



The Morphology of Culture in Romania. Lucian Blaga (1895-1965) – The Passage from Axiology to the Ontology of Culture

HORIA PATRASCU
Senior Lecturer, “Spiru Haret” University
Brasov, Romania

Abstract:

In the inter-war Romania the philosophy of culture rejoices over a high prestige. The questions regarding the birth and becoming of culture, as well as those regarding the role of culture and the possible classifications of cultures, occupy a large space in the Romanian philosophers' writings. We are in the epoch in which the psychology of peoples is an actual issue, while anthropology, together with the history of religions, exploits unknown and exotic cultural areas.

Key words: Lucian Blaga, inter-war Romanian generation, small culture, temporal horizon, the Trilogy of Culture

Introduction

In the period of time between the two world wars, the archaic-traditional societies are subjected to a hermeneutic reading whose key is their placement inside or outside the sphere of culture. It is an epoch in which Europe defines itself through exclusions rather than inclusions, through differences rather than resemblances. Alterity watches at each and every step: a single different nuance makes a thing, an individual or a nation becomes not only another thing, individual or nation, but it transforms it in the other thing, the other individual, or the other nation. An insignificant fissure is deepened to become an entire rift. People seem to feel more confident the lonelier they become. Before physical bridges to be bombarded during World

War II, the communicating bridges are effectively cut. The obsession *we* versus *they* spans from East to West, from North to South. *Big cultures* versus *small cultures*, *peoples of culture* and *peoples of nature*, the *primitives* and the *civilised*, *religions* and *religious believes*, *young* versus *old* peoples and so on. A true thrill of marking borders overwhelms the whole world. Imperialism is at home. Each and every part claims the whole by excluding any other part. It is beyond any doubt that in the entire world Europe has this privilege of the part that is a whole. Eurocentrism is almost an axiom of that time. There was still one aspect to clarify. What is Europe? France, United Kingdom, Germany or Russia? World War II breaks against the background of this confusion.

Within such a context, the philosophy of culture in Romania started to develop. The question that puzzles is who we are. The Romanian nation is a young one, while its culture cannot rival with the important cultures on the world scene. Will it have to acknowledge itself as a minor culture and be satisfied with this status? Will it have to acknowledge itself as a satellite culture that gravitates around a planet? And if yes, what planet is that? Is it the planet of the German or of the French culture?

It is to these questions that Lucian Blaga tries to answer in a series of works called *The Trilogy of Culture (Horizon and Style, The Mioritic Space, and The Genesis of Metaphor and the Meaning of Culture)*. Overtaking much from the morphology of culture, Blaga reinterprets however the meaning of the concepts of minor versus major culture, a reinterpretation that allows him their revaluing. For Blaga, *the minor* and *the major* cultures do not refer either to the value of the works produced by the two types of culture, or to their grandeur. A major culture may include both valueless and valuable works, both grand and quantitatively reduced works. The same applies to a minor culture. Then what does this difference refer to? By appealing to the so-called abyssal psychology and to the knowledge of the philosophy of culture, Blaga separates these two cultures according to the criterion of “age.” Contrary to Spengler’s ideas based on which culture was perceived as in an organic evolution – following the stages and the ages of a living body (birth, youth, maturity, agedness/decline), each culture

experiencing, as a fatality, these successive stages – Blaga perceives the “ages” as traits of creators. The creators of a minor culture find themselves during an age of childhood, while the creators of a major culture – in an adoptive age of maturity.

A first conclusion that Blaga reaches is that the dichotomy *minor* versus *major* culture no longer bears a positive or negative value connotation. A major culture does not necessarily produce valuable cultural products, as a minor culture does not necessarily bring forth insignificant cultural productions. The maturity of a major culture and the youth of a minor one express themselves a certain mental typology of the individuals who create them. In the former case, they will live in time, in history, they will cultivate urban areas, they will try to define themselves by means of conquering, a thirst of new spaces, while they will divide the world between there and here, they will chart clear and precise distinctions. In the latter, the individuals will live out of time, will cultivate rural areas, they will not manifest imperialistic drives, while their world will not experience the break between the transcendent and the immanent. On the contrary, those situated within the horizon of childhood will experience a “sophianic” positioning (from Saint Sophia Church in Istanbul, considered the symbol of Eastern sensitivity and mentality) in which the two dimensions intertwine easily, in which the transcendent pours into the sensible world, filling it with meaning and signification. The immediate / immanent is a receptacle of the transcendent, the “here” is an open gate for the “there.” That is the reason why, the one situated in a minor culture will not know anything of the “creative” uneasiness of the major culture. He does not attempt to spear the sky with the sharp heads of the gothic cathedrals; he waits for the spirit of the transcendent to blow onto him as well. His churches are not spears thrown to the sky, but bowls placed under the sky, waiting to be filled by it.

The conception of culture of the great Romanian philosopher has a special place in the context of the philosophy of culture during his period. Against the general trend of the epoch, he finds similarities where there usually are discrepancies; he finds liaisons where the general tendency manifests to identifying only breaks. Such a perspective cannot be separated from an axiological overturn. Blaga no longer

divides societies between cultural and non-cultural cultures, while cultures are not differentiated as more or less valuable ones. Lucian Blaga moves the discussion from an axiological field to an ontological one, culture being perceived as inseparable from the human being. The purpose and mission of the individual is that of a culture producer; therefore, any individual, since he is an individual, is a cultural entity as well. Such a perspective is, for Blaga's time, extremely progressive, while its consequences can be profitable nowadays as well. Unfortunately, Lucian Blaga has not added that a philosopher – despite being a valuable one – once belonging to a minor culture, cannot make himself heard worldwide.

Who is Lucian Blaga?

Lucian Blaga was born in 1895 in Lancreăm (Sebeș) in a period in which Transylvania belonged to the Austro-Hungarian Empire. This is the reason for which, as his younger compatriot Emil Cioran who was also born in Transylvania (Sibiu), he benefited a German based education. Moreover, he obtained his doctorate in philosophy at the University of Vienna in 1920, with a thesis entitled *Kultur und Erkenntnis (Culture and knowledge)*.

In an article entitled “The Internal Style of Lucian Blaga”, Cioran (then 20 years old) defined him as being characterized by a “serenity in twilight”. A simple coincidence or not, the two publish in the same year – 1936 – books that deal with Romania's “fate”. Lucian Blaga launches his second book from the so-called *Trilogy of culture*, *The Mioritic Space*, while Emil Cioran publishes *The Transfiguration of Romania*. Although they approach the themes very differently, both books inscribe in the same field of the philosophy of culture, approaching specific issues, with a common terminology and theoretical background. Even if he is 16 years younger than Lucian Blaga, Emil Cioran belongs to the same Transylvanian space in which the German influence is still powerful. Like Blaga, Cioran is an assiduous reader of Spengler, Simmel, Frobenius and other philosophers of culture.

The obsession shared by both authors is that of the place in which the Romanian culture situates itself starting from the

current distinctions in the philosophy of culture. One must say that the distinctions and polarities settled by Spengler and Frobenius find no place for a culture like the Romanian one. The Romanian culture could not find its place either among the Western cultures, or among the Eastern cultures. A whole area was in fact left aside by the philosophy of culture, if we think that the only reference to the Eastern space of Europe was to Russia.

The Romanians could not find themselves either in Frobenius' dichotomy – the European and the Asian spaces, or in Spengler's trichotomy: the Ancient, the Arab and the Western cultures. Extended, Spengler's classification comprises six cultures, but, again, the Romanian culture cannot find itself in any of them: the Ancient culture – the isolated body, the Arab culture – the cave, the Chinese culture – the way in nature, the Western culture – the three-dimensional infinite, the Egyptian culture – the way of the labyrinth, the Russian culture – the unlimited space.

Another hard to accept dichotomy is “major” versus “minor culture” or “monumental” versus “ethnographic” cultures. Romania became after the Great Union in 1918 a big country, spatially extended, which could solicit being recognized among the great nations. The effort of modernization and rising to the height of its present status is a general one, and the undertakings of Lucian Blaga and Emil Cioran can be inscribed here.

In conclusion, those who reflect on Romania's situation in those times find themselves in the position of the ‘third’, the foreigner, the between worlds dweller. The in-between condition of Romania unrests and provokes intense debates. Categories are already settled, but Romania seems not to find a place anywhere. The new situation brings to apogee a whole history whose starting point could be situated in the moment of the Small Union of the Romanian Principalities. (1859) Since then, Romania has tried to define itself either by its adaptation (the so-called modernization) to what Europe already represented, or by an assertion of the national spirit, of the traditions, history and its own individuality. The dispute between traditionalists and modernists, between conservatives and liberals, represented a common debate of the times.

Therefore, simultaneous with the Great Union and the fulfilment of the forming process of the Great Romania, its cultural redefinition reached its climax.

The Inter-war Generation

In the period between the end of World War I and the beginning of World War II, a period of extreme cultural productivity and effervescence, there activates in Romania one of the brightest generations of Romanian intellectuals – worldwide known, such as Emil Cioran, Mircea Eliade and Eugen Ionescu. The entire inter-war generation is concerned with defining its place in the world and history, asserting itself in the world, and raising the Romanian culture to the level of the other major cultures. Mircea Eliade will say that it is time for a new type of heroism which, unlike the ancestors that had as a purpose the realization of the Great Union, is a spiritual one, having as objective the finding of the universal in the local. Perhaps the whole phenomenology of religion practiced by Mircea Eliade is not strange from an attempt to reveal, behind the cultural phenomenality, *a priori* religious structures, common to everyone, archetypes that manifest themselves in an indefinite variety of cultural products.

Regarded from this archetypal perspective, cultures deny value hierarchy: the dichotomies ‘major’ versus ‘minor cultures’, ‘inferior’ versus ‘superior’ cultures no longer apply. Human beings react similarly when confronted with the sacred – the profane dialectics; therefore, it is irrelevant whether the feeling of sacredness is triggered by entering a majestic cathedral or a humble wooden church. The Romanian culture will face the historian of religion with an immense richness of cultural creations that hide the common background of the generally human religious behaviour. From this perspective, the Romanian space is as relevant and important as the space of the Western culture, if not even more relevant.

Eugen Ionescu, the creator of the theatre of the absurd, will criticize the Romanian culture from the perspective of authenticity, while he was still a writer in Romania, before affirming himself as a famous playwright in France. Romanians are a minor culture because they are not authentic. They create

literature instead of living, use metaphors instead of suffering, while ideas are borrowed, therefore decorative. In order to grow in importance, which is almost impossibility, we firstly have to learn how to become authentic. Until then, we can be intelligent, talented, and even genial. As the wind of authenticity used to blow from Paris during that time, the conclusion can be but one: in order to be authentic you have to be French. In addition, this is what Eugen Ionescu became.

Emil Cioran recognizes the fact that Romania is a minor culture. There is a possibility of salvation, but this is not related either to the liberal solution – of modernization, of adaptation to the European exigencies, or to the conservative solution – that of keeping up to the ‘national’ specific. The solution proposed by Cioran is related to a so-called transfiguration, a process by which something becomes a very different thing. The idea was announced in the author’s first two books, but now this gets ‘political’ applicability. Shortly, what defines a major culture is the *tragic sensibility*, while what defines a minor culture is the lack of it. The method of reaching transfiguration is agony. By bringing an individual or a whole people in agony you oblige him/it to come to life in a different shape, you force him/it to get a new life. As agony is impossible without a tragic sensibility, this very sensibility must be stimulated. The tragic suffering will make the Romanian people escape the space of the minor cultures, even if it will never enter the realm of the major ones. The origin of the anti-democratic, totalitarian, and militaristic ideas in Cioran’s book could be identified here.

Minor versus major culture? Lucian Blaga’s solution: the theory of the autonomous ages

Although influenced extensively by the morphology of culture, he does not accept its presuppositions as self-understood. One of these rejected premises is that according to which culture is a beyond the individual body, having its own ages – childhood, youth, maturity and the old age. Culture, according to Lucian Blaga, is not a beyond the individual entity, but a product of the individual’s activity, therefore reflecting

his/her creative activity and unconscious psychological structures.

Despite this, one cannot deny the existence of the so-called minor and major cultures. Only that they will no longer reflect the ages of culture (understood as a beyond-the-individual body), but they will reflect the so-called ‘adoptive’ age of the creators within that culture. The age Blaga refers to has nothing to do with its chronological meaning, as a simple stage in man’s development. It is obvious that there is this meaning as well, only that Blaga brings into discussion a meaning less evident, but which serves his demonstration perfectly. This second meaning refers to ages – that of childhood and that of maturity – as being independent psychological structures, without connection to the individuals’ real age. There can be children with the adoptive age of maturity (e.g. Jeanne d’Arc, Mozart, Rimbaud), as there are adults experiencing the adoptive age of childhood. Childhood, as maturity, opens specific existential horizons, a clearly delimited universe having its laws within which the individuals can give birth to highly valuable cultural creations. The value of the creations has no relation with the psychological ages of their creators. The creators from the minor cultures share, despite their real age, the age of childhood, while the creators from the major cultures – the adoptive age of maturity. If we accept this idea, then we can explain why some cultures can be found in a permanent state of childhood, never getting out of it, even looking very plausible. The mental age of childhood is as functional and viable as the age of maturity. More than that, the minor cultures that reflect it can live more than the major cultures – the correspondents of the age of maturity.

This hypostatization of ages is one of the greatest contributions by Lucian Blaga in the field of the philosophy of culture. We can consider childhood and maturity as “archetypes” or unconscious “complexes” that come to put their specific marks on the whole activity of the individual. No longer being a step to maturity, the age of childhood has the same value as the age of maturity. Only a prejudice – which comes probably from the privileged place major cultures had in history – makes us believe that maturity is the final purpose, while

childhood is the way, that maturity is the peak of the mountain, while the other ages just the slope.

Childhood vs. Maturity and Minor Culture vs. Major Culture

Childhood	Maturity
Acute sense for undifferentiated totalities	Sense of differentiation for specialized fields
A child feels himself as a little deity and acts accordingly	The mature man is aware of his limits and fits / adapts to nature and society as in some hierarchical systems
A child is imaginative	The mature man is volitional
Childhood is passively open to the destiny	Maturity asserts itself as part of its destiny
Childhood is spontaneous	Maturity is organized
Childhood is cosmocentrically naive	Maturity is expansively dictatorial
Metaphysical sensibility	Rational
No sense of perenity	The feeling of perspectives and of duration

Minor Culture	Major Culture
The adoptive age of people from villages is childhood; therefore, the village is typical for a minor culture.	The adoptive age of the city people is maturity, so that the city is characteristic for a major culture.
The village dweller finds himself intimate with everything. The village is situated in the centre of the world; beyond the horizon of the village, nothing can be perceived.	The city man lives fragmentarily, in the relative, in the mechanic concrete. The spatial and temporal horizons spill out of the visible.
The individual represents an	The creative individual is a

undifferentiated and autarchic universality.	“specialized body” of a collectivity.
The individual makes no plan that he cannot fulfil by himself.	Directed creation, in which the individual is part of a plan whose fulfilment is possible only due to some generations.
The vision on time does not go beyond the duration of an individual life.	Time is a vast projection
It is anistoric.	Spatial and temporal expansion – history.
Minor culture keeps the individual closer to nature.	The major culture distances him from nature.

From the spatial feeling to the subconscious spatial and temporal horizons

A new aspect introduced by Lucian Blaga in the morphology of culture is the replacement of the spatial feeling with the subconscious spatial horizon. If for Frobenius and Spengler what determined the specific of a culture was the predominant feeling experienced in relation with a certain type of landscape, for Blaga this feeling – conscious – is less important than a so-called unconscious spatial horizon. This no longer has a direct relation with the landscape, though it may happen that the spatial horizon and the landscape coincide.

This explains why the same landscape could contain more cultures and, equally, it explains why one culture can maintain its specificity in a variety of landscapes. The culture creators carry with them this unconscious spatial horizon wherever they go. Their style will always bear the trace of this *a priori* unconscious space. This unconscious spatial horizon may be the easiest identified in the musical works. In a work by Bach, for example, we can notice the presence of the three-dimensional infinite, in a Russian song – the presence of the infinite dimension, of the horizontal infinite, while in a Romanian “doina” – the presence of waved infinite, the alternative hill – valley.

Another subconscious horizon that determines the cultural works stylistically is the temporal one. The temporal horizons are born depending on the focus that the subconscious places on one or the other of the temporal stances: present, past, or future. Therefore, there will be three temporal horizons: time as artesian well, time as waterfall, time as a river.

TIME AS ARTESIAN WELL: The focus is on the future, while the present and the past do not exist but in the virtue of an event, or of a proximate coming; the meaning of time is the future. Such a temporal horizon is proper to the Hebrew people who have always lived thinking of the future, from which they expected redemption; the same temporal horizon characterizes the Western European culture.

TIME AS WATER FALL: The focus is on the past. Time finds itself in a permanent consumption of an initial energy. The man experiencing such a temporal horizon feels the nostalgia of the beginnings. This kind of time is typical for the Hellenistic culture, but also to mythologies in general, the myth of the paradise included.

TIME AS A RIVER: The focus falls on the dimension of the present, moments are equal, while the flow of time is hardly perceived; there is a value and being equality among all temporal stances, all leveled to a permanent “now”. The Hindu culture can be perceived as representative for such a temporal horizon; also is the static conceptions on the world, life, and existence fit into this pattern.

The three temporal horizons can combine or overlap, there resulting hybrid temporal horizons, such as the cyclic time or the spiral-time. The cyclic time characterizes various cosmogonies, in the ancient Indians and the ancient Greeks.

Other determinant stylistic factors for a culture

Besides the spatial and temporal horizon, Blaga also distinguishes three more factors that determine the style of a culture; all these together shape the style of a culture, forming its stylistic matrix. These are the following: the axiological focus, the attitude to life [anabasic / catabasic / neutral], the

formative tendency [the individual, the typical, and the elementary].

The Axiological Focus: the subconscious has certain attitudes and preferences. For example, even if the ancient Indians had the same spatial horizon as the Europeans – the three-dimensional infinite, they did not share the same approach of the infinite. The Europeans have a strong preference for the large infinite, while the Indians for the narrow one. The European artist enlarges the initial framework by introducing it in an infinite perspective. In India, the artist deepens the framework, in an infinite horizon, within the framework.

The attitude to life: there are three attitudes to life: the “anabasic” attitude is the affirmative attitude in front of the infinite space – the moving ahead, the conquest and the taking into possession typical to the European. The “catabasic” attitude signifies the withdrawal from the infinite space, an attitude felt in the morality, metaphysics, art, and even the politics of the ancient Indians. The intermediate attitude is typical for the Ethiopian culture – the Ethiopian seems a prolongation of nature and therefore he will never attempt either advancing or withdrawal; he will be in a dreaming growth.

The formative tendency – a collocation to be found in biology, *nisus formativus*, the tendency to take a shape. It refers to choosing a form for which the spirit decides. The formative tendency manifests itself in three ways: the individualizing mode – illustrated in the German culture, with the focus on the individual and the particular (e.g. Leibniz and his monads), the typifying mode – illustrated in the Greek culture by Sophocles, Praxitel, Plato, but also in Renaissance and in all classical epochs, the elementary tendency is typical for the Byzantine painting, the Indian and Chinese art. Such a formative elementary tendency reduces everything to the essential in the sense of the element and the elementary: the Spiritual and the Material, the Animalistic and the Vegetative and so on.

Another thing very representative for Lucian Blaga’s philosophy of culture is that this five stylistic factors (the spatial horizon, the temporal horizon, axiological focus, the

attitude to life [anabasic or catabasic], the formative tendency [individual, typical, elementary mode of representation] are independent variables and they can freely combine each other. The combination resulted is named stylistic matrix which give the specificity for a culture.

In this way, Blaga succeeds to leave the reductionism, which characterise Spengler, and Frobenius approaches who did not conceive more than two-three main cultures. Lucian Blaga opens the realm of an infinite variety of cultural forms, of their styles in which Romanian culture will be able to find its place, its specificity, and its genius.

The mioritic space (the Romanians unconscious stylistic horizon) can be approached from the perspective of the five stylistic factors. Thereby, spatial horizon is defined by the waved infinite, while temporal horizon is defined by time as river. Axiological focus is a positive valorisation of the infinite¹, while the attitude to life is ‘anabasic’². The formative tendency is elementary as long as the most representative religious representations are icons on glass that are schematic in a sense of reducing figures at embodiments of forces, of holiness or diabolic.

Why culture? The metaphysical significance of culture

The purpose of this stylistic category is to assure an infinite variety of creative possibilities. It is not only two or three culture that exhaust man’s creative possibilities, as the morphologists of culture would have liked.

Man is a cultural being, a creative being, creation being the meaning of his existence. Man lives in the *horizon of existence for mysteries and revelations* and not, like the animals,

¹ “The hole is not felt as an inconvenient that is better to be annihilated, but as a medium necessary for an articulation of a rhythm” (Blaga 1994 *Spațiul mioritic*, 153).

² “The man of mioritic space is feeling himself as being in an eternal swing advance in a waved infinite. The man of mioritic space feels his destiny as an eternal, repeated monotonously ascending and descending.” (Blaga 1994 *Orizont și stil*, 1994, 140)

in the *horizon of existence for the immediacy of living and security*.

The stylistic and intellectual categories that allow an infinite number of combinations make man maintain indefinitely his essence of a creative being. Unlike Spengler who used to prepare us, in a pessimist way, for the death of the European culture, the Romanian Lucian Blaga brings a very optimistic note in the rather scarce and gloomy atmosphere of the morphology of culture: man's creative destiny is as eternal as man himself is. Culture is his creation, while creation is his purpose and destiny.

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