

LUCIAN BLAGA AND RICHARD RORTY. THE HISTORICAL BEING AND THE IRONIST*

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Abstract. The question to pose in this comparative approach of two philosophical concepts that at the first glance have nothing in common is the following: “Is ironism an awakening from the ‘infinite sleep where our being floats’”? And the entire study struggles to sustain a positive answer for this question. I consider that Blaga’s architectural complex is a celebration of ironism *avant-la-lettre*. The parallel between the historical being and the “ironist” has its importance in the very contemporary relevance as in the hope it brings about: life brings about the opportunity to be exposed to different vocabularies, to so interesting vocabularies (read “worlds”, “ideas”) as either Blaga’s or Rorty’s. Both their thought and lives speak volumes about ironism. Approaching the parallel between ironism and the historical being one understands that the tragic nature of the historical being is therefore counter-balanced, in a very complex and tensioned way, by the chances to live authentically as a (liberal) ironist and as an inherently creative being.

Keywords: Blaga, historical being, Rorty, ironism, vocabularies.

1. Ironism avant-la-lettre

1.1. Lucian Blaga – a fugitive biography of a great being

Lucian Blaga (1895-1961), the Romanian philosopher who has had his debut as a poet, has obtained his Ph.D. title in philosophy and biology at Vienna (1916-1920). He continued to be a “complete” writer all his life, at once poet and dramatist and philosopher and journalist¹. Meanwhile he was as well a professor², a researcher³ and a librarian⁴. He gets inscribed into this great intellectual tradition of connecting and reconnecting Romanian culture to the world as a press attaché

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¹ For instance at the newspaper *Voința* where his first theater play *Zamolxe* (Adamachi Prize for debut, granted by the Romanian Academy), was published in 1921, or, for example he has published in the publications *Patria*, *Gândirea*, *Adevărul literar și artistic*, *Cuvântul*.

² At the Faculty of Letters and Philosophy, Cluj University (1946-1948).

³ At the Institute of History and Philosophy, Cluj (1949-1951).

⁴ Actually, he was the librarian-in-chief, at the Library of the Romanian Academy, Cluj section (1951-1954).

and counselor at Warsaw, Prague and Berne (1926-1936), as a state vice-secretary at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (1936-1938), delegate minister of Romania in Portugal (1938-1939). In 1935 Lucian Blaga is given by the Romanian Academy the Great C. Hamangiu Prize “for his dramatic and poetic work”. After Vienna dictate he lives at Sibiu, lectures for the Faculty of Letters and Philosophy of the University of Cluj (1946-1948), researches at the Cluj Institute of History and Philosophy (1949-1951) to become afterwards the chief-librarian, at the Library of the Romanian Academy, Cluj section (1951-1954) and then vice-director at the same institution until 1959, two years before his departure for eternity in his natal village, the place where, in the words of the poet, “eternity itself was born”.

Lucian Blaga has published, as a philosopher, several volumes of articles, essays and studies. The first one was *Culture and Conscience* in 1922 and then many more followed: *The Philosophy of Style* (1924), *The Original Phenomenon* and *The Faces of a Century* (both in 1925), *Colored Windows* and *Daimonion* (both in 1925) *The Dogmatic Aeon* (1931), *The Luciferic Knowledge* (1933), *The Transcendent Censorship* (1934), *Horizon and Style*, and *The Mioritic Space* (both in 1936), *The Eulogy of the Romanian Village*, and *The Genesis of Metaphor and the Sense of Culture* (1937), *Art and Value* (1939), *Divine Differentials* (1940), *About the Magic Thinking* (1941), *Religion and Spirit*, and *Science and Creation* (both in 1942), *On the Philosophical Conscience* (1947) *Anthropological Aspects* (1948), *Romanian Thought in Transylvania in the 18th Century* (1966), *Horizons and Stages* (1968), *The Experiment and the Mathematical Spirit* (1969), *Sources* (1972), *The Historical Being* (1977), the last five volumes being published post-mortem.

1.2. Lucian Blaga’s philosophy – the “historical being”

The concept of “historical being” that Lucian Blaga has developed is an important part of a larger philosophical architecture. Lucian Blaga himself presents his system, about the totality of existence, in *The Sketch of a Philosophical Self-Representation* (1934)⁵. The main part of this architecture is composed of three trilogies. The first one is *The Trilogy of Knowledge*, consisting in *The Dogmatic Aeon*, *The Luciferic Knowledge* and *The Transcendent Censorship*. The second one is *The Trilogy of Culture* formed by *Horizon and Style*, *The Mioritic Space* and *The Genesis of Metaphor and the Sense of Culture*. The third part is *The Trilogy of Values* concerning matters of art and value, matters of the philosophy of biology and matters of pure metaphysics.

As a philosopher Blaga wanted to build a system of a symphonic character, like a “church with many cupolas”⁶. Blaga’s philosophical construction,

⁵ L. Blaga, *Schița unei autoreprezentări*, Cartea Românească, București, 1934.

⁶ L. Blaga, *Schița unei autoreprezentări*, în A. Botez, *Dimensiunea metafizică a operei lui Lucian Blaga*, Editura Științifică, București, 1996, p.29.

metaphysical in nature, is not erected on the basis of one sole idea, but it relies on several, completing and consonant ideas. Each idea grows on the meanings startled by the others and triggers new horizons of meaning and understanding. Culture, history and historicism, time and temporality, being and becoming of being are only a few of the pillars of his architectural philosophy. The human being is a historical being but not merely a historical being. When we tackle historicism at Blaga we are in fact construing a being in a process of becoming, overcoming past mysteries and preparing for the future ones.

Historical Being (Ființa istorică) is the final work of Lucian Blaga, published in 1977, post-mortem. There the author's intention was to prepare the philosophical architecture for a "historical knowledge", and eventually, for the "metaphysics of history". In the final chapter of this work, Blaga pays attention to the metaphysical aspects of a philosophy of history. He says that the historicism of the human being is "conditioned" metaphysically, in the sense that the history of each human has the core of a justification and a foundation of the permanent creative state of the human being. While he was still working at *The Trilogy of Values*, in 1938, he gave a speech entitled "About historical plenitude", where he capitalizes on the Kantian tradition in the philosophy of culture, and as well on the "philosophy of symbolic forms" of E. Cassirer. In the later, Blaga finds a parallel to his "'metaphorizing' being" in Cassirer's⁷ expression "symbolic being" for the human being. History is therefore interesting mainly in the ontological leaps and in the ontological mutation that occasions and captures in any act of symbolic creation. From this perspective, the history is the history of the creator of human creativity, which is also the very human nature. The mechanisms and processes of human action are at the same time mechanisms and processes of human creativity. It seems that while he was preoccupied by the aspects of style, while he was transforming his interest for the "stylistic matrix" into attention towards a more complex and flexible notion of "stylistic field", he was also developing a general field of becoming interesting for its stylistic dimensions as for its diachronically developments. Blaga keeps the pace with the cultural philosophy of his times (present at Goethe, Nietzsche, Simmel, Riegl, Worringer, Frobenius, Spengler, Keyserling...). In complementing the stylistic dimension with the historical dimension of human creativity, Blaga wants to surprise and consider creativity in its becoming and to surprise therefore the "medium" for an actualization of the very humanity of the human being.

⁷ As E. Cassirer has said: "Man has, as it were, discovered a new method of adapting himself to his environment. Between the receptor system and the effector system, which are to be found in all animal species, we find in man a third link which we may describe as the *symbolic system*. This new acquisition transforms the whole of human life. As compared with the other animals man lives not merely in a broader reality; he lives, so to speak, in a new *dimension* of reality." (*An Essay on Man*, 1944)

To analyze the historicity of the human being is at Blaga to understand the dual inner structure of human being: an existence in the horizon of the given world in the view of conserving his or her being (a “paradisiac” ontological mode) and an existence in the horizon of mystery that is to be revealed (a “luciferic” ontological mode). The later retains the core of historical existence of the human being. And, at their turn the historical phenomena keep stylistic stigmata that define them. Blaga’s historical being is forbidden access to absolute. But by this very limitation the human being is obtaining both relativity and creativity.

Mystery becomes a determinate and, at the same time, central philosophical category at Blaga. The philosopher understands that mystery has an important role to play into the constitution of the human knowledge. He states: “The “mystery” exists for us as an original, irreducible horizon of our existence. Under the pressure and operations of the process of knowledge, this mystery precipitates itself in a multitude of “varieties”, that, logically, are very much determinable precisely in their quality of mysteries. Here are several of these “varieties”.⁸ As the author explains, there is first of all the mystery as initial horizon of the manner of existence specific to the human being. Then there is the variety of the mystery that is “signaled” to us through our senses, an opened mystery, through the very signs related to our empirical sensitivity. Here is also the variety of the “revealed” mystery, at the constructive level of our knowledge, at the imaginary level and at the level of the abstract visions of our knowledge. Blaga underlines: “This mystery, both imaginary and revealed can be opened again as such and submitted to a new “revelation”. The process is infinite.”⁹

This infinite process is the mark of the infinite creativity of the human being. Philosophical thinking is called to unveil precisely these particular characteristics of the manner of existing through creativity, specific to the humans.

“Philosophical thinking, through its buildings and its debris, through its delusions and disappointments that it does provoke to us all, through the suspicions and presentiments that it communicates to us, through the ever deeper inquiries that occasions and invites, will mean therefore for the human genre an unlimited surplus of lucidity, its different stages being equivalent to as many “awakenings” from the infinite sleep where our being floats.”¹⁰

2. The ironist

2.1. Richard Rorty – brief biography

Richard Rorty was born at the 4th of October 1931 in New York City, he was educated the University of Chicago and at Yale University and he spent his early

⁸ L. Blaga, *Despre conștiința filosofică*, Editura Humnaitas, București, 2003, p.207, my translation.

⁹ *Ibidem*, p. 208, my translation.

¹⁰ *Ibidem*, p. 21, my translation.

career complementing his personal interests and beliefs with the Platonic search for truth. His doctoral dissertation, "The Concept of Potentiality," and his first book, *The Linguistic Turn* (1956) were part of the tradition of analytic philosophy. Discovering the pragmatist John Dewey and the post-analytic philosophers such as W. V. Quine and Wilfrid Sellars he became a pragmatist, generally holding that the worth of an idea should be measured by its usefulness or ability to cope with a given problem, not by its correspondence to some antecedent 'Truth.' And Rorty takes this definition to its most extreme point.

In his major opus, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* (1979), Rorty uses Sellars, Kuhn and Wittgenstein arguing that epistemology, the study of knowledge, is in fact the product of the mistaken view that the mind is a glassy essence, of which the main function is to faithfully reproduce external reality. He attacks 'universal' philosophical investigations, such as the Mind/Body Problem, by historicizing them and exposing their contingency. Rorty argues for hermeneutics, the explaining of texts by other texts, rather than the search for an ultimate interpretation that would be validated by a higher force.

Rorty is as famous for his other main work, *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*, published in 1989. In it, Rorty abandons the analytic attempt and creates an alternative conceptual schema based on the belief that there is no 'truth' higher than the human being's ability to recreate herself, a view that has been adapted from Nietzsche. This book also marks his first attempt to consciously articulate a political vision consonant with his philosophy, the vision of a diverse community bound together by opposition to suffering, and not by abstract ideas such as 'justice,' 'common humanity,' etc.

Rorty is one of the most widely-read and controversial contemporary philosophers. Over the past fifteen years Rorty has published voluminously, including three volumes of philosophical papers, *Achieving Our Country*, a political manifesto partly based on readings of Dewey and Walt Whitman, and *Philosophy and Social Hope*, a collection of essays for a general audience.

Having held teaching positions at Wellesley College, Princeton University and the University of Virginia, Rorty is currently a professor of comparative literature at Stanford University.

3. Rorty's "ironist"

Rorty's ironism is a post-analytical notion created around a certain profile of an individual, an ironist. After Rorty's definition an "ironist" is "someone who fulfills three conditions: (1) She has radical and continuing doubts about the final vocabulary she currently uses, because she has been impressed by other vocabularies, vocabularies taken as final by people or books she has encountered; (2) she realizes that argument phrased in her present vocabulary can neither

underwrite or dissolve these doubts; (3) insofar as she philosophizes about her situation, she does not think that her vocabulary is closer to reality than others, that is in touch with a power not herself. Ironists who are inclined to philosophize see choice between vocabularies made neither within a neutral and universal metavocabulary nor by an attempt to fight one's way past appearances to the real, but simply by playing the new off against the old."¹¹ So ironist enjoys creatively other vocabularies as a continuous inspiration to their own vocabulary, continuously "under construction". An ironist is still a philosopher either by training or by orientation, but not an analytic philosopher and, more precisely, not a "metaphysician", that is, not someone who considers that "any term in his vocabulary has as correspondent something of a *real* essence." Both intellectual types have in common the desire to know, but this has different manifestations and outcomes, in the case of the ironist and in that of the metaphysician. For the ironist the desire to know is not oriented to a unique and final vocabulary in the detriment of the others.

4. *Richard Rorty in the light of Lucian Blaga's ideas*

As Angela Botez has pointed out, Blaga's modernity stays in interdisciplinarity and in the method of "transfigured antinomy"¹², that is the dual manner of thinking, characteristic for the entire 20th century. This way Blaga's postmodernity relays on integrative concepts such as the mystery or the two types of knowledge ('paradisiacal' and 'luciferic').¹³

Blaga's metaphysics opens an avenue towards ironism.

As a relative and creative historical being, the human always hopes to reach the absolute, in other terms to become substituted to the Great Anonymous and always fails. In rortian terms, the human being is always threatened by the illusion to possibly get to a final vocabulary clear, true and definitive for all, but hopefully, as an ironist, fails to give way to this illusion.

¹¹ Rorty, R., *Private Irony and Liberal Hope*, în Walter Brogan, James Risser (eds.), *American Continental Philosophy. A Reader*, Bloomington and Indianapolis, Indiana University Press, 2000, p. 46.

¹² For instance, it is in the spirit of this method of "transfigured antinomy" to conceive the light as both wave and corpuscle. Or, one can bring forth an even more metaphoric example, also in the spirit of the metaphorical being of Blaga, quoting the idea within his lines: "there is only on the lakes with muddy bottom the waterlilies grow". Or, as another example, capturing another aspect of the concept of antinomy, one can even think of a relatively known line from a song of Leonard Cohen: "There is a crack, a crack, in everything, there is how the light gets in..."

¹³ For a more detailed account of integrative concepts in Blaga's philosophy see Botez, A., *Concepte integrative în Trilogia cunoașterii*, "Revista de filosofie", nr. 5-6/2001, Botez, A., *Un secol de filosofie românească*, Editura Academiei Române, București, 2005, pp. 137-142 and Botez, A., *On Complementarity and Antinomy*, *Revue roumaine des sciences sociales*, nr. 4/1986.

We came to observe that Rorty underlines in fact the static aspect of the metaphysics its “conservatism”, its need for secure roots in a never changing reality. At Blaga there is a dynamic element in his metaphysics. In order to explain this aspect we have to return to the two types of ontology in Blaga’s philosophy. These types are strongly interwoven. First, there is an existence in the horizon of the given world in the view of conserving his or her being (a “paradisiacal” ontological mode) and an existence in the horizon of mystery that is to be revealed (a “luciferical” ontological mode). The later retains the core of historical existence of the human being and at the same time it explains the dynamics of a more ironist-like thirst for knowledge.¹⁴

Blaga was an ironist. He loved being exposed to different vocabularies, as a poet and play writer and journalist and as a fervent reader, as a librarian.

It seems that Rorty said at a recent conference, or at least the last issue of the American literary journal «Of course», quotes him with the following notice: “Our culture has not only been carried upward by a bubbling fountain of puns and metaphors; it has been increasingly conscious of itself as resting on nothing more solid than such a geyser.”

And Blaga is the philosopher of metaphors. For him, the human being is a metaphor creating being. Knowledge comes through metaphors as through rationalizing, demonstrating, or pragmatically perceiving and analyzing the facts. The philosopher noticed at some point that even a corner stone thinker as Heidegger could be read, as lacking meaning from a positivist or neo-positivist standpoint, and that generally, not much would stand up from such a perspective.

Only by our inherent creativity, we can hope to leap from the ‘enstatic’ to the ‘ecstatic’ intellect, the one able to acquire knowledge beyond logic. Only from going beyond what Blaga names the ‘fanic’, or the more or less raw material of observation, within the ‘cryptic’, or, to make more sense in English, within the encoded, intricated core of an open mystery. Our “minus knowledge” the one that goes rather beyond than against general logic is the hope to leap into another dimension, where other people experiences to us, where we encounter other vocabularies, where the humanity of other people suffering and humiliation becomes intelligible even in different vocabularies than our own.

We are as well interpreting in this paper that the exposure to different vocabularies is like an exposure to mystery. But it is never easy; to understand

¹⁴ An ironist-like thirst for knowledge is as well cultivated as quenched, for instance, in the contemporary reading-groups experiences. A reading-group organized in 1996 by professor William Stearns and professor John Elly, both visiting professors in a Civic Education Programme of the Foundation for Open Society, with the participation of the authors of this communication (Șerban and Gilder), brought together into Romanian attention two different universes of interest for Romanian and universally for the human kind contemporary humanities – Slavoj Žižek and Anthony Giddens.

different vocabularies is to open yourself, oneself, to alterity and to the contextualism and historicism of somebody else. Always something remains postponed, to be understood later and always something awakens in us as we encounter through (or behind?) vocabularies the complex ethical and almost religious experience of suffering and humiliation. As Wordsworth said, in a fragment we have recently discovered reading J. Sallis' meditation on the subject of wonder and metaphysics: "As if awakened, summoned, roused, constrained, / I looked for universal things; perused / The common countenance of earth and sky". (*The Prelude*, 3:105-107)¹⁵

In the light of Blaga's ideas, Rorty is, paradoxically, a particular metaphysician, because he is creating a world, a world where the ironist is not king, but some sort of model. The relativism that Blaga explains as characteristic for the human being, a tragic historical being attempting to go beyond relativism, on another plan is as well characteristic for philosophy: a plurality of metaphysics as "forms of literary creation, fiction and myth", after a formula proposed by A. Botez. Of course, Rorty may have problems with this idea. The question to pose in this comparative approach of two philosophical concepts that at the first glance have nothing in common is the following: "Is ironism an awakening from *the infinite sleep where our being floats*"? And the entire study is an attempt to sustain a positive answer for this question. We can awake from this infinite sleep reading.¹⁶

Blaga's architectural complex is a celebration of ironism *avant-la-lettre*. The international symposium in memoriam Blaga represented in fact as well another celebration of human becoming via mystery, as an exposure to different vocabularies, emerging outside the sleep of a comfortable universalism. For as Ortega y Gasset later on, Blaga understood that no metaphysics can be perfect as to be the end of philosophy and that perfection is always postponed, belonging to the absolute. All metaphysics are under the rule of times; hence all form a philosophical string of pearls of both wisdom and errors. Imposing even more modesty on the perspective, Rorty reminds philosophers that, bottom-line, they contribute to philosophy mere vocabularies.

The parallel between the historical being and the ironist has its importance in the very contemporary relevance as in the hope it brings about: life brings about the opportunity to be exposed to different vocabularies, to so interesting

¹⁵ Apud J. Sallis, *Imagination, Metaphysics, Wonder*, in Walter Brogan, James Risser (eds.), *American Continental Philosophy. A Reader*, Bloomington and Indianapolis, Indiana University Press, 2000, pp. 15-41.

¹⁶ And, at once, we get better prepared to interact in a solidary manner with the others, since more attentive and more accustomed with their universe of life through their specific vocabularies. Then, a valuable lesson from Rorty – in the light of Blaga's ideas, though – there is that we all need to expose ourselves to different vocabularies in order to understand both the linguistic aspects of otherness and the nonlinguistic aspects of otherness, that glow beyond the linguistics...

vocabularies (read “worlds”, “ideas”) as either Blaga’s or Rorty’s. Both their thought and lives speak volumes about ironism.

Ironism similarly to the challenge of mystery are both works of Sisyphus, in the sense they are never ending, and they represent both the hard work that the human being owes to his or her self. People have to go beyond, challenging mysteries around them and the universes of otherness around them, endlessly. Because, as the poet warns in his *Inscription*: “ The roads we do not walk on,/ roads at rest within us,/ they also take us, numberless, somewhere/ The words we do not utter,/ words at rest within us,/ they also discover, immeasurable, the being (...)”.

Approaching the parallel between ironism and the historical being, one understands that the tragic nature of the historical being is therefore counter-balanced, in a very complex and tensioned way, by the chances to live authentically as a (liberal) ironist and as an inherently creative being.

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