

EDITORIAL

Blaga the Poet and/or/vs. Blaga the Philosopher

This issue of *East West Cultural Passage* is dedicated to exploring and understanding the relationship between the philosophical work of the great Romanian intellectual Lucian Blaga and his other writings, particularly his poetry, drama, and fiction. Blaga (1895-1961) was a prolific author and a prominent figure in interbellic Romania. Prior to WWII, he served in the Romanian government and then was appointed professor of philosophy of culture at the University of Cluj (now Babeş-Bolyai University).¹

Blaga was a versatile writer. His earliest publications were poems, and it is these that brought him to the public's attention. Today, many Romanians think of Blaga primarily as a poet. His poetry is still read in schools and celebrated throughout the country.

In addition to poetry, Blaga wrote nearly a dozen plays, and these are still being performed in Romania and in other countries. He also wrote history, fiction, literary studies, and articles on popular culture, and published several important translations.² But more than anything else, he wrote philosophy. His *oeuvre* contains more than thirty books of philosophy and a very large number of periodical articles that span philosophical topics from cosmology to eschatology.³

Blaga himself divided his philosophical writing into two periods that he labels the preparatory phase and the systematic phase. The latter began with his book *Eonul dogmatic* (*The Age of Dogma*) and includes all of the books found in his four trilogies: *Trilogy of Knowledge*, *Trilogy of Culture*, *Trilogy of Values*, and *Trilogy of Cosmology* ("Schița" 11, 19). They develop a cohesive and fairly comprehensive vision of reality. In these books, Blaga's

writing is clear and straightforward, presenting data and argumentation that lead to specific conclusions or that support theories that have been previously introduced. His argumentation is logical, even when he argues that there are some things that transcend reason. It is true that he sometimes uses metaphors to illustrate and/or express certain ideas, but that is not because of a rejection of a more “scientific” approach to philosophy but instead because he believes that some things transcend expression in ordinary language, and also because he believes that philosophy can be expressed beautifully without abandoning reason. In an autobiographical essay, he wrote “One of my enduring preoccupations has always been not only to write philosophy, but to write it more beautifully, without compromising the thoughts themselves” (“Schiță” 18).⁴

The style of Blaga’s poetry contrasts rather sharply with the style of his philosophical writing. His poetry is full of imagery, metaphor, myth, and hyperbole. He takes liberties with language, makes striking contrasts, and occasionally resorts to the absurd. The purpose is clearly to suggest and move rather than to hypothesize and prove. Nonetheless, those who are familiar with both can find overlaps. For example, in his writings on epistemology, he exerts considerable effort exploring the limits of human cognition. He argues that, from an epistemological perspective, there are three different types of mystery: those that can be solved (via “plus cognition”), those that can only be attenuated (via “minus cognition”), and those that cannot be solved at all (“zero cognition”) (*Cunoașterea luciferică* 384-403). In his anthropology he returns to the subject of mystery and argues that the existence of mysteries to be solved is essential to full humanness, since the unknown is what drives humanity to triumphs of discovery and understanding, which he views as hallmarks of humanity’s greatness (*Ființa istorică* 487-511).

This same exalted view of mystery is found in one of Blaga’s most famous poems, “I Do Not Trample the World’s Halo of Wonders”:

I do not trample the world's halo of wonders
 nor do I kill with my mind
 the mysteries that I find
 along my way
 in flowers and eyes, on lips or graves.

The light of others
 the spell of the unfathomed smothers
 in the depths of darkness.

But I,
 I grow the secrets of the world with my light -
 and just as the moonlight white,
 does not suppress, but quivering,
 powerfully increases the secrets of night,
 so I enrich the dark horizon
 with tremors of sacred mystery.

And all that's not understood
 transforms into mystery before me-
 for I love flowers and eyes, lips and graves.⁵

So, we see that there are differences between Blaga's poetry and his philosophy, but there are also similarities. This is likewise true of the relationship between Blaga's philosophy and his theater and fiction: there are clear stylistic differences but also thematic overlaps. This issue of *East West Cultural Passage* is devoted to exploring these areas of overlap and distinction.

Many people who have a passing familiarity with Blaga's work seem to assume that one can discern the basic outline and sentiment of his philosophy from reading his poems and other non-philosophical writings. Perhaps the most elaborate scholarly articulation of this perspective is Alexandru Tănase's 1977 book, *Lucian Blaga – filosoful poet, poetul filosof* (*Lucian Blaga: Philosopher Poet, Poet Philosopher*). This is a well-documented work that begins with a chapter summarizing Blaga's life and work, followed by nine chapters that explain Blaga's philosophical system. The final two chapters discuss the relationship between

Blaga's philosophical writings and his poetry and the relationship between Blaga's theatrical pieces and his philosophy. Tănase documents a number of areas of overlap between Blaga's philosophical writings and his other literature.

A recent defense of this complementarian view of Blaga's work is Iolanda Mănescu's paper, "Poetry and Philosophy in Lucian Blaga's Works." Presented in 2008 at a conference at the University of Helsinki, this paper argues that "Blaga's poems and plays, on the one hand, and his philosophical works, on the other hand, are so closely connected that one cannot understand his poetry and drama without knowing his philosophical ideas, and, likewise, one cannot understand the philosopher's works without knowing the metaphors in his literary works" (Mănescu 2).

These assertions of interdependence notwithstanding, the differences between Blaga's philosophy and his poetry and theater seem to be more than merely stylistic. For example, the latter contain strong currents of Romanticism and mysticism that are intentionally absent from his systematic philosophy. In "Outline of a Philosophical Self-presentation," Blaga states that "although I don't believe that mysticism is at all a crime, I must declare that in philosophy I don't do any kind of mysticism. I sometimes do it in poetry and in drama, where the mystical life has a place" ("Schița" 12, my translation). Furthermore, while Blaga views poetry, drama, and philosophy as creative constructs, he also differentiates them by their methodologies and materials. See, for example, his statement in *Gândire magică și religie (Magical Thought and Religion)*,

Mythical constructs represent attempts of the human spirit to reveal the mysteries of existence, like any other similar attempts, such as metaphysical, artistic, religious, or scientific attempts. The distinction from metaphysical, artistic, and scientific constructs consists, essentially, in the material used as the means of revelation. Metaphysics uses for this purpose abstract constructions and sometimes schematic visions. For the same purpose, art uses concrete intuition. Science uses imaginary constructs, as well as

concepts and empirical evidence. Mythology preserves an imaginary material, eminently moldable and animated. (274)

Thus, there appears to be both overlap and distinction between Blaga's philosophical writing and his other literary work. The exact nature of this relationship is worth exploring.

The articles contained in this edition of *East West Cultural Passage* suggest new approaches to this issue. Maria Tupan, in her article "Lucian Blaga and the Rural Imaginary at the Beginning of the 20th Century," argues that Blaga proposes a futuristic epistemology and a vitalist philosophical outlook that influence his literary works. She sees evidence for this in his interest in the work of thinkers like Jung and Bergson and in his embrace of polyvalent logics and particle physics.

Slaymen Bonilla, in his article "Towards an Architecture of Mythos: Lucian Blaga and Utopian Pessimism," puts Blaga's concepts of mystery and the Great Anonymous into play with the notion of cognitive bias and Jacobo Grinberg-Zylberbaum's synergic theory to create a "metaphysics of mythos." According to this interpretation of reality, human reason has inherent limitations that can be at least partially overcome through mythical and poetic thinking. Bonilla calls this metaphysical vision "utopian pessimism." It is pessimistic because it doubts that humanity can fully comprehend the mysteries of existence, but at the same time it is utopian, because it views this inability in a positive light, since this inability is the very thing that drives humanity to its creative endeavors.

Valeriu Sofronie's article "Intellectual Elasticity as a Blagian Episteme: The Basis of a Modus Vivendi between his Philosophy and Dramaturgy" argues that there is a middle way between viewing Blaga's philosophy and his other works as synoptic and viewing them as divergent. He attempts to show that Blaga's writing exhibits an elasticity that avoids rigid categories such as philosophy, poetry, and theater. He accomplishes this through a comparison of Blaga's systematic philosophy with his play *Zalmoxis*.

Blaga's philosophical system itself appears to suggest at least a partial explanation of the similarities and differences between his philosophy and his other writings. As was shown earlier, Blaga sees the task of philosophy as somewhat different from the tasks of poetry and theater. The former is an attempt to analyze the nature of reality, while the latter have as one of their goals the expression of sentiments that arise as one experiences reality. This may account for some of the divergence between his philosophical writings and his other literature.

The similarities may be partially accounted for by the effect of the abyssal categories and the stylistic matrix that they form. Blaga's book *Geneza metaforei și sensul culturii* (*The Genesis of Metaphor and the Sense of Culture*) contains a chapter titled "The Abyssal Categories" that explains that, in addition to the categories of the conscious mind proposed by Immanuel Kant, humans have a second set of categories that reside in the subconscious and exert a profound influence on all of their creations. These categories reflect the culture in which people live and account for the stylistic aspects indigenous to each culture.

In Blaga's philosophical self-presentation, he writes that "All cultural constructs: works of art, metaphysical visions, great scientific constructs, mythology, and others bear the seal of these abyssal categories" ("Schița" 16). Hence, according to Blaga, his own works – his philosophy, his poetry, everything – are shaped by the categories in his subconscious mind. If this is correct, then it is no surprise at all that there are deep cultural similarities between his philosophical writings and his other work.

Clearly these suggestions are open to further development. Blaga's work is creative, deep, and challenges us to think in new ways. The editors of *East West Cultural Passage* hope that the articles contained in this volume will contribute to the growing recognition of the multifaceted nature of Blaga's genius and also spur continued research into and application of Blaga's ideas.

MICHAEL S. JONES
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Notes:

¹ An English-language introduction to Blaga's life and work can be found in the first two chapters of Michael S. Jones, *The Metaphysics of Religion: Lucian Blaga and Contemporary Philosophy*.

² Sean Cotter's *Literary Translation and the Idea of a Minor Romania* contains a chapter on Blaga's translation work.

³ Some of Blaga's books of philosophy were published posthumously. For a complete list of articles published during his life, see Aurora Aluceai, *Lucian Blaga, 1895-1961: Biobibliografie*, Iași: Biblioteca Centrală Universitară "Mihai Eminescu," 1979.

⁴ All translations from Romanian in this editorial are by Michael S. Jones.

⁵ Translated by Michael S. Jones, in Ioana Zirra and Madeline Potter, editors, *The Literary Avatars of Christian Sacramentality, Theology and Practical Life in Recent Modernity*, 143.

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