Lucian Blaga in the Shadows: English Translations of the Poet's Work

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Although Romanians have taken part in some of the most influential literary movements in the twentieth century, their contributions have done surprisingly little to raise the status of Romanian literature *per se* on the global stage. The explanation for this lies partly in the peculiar nature of their work, as well as in their marked propensity to recast their literary personas in radically cosmopolitan terms. Romanian authors played founding roles in four major movements of the international avant-garde: *dada*, *surrealism*, *absurdism*, and *lettrism*. But "international" as these movements may have been, they were invariably headquartered in Western Europe, specifically in Switzerland and France. Consequently, literary émigrés like Tristan Tzara, Benjamin Fondane, Ilarie Voronca, Eugène Ionesco, Gherasim Luca, and Isidore Isou soon adopted French as their literary tongue; and, at any rate, French had long been the prestige language of Romanian intellectuals.

The avant-garde movements in question were concerned with the disintegration of cultural, cognitive, and linguistic norms, indeed, with the disintegration of language itself. And who, after all, was more attuned to the pitfalls and shortcomings of language than de-centered, exophonic Romanians – whose encounters with various kinds of political or religious discrimination and oppression had often contributed to their cultural flight. It is no wonder, then, that the avant-garde's conspicuous *Romanianism* was essentially effaced. Such was the fate of Romanian authors who emerged onto the global stage – but what of those who remained uncompromisingly Romanian? Needless to say, the fame accorded the Francophone avant-gardists was of no aid to Romanian writers who stayed home, continued to write in their own tongue and whose aesthetic and intellectual sensibilities were out-of-step with the *dadaists*, *surrealists*, and *absurdists* then making waves across the continent. Nor was their cause furthered by the repressive regime which took hold of Romania after the Second World War. Little else can explain the relative obscurity of the brilliant Romanian poet, philosopher, and dramatist Lucian Blaga (1895–1961).

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It is only in the past couple of decades that Anglophone readers have received collections of Blaga's work executed with sufficient poetic mastery and scholarly attention to give readers a true sense of his achievement. Two bilingual volumes of Blaga's verse were released in 1975 by the Bucharest-based Minerva and Eminescu Publishing House, respectively. The first volume, titled *Poems of Light*, included English translations by Don Eulert, Ştefan Avădanei and Mihail Bogdan (1975a), while the second, titled *The Great Transition*, featured English versions by Roy MacGregor-Hastie (1975b). Both editions contain wide-ranging selections Blaga's verse, reaching beyond the two Romanian volumes after which they were named, *Poemele luminii* (1919) and *În marea trecere* (1924). The translations, however, are somewhat uneven and though the poems in *The Great Transition* give the reader a clear sense of Blaga's poetic development through the years, they are presented without dates, so his development is difficult to map and assess properly. Furthermore, both editions have long been out-of-print and are now exceedingly difficult to acquire.

More recently, in 2002, the appropriately titled Old Stile Press published a hand-crafted limited edition (200 copies) of *Poemele luminii* titled *The Poems of Light*, with striking expressionistic collage drawings by Sara Philpott and translations by Oltea Simescu and Eric Williams. Simescu and Williams's translations are daring and often depart from the originals, as in the case of the opening poem, "Eu nu strivesc corola de minuni a lumii," the first lines of which are rendered, "The aura of this earth must not be extinguished:/ Let me not trample through the mysteries/ I meet on my path" (Blaga 2002: unnumbered pages). This is fine poetry, but it curtails the agency of the speaker. Blaga's original is an expressionistic manifesto of what the poet *expressly* does not do – it is the "I" who does not crush the world's corolla of wonder and does not kill mysteries. The plea "Let me not" is out of character for such a bold, albeit negating, declaration. Another minor problem with the volume is that the brief preface by Simescu lists the publication date for *Poemele luminii* as 1916, although a Romanian text of "Eu nu strivesc" (the only Romanian text in the volume) is dated 1919 on the page facing the preface. The volume is clearly an artistic achievement, but its small print run, prohibitive price, and limited selection of poems in rather creative translations make it a less than ideal introduction to Blaga's work. A slim 1983 bilingual edition of Blaga's poetry released by the University of North Carolina, titled *Poezii/Poems* (Blaga 1983), suffers from some of the same limitations – namely, a small selection of poems and a dearth of available copies.

At the Court of Yearning (1989) presents a broad selection of translations by Andrei Codrescu, a well-known poet in his own right, and the stupendous *Complete Poetical Works of Lucian Blaga, 1895–1961* presents the entire oeuvre rendered by Brenda Walker, with assistance from Stelian Apostolescu. Even a cursory glance at Blaga's work in either of these volumes reveals the immense divide between him and the avant-gardists. For one, unlike the Francophile (and largely Francophone) poets who often began their careers in Romania's capital, Blaga's worldview and aesthetic were shaped by his southern Transylvanian upbringing and informed by the Austro-Hungarian cultural stratum so pronounced in the region. Indeed, it is not by chance that Blaga received his 1922 doctorate in philosophy from the University

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of Vienna and that both his philosophical and poetic work is strongly impacted by Schopenhauerian, Spenglerian and, most of all, Nietzschean ideas – though he extends and modifies these ideas in a most original manner.

In his penetrating and problematizing afterword to Andrei Codrescu's translations, Marcel Cornis-Pop places Blaga in the

> 'constructivist' phase of Romanian modernism. Picking up the scattered pieces of Dadaism, futurism, and Expressionism, and avoiding the excesses of the New French art (surrealism), [his] work participated, however indirectly, in a reconstruction of European art in a post-Dada age (Blaga 1986: 189–190).

That "indirectly" is a telling qualification; Blaga's "reconstruction" was indeed an intensely private and an intensely Romanian endeavor. As Cornis-Pop and Keith Hitchins show, it was an endeavor that led inexorably deeper into the Romanian village, "the locale of the organic, preeminently human mode of existence, the place where the generating sources of the native culture were strongest and purest" (Blaga 2001a: 32). "Sufletul satului" ["The Soul of the Village" (1922)], drawn from Blaga's transitional and, hence, aptly titled *În marea trecere* [rendered by Walker as *On the Great Passage*], bares both the warm spirit and aphoristic precision of his work: "I think eternity was born in the village./ Here every thought is slower,/ and the heart throbs more slowly,/ as if it beats not in your breast/ but deep down somewhere in the earth" (Blaga 2001a: 137).

The reader needs no commentary to witness Blaga's evolution from the explosive, solipsistic Expressionism of *Poemele luminii*, to "the mythic anonymity of the village" (Blaga 1986: 196) fully realized in *La cumpăna apelor* [*On the Great Water Divide* (1933)] and *La curțile dorului* [*At the Courtyard of Yearning* (1938)], from the syncopated *vers libre* of "Vreau să joc!" ["I Want to Dance!" (1919)] to the "mioritic" formality of "Fetița mea își vede țara" ["My Little Daughter Sees Her Country" (1941)] – not to mention the neoclassical rigor of sonnets like "Cânele din Pompei" ["The Hound of Pompeii" (1943)] and meditations-in-verse like "Cimitirul roman" ["The Roman Graveyard" (1959)]. Nevertheless, the essays furnished by Cornis-Pop and Hitchins do much to enrich our appreciation of Blaga's subtle development and to illuminate its philosophical underpinnings. They also serve to confirm the obvious: however much Blaga's poetic praxis changed over the years, his voice, as well as the central concerns and conflicts of his work, remained unshakably consistent.

As Cornis-Pop observes, Blaga "had always been a poet of intensive rather than extensive thematics" (Blaga 1986: 198). Indeed, the poet constantly refigures his handful of central themes (mystery, the unconscious, cultural identity) in new metaphorical terms – be it in the Nietzchean struggle between a Dionysian purity, represented by the pagan deity Pan, and the stifling Apollonian force of Christianity, represented by the dragon-slaying St. George, or in the contrast between the *lunar* light which deepens mystery and the *solar* light which blinds and banishes it. That last conflict is key to Blaga's work, uniting the first volume's signature second poem, "Lumina" ["The Light" (1919)], with one of the poet's darkest final works, "Umbra" ["The Shadow" (1960)]: "The shadow we bear on the way,/ be it from the sun, be it from the moon,/ isn't known as a rune/ written in stone by the lagoon"

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(Blaga 2001a: 527). Blaga's themes may have been constant, but they were never static. The poems are alive because the struggle they dramatize could never be resolved, the contrast never reconciled. Cornis-Pop, following earlier Romanian critics, rightly describes "Blaga's poetry as an unstilled dialectic movement" (Blaga 1986: 200).

Although both translators ought to be commended for their efforts, to my ear, Walker's translations go farther in reproducing the music of Blaga's original verse. Codrescu claims that "[t]he strong Romanian music of the rhymed poems based on folkloric rhythms is almost impossible to render into English. Where possible I have created a hybrid form whose strangeness is meant to flag the appearance of an odd linguistic territory […]," and his version of "Fetița mea își vede țara" demonstrates his approach: "Ana my golden shadow/ Laurel dowser laurel// I gather you from sunsets/ High road low road" (Blaga 1986: 164). Compare this to Walker's mellifluous, off-rhymed version in Blaga's own trochaic tetrameter: "Little leafy bough of laurel/ Ana dear, my golden shadow–// walking near and riding there/ from sunsets I brought you here" (Blaga 2001a: 246). The latter version retains the original's "strangeness," while doing more justice both to its "mioritic" meter *and* to its literal sense: "Frunzuliță ram de laur,/ Ană, umbra mea de aur–// drum pe jos şi drum pe sus/ din apusuri te-am adus". Walker's fidelity to both the original's sense and its music give her volume a palpable advantage over Codrescu's, whose own avant-gardist affinities seem at times to produce an unduly estranged Blaga. Furthermore, whereas Walker renders the entire corpus of Blaga's poetry, Codrescu gives us only "the majority of [his] poetry written before the Communist era," claiming that the late poems' "animating breath is largely missing" (Blaga 1986: xix). I find nothing suffocated or suffocating about Blaga's later work; it is simply too restrained for Codrescu's taste. I stand with Cornis-Pop, who in the same volume states that "Blaga's posthumously published poetry […] is sufficiently diverse in tone and attitude, revealing a troubled face under its placid and resigned surface" (Blaga 1986: 199).

In Codrescu's and Walker's translations, Blaga emerges as a *sui generis* Romanian voice of universal relevance, and a poet of the highest stature. His accomplished body of work puts him in the main current of post-Symbolist poetics, alongside Valéry, Rilke (whom Blaga eulogized and to whom he is often compared) and Pasternak – poets who attained universality not by abandoning, but by embracing and re-conceiving the particularities of their cultural heritage. It is worth noting that Blaga's evolution from an idiosyncratic expressionism to folklorically-inflected classicism mirrors that of the German-educated Pasternak. The fact that, unlike his fellow post-Symbolists, Blaga remains virtually unknown in the Anglophone world, and that most of his philosophical work hasn't been translated, should serve as a call to arms to capable translators and scholars. Walker's *Complete Works* – as well as the publication of Michael S. Jones's book-length study *The Metaphysics of Religion: Lucian Blaga and Contemporary Philosophy* (2006) and Keith Hitchins's translation of *Zalmoxis: Obscure Pagan* (2001) – are encouraging signs of a slowly dawning recognition of Blaga's rich literary and intellectual contribution, which has as much to offer Anglophone readers as that of his better-known contemporaries.

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Abstract

Lucian Blaga's poetry, which places him in the main current of post-Symbolism, is no less significant a body of work than that of Rainer Maria Rilke or Boris Pasternak, yet Blaga remains virtually unknown to Anglophone readers. There are two interlinked reasons behind this prolonged invisibility. First, unlike his better-known countryman, who made their careers in emigration as members of international literary movements, Blaga – despite his wide-ranging philosophical concerns and profound interest in the broader Western poetic tradition – remained steeped in Romanian culture. This, in turn, made his work more challenging for English-speaking translators, as well as less marketable to an audience who had come to associate Romanian authors with the avant-garde. Two volumes of translations published in Bucharest in 1975 did not make a big impact abroad, and are now very scarce. However, since 1989, awareness of Blaga's work has begun to spread, thanks to two volumes of skillful translations that offer Anglophone readers a chance to assess the poet's achievement over the course of his career. Andrei Codrescu's *At the Court of Yearning* (1989) and Brenda Walker's *Complete Poetical Works of Lucian Blaga, 1895–1961* (2001) were both important in bringing Blaga out of the shadows, but Walker's collection is ultimately more representative of the full range of the poet's work – of his evolving themes and formal techniques.

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