

PHILOSOPHY AT THE END OF THE TWENTIETH CENTURY WITH A NOTE ON LUCIAN BLAGA *

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Abstract. As we work through the challenge of moving into a new century at the crossroads of modernity and postmodernity, we find ourselves in the happy circumstance of being rewarded by the discovery/rediscovery of the mid-twentieth century contributions of the Romanian philosopher and poet, Lucian Blaga. Thanks principally to the restorative effort on the part of the editors of the *Romanian Review*, the consummate legacy of this very important Romanian man of letters has been made available to a global readership.¹ It is indeed quite remarkable that already in his 1939 “Philosophical Self-Preservation Essay” Lucian Blaga was able to marshal conceptual and spiritual resources for addressing the philosophical situation of our time. It were as though Blaga anticipated the intersection/confrontation of the modernist and postmodernist cultures at our own *fin-de-siècle*. And it is his notion of “transfigured antinomy” that we find to be of particular pertinence for addressing the issues at hand.

Keywords: modernism, postmodernism, Lucian Blaga, “transfigured antinomy”.

Approaching the end of the twentieth century, the philosophical world finds itself at the intersection of *the* continuing culture of modernity and the reactive forces of postmodernity. This intersection, like all intersections that involve the dynamics of the human spirit, is not that of a smooth convergence. As much a confrontation as an intersection, it is the-site of the conflict that defines the conceptual constructs on the topography of the modern mind and its obsession with epistemological foundationnalism, standing in opposition to the deconstruction of such conceptual constructs and a refiguration of the topography by postmodern critique.

The story of the intersection/confrontation of modernity and postmodernity – a story which is yet much in the process of being told–has a quite colourful cast of characters. From Descartes, Kant, and Hegel to the representatives of the Age of the Enlightenment on the one hand, and from Nietzsche and Heidegger to the garden varieties of the “New French” thought on the other hand, we find the voices of the makers of modernity pitted against the voices of the prophets of postmodernity. Precisely what it is that separates these two voices of our destiny will no doubt be debated for some time to come, as also will the question about

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¹ *Romanian Review*, “Lucian Blaga Centennial”, no. 3-4, 1995.

the instantiation of these voices. Who the filial descendants of these two philosophical approaches and cultural attitudes are is not all that easy to determine. Such is particularly the case when one attempts to identify the membership in the company of the postmodernists, it is surely an ironical state of affairs when some of those who have been singled out as postmodernists have pleaded innocent of the charge – or undeserving of the accolade, depending of course on one's assessment of the phenomenon in question! When Michel Foucault was asked in one of his later interviews to clarify his role in the so-called postmodern movement, he somewhat wryly replied: “What are we calling postmodernity? I'm not up to date”².

If, however, a heavy indebtedness to Heidegger and Nietzsche betrays membership in the postmodernist enclave, then assuredly Foucault qualifies. In his last interview, conducted several weeks before his death, Foucault quite explicitly acknowledged his indebtedness to Heidegger and Nietzsche. “My entire philosophical development was determined by my reading of Heidegger. I nevertheless recognize that Nietzsche outweighed him”³. Assuredly, Nietzsche and Heidegger have had much to do with the shaping of the “postmodern” ethos, and particularly as this ethos has developed on the French scene. Already in his provocative essay, “On Truth and Lies in a Nonmoral Sense”, Nietzsche chartered a pivotal motif in postmodernity in announcing the functioning of a *Verstellung*, a dissimulation, a dismantling, that plays itself out against the backdrop of a *Vorstellung*, a presenting and a re-presenting, that had become a hallmark of the modern mind.⁴ Already in *Being and Time* but more specifically in *The Basic Problems of Phenomenology* Heidegger defines the very task of philosophy as that of carrying through a “destruction” of the history of ontology by way of a “deconstruction” (*Abbau*) of its epistemological and metaphysical conceptual constructs.⁵ That the “dissimulation” of which Nietzsche spoke and the “deconstruction” proposed by Heidegger made their way in Jacques Derrida's philosophical vision is of course well known. Heideggerian *Abbau* is the informing principle of Derridean *deconstruction*.

There is surely much to be learned at the end of the twentieth century from the strategies of deconstruction as practiced by Heidegger and Derrida, as well as from the accompanying celebration of difference (*differance*), diversity, plurality, heterogeneity, and incommensurability by some of their postmodern sympathizers. It

² Michael Foucault, *Politics, Philosophy, Culture: Interviews and Other Writings 1977-1984*, ed. Lawrence D. Kritzman (London; Routledge, Chapman, & Hall, 1988), p. 33.

³ Michael Foucault, “Final interview” in *Raritan: A Quarterly Review* 5, no. 1 (1985): p. 8.

⁴ “On Truth and Lies in a Nonmoral Sense”, in *Philosophy and Truth: Selections from Nietzsche's Notebooks of the Early 1870's*, ed. Daniel Breazeale (Atlantic Highlands: The Humanities Press, 1979), pp. 79-91.

⁵ Martin Heidegger, *The Basic Problems of Phenomenology*, trans. Albert Hofstadter (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1975), pp. 22-23.

is precisely the overly inflated claims for identity, unity, totality, and commensurability by the modern mind that are contested before the deconstructionist tribunal. Yet, as we stand at the threshold of the twenty-first century, situated at the crossroads of the modern and postmodern, we need to explore possible navigable routes between the antinomial paths marked out by the sojourners of modernity. We need to inquire into the possibility of a way of thinking that is able to think beyond the delivered criteriology of identify and the new discoveries of difference, beyond the realms for metaphysically secured unity and epistemologically assured commensurability on the one hand and the valorization of plurality and incommensurability on the other hand.

In short, what the times require is a reassessment of the resource, of rationality for a new way of thinking about ourselves and about the world of differences which paradoxically we all share. It is this new way of thinking, expanding the resources of reason, splitting the differences, passing between the narrow rationalism of modernity and the flirtation with irrationalism by postmodernity, that we have come to call *transversal* thinking, utilizing the resources of a *transversal* logos, oriented toward transversal communication.⁶ We make use of the grammar of transversality to help us articulate the passage between the universal logos of modernity and the anti-logos posture of postmodernity. The transversal logos has the resources to inhabit different planes and surface, different configurations of thought, different social practices, and different cultural paradigms, without requiring an identification with any particular one of them. Transversal thinking is a thinking that enables a converging without coinciding, intersecting without concealing into an identity, unifying without totalization, and harmonizing whilst acknowledging dissonance. As we enter the twenty-first century, transcultural understanding of self and society in the spheres of science, morality, art, and religion, will require the resources of transversal thought and communication for our survival as a global humanity.

As we work through the challenge of moving into a new century at the crossroads of modernity and postmodernity, we find ourselves in the happy circumstance of being rewarded by the discovery/rediscovery of the mid-twentieth century contributions of the Romanian philosopher and poet, Lucian Blaga. Thanks principally to the restorative effort on the part of the editors of the *Romanian Review*, the consummate legacy of this very important Romanian man of letters has been made available to a global readership.⁷ It is indeed quite remarkable that already in his 1939 "Philosophical Self-Preservation Essay" Lucian Blaga was able to marshal conceptual and spiritual resources for addressing the philosophical situation of our time. It were as though Blaga anticipated the intersection/confrontation of the modernist and postmodernist

⁶ See Calvin O. Schrag, *The Resources of Rationality: A Response to the Postmodern Challenge* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1992), and particularly chapter six, "Transversal Rationality", pp. 148-179.

⁷ *Lucian Blaga Centennial*, "Romanian Review", no. 3-4, 1995.

cultures at our own *fin-de-siècle*. And it is his notion of “transfigured antinomy” that we find to be of particular pertinence for addressing the issues at hand.

Blaga developed his notion of transfigured antinomy in responding to the breakthrough discovery in the physics of his days regarding the phenomenon of light. The ondulatory theory of light was pitted against the corpuscular theory. Theoretical physics appeared to be in the throes of an unresolvable contradiction in its effort to explain the structure and dynamics of the phenomenon of light. Having sympathies with the grammar of “complimentarity”, as employed specifically by Niels Bohr and Max Born, Blaga developed a philosophical matrix for an understanding of the clash of theories on the frontiers of scientific discovery. This philosophical matrix centered on his notion of transfigured antinomy, which highlighted the limitations of traditional logic of identity for resolving the recalcitrant contradictions on the theoretical level. Rejecting both the irreconcilability of the conflicting theories and a Hegelian sublation of the two into the impermeable unity of a higher synthesis, Blaga found himself talking of a “transfigured antinomy”. The dynamic of a transfigured antinomy is such that the differences at issue retain their integrity whilst being transfigured in such a manner as to be comprehended through a complementarity of perspectives, articulated via a new logic of opposition. Now it was the genius of Blaga to discern the applicability of the dynamics of transfigured antinomies not only across the specialized areas of the physical sciences, but also with the developing field of micro and macro biology, as well as within the wider cultural existence of the human species.

That which strikes us as being of particular moment in Blaga's understanding and use of the notion of transfigured antinomy is its relevance for addressing the modernity versus postmodernity problematic of our time. As the forces of these two philosophical and cultural perspectives collide, we appear to be confronted with an antinomy of unrelenting opposites. On the one hand we are presented with a logic of identity, with its claims for a unity of knowledge, a totality of explanation, and a universal commensurability; and on the other hand we encounter the partisans of difference, plurality, heterogeneity, incommensurability, and historical particularity. The modernist would have us keep the vision of a universal logos wherewith to secure the stable contents of knowledge; the postmodernist, positioned against the logocentrism of modernity, would have us scatter the universal logos to the wind and make do with the heterogeneity of language games and the relativity of historically-specific beliefs and practices. With our notion of transversal rationality *cum* communication we are in position to split the difference between the universal logos of modernity and the anti-logos of postmodernity, utilizing the resources of an expanded reason that is able to extend across the differences of beliefs and perspectives, converging with them without achieving coincidence at a point of identity. And it is with a measure of philosophical excitement that we have found a family resemblance of our notion of transversal rationality in Lucian Blaga's notion of transfigured antinomy.
