

# Preliminaries to a Philosophical Polemic – Blaga’s Ethnicism, in the Interpretation of V. Băncilă and C. Fântâneru

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## Abstract

*L. Blaga’s traditionalism, defined as early as 1924 (Filosofia stilului), has as fundamental value the absolute, an expression which dissolves in its essence the abstraction, the stylization, the eternity. For Blaga, the traditionalism finds its expression in nationalism, a concept defined as ‘spiritual collectivism born from the thirst for absolute’.*

*The idea will be resumed and developed by Vasile Băncilă in his work Lucian Blaga și energia românească (1936), but we have to specify that Băncilă was having mostly in attention Blaga’s papers published up to that moment (especially Încercare metafizică, 1934, and Daimonion, 1930). According to Băncilă, Blaga’s interest in the forms of archaic culture was proceeding from ‘the conscience of a destiny emanated by the infinity’. As it was expected, such views had a critical reception. Exemplary in this regard remains the polemic between Blaga and Rădulescu-Motru, unfolded between 1943–1944 in the two pennant-publications of the epoch, “Revista de filosofie” and “Saeculum”, representing, in fact, the dispute between the scientific trend and that of mystery and vital impulse.*

*One after the other, the key of interpretations was claimed by Blaga’s admirers and advocates, from V. Băncilă to C. Fântâneru, the latter mostly known as a poet, a literary critic, and less as a classical thinker and interpreter. Appealing to Plato’s dialogues, C. Fântâneru identifies Blaga’s metaphysics as ‘a state of existence between mystery and revelation’. The mythical thinking is a form of becoming, opposed to the loss, the unraveling. Euphoria excludes aporia, being the conclusion of this investigation.*

*These ideas and interpretations are essentially in contradiction with the opinion that L. Blaga’s philosophical concepts didn’t influence his poetry, a proof being the lasting of “the lost generation” as a demonstration that “the mystery has its persistence”.*

**Keywords:** *traditionalism, ethics of anonymity, culture of primitiveness, Romanian ethnicism, mythical thinking.*

In a paper appeared in 1924<sup>1</sup> dedicated to the philosophy of style and entitled *Filosofia stilului*, L. Blaga established the fundamental terms in which it is embodied the content of an artwork in a culture. Identifying what he himself has defined as *a nisus formativus* (... formative or format, that is the dough through which the human spirit gets closer the indeterminate material which constitutes the value of the artwork)<sup>2</sup>, Blaga noticed that the form of manifestation of the world of senses, *ideoplastia*, as he named it, meaning the ideal artwork's model, materialized under the influence of the thought<sup>3</sup>, is nothing else but the style, specific not only to art, but by extinction, especially to "any form or social elaboration."<sup>4</sup>

Blaga sustains that the style does not represent an emanation of the aesthetics under a form or another, but an invasion situated *beyond* the aesthetics that is *a cultural invasion*<sup>5</sup>. Regarded as a temporal sequence, the styles have in common, as the thinker from Lăncram believes, the un-aesthetic origin, moving between *the individual, the absolute, and the typical* and normally and objectively removing any artwork, from the time when it has been created, from the values and the specificity ("the style") of the epoch, leading it on an *intuitive way*, to the absolute conscience of its uniqueness.

Analyzing, for instance, the absolute as a fundamental value of a culture, Blaga finds out that to this aesthetic category corresponds, in metaphysics, the eternity, in science, the solitary phenomenon, in moral, the ecstasy, the contemplation, and in art, the symbol. As a consequence, the absolute, as an artistic style, leads the artist towards a traditional approach, meaning the area where the ideal abstracts itself in anonymity.

This model of the absolute style, in which the spirit is the dogma (seen as a seal of the absolute), finds, according to Blaga, the full expression in the Jewish culture, in which the anonymity leads to the destruction of the personal individuality, to the symbolic, abstract, and passive contemplation of the uniqueness of the supreme artwork.

Therefore, culture manifests itself through the repetition of the same forms, in different plans of existence. The correspondences between the various forms

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<sup>1</sup> Lucian Blaga, *Filosofia stilului*, Cultura Națională, Bucharest, 1924.

<sup>2</sup> Lucian himself defined *nisus formativus* as a fundamental value constituted from the plastic material of the senses and in which are gathered all the imaginations of the human conscience. *Filosofia stilului*, p. 44.

<sup>3</sup> Lucian Blaga, *op. cit.*, p. 45.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 45.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 81.

have as basis a *nisus formativus*, that is a common source. For example, for the Greeks, *nisus formativus* was the pure and unbounded *idea*. Other people choose different cultural forms, but exclusive on the basis of the correspondences.<sup>6</sup> As a result, *the style of the artwork* is equally established by the values of the epoch, but also by the original seed. *The value of the artwork* is intuitively revealed. The life intuitively lived means, according to Blaga, a higher evaluation of the *subconscious* values.<sup>7</sup>

The artwork's style is not necessarily a matter of aesthetics, but more a social one, a cultural emanation which evolves together with the epoch. The style makes the artwork more beautiful, it gives its value, and it brings the artwork to a *common denominator*, which is something else than *nisus formativus*.

In this respect, Blaga analyzes *the traditionalism* having the absolute as a fundamental value. From a philosophical point of view, the traditionalism corresponds to the infinite, the eternity, and the unique. The artistic expression of the traditionalism is the abstraction and the stylization. Blaga's traditionalism is opposing the formalism but also the falsity of modernism, being a higher artistic movement, which overcomes both the modernism (as an expression of the individualism), but also the classicism (concerned by the typical). In Blaga's opinion, the nationalism is "the new church", or *dogma*, based on a "spiritual collectivism born from the thirst for absolute."<sup>8</sup>

Analyzing the concept of "dogma" we notice that the meaning given by Blaga corresponds to Bergson's conception, having the meaning of something "boundless", irrational. This new type of art is meant to resign in front of an immeasurable reality, as Blaga sustains.

As a result, the contemporary spirit is, according to the same thinker, in search for a new way to escape the chaos. The "new" art, whose signs appear in all the fields of culture, leads to a "new division of the spirit"<sup>9</sup> in which the person is sacrificed in order to face the anonymity. *The anonymity's ethics*, represents in Blaga's view, the only way to truth and equilibrium<sup>10</sup> able to separate us from the *vague and decadent* sentimentalism and to bring us a wave of *manhood* and *irreducible spirituality*.

The idea will be resumed by V. Băncilă (01.01.1897 – 10.06.1979) in his work *Lucian Blaga și energia românească*, first presented as a public conference,

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<sup>6</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 80.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 73.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 72.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 74.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 78.

at Cluj, in 1936, and published, with an amount of additions and amendments, first in the *Gând românesc* magazine (year II, 1937) and later, in a separate volume (1937). The basis of V. Băncilă's analysis is represented by the papers published by L. Blaga, up to that moment, especially *Censura transcendentă*, (*Încercare metafizică*, 1934), *Orizont și stil* (1935), and *Geneza metaforei și sensul culturii* (1937). The mentioned volumes, in addition to some collections of essays *Filosofia stilului* (1924) and *Daimonion* (1930), were bringing in the Romanian cultural area a new vision, proving not only a wide area of lectures, but mostly an associative, logical and extremely original ability. Blaga was interested in the forms of archaic culture of a natural primitivism, which must have lived according to Blaga's opinion, in a "cosmic horizon", having the conscience of a destiny "emanated by the infinity". Essentially, this conservative view, of the traditional style of living, resistant to any attempt of change, mostly corresponded to Blaga's thinking, in the centre of which there was its fundamental un-historicity. In this context, the philosopher's interest for the rural humanity, different from the urban one, perverted by the effects of the civilization, finds its expression in the interest for the culture of the primitiveness, which is "naïve", aurora, "creative of fairytales" opposed to the "cold, mechanic, and rational" civilization. These opinions can be found in his fundamental work *Trilogia culturii* (constituted by the following: *Orizont și stil*, 1936, *Spațiul mioritic*, 1936, and *Geneza metaforei și sensul culturii*, 1937), all being included in the European philosophical movement, which has dominated the thinking from Nietzsche to Spengler, sustaining the positivist Occident's decline and the fall of the trust in the values of reason.

During a diplomatic mission in Bern (between the 1st of April 1928 – 31st of October 1932), L. Blaga, despite having a very busy<sup>11</sup> official diplomatic agenda, did not stop to be preoccupied by the "system", a phrase which signified not a philosophic system of the philosopher, but more a "symphonic" one, maybe even encyclopedic or universalistic, in the spirit of the artwork of Cantemir, Hașdeu, or Eminescu, which might have corresponded, in his view, "with the dominant notes of the Romanian culture."<sup>12</sup> The interest he gives to the concept of culture (extensively analyzed in the volume *Geneza metaforei și sensul culturii*), speaking about an *anthological mutation* through which the man, different from animalism, may reveal The Mystery. The man, as Blaga sustains, is a *creator of culture*, being therefore, the only being able to live between mystery and revelation. Trying to

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<sup>11</sup> Mircea Eliade, "Convorbiri cu L. Blaga", *Vremea*, 1934, in L. Blaga, *Filosofia stilului*, p. 484.

<sup>12</sup> Constantin Turcu, "Lucian Blaga în diplomația românească", in Lucian Blaga, *Culegere de studii*, Cartea Românească Publ. House, 1987, p. 525.

solve the mystery, the man lives and creates culture, while “the transcendent brakes” are with the Great Anonymous, the one who maintains the equilibrium in the universe, forcing the man to realize his status of a creator of culture...<sup>13</sup>

Following Spengler, Blaga admits that “Any culture, getting older, transforms itself into a civilization”, adding that: “The culture is a fantasy of the human spirit only by its stylistic source”.<sup>14</sup> Opposed to culture is the civilization, as an expression of the human's need for security and self preservation. The man creates his comfort from the need of security, surrounding it through imitation with the signs of a style...<sup>15</sup>

This observation is more valuable as, during the fourth decade of the previous century, a researcher from the “saeculist” camp, meaning the followers of the ideology promoted by Blaga in “Saeculum” magazine from Sibiu (old series, 1943–1944), Melania Livadă<sup>16</sup>, finds out that Blaga is not such a “fashionable philosopher, as much as one belonging to the «infinity's spirit», which makes the philosophical spirits to get warm during a time of winter wisdom”<sup>17</sup>. Trying to find an explanation for both the obvious interest of Melania Livadă in sustaining Blaga's opinions in the polemic with C. Rădulescu-Motru, but also for Ștefan Augustin Doinaș' observation, according to which Blaga's philosophy remained “mostly unassimilated”<sup>18</sup>, we discover an undisputed truth, based on an amount of knowledge, hard to be subscribed in the absence of a mental exercise. The reasons, for which the exegetical interpretations on the metaphor and myth have been proved more pronounced in the poetry's campus, and less consonance for the Romanian thinking, are related to how Blaga was understood as a philosopher.

A first proof of the critical reception we are having in the polemic started in July 1943, once with the publication in *Revista Fundațiilor Regale* of C. Rădulescu-Motru's “Offensive against the scientific philosophy”. Essentially, Motru regarded Blaga's philosophy as “anti scientific” as dominated by “the sovereignty of mystery”. We quote: “How much reason and how much mysticism is in Blaga's philosophy we cannot determine as long as we lack the necessary tools to measure the vital, irrational and illogic impulse”, according to Motru's view.<sup>19</sup> Or, the essence of Blaga's ideology is exactly the integration in mystery,

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<sup>13</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 481.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 485.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 485.

<sup>16</sup> Melania Livadă, *Lucian Blaga. Comentarii la o discuție filosofică*, Dacia Traiană, Sibiu, 1944, p. 7.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 8.

<sup>18</sup> Lucian Blaga, *Filosofia stilului*, p. 301.

<sup>19</sup> Melania Livadă, *op. cit.*, p. 8.

where reason has no access. Therefore, Blaga's "mythosophy" places the man in front of an explanatory aspiration which gives the measure of "the knowledge's drama". The mystery is "cryptic", *the transcendent censure* acting as a barrier to its solving. The path chosen by L. Blaga is, according to Melania Livadă, the only one rightful, in the "spirit of infinite", through the revealing of the *mystery* and of *the ethnic ontology*. M. Livadă sustains that there is a common path for many foreign philosophical schools, maybe the only one meant to be highlighted, a small part from the poet's and the philosopher's originality.<sup>20</sup>

In this case, any new attempt of searching the Romanian *ethnicity* represents a definite contribution at the autochthonous philosophical progress, for at least two reasons: 1) by ethnicism the originality of the Romanian thinking is guaranteed; 2) any creative idea conceived by a local thinker assures an extra chance for success for the Romanian philosophical school. As a first conclusion, we can launch the idea of the spirit of infinite promoted by L. Blaga, while he was the leadership of the magazine "Saeculum" from Sibiu, it was not a simple fashion, but it was the existential condition of the Romanian philosophy.<sup>21</sup>

This idea is examined by V. Băncilă, in the analyzed study<sup>22</sup>. By resuming Blaga's thesis from *Geneza metaforei și sensul culturii*, V. Băncilă observes that what is individual is *minor*, and what is ethnic is *major*. In other words, the Romanian energetic lines have an *ethnic meaning*, leading on *imperial ways*, towards a mysterious continent.<sup>23</sup> Therefore, V. Băncilă finds that the Romanian ethnic realities, as they are perceived by L. Blaga, are revealed only by personal experiences, during the contact with the world of shapes, of meanings, and wonders.

The artistic process used by Blaga in order to reach this objective reality, is defined by V. Băncilă as the *agnostic method*, that is the search of a link between the self and the world, meant to express and reveal a general reality. From a philosophical point of view, Blaga's knowledge becomes an *agnostic*<sup>24</sup> product, able to offer the key for the creation's interpretation, in other words to create its own explanations.

Blaga's *ethnic* is not a *precise* product, and less a finite one. It is a multi categorial quantity, of which all the threads of creation are bounded. The ethnic

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<sup>20</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 13.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 7.

<sup>22</sup> Vasile Băncilă, *Lucian Blaga și energia românească*, Colecția "Gând românesc", Bucharest, 1938.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 4.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 7.

does not exist outside the reality, and its definition remains a *mystery* as Băncilă says: “The creation’s mystery is the divinity’s mystery: and its explanation, if it were possible, *should be forbidden*.”<sup>25</sup>

According to what we have analyzed, we reach V. Băncilă’s fundamental conclusion from the analysis of Blaga’s work, that is *the ethnic is a philosophy*, in fact it is the *slow* and *diffuse* philosophy, which for the people, has the attributes of a philosophy, meaning the unitary attitude towards life. At the same time, the ethnic is a reality, simultaneous metaphysical and having metaphysical implications, whose scientific basis may be identified, if not in science, at least in the axyomatic thruths given by faith.

Regarding from this point of view, Blaga’s ethnic becomes the basis of philosophy, its guarant, on the principle that the axiomatic thruths also stand for the universal thruths. V. Băncilă’s conclusion, started from the analysis of Blaga’s philosophy, is that the ethnic represents the act of birth of a certain type of local philosophy, would also be the basis of its latter development. Even though the proper philosophy does not have an ethnic characteristic, however, it reflects a certain ethnic reality, that is the ground for the believes, the attitudes, and not least of the social collective that has generated it. So, the ethnic is the basis of philosophy, offering the structural ‘local axioms’, on which the universality of the philosophical interests relays.

Noticing that philosophy is subjective, V. Băncilă emphasises the idea of a private, intrinsic link between philosophy and the ethnic element, idea which is depicted from research on “the articulations and peaks of Blaga’s view” on philosophy. The ethnic direction, that has found a major expression in Blaga’s work, starts according to V. Băncilă from the “ancestral fund”, “from the primordial Romanian spirit” of the philosophy that has appeared “exactly on time”.<sup>26</sup> In other words “the critical awakening” of the Romanian people, at a spiritual and metaphysical level has been made “by predestination” and less from elements that belong to the “exterior picturesque”. The philosophical conscience about *ourselves* is part of our deep spiritual fund, Blaga’s merit being that of revealing the character of the Romanian philosophic artwork, identified by: 1. vocation, 2. creative precocity, 3. a natural adhesion to the metaphysical.

Starting from these suggestions, we will find a common link between philosophy and poetry in L. Blaga’s work, a duality that reveals the key of interpretation of Blaga’s artwork: poetry and philosophy have common sources,

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<sup>25</sup> Vasile Băncilă, *op. cit.*, p. 9.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 13.

forming a complex reality, a harmonious one, and mostly, without any resemblance, on the autochthonous spiritual lands. Regarded from this point of view, Blaga's work has, of course, an ethnic character, as long as the ethnic implies the idea of return to the origins, but also the prediction of the future. Blaga's ethnicism is not an empiric one, a predominant social one..., but it is most *transcendental* having its sources in the deep rural reality, to which the philosopher often appeals.

About the same transcendental experience that assures the access to 'the intuition of our times', C. Fântâneru (01.01.1907 – 21.03.1975) also refers to in his study *Poezia lui Lucian Blaga și gândirea mitică*<sup>27</sup>, which was regarded by V. Durnea "useful even nowadays, at least in some of its parts."<sup>28</sup>

Noticing that the epoch he was crossing was filled by certain *euphoria*, a state characterized by an accentuated loss of the spiritual content, C. Fântâneru uses "the mythical thinking", meant to assure the fullness of the sources. *The euphoria* the critic appeals to, a concept taken from Plato's dialogues, represents exactly what L. Blaga was defining by "metaphysics", meaning the state of existence between mystery and revelation. The mythical thinking or the *euphoric* one is a state of attempt, of spiritual fecundation, of retrieval of some dried or deserted veins of the spirit, including the discovery of some new veins. From this point of view, the mythical thinking is a form of "becoming, opposed to the loss", to the unraveling once with the aporia.

At a spiritual level, "the grace", "the wonder" are methods of "becoming" opposed to the Christian tradition, which states the "eternal return". Exactly in this area is, as C. Fântâneru highlights, L. Blaga's distance from the theological knowledge: "Blaga has reached the denial of the theological knowledge by the lucid observation of *the becoming*."<sup>29</sup>

Entering into details, having a thorough training on classicism, the critic finds out that *the becoming* represents the fundamental human condition, crumbled by the incessantly death of each moment. The human becoming has as model the natural becoming, or what Plato intuited "with the destructive precision of a modern physician": What is the most troubling is what is happening with knowledge...

Moreover, in what concerns the fact that we can *learn*, this supposes more

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<sup>27</sup> Constantin Fantaneru, *Poezia lui Lucian Blaga și gândirea mitică*, Colecția Convorbiri Literare, Bucharest, 1941.

<sup>28</sup> Eugen Simion, *Dicționarul General al Literaturii Române, Literele E/K*, Encyclopedical Univers Publishing House, Bucharest, 2005, p. 129.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 15.



the loss of knowledge... By creating a new conscience instead of the forgotten one, the *study* brings again the knowledge, making it to appear the same. Never being identical to itself, as a divine being, it replaces the lost knowledge by unraveling, a new knowledge, as if it had left the old one to replace it, claiming that it resembles to the old one. Plato's text (from *Symposion*, 207-208 a.b), quoted by Fântâneru, shows *the becoming* as a way of saving the knowledge (*episteme*), from oblivion (*lethe*). Therefore, the becoming is a reminiscence from "the immortal soul", which does not relieve the human being from searching and researching. The thinking which relates itself to the copy of the eternal being, meaning at *the becoming*, there is a *likely* thinking, as long as the image of becoming resembles with the eternal being', as Fântâneru concludes<sup>30</sup>, adding that: "Appeared under the protection of «the mythical thinking» but not under that of the rational one, the faith that the human being has the possibility of becoming was possible through the metaphysical knowledge."<sup>31</sup>

So, the mythical thinking, hidden under symbols, schemes, myths prefigures a new mode of "seeing" or perceiving the things, beyond the visible space or, speaking in a synthetically way, where the *invisible* reflects itself in visible.

In Blaga's conception, the mythical thinking has as equivalent "the Luciferian knowledge" the only one allowed to the man and that represents, in essence, the return to the elementary powers of the human being, who is not allowed other way of knowledge, beyond the intuitive ability.

By appreciating his forerunner's effort, V. Băncilă, of analyzing the mythical and the folklorical valences of Blaga's creation, C. Fântâneru considers that "Covering the becoming with extra significances /Lucian Blaga/ will bring higher the deeds and the elements at the mythical level of principles and verses..."<sup>32</sup>

If to all that has been mentioned, it is added Fântâneru's effort to identify "L. Blaga's influence, the configurism" as it is named by the critic, in the wide field of the recent lyrical production (corresponding to the 40s of the past century, the period while C. F had the function of artistic director at *Universul literar*, 1938–1941- n.a.), was confirmed the thesis of Ștefan Augustin Doinaș, which states that in the field of lyrical creation, Blaga had a very strong influence, determining even "a Romanian expressionism post Blaga"<sup>33</sup>. If we include Fântâneru himself in this myriad, as a poet, with the volume *Râsul morșilor de aur* (1940), characterized as "a hermetic pushed to extreme", from which do not miss images inspired from the

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<sup>30</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 18.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 19.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 24.

<sup>33</sup> Lucian Blaga, *op. cit.*, p. 501.

autochthonous folklore.<sup>34</sup> We find out that “the abundance of transcendent meanings” of the lyric analyzed by C. Fântâneru indicates, in his opinion “a stage of Bizantinism” in which “the mystery has its dialects”. If nowadays, names of poets as Aurel Chirescu (awarded with the title of “The Young Poets” by the Royal Foundation), Grigore Popa or Ion Sofia Manolescu are no longer of interest, the presence in Mihai Beniuc’s enumeration (with a lyric fragment *Cântece de pierzanie*) or of Vlaicu Bârna, is a proof that the literary of left orientation has recovered, if not spiritually, at least physically, the most promising poets of “the lost generation”.

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<sup>34</sup> Eugen Simion, *op. cit.*, p. 129.