Lucian Blaga, Nietzsche and Zamolxe

Keith HITCHINS*

Keywords: *Nietzschean*; *Expressionism*; *myth*; *Dacians*; *Dionysian*

1. Lucian Blaga (1895–1961), Romania's most original philosopher and, for many, most eminent poet of the 20th century, shared the fascination with the philosophy of Nietzsche of many Romanian intellectuals of the interwar period. His vitality, his reevaluation of all values, and his summons to create and to surpass oneself had an irresistible appeal for the post-World War I generation of intellectuals (Giorgoi 2000: 125–283). They themselves were anxiously seeking new spiritual truths and exploring new approaches to existence in the aftermath of a conflict that had shattered all established values. For many, Blaga among them, Nietzsche's emphasis on intuition, his rejection of science and reason as the sole keys to understanding existence, and his hostility to modern society with its machines and materialism were enormously congenial.

Blaga's own reception of Nietzsche was a logical extension of his immersion in German literature, philosophy, and psychology (Bruciu 2006: 37–102). He displayed great admiration for German culture and ascribed to it a crucial role in the development of modern Romanian literature and thought. He characterized German influence as "catalytic" because it inspired creativity, but did not intrude upon it, while he classified French cultural influence as "modeling," since it strove to remake the foreign culture in its own image (Blaga 1944: 319–320). Those writers and thinkers to whom he felt especially drawn were the Romantic philosopher Friedrich Schelling and the Romantic poet Friedrich Hölderlin, the philosopher of culture Oswald Spengler (Blaga 1977: 196–208), and, above all, Goethe (Bruciu 2006: 37–46).

Of the currents of ideas in his early career that deeply affected him, German Expressionism proved the most appealing[1]. It lay at the heart of his own aesthetic theory and infused his first volumes of poetry with both a celebration of life and spiritual despair. He also shared the Expressionists' anxiety at the direction contemporary Europe had taken. He experienced the same sense of isolation from ordinary humanity as they, and, like them, he attributed this condition to an overdose of "cerebralism," which had numbed the faculties of normal behavior and feeling. He, too, wanted to live "irresponsibly" as taught by the vitalist philosophies of the

* University of Illinois, U.S.A. (khitchin@gmail.com).

[1] On Blaga's relationship to Expressionism see Crohmălniceanu 1978: 64–92. On the influence of Expressionism on Blaga the playwright see Cebotari 2010: 102–130.

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turn of the century. With the Expressionists he longed to return to some primordial form of existence when man lived in close communion with nature. Like them, he rebelled against the science and technology of their own century, which, he thought, had turned the vibrant world of phenomena into ossified abstractions. This sense of the loss of Eden lay behind his (and the Expressionists') desperate search for civilizations that had preserved the wholeness and spontaneity of natural human existence.

2. Blaga was drawn to Nietzsche because he shared his anxieties about man's condition. The implications of Nietzsche's "God is dead" for Blaga were profound. In his poetry he yearned for a God who would reveal himself and shatter the mystery of existence, but God chose to remain hidden and thereby thwart man's striving to know ultimate reality. Blaga defined the tragedy of his own times as the conflict between man's desperate need for communion with God, on the one hand, and, on the other, his lucidity, which rendered such an illusion impossible. Thus, the credo of modern times, he lamented, no longer began with the unconscious, "I believe," but with the tragic, "I want to believe" (Blaga 1919: 22).

Nietzsche's challenge to the ethical values of his day and his alarm at the direction modern society had taken accorded with Blaga's own spiritual restlessness and search for truth. He sought reinforcement in Nietzsche's writings for his hostility to machine civilization and the mechanized city. He also found in Nietzsche's doctrine of the will and in his vitalism an antidote to the "intellectualism" that oppressed modern man and inhibited his natural exuberance and creativity. He praised Nietzsche's opposition to the logical and dialectical analysis of truth and his defense of the "rights of myth" and of the ways of thinking mythically, and he quoted approvingly his dictum that without myth every culture lost its creative power (Blaga 1994: 191)[2]. Blaga thus condemned intellectualism as the reduction of reality to the mere play of blind, elemental forces neatly arranged in algebraic formulas, a world devoid of the "internal abyss," without life and without values. In Nietzsche he admired the aspiration to the absolute and the striving to transcend oneself, qualities that attracted him to Zarathustra.

Blaga was particularly taken by Nietzsche's intuitive approach to the problems of the philosophy of culture. He admired Nietzsche's skill in establishing the specific character of numerous ancient, medieval, and modern cultural styles by extending the notion of style from art and literature to all the cultural activities of a particular age (Pop 2006: 29–148). Nietzsche's application of Goethe's method of the *Urphänomen*, the primordial phenomenon, struck him as especially creative, for in *The Birth of Tragedy* he had expanded Europe's understanding of ancient Greece by applying to its civilization the proposition that two creative impulses existed in man – the Apollonian and the Dionysian. In this way, Blaga argued, Nietzsche had demonstrated how both these forces had molded Greek civilization, and thus he had given the lie to the long-held belief that it was totally Apollonian in nature. Blaga was convinced that Greek civilization had emerged out of the struggle between these two opposing creative forces, and, thus, the original phenomenon underlying it was this polarity (Blaga 1968: 183–188). Nietzsche's formulation seemed to him a

[2] L. Blaga gave this course the University of Cluj in 1940.

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splendid example of how an idea (the *Urphänomen*) which had been thoroughly "compromised" by forced applications in the natural sciences could be productive in another domain.

3. Nietzsche's influence on Blaga's thought and creativity as a poet and dramatist in the early years of his career was profound. Blaga devoted three essays to Nietzsche in the 1920s in which he treated him as one of the "prophets" of the new age and recognized him as one of the initiators of a "Copernican inversion" that was revolutionizing all the domains of European intellectual life. He insisted that the dynamism of Vincent Van Gogh in painting, the vision of August Strindberg in literature, and the Dionysian "style" of Nietzsche in philosophy had become indispensable components of a "new style," a new way of imagining the world and observing its phenomena. Of the three, Blaga accorded Nietzsche pride of place. He described him as the "great crossroads," the convergence of all the styles of life of the later 19th century: in *The Birth of Tragedy* and in his admiration for the messianism of Wagner's music, he was a romantic aesthete; in his free thought in *Untimely Meditations* and *Human, All-Too-Human* he was a "naturalist"; in the varied sensibilities that infused all his work he was a decadent; and in the gospel preached by Zarathustra he was the harbinger of creative expressionism (Blaga 1925: 109). Without Nietzsche, Blaga concluded, it was impossible to conceive of the "cosmic enthusiasm," the "agitated speech," and the "verbal invention" of the Expressionists (and, he might have added, of his own early volumes of verse). In *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* he discovered the invigorating prelude to the new style. He interpreted Nietzsche as teaching men to say "yes" to existence and as preaching in a way strikingly different from that in which similar messages had been preached in the past. Blaga emphasized that Nietzsche wanted men not just to be, but to be more than they were; he yearned for an intensified life, a life that was moving ever upward. Blaga saw in Nietzsche's superman the full expression of the "invincible élan" that he taught, for the superman was a law unto himself and a creator par excellence (Blaga 1925: 108).

In Blaga's poetry it was the lyrical quality of Nietzsche's thought and style and his intuitive approach to fundamental questions of existence, rather than a set of doctrines or an *ars poetica*, that inspired many of the poems in Blaga's early volumes of verse. Of all the attitudes and sensations that he absorbed from Nietzsche, the one that impressed itself most firmly on his creative consciousness was the Dionysian – the revelry in elemental existence, the union with nature, and the metaphysical anxiety. Yet, however unrestrained Blaga might become in his celebration of life, his exultation in his own creativity, and his despair at man's tragic destiny, he drew back from the extreme, if logical, consequences of Nietzsche's thought which sometimes overwhelmed his Expressionist colleagues. Nietzschean motifs abound in Blaga's first three volumes of poetry: *Poemele luminii* (The poems of light, 1919), *Paşii profetului* (The footsteps of the prophet, 1921), and *În marea trecere* (In the great passage, 1924). In *The Poems of Light* he gives forceful expression to the ideal of the superman:

> O my heart! When it pierces my chest with its/ Leaden pounding,/ Emboldened, it cries out to me/ That after long and empty and barren centuries,/

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> When God will rouse Himself/ To make another world/ And other men/ Of pure, godly races,/ Then will the Good Master mold from its clay/ The new Adam[3].

He feels the boundlessness of life in bursts of vitality in which light becomes a demiurgic force invading his being and releasing a divine energy:

> I want to dance as I have never danced before!/ So that God in me will not be chained,/ Like a slave in prison./ Earth, give me wings!/ I want to be an arrow to pierce/ Infinity,/ To see around me only sky,/ Sky above,/ And sky below –/ And, radiant in waves of light,/ To dance/ Charged with passions rare/ That God may freely breathe in me/ And not complain:/ "I am a slave in prison!"[4]

Blaga's mature Expressionism manifested itself in *The Footsteps of the Prophet*. If the vitalism of his first volume could be ascribed mainly to youthful exuberance, now it became an existential attitude. His acceptance of Nietzsche's Dionysian attitude is evident in his ecstatic impulses and Zarathustran prophecies, and his yearning to lose himself in the infinite spaces of nature has its inspiration in Nietzsche's intellectualism:

> The shafts of wheat bend from too much gold./ Here and there red streaks of poppy/ And in the field/ A girl/ With eyelashes long like barley seed./ With a glance she gathers in the sheaves of blue serenity/ And sings./ I lie in the shadow of the poppies,/ Without desire, without reproach, without regret/ And without ambition, only body/ And only clay./ She sings/ And I listen./ On her warm lips my soul comes alive[5].

The poet accepts the proposition that a reconciliation with nature requires an extinction of reflection: the "intense life" presupposes a return to some primordial form of existence where individual reason and ethical consciousness do not impede the fulfillment of spontaneous, instinctive acts.

Blaga's celebration of life and joyous fusion with nature abruptly end as he contemplates the full import of the Nietzschean pronouncement, "God is dead." In *In the Great Passage* he is overwhelmed by the failure of the Christian God to reveal Himself and to establish a personal connection with his creation. The thought of cosmic emptiness fills him with despair, which he expresses with touching simplicity:

> I lean over the edge. I do not know – is it of the sea/ Or of a poor idea?/ My soul drops into the abyss,/ Slipping like a ring/ From a finger wasted by illness./ Come, death, spread ashes over things./ No path is long any more,/ No challenge stirs me./ Come, death./ On my elbows once again/ I push up for a moment from the ground/ And listen./ Water beats against the shore./ Nothing else, nothing,/ Nothing[6].

4. When Blaga was publishing his first books of poems and his first essays on the philosophy of culture he finished work on his first play, *Zamolxe*, his so-called "pagan mystery"[7]. Its appearance in 1921 was a response to the artistic and

[3] I have used the critical edition of Blaga's poetry by George Gană: Blaga 1982; Blaga 1984. The excerpt is from "Inima", from *Poemele luminii*, in Blaga 1982: 35–36. This translation and the others are mine.

[4] "Vreau să joc," from *Poemele luminii*, in Blaga 1982: 11.

[5] "In lan" from *Paşii profetului*, in Blaga 1982: 62.

[6] "Un om s-apleacă peste margine" from *În marea trecere*, in Blaga 1982: 95.

[7] I have used the text in Blaga 1986: 1–52, with copious notes, pp. 325–432.

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philosophical preoccupations that were evident in the two volumes of poetry, *Poemele luminii* and *Paşii profetului*, and in *Cultură şi cunoştinţă* (Culture and Cognition), his dissertation for which he was awarded a doctorate by the University of Vienna in 1920.

Blaga turned to drama to satisfy his creative aspirations. As a poet he was forever testing new forms, and now he was eager to try his skill at the longer dramatic poem. He had already included several in *Paşii profetului*, and now he intended *Zamolxe* to be his most ambitious experiment to date with the genre. As a philosopher he also wanted to deepen his exploration of the mystery of existence and to sharpen his understanding of cultural style. As he pursued the coordinates of Romanian ethnic and spiritual identity he was fascinated by the complexities of the Romanian cultural style and the apparent contradictions in its spiritual manifestations. He set forth his initial ideas on the subject in an article, "Revolta fondului nostru nelatin" (The revolt of our non-Latin sources), published in the same year as *Zamolxe* (Blaga 1921 : 181–182). Here he insisted that the Romanians were much more than Latins with their rationality and classical sense of balance. He pointed out that even though Latinity predominated, the Romanians also possessed a rich Slavic-Dacian heritage, which was exuberant and full of life and from time to time forced its way into their consciousness. This revolt of the Romanians' non-Latin heritage, which originated in the "metaphysical depths" of their spirit, disrupted its Latin symmetry and at the same moment proved the infinite variety of the Romanian cultural style. Blaga found himself drawn to the Dacians partly because they were one of the ancestors of the Romanians but also because they appealed to his poetic sensibilities: he viewed their world as overflowing with vitality, open to nature, and yearning for the absolute. For him, they were a gushing spring and fierce lightning and they lived life to the fullest and paid homage to Dionysus.

Blaga chose Zalmoxe as the hero of his play because he challenged the Dacians to be true to themselves. He was, to be sure, an historical figure. According to the ancient Greeks, he had been a Dacian slave of the philosopher Pythagoras on the island of Samos and had acquired great knowledge from his master. But then he had then returned to the Dacians, bringing them the religious teachings he had absorbed. For the Dacians, he was a priest and prophet, but under the name Gebeleizis he was also a celestial deity. In time a cult developed around him, and temples were dedicated to his memory, one of which recalled the place where he retired every three years to meditate (Eliade 1982 vol. 2: 170–179).

In portraying his hero, Blaga drew on the information provided by ancient and modern historians, but *Zalmoxe* is not an historical drama[8]. Rather, Blaga sought to explore the deepest layers of Romanian spirituality, and he was guided by his imagination and his lyric sensibility. He put himself in the figure of Zamolxe, and thus the portrait of the Dacian prophet that emerges is, in a sense, a self-portrait. It is Blaga as Zamolxe, who confronts the mystery of existence and seeks the meaning of cultural style and tests hypotheses that will reach their fullest expression later in his philosophical trilogies.

[8] For an analysis of the play one may consult Todoran 1985: 65–88; Modola 2003: 61–180; Cubleşan 2005: 414–428.

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Zamolxe is composed of three acts of three scenes each, which introduce the leading characters – Zamolxe, the High Priest, and the Dacians – and depict their relations with one another. In form the play resembles a poem, as Blaga chooses to reveal his characters through monologues and dialogues rather than through action. The main conflict is one of ideas between Zamolxe and the High Priest, who are at odds over how men shall relate to the world. The High Priest, who resides in the city, represents the old order, the traditional polytheistic faith, which has become institutionalized and has separated the Dacians from nature. In contrast, Zamolxe, who lives close to nature and shuns the city, stands for a new beginning, a religion that will reconcile the Dacians with their true essence. Blaga's attachment to Expressionist ideals is clear, as he treats his characters primarily as vehicles of ideas and prefers primitive nature over the sophisticated metropolis.

The play opens with Zamolxe seated in front of a cave contemplating nature and feeling himself a part of nature and at the edge of the mystery of existence. He had taken refuge there seven years earlier when the people had driven him from the city where he had taught a new religion, that of Marele Orb (The Great Blind Man). At first, he had welcomed solitude, but now he is ready to return to his people in order to bring them the wisdom he has acquired in his years of meditation. Although he feels a duty to undertake this mission, he nonetheless hesitates because action is contrary to his contemplative nature. As he thus stands between two worlds, one of reflection and the other of deeds, three visions appear to him one after the other: Socrates, Jesus, and Giordano Bruno. The message all three bring him is an admonition to take action, but their fate as prophets reinforces his presentiment of tragedy. Yet, in the end, he decides to leave the cave and return to the world of men.

Zamolxe embarks on his mission at a time of deep spiritual crisis among the Dacians: the old gods are dead, as men have ceased to believe in them, and a reevaluation of all values is under way. Yet, despite their banishment of him, his teachings have steadily gained ground among the people, and the old ecclesiastical order is threatened with as the people rise up and try to seize the temple and remove the High Priest. But the High Priest is resourceful. He spreads the word that Zamolxe is a god who has descended among men to make them young again and teach them suffering. Calm immediately returns to the city, and the people ask the High Priest to place a statue of Zamolxe in the temple alongside the other gods. This he does gladly because he intends to blunt Zamolxe's message by associating him with the old order.

By this time, Zamolxe has reached the meadow outside the city. When he learns that he has been made a god, he is incensed and rushes to the temple to confront the High Priest. Zamolxe overturns his statue, and the people, who do not recognize him, slay him with pieces of the statue. Zamolxe has seemingly perished, but then the Dacians have a sudden revelation of the presence among them and in them of The Great Blind Man, the revelation that Blaga refers to in the designation of his play as a "pagan mystery".

5. Similarities between Blaga's Zamolxe and Nietzsche's Zarathustra abound. Both are prophets who withdrew from the world of men to meditate, and when they reappear it is to bring them a new vision of existence they are rejected. But in their preaching both represented for Blaga the harbingers of a new style, a new morality. He thought that Zarathustra's preaching caused traditional morality to snap "like brush under the footsteps of the superman". He called Nietzsche's creation of the

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superman a revolutionary act because it brought about an "inversion" of the moral code; he taught that vitality could not be subordinated to eternal laws and that these very laws must adhere to the requirements of the life force.

Yet, Zamolxe is not Zarathustra. Even though Zamolxe's dispute with the High Priest, his attacks on the traditional gods, and his efforts to prepare men to accept new values are reminiscent of Zarathustra's diatribes against the priests and his attacks on all that was outmoded, Zamolxe was a gentler, more human figure who felt an attachment or at least a responsibility toward the common people. Zarathustra, on the other hand, in Blaga's interpretation, is the incarnation of the will to power. As the prophet of the superman Zarathustra conceives of his ideal as the being of the future, a being who will live in harmony with the vital instincts of life, who will embody the highest expression of the life force. He thus directed his prophecy against all those doctrines – Christian morality and mercy in the first place – that made man a weakling and decadent (Blaga 1994: 196).

Zamolxe's sacrifice is not in vain. Through it the Dacians rise above their immediate, primitive urges, which were frenzied and wanton. As Zamolxe had taught them, the religion of The Great Blind Man symbolized the fusion of nature and the divine and was the embodiment of the creative, if sometimes aimless, power of nature. In embracing it, they cast aside the gods that the High Priest had set up between them and nature. They became themselves, that is, they returned to the deep, unconscious sources of their faith, symbolized by a serene communion with nature.

Blaga's play, despite its debt to Nietzsche, is not an affirmation of Nietzsche's philosophy. Blaga created his own myth of Zamolxe both to explore the "hidden instincts of the people" and to reveal his own philosophy of life. The similarity between his "pagan mystery" and Christian revelation is striking. His prophet is not Zarathustra. Zamolxe does not advocate the superman, nor is there anything of the will to power in him. Rather, he is a humanized reformer possessing the instincts of a peaceful rustic. He is the central figure of what is essentially an Expressionist drama. The conflict takes place on a cosmic level, and the characters are not individuals, but represent abstract principles. The Dacians who undergo an "ontological mutation" after their slaying of Zamolxe are precisely the "new men" foreseen by the Expressionists.

Blaga, then, was not a Nietzschean. Nietzsche's gift to him was not a series of ideas that coalesced into a philosophical system, for Blaga was engaged in elucidating his own system. He indeed found reinforcement for his doubts about Christianity in Nietzsche's work. He himself was pre-Christian and heretical, if not atheistic, and his interpretation of the nature of the divinity and its relationship to man was anything but canonical. He called into question the validity of Christian revelation, portraying God as a deceiver who avoided all communication with his creations. For Blaga, revelation was not divine at all, but was a preeminently human act, resulting from the creation of culture[9]. He treated religions in the same way as mythologies and scientific theories: they were modes of approximate knowledge. Yet, his hostility to Christianity was gentler than Nietzsche's and was tinged with sadness that he could not believe and that God was indifferent to man. He detected a

[9] Lucian Blaga, *Censura transcedentă*, in Blaga 1943: 337; Blaga 1939: 87; see also Sonea 2011: 13–40.

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similar sadness in Nietzsche. As he saw it, Nietzsche loved life and the earth, but in that very sentiment lay tragedy because he had no hope of another life beyond death in some transcendent world (Blaga 1994: 197).

Blaga's relationship to Nietzsche, then, may be described as lyrical rather than programmatic. It was one of suggestion and inspiration, and it endowed him with new creative powers with which to confront the decisive questions of human existence.

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Abstract

A discussion of the influence of Friedrich Nietzsche's work on the Romanian poet and philosopher Lucian Blaga at the beginning of his career. The effects of Nietzsche's thought and of German Expressionism were strong on Blaga's early poetry and, especially, on his first play, about the Dacian prophet Zalmoxe. Although the affinities between Zalmoxe and Nietzsche's Zarathustra are abundant, Blaga's play is not an affirmation of Nietzsche's philosophy. Rather, Blaga is engaged in creating his own myth of Zalmoxe in order both to explore the hidden life force of the Dacians and to reveal his own philosophy of life.

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