try to reconstitute in a single framework the discursive traces of an encounter between a philosopher and a poetic oeuvre. What emerges is an encounter not only complex but also paradoxical. Complex, considering the different angles under which Luca's poetry has been approached. Paradoxical, given the glaring absence of any reference in Deleuzian texts to the concept of "non-Oedipus," so close, if only in its form, to the famous "anti-Oedipus".

Translated from the French by Hélène Gresso

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