Studies and Essays on Romance Literatures

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A Labyrinth of Interpretations

By

Rodica Grigore

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PREFACE

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The essays contained in this collection may be generally subsumed under a few large themes: internal and external exile, real or perceived, a broad 20th century European aesthetics of poetry and prose, and bridging the understanding of masterful works of literature from either side of the Atlantic that follow particular patterns of expression. The endeavour to find commonality in these pieces is the work of comparativist Rodica Grigore, professor of literature at "Lucian Blaga" University of Sibiu, Romania.

Transnational aesthetics, shaped by common philosophical sources, are noted in this work: European modernism was introduced to Latin America in the writings of Jorge Luis Borges, from which all contemporary and successive Latin American novelists have drawn, a pivotal point made more than once in these essays. Narrowing down the scope of examination to Romanian, Spanish, Latin American, French and Portuguese writings, Rodica Grigore brings particular points in 20th century Romanian poetics, marking their passage to parallel concerns in the Western Hemisphere via France, translations, political flux and upheaval, and the common questions of rule by law or by decree, dictatorship, introspection, and internal or external exile, either by author or character. This is achieved flawlessly in the examinations of a character in a work by Clarice Lispector, nostalgic re-creations in Cabrera Infante, García Márquez, Donoso, and especially Carpentier, a notoriously difficult Cuban novelist of great merit. Thematic representations of exile mirror the experiences of the authors in these pieces. A primary example of this can be found in the chapter on Lucian Blaga: "Modernity itself acquired very different definitions during the last decades. Nevertheless, one of the subtlest critics on the subject, Octavio Paz, convincingly demonstrated that modernity is a polemical tradition which displaces the tradition of the moment, whatever it happens to be, but an instant later yields its place to still another tradition which in turn is a momentary manifestation of modernity; modernity is

never itself; it is always the other. The modern is characterized not only by novelty but by otherness."

Blaga's particular form of modernism through reconnection with primal cultural elements in the Romanian countryside is reflected as well in the works of his Cuban contemporary, Alejo Carpentier, most especially in *Los pasos perdidos* (*The Lost Steps*, 1953), in which the author uses a first-person narrator who ventures back to the country of his childhood to find a primitive musical instrument. The parallel understanding of Modernism by contemporary writers on different sides of the Atlantic through visions of novelty linked to feelings of alienation, as noted above, are at the heart of this collection.

Having spent most of his professional life first in Barcelona and then in Mexico City, García Márquez never returned to live permanently in Colombia. This is quite different to Swiss-born Alejo Carpentier, son of a Russian mother and a French father who often claimed to have been born in Cuba but his birth certificate was found in Switzerland after his death. Like Julio Cortázar, his spoken Spanish was marred by a French accent, whether natural or affected in either case is uncertain, but in either writer it become a mark of external displacement. Such is the life story of Brazilian novelist Clarice Lispector, born in the Ukraine to a Jewish family who fled and ended up in Brazil when the future novelist was an infant. And of course, the allegorical form of internal exile, blindness, stalked Jorge Luis Borges, limiting his freedom and perception. That is in addition to the years of displacement in Switzerland that made return to Argentina impossible because of the outbreak of the First World War. In the works examined in this collection one of the overarching common themes is displacement. External displacement for ten years of his youth also affected the work of Portuguese poet, Fernando Pessoa. And it is the essence of Cortázar's *Rayuela* (*Hopscotch*), a novel that details the lives of Argentine exiles living in Paris. Roberto Bolaño's forms and visions of exile are present but uniquely unsentimental, perhaps illustrating the question of novelty while dispensing with alienation.

Reaffirming Andrei Codrescu, Grigore underscores that for Romanian poet and philosopher Lucian Blaga, "myth and metaphor are the foundations of his world view", a parallel that can be found in all the writings examined in this collection. To be certain, one may easily envisage the labyrinths in Borges's works as a metaphor for blindness and for the novelty and alienation of different forms of exile, whether physical or emotional, and inexorably tied to the myth of the Minotaur. Pessoa's fragmentation of the poetic voice in heteronyms as he called them may also represent a form of alienation from the self, another form of exile,

whether it is an expression of self-loathing or of generating metaphors for facets of the self, recalling Codrescu's assessment of Lucian Blaga's worldview, albeit taken to its limits.

There are, to my knowledge, analyses of individual works of Latin American fiction based on ideas taken from Mircea Eliade's idea of eternal return, but to date no there are no such works encompassing Romance Literature taken in consideration of Lucian Blaga's visions that I am aware of, neither in English nor in any other language. And it is very likely that there are very few comparativists in Romania who are specialized in and have as deep an understanding of major novelists of the Romance Languages as Rodica Grigore.

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Most of the chapters of this book were originally published, in a more or less different form, in *Theory in Action (The Journal of Transformative Studies Institute*, New York). Therefore, I want to thank to this American academic publication for permission to include the revised and expanded texts in this volume. The essay *History, Violence and Fiction in Alejo Carpentier's Novel "Reason of State"* first appeared in *The Handbook of Violence in Latin American Literature* (New York and London: Routledge, 2022), edited by Pablo Baisotti, to whom I want to express all my appreciation.

Over the years, I received guidance, encouragement and constant support from some special people, my long-time and long-distance friends: professors Jay Corwin, Ali Shehzad Zaidi and John Asimakopoulos. To them all, again and again, my heartfelt thanks and my entire gratitude.

INTRODUCTION

ON LABYRINTHS, JOURNEYS AND QUESTS

There'll never be a door. You are inside
and the fortress contains the universe
and has no other side nor any back
nor any outer wall or secret core.
—Jorge Luis Borges, *Labyrinth*. Translated by Stephen Kessler (1971: 245)

Usually defined as elaborate combinations of paths and passages in which it is rather difficult to find one's way out, labyrinths also represent symbolic forms of quest: those who attempt to walk in are always trying to find enlightenment or spiritual salvation. Originally naming the Cretan palace of King Minos, the labyrinth was meant to hide, house and shelter the Minotaur; Theseus entered this intricate structure and could only walk out using Ariadne's thread, labyrinth thus serving as a powerful metaphor for personal journeys into the self, then back into the world. At the same time, the labyrinth is a well-known symbol relating to wholeness: it combines the imagery of the circle and spiral in order to express the difficulty to find the most adequate direction to the centre, be it personal or spiritual.

Every act of reading implies the adventure of entering the labyrinth of a text; and "all truly literary text is labyrinthine" (Bloom 2007, xvi), conveying the personal experience of a symbolic journey from everyday reality to the realm of imagination. Jorge Luis Borges masterly proved this in his poems and exquisite short stories, the Argentine writer frequently using the images of mirror and labyrinth to hint at some of his most important themes: identity (and alterity), knowledge as illusion, human life understood as an initiatory expedition through the world of literature, seen as a garden of forking paths.

Adopting the challenging perspective of Comparative Literature with respect to some important books of the 20th century, this collection of essays is also a journey through the labyrinth of literature, trying to find some new and unexplored meanings of certain famous novels, short stories or poems, decoding symbols or plots in a particular way. A journey made,

however, not around a room, like that of Xavier de Maistre in his *Voyage autour de ma chambre*, but in the library, in the attempt to travel within and among books, a Borgesian passage through infinite labyrinths; not a history of labyrinth and journey in world literature, but a personal approach to mazes and quests' different meanings and forms—one of them being exile.

Writers in exile have often been seen as prisoners between different realities, forced to adapt to a binary way of living or thinking (and, subsequently, of structuring their literary material), outraged or grieved by the circumstances that caused them to leave, but harbouring a deep nostalgia for the places they had left behind. On the one hand, they always try to configure a new identity, including a literary one, but on the other, they tend to preserve, even if in a subtle way, the old one, impossible to forget. This is the convincing evidence that the very condition of travellers-exiles allows these writers—and their readers as well—to explore the complexities of personal and artistic identity.

Some characteristics of contemporary exile correspond to specific social or political conditions, and there are many elements common to all eras and to all exiles. The literature addressing these issues is vast, going back to Ovid, Seneca and Dante. But it also brings together some of the authors discussed in the essays composing this book, a thematic approach putting into question some representative works belonging both to European and Latin American literature: for example, the Romanian Vintilă Horia and the Brazilian Clarice Lispector, like José Donoso or Roberto Bolaño share journey and exile as their major personal and artistic experiences. The entire 20th century can be considered an age of departures and wanderings and it can be analysed under the general idea of an intricate labyrinth of various paths going to the deeper meanings of the human self. Comparing two literary works has always been a fascinating undertaking, and in this book, I try to offer new perspectives over some representative trans-Atlantic texts, to put it like this: for example, Julio Cortázar's short stories may mirror the "bizarre pages" authored by Urmuz; Lucian Blaga's poetry is better read through the filter of European modernism; and Vintilă Horia's novels can be more appropriately understood from the perspective offered by a poetics of exile.

Literature has always been a specific form of exile, perhaps the most intimate and the most special form, working its magic for many authors from all over the world and from all ages—and for each of us, too. Especially during hard times or challenging years, people have manifested the tendency to consider the labyrinth of literature as the most adequate solution to everyday problems: both a symbolic escape and an aesthetic

answer, it has proved that words can save our souls—or, at least, they can offer us comfort.

Covering a wide range of writers, from the Romanian poet Lucian Blaga to the Portuguese Fernando Pessoa, or from the rather unknown Romanian representatives of the avant-garde to the great Latin American novelists Alejo Carpentier, Julio Cortázar, Gabriel García Márquez or Guillermo Cabrera Infante, the studies and essays included in this volume re-interpret some masterpieces of Romance literatures in the attempt to highlight the deep and often hidden truth of these authors' great books. It is a quest that also tries to metaphorically cover the distance between the two sides of the Atlantic, encompassing the initiatory experience often lived both by the above-mentioned writers and their characters. Throughout literature, journey means adventure and, in its turn, even exile: it determines enrichment of soul and mind and changes everything, no traveller being, at the end of the road, the same: this is obvious, as the reader of this volume can see, in Lispector's novels, as well as in Vintilă Horia's, Carpentier's or Bolaño's fiction.

Each journey (through the labyrinth or not) represents spiritual progress and the quest it implies stands for a personal search for truth, peace of mind, or the attempt to discover a hidden (sacred or secular) centre. (Chevalier and Gheerbrant 1997, 589) Pilgrims have always understood their experience as a complex self-escape meant to shape the inner world and to meet the challenges of the universe. All dictionaries of symbols reveal that journeys turn into personal adventures and explorations, witnessing the protagonist's deep desire for understanding and knowledge, an irrepressible need to make sense of one's inner labyrinth, memorize its paths and find the most adequate way out, because the only true journey is the one each human being makes within themselves. There are also so many possible symbolic journeys through numerous labyrinths, hinting at each individual's attempt to self discovery and self assertion; or inner journeys meant to find the hidden meaning of the entire universe in a library. Or quests whose only limit is the sky—and human soul.

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CHAPTER ONE

LUCIAN BLAGA BETWEEN WORDS AND SILENCE

A tradition of modernity

One of the most important Romanian writers of the interwar period, Lucian Blaga (1895—1961) has been well known as a poet and a philosopher, an exquisite translator, a subtle essayist and a beloved playwright. Had he been awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1956, as it seemed likely at the time, his work would have been studied all over the world, as it deserves. Nevertheless, the situation was complicated by politics and the prize went instead to Juan Ramón Jiménez. Blaga remained relatively unknown to the Western reader and has since often been considered a marginal or peripheral author, his great accomplishments being ignored outside Romania. Believing mystery to be an integral part of human life, he used his poetry to illuminate its significance to individuals and society and his philosophic system proved to be, at least partially, a type of pantheism dominated by the search for an elusive metaphysical principle called the "Great Anonymous".

Discussing Lucian Blaga's place in the field of Romanian culture but also keeping in mind the general context of world literature, Marcel Cornis-Pop considers that this author holds a singular position in modern Romanian literature, "comparable to that of Eliot and Pound in the English-speaking countries" (Cornis-Pop 1989, 189). In fact, Blaga was the first Romanian poet whose work synchronized with some essential European artistic forms, his most important achievement being, perhaps, that of "adapting Expressionism to Romanian poetry" (Cornis-Pop 1989, 190), but also reappraising the models and relieving the "will to modernity" in terms specific to Romanian culture.

The period between the two World Wars was "Romania's golden age of modernism" (Codrescu 1989, xi): Tudor Arghezi, Ion Barbu, Tristan Tzara, Eugen Ionescu, Mircea Eliade and E.M. Cioran are only some names representing a generation determined to change something in the

Romanian culture. Some of them became more or less familiar to the Western world, especially after leaving their native country and established mainly in France. But mention should be made that, as Andrei Codrescu pointed out, 20th century ideas descended on Romania "all at once and were quickly absorbed and transformed." (Codrescu 1989, xii) Together with some of his contemporaries, Blaga represents a "constructivist" phase in Romanian modernism, mainly because,

> picking up the scattered pieces of Dadaism, futurism and Expressionism and avoiding the excess of the new French art (surrealism), their work participated, however indirectly, in a reconstruction of European art in a post-Dada age. (Cornis-Pop 1986, 19)

In addition to the aspects mentioned before, Blaga belongs to the family of modern creators destined to have a "many-sided commanding influence over the culture they belong to", considers Edgar Papu, stressing that these types of scholars,

> heralded already by Nietzsche and who cannot be absent from a privileged place neither in the history of poetry nor in the history of thinking, have appeared in orderly succession from Miguel de Unamuno to Jean-Paul Sartre. Their fecund polyvalence cannot be separated from the unity of their own personality which, from all sides, radiates the same vivid originality and the same message. (Papu 1970, 52)

Blaga is somehow paradoxical within Romanian culture: very keen on penetrating deep into the essence of his native land and, at the same time, being eager to resonate with the modern ideas of his own time, the poet carried the resources of the Romanian spirit to a culminating convergence; he made up his own inner horizon and connected with the spiritual profile of his people in order to find all specific reflexes of the great horizons of this particular circuit. Unamuno surprised an "essence" of Spain and established its place in the world and Blaga did exactly the same for Romania. Besides, Blaga is the first to include the search for final traits in the philosophic register, by applying concepts and categories of the philosophy of culture especially to the Romanian "sub-history", to the unrecorded strata of the visible known history. He derived his ideas from an investigation of the mythical traditions of the Romanian village, from where there results an original intuitive philosophy of the genuine folk art and the determining of the mental horizon of a specific cultural space. That is why of his three trilogies, *The Trilogy of Culture*, less affected by the agnostic metaphysic of Blaga's philosophy, seems to be the most consistent.

Perhaps in it the spirit of Blaga (to a great extent subjective and metaphysical) draws nearer to the objective essence of things. With exceptionally subtle intuition, he applies to the Romanian people an original philosophy of culture, as Unamuno did to the Spanish people, Okakura Kakuzo to the Japanese and Martínez Estrada to the Argentine land and the *gaucho* type, Blaga would certainly not have reached, "such intuitive keenness, if he had not been, at the same time, a poet." (Papu 1970, 53) Although his philosophy and poetry convey a sense of mystery, poetry is where the author proved that his adherence to Expressionism can transform a somehow "foreign" phenomenon into a Romanian one, also applying its traits to the philosophy of culture.

> Impressionism reduced man to his retina. Van Gogh changed all that by making things partake of his inner life. He ran from impression rendered from the outside, seeking instead the expression charged with the inner soul (qtd. in Codrescu 1989, xv),

Blaga wrote in an essay on art, talking about the relation established between impressionism and the new kind of Expressionism he himself professed. Therefore, we may agree with Marcel Cornis-Pop who considered that "modernity for Blaga was doubly constituted and in tension." (Cornis-Pop 1989, 190) The critic took into consideration Blaga's own words, the poet and philosopher stating in an interview dating from 1926:

> The poetry that best suits me is ultra-modern but also, I think, in certain ways more traditional than ordinary traditionalism, because it revives one of the connections with our primitive substratum. (qtd. in Codrescu 1989, xvi)

Modernity itself acquired very different definitions during the last decades. Nevertheless, one of the subtlest critics on the subject, Octavio Paz, convincingly demonstrated that modernity is a polemical tradition which displaces the tradition of the moment, whatever it happens to be, but an instant later yields its place to still another tradition which in turn is a momentary manifestation of modernity; modernity is never itself; it is always the other. The modern is characterized not only by novelty but by otherness. Besides, by the first decades of the twentieth century,

> what was new was not so much that poets were speculating in prose about poetry, but that this speculation overflowed the limits of the old poetics, proclaiming that the new poetry was also a new way of feeling and living. (Paz 1974, 58)

The conclusion related to Lucian Blaga is, therefore, undoubtedly clear:

> After Mihai Eminescu, he is the most important link within Romanian culture between tradition and modernity, between a 'heroic age' of trial and survival and the age of consolidation. Blaga was a poet of double vocation, an innovator (disrupter) and a consolidator. (Cornis-Pop 1989, 190)

And while his early poems express the spirit of a transformed type of Expressionism, his later ones illustrate a more sceptical attitude towards reality. All these poems illuminate and are illuminated by different sides of Blaga's philosophy; and at the same time, they "render the conceptual aspects of his work problematic, submitting them to a poetic interrogation." (Cornis-Pop 1989, 191) Virgil Nemoianu defines the relationship between Lucian Blaga's poetry and philosophy as "double-centred":

> Blaga started writing poetry and philosophy almost at the same time and continued to express himself in both media throughout his active career. […] A curious kind of self-mirroring pervades Blaga's twin-structured production. (Nemoianu 1985, 9-10)

After all, this attitude too is an aspect defining the Romanian author's special modernity.

As far as the modern trend of Expressionism is concerned, mention should be made that in Romania Blaga was the first to mention the names of creators such as Däubler, Trakl or Heym. He also used his Expressionistic readings as a catalyst for his own poetic work. As a matter of fact, his first volume, *Poems of Light* (1919) contrasts the conflicting characteristics of "the new style" in order to create an original synthesis. The result is astonishing, bringing together "Dionysian vitalism and spiritualization, sensual euphoria and metaphysical melancholia." (Cornis-Pop 1989, 191) The exegetes discussed the details of this poetic new style, concluding that

> Blaga's Expressionism was from the beginning comprehensive and contradictory: a poetic style rather than a rigid doctrine, it emphasized the passage from sensation to abstraction, from material to spiritual, from fact to its problematization—and back. (Cornis-Pop 1989, 191)

As the poet himself explained several times and suggested even in the above-mentioned fragment, he felt closer in spirit to some of the great forerunners of Expressionism (Nietzsche, Strindberg and Van Gogh) than to later theoreticians as Worringer. More than that—and complicating even more the whole aspect of his specific and somehow "innate"

Expressionism—some of Blaga's early poems are often articulated around plastic or abstract visual images, bringing to the reader's mind the work of Brâncuși.

As mentioned before, Blaga's poetry has been often analyzed in relation to his own philosophy. In his philosophical writings, the Romanian author asserted that mystery is the principle behind all creation; and he named this principle the "Great Anonymous", as it could not be ascertained directly but only seen residually in nature. This entity also represented for the creator the deep soul of the Romanian people, forming the collective ethnic consciousness that was the cornerstone for his theory of style. Approaching the problem, Virgil Nemoianu explains,

> Blaga's philosophy is a neo-Platonism in reverse: the creation is indeed trying to rush back to its source and to be reunited with it, but the 'Great Anonymous', full of dark suspicions and sly jealousy, set obstacles against this yearning and built brakes in nature against the emergence of truly integrative Types or Ideas. At times, indeed, it seems more interested in thwarting than in generating. (Nemoianu 1989, 163)

While some critics have seen Blaga as a nature poet concerned only with the physical world and present experience, other explain this specific creation as expressing a profound melancholy and nostalgia for a lost paradise. Most of them agree, however, that the connection between Blaga's poetry and philosophy reveals the ways in which his theory of culture is inseparable from his literary works.

Blaga took his doctorate in philosophy in Vienna with a treatise entitled *Kultur und Erkenntnis (Culture and Cognition)*; this was the beginning of a distinguished philosophical career that closely paralleled his poetic work. Andrei Codrescu considers that "Blaga's philosophy is 'poetic' just as his poetry is 'philosophical'. But the two are intimately connected, as far as his ideas on culture and metaphor "echo in his poems." (Codrescu 1989, xiv)

"Our duty, when faced by a true mystery", Blaga writes, "is not to explain it, but to deepen it, to transform it into a greater mystery." (qtd. in Codrescu 1989, xvi) This credo could be discerned within his entire poetic and philosophical work: in his poetry, mystery is approached directly through intuition and music, as well as by a continuous invention of mythical motifs, as Codrescu argues. "Mythical thinking", a consistently generative principle in Blaga's poetry, is also an idea developed in essays such as *The Philosophy of Style* and in his three trilogies published between 1943 and 1946. Therefore, "myth and metaphor are the foundations of his world view." (Codrescu 1989, xiv) Nevertheless, one of the most prestigious

Romanian critics, George Călinescu, expressed very early his reservations as far as Blaga's method was concerned, unequivocally disapproving it and describing the creator as a "true mystic" who accepted delirium as an instrument of investigation and who overstepped the bounds in search of some new literary expressions.

Lucian Blaga, as he himself confessed in *The Emergence of Metaphor and the Meaning of Culture*, was fully aware that his attempt to create a philosophical vision and thereby to explain the ultimate significance of style and culture, of man's creative destiny, had failed to find a language that would meet his scientific requirements. In order to express his ideas, he often had to resort to "strange images", mythical not philosophical, that is he went beyond philosophy proper and reached the obscure but fascinating realm of mythosophy.

Blaga's theory of style was greatly influenced by the German exponents of the morphology of culture, especially by Leo Frobenius (an ethnologist and an important authority of prehistoric art) and Spengler. An early admirer of *Decline of the West*, the Romanian writer described Spengler as "a Copernicus of history" because of his substitution of morphology for chronology in the treatment of human development and his search for the "archetypal phenomena" behind historical facts; he placed Spengler alongside Kant and Einstein as revolutionizers of thought. Taking into consideration this aspect, Keith Hitchins considered that

> Blaga borrowed Spengler's technique of the comparative study of civilizations and the antinomy between culture and civilization, but he found Spengler's overall approach deficient: it reduced the phenomena of culture to form, despite the fact that all these encompassed many other elements and it made the intuition of space the determining factor of style, treating it as a creative act of the conscious sensibility rather than a product of the unconscious categories as Blaga proposed. (Hitchins 1978, 142)

Therefore, in his search for the essential coordinates of the Romanian cultural style, Blaga focused on the rural world, where he thought the constituent elements of Romanian spirituality could be found. That is why he granted Orthodoxy an organic place in the national psyche, not being fundamentally interested in religious dogma: by Orthodoxy he meant an ethnic-geographical area able to separate his people from Roman Catholic or Protestant Europe. The term he used is to be understood "in a cultural rather than a religious sense" (Hitchins 1978, 145), making clear that the originality of the Romanian spirit

> was not to be sought in Orthodox dogma, but in the derogations of it brought about by the 'spirit of heresy', that is in the semi-pagan folklore preserved in sacred legends. (Hitchins 1978, 144)

Blaga was convinced that behind the mask of Orthodoxy the Romanians had preserved their ancient, pre-Christian beliefs and customs, especially their way of understanding and feeling existence, which in his view went back to pagan Thracian age. The result was that Blaga (himself born in a small Transylvanian village and always fascinated by his memories of childhood) thought of the Romanian traditional village as the privileged and organic mode of life. Using Spengler's antinomies, he defined the creative existence of the village as "culture", whereas the city fully embodied "civilization". Modern city is therefore understood as a mechanized and bourgeois world whose imminent doom Blaga, as well as many of his contemporaries (Romanian or West-Europeans, from Trakl to T. S. Eliot), foreseen and predicted. Hence his antinomy between the rural world and the city, transformed later on into a theory of minor versus major cultures, as expressed in his study *The Emergence of Metaphor and the Meaning of Culture*.

Placing Blaga's work in the context of Western philosophy is an interesting experience: he appears to be a neo-Spenglerian who has absorbed the influences of Bergson, Dilthey and Nietzsche, while reacting somehow against a Platonist background.

> In a word, from a purely Western point of view, Blaga seems an interesting but minor continuator of nineteenth-century theories of value and vitalism and the philosophy of culture. (Nemoianu 1989, 162)

The critical dissociations and analyses that Blaga makes with regard to Freudianism, the revelation of the one-sidedness and inefficiency of Spengler's morphology of culture, Blaga's deep insights illuminating the differences between the condition of man as he really is and the way he is presented by Christian spirituality, his criticism of Nietzscheanism whose criteria he described as "a hysterical grimace of a decadent", his emphasis on the limitations of Heidegger's existentialist theory are as many individual and important elements worthy of special consideration. Blaga contended that rationalism and empiricism are neither a privileged nor a promising way to achieve knowledge or to satisfy human aspirations, whereas an integration of knowledge and mystery is much more appropriate. As Virgil Nemoianu put it, this means "a cooperative attitude of the principal towards the secondary" (Nemoianu 1989, 164), because

> for Blaga, the explanation of epistemological paralyses and relativities is that mystery (and we could add, secondariness) is mandated by the structuring principles of reality itself. […] Human life would not be the same if devoid of ontological absence. Blaga's unexpected twist to modern relativism adds a more constructive and optimistic dimension to it. (Nemoianu 1989, 167)

This author is a creator of the problematic kind, with moments of tension and calm, steeped in philosophy and fascinated by old mythical images or ideas. Both modern and archaic (but not at all old-fashioned!) in expression, a seeker of analogies between self and cosmos, apologist of white light yet savouring moonlight shadows, the portrait of this writer is captivating and difficult to trace in a few lines. One cannot penetrate the inmost nature of this poet, one of the greatest in the whole Romanian literature, without a feeling of active participation, albeit theoretically one may not agree completely with his philosophy. Besides, if in the case of other writers the contact with some of their representative works may be enough, Blaga's creation has to be read and studied in its entirety. The difficulties encountered by the reader of this lyrical work "are the difficulties of any poetic world built from the inside" (Codrescu 1989, xvii). Nevertheless, in Blaga's case "they are compounded by an almost total reliance on nuance and sound to express 'the cosmic, the absolute, the unlimited'" (Codrescu 1989, xvii), as the writer himself expressed in his *Philosophy of Style*.

The practice of poetry

Nevertheless, Blaga's poetry is essentially a sequence of reaching-out towards the transcendent, a mode of expansion in the miraculous grandeur of the cosmos, and of inner exile, bespeaking a dilemmatic personality. From his first volume, *Poems of Light* (1919), followed by *The Footprints of the Prophet* (1921), *In the Great Passing* (1924), *In Praise of Sleep* (1929), *On the Great Water Divide* (1933) and *At the Court of Yearning* (1938), down to the posthumous publication of 1962 *Poems*, there come unceasingly into his system of spiritual experiences advances and withdrawals, presumption and resignation, a self-centred titanic indulgence in a particular kind of deliberate anonymity. Already in his first poems, included in *Poems of Light*, Blaga proves to have understood some of the tensions present in the Expressionist stance, that blend of "cosmic enthusiasm and tragic hysteria, troubled speech and verbal invention" (qtd. in Codrescu 1989, xvii), as he himself expressed. More important is that all these aspects were exactly those considered by Blaga the characteristic

details in Nietzsche's thought. Expressionism wanted to affirm subjectivity, "but ultimately effaced it through overstatement, Worringer's 'expressionistic cry'." (Cornis-Pop 1989, 193) The two alternatives offered by Expressionism (cosmic expansion and introversion, empathy and abstraction) dissolved the subject into the supra-personal.

The sensuous images included in his first volume (but also in the one to follow, *The Footprints of the Prophet*) made some critics affirm that Blaga had to be related to impressionism. In fact, all these images are "only outward expressions of a sensibility that seeks to become one with the cosmos, to leave consciousness behind in a total identification with nature". (Codrescu 1989, xvii)

Even if Blaga was considered "an imagist" by some leading Romanian critics (Eugen Lovinescu introduced him as one of the most original creators of sensory images in Romanian literature), at a closer reading he proves to be an excellent representative of a specific kind of Expressionism. His first volume expresses the tensions of a sensitive poetic soul confronted with a large ontological drama; the second one already marks an effective shift of perspective and a change of tone: "Dionysian fervour is displaced by an ascetic interiority." (Cornis-Pop 1989, 193) What is expressionistic in Blaga is equally related to the paroxysmal practices of the romantics: through the uninterrupted questioning and obsessive monologue, through the striving to see miracles, the poet wants to attain the very essence of things. And this essence seems to be often found in the primary zones, "ab originem", or in the simple, elementary forms of contemporary life. By "baptism in the earth", that is, by a return to primordial meanings, revelation occurs not by way of complexity, but of simplicity. The result is not necessarily a complete clarification, whereas often the final lines of Blaga's poems have a sense of deep resignation. The gesture alluded to in one text, entitled *I Understood the Sin that Weighs Down My House:*

> I understood the sin that weighs down my house
> like ancestral moss.
> Oh why did I interpret time and its seasons
> differently from the old crone spinning silk in the swamp?
> Why did I need a smile unlike that of the stonemason
> drawing sparks at the edge of the road? (Blaga 1989, 72)

is placed in definite opposition to the torments of consciousness offered by the integration into the elementary:

> Why did I covet a different fate
> in the seven-day world
> from the bell-ringer's who ushers the dead to the sky? (Blaga 1989, 72)

"Is modern literature modern?" asked Octavio Paz, discussing the complicated relationship established between it and the production of the centuries before as well as the characteristics of "modernity". Blaga's poems (and the above quoted one is an example) represent, in their way, an answer, whereas its modernity was often seen as ambiguous, embodying a conflict between poetry and the modern world that started with the pre-Romantics and continues until today.

Adopting a different perspective, Ștefan Augustin Doinaș compared the similitude between Blaga's conception of speech and Hölderlin's as set off by Heidegger. (Doinaș 1970, 28). The German poet considered speech the most innocent of all pursuits, but at the same time man's most dangerous possession since through speech one can express absolutely everything. In these Heideggerian assertions it is not difficult to identify the poetical thesis contained implicitly in Blaga's poetry. Blaga himself wrote, in *Faces of an Age*:

> Human language, made expressly to trap things existing externally in space, is unable to pinpoint the indefinable nuances of consciousness. This process can be caught only with the help of a profound intuition that has freed itself from the mathematical procedures of the intellect, with its categories formed for spatial realities. (qtd. in Codrescu 1989, xviii)

Silence becomes important in his later poems, such as *Self-Portrait*:

> Lucian Blaga is mute like a swan.
> In his country
> the snow of being fills the place of the word.
> Since the beginning
> his soul has been searching,
> mutely searching
> to the last frontiers of the world.
> He is searching for the water the rainbow drinks from.
> He is searching for the water
> from which the rainbow drinks
> its nonbeing and its beauty. (Blaga 1989, 163)

Still, Blaga's swanlike muteness has little (if anything!) in common with Beckett's nihilistic silence. Even though it questions the "expressionist" optimism of Blaga's early poetry, it does not end his poetic exploration. On the contrary, it pushes the orphic quest beyond the given boundaries of

discursive reality, teasing new meanings out of the cosmic "runes". (Cornis-Pop 1989, 193) The Romanian essayist Nicolae Balotă was the first to point out the connection between Blaga's motif of silence and his orphic quest. Besides, he once noticed the silence and words mark two different ontological regions: the former corresponds to a realm of non-created, a paradisiacal space in which human being lives in a state of ineffable grace; the latter signifies man's entrance into temporality and determination, his "fall into sin", namely subjection to his own mortal condition. (Balotă 1969, 302-305) In the poem *Holding the Great Blind Man's Hand—variant* (included in the volume *In the Great Passing*) we may find the key (or, at least, one key) of Blaga's specific attitude. The great blind man is an image of the Creator in front of whom the poet praises the cosmic order:

> I lead him by the hand through the woods.
> We leave riddles through the country in our wake.
> Now and then we rest on the road.
> Clammy snails climb into his beard
> from muddy swamp grasses.
> I say: Father, the path of the sun is firm.
> He is silent because fears words.
> He is silent because each word he speaks turns into a deed. (Blaga 1989, 69)

The Expressionist self (like Blaga's Pan) is progressively defeated by the sly signs of time:

> Covered with withered leaves Pan lies on a rock.
> He is blind and old.
> His eyelids are flint—
> he tries in vain to blink—
> his eyes like snails have closed for winter.
> Warm dewdrops fall on his lips:
> one
> two
> three.
> Nature feeds her god. (Blaga 1989, 37: *Pan*)

Increasingly aware of the gaps between self and the world, signs and their meanings, Blaga's middle-period poems emphasize rupture and discontinuity rather than unity of thought. They begin, according to Marin Mincu, a slow process of "de-rhetorizing and disrupting Expressionism" (Mincu 1983, xxxvii), whereas the early poems celebrate individual expression,

cosmic vitalism and movement. The Expressionistic outcry in *I Want to Dance!*

> Oh, I want to dance as I have never danced!
> Let God not feel himself a prisoner in me.
> Earth, give me wings:
> I want to be the arrow
> tearing infinity,
> to see only sky around me,
> sky above
> and sky below—
> burning in waves of light
> I want to dance
> torn by the lightening of unborn desire
> so God will breathe freely in me
> and will not say:
> 'I am a prisoner in his dungeon!' (Blaga 1989, 5)

reappears in a poem from the volume *The Footprints of the Prophet* (*Give Me a Body, You Mountains*):

> Give me a body, you mountains,
> you seas,
> give me a body capable of bearing
> my madness in full!
> Big earth, be my trunk,
> be the chest for this furious heart,
> be the shelter for the storms that toss me,
> be the vessel of my stubborn self! (Blaga 1989, 47)

Revived by the existentialists a few decades ago (*The Myth of Sisyphus* dates from 1942), the absurd appears to them as the refusal of existence to conform to human reasons. Confronted with the absurd walls, obstacles which Blaga too takes into consideration, the answer on the plane of consciousness, proposed by Camus, is a revolt, a creative revolt which alone can attenuate the feeling of bitterness. For Blaga, the complete neutralization of anxiety is not possible, but he finds, nevertheless, several solutions to appease it: one of them is the eros as seen in *The Poems of Light*—a method of forgetting, as some critics considered:

> So many stars falling tonight.
> Night's demon holds the earths in his hands
> and blows sparks over it
> to set it ablaze like tinder.

Tonight, when so many stars are falling
your young sorceress body burns
in my arms like a bonfire.
I offer my arms like tongues of flame
to melt the snow of your naked shoulders
your power, blood, splendour, the spring of your being. (Blaga 1989, 11: *Us and the Earth*)

The second one is getting free of everything around and getting closer to the primal state of simple animals (*I Understood the Sin that Weighs Down My House*):

Give me your hand, passerby,
both you who are leaving and you who are coming.
All the flocks of this earth have
halos over their heads.
I love myself differently now,
as one among many,
I shake myself free of myself
like a dog coming out of a cursed river.
I want my blood to flow down the world's chutes
to turn the wheels
of the celestial mills. (Blaga 1989, 72: *I Understood the Sin that Weighs Down My House*)

Long ago it was remarked that the Greeks did not transpose reality into art, they simply introduced it through the intermediary of fiction into myths. The paradox of Blaga, a spirit consumed with longing for certainty, is his parallel involvement in the imprecision of mystery, in a misty zone of the subconscious; the word no longer denotes precisely, as in *The Magic Bird (Molded in gold by Constantin Brâncuşi)*:

Are you a bird? A traveling bell?
Or a creature, an earless jug perhaps?
A golden song spinning
above our fear of dead riddles?
The light in your green eyes is
phosphorus peeled from old bones.
Listening to wordless revelation
you are lost in flight in celestial grass.
You guess profound mysteries
under the hewn domes of your afternoons.
Soar on endlessly
but do not reveal to us what you see. (Blaga 1989, 85)

This determines the dualism between self and the world. If the essence of the human being consists in "setting the mystery and trying to reveal it", as Blaga put it, then genuine poetry is that which connects them to two modalities proper to human thinking: the mythical and the magic thinking. The former endeavours "to reveal a mystery with the means of imagination", whereas in the latter "the mystery itself as such acquires consistency like in a lucid appendix of its own" (qtd. in Codrescu 1989, xviii).

Therefore, Ștefan Augustin Doinaș concluded that genuine poetry should have a certain mythical and magic "content" at the various levels of the verbal material into which it is incorporated. Hence the larger critical debate concerning the relationship between this theory of mystery and the image of that specific "Great Anonymous" or even of "anonymity" often present in his work. Blaga tried to clarify everything stating that "Anonymous does not mean collective." The poet himself admitted that in time his Expressionism became, especially with *In Praise of Sleep*, so well organized talline that it can be named neoclassical. We may say that Blaga's maturity poems seek confirmation, not new departures, reworking previous themes and cultivating some techniques learnt from Romanian folklore:

> Each book seems a cured illness to you, brother.
> But the one who spoke to you is now dust.
> Scattered in water. In the wind.
> Or even farther away.
> With this page I lock the gates, draw out the keys.
> I'm somewhere on high or somewhere below.
> Blow out your candle and ask:
> Where did the living mystery go? (Blaga 1989, 104: *Closing*)

But the modern nostalgia for an original time and for mankind reconciled with Nature is an attitude radically different from pre-Christian conceptions; although, like the pagan world, it postulates the existence "of a golden age before history, this age does not fit into a cyclical vision of time". (Paz 1974, 45) And this turns out to be true in the case of Blaga's poetry: his images, "even when borrowed from a traditional, mythic-pastoral fund, are jarring and distorted" (Cornis-Pop 1989, 193):

> A sickness enters the world,
> nameless, faceless.
> Is it creature? Or wind?
> No voice can tame it.
> Man is sick, stone is sick.

Tree is extinguished, fire put out.
Wretched sod, black silver,
sick, diminished gold.
Obliquely fall the century's tears.
I invoke forgetting and healing. (Blaga 1989, 108: *Sickness*)

Some of the myths Blaga includes in his poetry are purposely "naively medieval, like the frescoes on Byzantine monastery walls" (Codrescu 1989, xvii): St. George wandering, old, in search of the dragons that all the girls in the villages are in love with. Other are vaguely Greek, staged awkwardly on painted rocks and cardboard caves: Pan grows old with a spider for his only friend; and other poems are textually folkloric:

The fatherless child
sleeps in the pen.
His mother cries
and tells the cow
that he has no linen
no water no blanket
no candle no nanny.
Joseph hung his halo
on a nail by the door
and took off somewhere
to the bark of strangers' dogs. (Blaga 1989, 127: *Carol*)

The transcendental interests Blaga precisely as mythic (emblematic) fiction: the middle-period poems abound in references to myth and its relatives (story, legend, the fairy tale of the spoken blood). Blaga responded to the modern angst of the "great passing" by reasserting the value of mythic narration:

He's resting under the abbey's plums, sniffing
the ancient wind. Yesterday a girl gave him a lily.
He will travel through thousands of villages.
They will offer him holy bread on wine-blessed roads. (Blaga 1989, 128: *The Bear with the Lily*)

The village nevertheless is an idealized space of the mind, an imagined place, occasionally resembling a "crumbling paradise", this being also the title of a famous Blaga's poems:

The winged doorman holds out to you
the charmed stump of his broken sword.
At night the naked angels

huddle shivering in the hay:
woe to me, woe to you,
the water of life is crawling with spiders,
even angels will rot one day under the dirt,
dust will drain the stories
from our sorrowful body. (Blaga 1989, 84: *Crumbling Paradise*)

The romantics cultivated sleep therapy, Hölderlin, Novalis and Eminescu preferring the dream-state to walking. To Blaga, sleep is often tormented and peopled by strange mythical figures, like in *Old City*:

Night. The hours turn
without urging.
Be still—clock hands
stop—sighing
on the ultimate sign.
Creatures of sleep
crawl under gates—
red dogs and trouble.
On the streets— tall and thin
the rain walks on stilts. (Blaga 1989, 88)

The images are somehow reminding the reader of the lyrical work of Georg Trakl. Nevertheless, the treatment of myths brings Blaga closer to Yeats, one of the poets he himself translated. To the accusation that his poetry is "mythical and metaphysical", Blaga admits not only mythical, but also theological themes: free, though, as with Yeats, of the rigor of dogma. Blaga is preoccupied primarily with a personal analogical stylization, to the extent to which a modern writer can revitalize the functions of symbolic metaphor. He therefore invents in the spirit, not the letter of his folk models. The mythical vision consists then essentially in transfiguration, progressive reincarnation.

In Blaga's poetic world the mythic fertility of the beginnings has left an atmosphere in which the poet has made his home. If Blaga is to be compared to anyone,

> it would have to be Rilke, to whom he dedicates a touching poem. Expressionism, with its vitalistic and avant-garde offshoots, was the backdrop for these two poets whose sensibilities lay in a great desire to disappear in the mythic collective unconscious. Both felt their condition as one of exile, but whereas Rilke was in fact an exile, Blaga's exile consisted in an acute yearning for the very place where he was. This place, moreover, retains the imprint of myth in its vacated shell. The poet finds the 'footprints of the prophet' everywhere. (Codrescu 1989, xvi)