

AN INTRODUCTION TO MODERN ROMANIAN PHILOSOPHY

TRANSLATIONS OF EXTRACTS FROM LUCIAN BLAGA, THE DIVINE DIFFERENTIALS
AND EMIL CIORAN, THE TWILIGHT OF THOUGHT

By Stefan Bolea

First of all I must say that my presentation is fragmentary from two points of view. a) Blaga and Cioran are two of the most important Romanian philosophers, but there are other challenging philosophers, like D.D. Roșca (1895–1980), Constantin Noica (1909–1987), Alexandru Dragomir (1916–2002), who would deserve to be mentioned in a historical sketch of Romanian philosophy. b) The translated texts, fragments from Blaga's *Divine Differentials* (1940) and Cioran's *The Twilight of Thought* (1940) are representative for the styles and the manners of thought of the two philosophers, but they could not cover entirely the amplitude of their works. For example, Blaga expressed himself through wonderful poems, which turned him into a canonical poet of the Romanian culture, (a rare case for a philosopher, we might add) and through important plays that express a deeper understanding of the Romanian mythology. It is the same with Cioran, who not only belongs to two cultures (the Romanian and the French), but wrote such divergent books as *On the Heights of Despair* (1934), a vitalist portrait of the disintegrating Ego, and *The Transfiguration of Romania* (1936), a justification of political nihilism. Furthermore, the Norwegian readers should not believe that Romanian philosophy consists mainly of poetry and metaphor; the two translated writers surely could give this impression. The other aforementioned thinkers (especially Noica) are more "hard-core" philosophers, influenced by the German school of phenomenology and treating many Continental themes, while translating into Romanian the Greek original sources.

An important characteristic of the Romanian culture (implicitly philosophy) in the 20th century is that, between the world wars, a sort of Romanian Renaissance took place

(roughly between 1920 and 1940). The so-called generation of 1927 gave Romania some of its best writers, some of them achieving international fame and success (Cioran, Eliade and Ionesco). After the Second World War (1945–1989), with the advent of Communism, Romania suffered a relapse to the Middle Ages, from a cultural point of view. Marxism was the dominant philosophy of the time: It was not a genuine, critical or a revolutionary way of thought as we see in Althusser or Žižek, but an imitation of Marxism, that didn't produce anything valuable. "Capitalist" philosophers like Nietzsche, Kierkegaard, Schopenhauer or Schelling (to give only a few examples) were not translated, and there were cases of people sent to prison for reading them in original.

Another trait of Romanian philosophy, a more general one, evoked by the young Cioran, is that Romanian thought has an Adamic dimension. Let me explain that: We know that history of philosophy is paramount for a philosopher. To become a philosopher, especially an original one, one has to study thoroughly (from Plato to Rorty, so to say): to get used to the concepts, to enhance one's arguments, and so on. Romanian philosophers, like Blaga, Cioran or Noica (and I could present more recent cases, too) always start with themselves. They are Adamic in ignoring the Romanian tradition. This is partly explained by the fact that the 19th century tradition of Romanian philosophy was not at all impressive. Still, a problem appears: in their self-referential and somehow monadic discourses, the main Romanian philosophers ignore each other, avoiding conversation, claiming first hand originality and authority. This being said, I offer you a glimpse of Romanian philosophy from two of its masters that breed controversy even today, Lucian Blaga and

Emil Cioran.

Lucian Blaga and *The Divine Differentials* (1940)

Lucian Blaga (1895–1961) was a Romanian philosopher, poet, playwright, journalist and diplomat. He studied Philosophy and Biology at the University of Vienna between 1916 and 1920, defending his Ph.D. thesis *Kultur und Erkenntnis. Beiträge zur Erkenntnislehre vom kulturhistorischen Standpunkte* in 1921. In 1919 he published his first volume of poetry, *Poems of Light* and his collections of aphorisms, *Stones for My Temple*. In 1922 he began his diplomacy career and then in 1938 he became a university professor of Philosophy of Culture at the University of Cluj. He wrote four “trilogies”, where he exposed his original philosophical system (*The Trilogy of Knowledge*, *The Trilogy of Culture*, *The Cosmological Trilogy*, *The Trilogy of Values*). In 1949 he was removed from the university by the Communist government. He was proposed for the Nobel Prize in 1956, but the Romanian Communist authorities didn’t support his nomination.

The portrait of the Great Anonymous, chosen for this translation, is a fragment from *The Divine Differentials* (1940), a part of his *Cosmological Trilogy*, which remained unfinished. Blaga’s book is a “story” of the creationist appetite of the Great Anonymous, who has to censure himself, not to produce a situation of theonarchy. Blaga’s study detaches itself from theology and the first clue to this is that God is not properly named. For him a masked concept must be invented, which has to suggest more but not to name. The metaphor being used (Great Anonymous), a little strange in a metaphysical discourse, must be understood this way: God served, in his entire metaphysical-theological history as a metonymy and justification for justice, truth, law or being. Dismissing this line of thought, Blaga demonstrates an invalidation of the “God” concept through the un-naming and re-signifying of Great Anonymous.

One of the most important traits of the Great Anonymous (and here we read Blaga through Foucault) is the following one: to keep his supremacy, “God” must become a controlling mechanism. The connection between the Great Anonymous with the virtual “divine wholes” consists in a power relationship. Divinity despises competition: if he created a perfect clone (that shared his initial structural and substantial complexity), he would lose absolute control. If we understood Blaga’s philosophy through the lens of political sciences, we would say that we have a system with a single hegemon, which is by definition unstable. Thus testing Blaga through Foucault or Baudrillard, we could infer that a simulation of theonarchy (the greatest single fear of the Great Anonymous) from a scientific or cybernetic point of

view would prove highly interesting for the dynamics and evolution of the human being.

The Portrait of the Great Anonymous

We cannot speak of the genesis of the world without admitting the existence of a metaphysical center, which has another nature than the world itself. Searching a name for that overwhelming center, so difficult to grasp, we believe that we have to use a concept that must keep awake our capacity for wonder and guess work. We begin by calling it the Great Anonymous. This term, although not containing any demonstrative value for the designated existence, comprises in itself everything our soul can guess about this foreseen existence, beyond light and darkness, more precisely all submission and wonder. The Great Anonymous is the existence, which keeps us in the “outskirts”, refuses and limits us, though it is responsible for any type of existence. Traveling through ourselves in his search we presumed it was on occasion beyond us. Sometimes we wavered if we should call the Great Anonymous “God”. Our hesitation is excusable, because the Great Anonymous baffles us through his egocentric moves, whose prompt qualification would produce stupor to theologians.

The egocentrism of the Great Anonymous exceeds imagination. We concede that we possess only fragile and all too human criteria to judge his situation. Metaphysics shouldn’t be condemned because it sometimes uses hard words. Its proceedings aren’t ostentatious. The hard word signifies a greater wonder. Neither do theologians have reasons to be afraid, because the aspects which make the impression that we are approaching a demonological territory might permit, in another way, a rehabilitation. The Great Anonymous takes preventive measures, to make sure that the human being and *beings* in general are able to affirm themselves in a limited fashion. We are led to believe that beings might, in the absence of preventive measures, become dangerous for the Great Anonymous. If we asked ourselves about the legitimacy of measures and preventive interdictions, we wouldn’t hesitate to agree that they are completely motivated from the points of view of both anonymous centralism and cosmic balance. In this way we arrive, through a detour, at the point where we endow the Great Anonymous with divine attributes, which, if we didn’t have the necessary perspective, we wouldn’t accept granting them. If we gave the word a more elastic sense, nothing would stop us from calling the Great Anonymous “God”.

The Great Anonymous is a unitary whole of maximum substantial and structural complexity, a totally autarchic existence. We confer to the Great Anonymous, according to its complexity and its plenitude, the capacity to “generate” an unlimited number of identical existences. Taking into consideration only his nature and his usual

possibilities, we must say that he isn't a world-creator, but a generator of equivalent Gods. The Great Anonymous comes to being under the pressure of an immanent mission, whose natural outcome would be an infinite theogony. The Great Anonymous, an existence of overwhelming complexity and amplitude, has, without suffering diminution, the capacity of generating *ad indefinitum* existences with the same substantial amplitude and the same structural complexity. The Great Anonymous represents the ultimate autarchic system, his being consisting in a unitary whole, but, because of his plenitude, he is guided to reproductive generation. The reproductive possibilities of the Great Anonymous remain though, following special measurements, an eternal virtuality, because if the reproductive process had been unleashed, other divine "wholes" would follow. More exactly, the consequence of the reproduction would consist in either the creation of autarchic systems, which could escape the central watch and control or the creation of egocentric systems, which could take the place of the original one. In both cases a serious *theoanarchy* would be unleashed.

To anticipate the theogonic process and its anarchic consequences, the Great Anonymous will deliberately paralyze its reproductive possibilities on a maximum stretch. The Great Anonymous, being virtually a generator of "divine wholes" equal to himself, will manifest himself only through reproductive acts with a minimized objective, meaning to save the centralism of his existence. Those minimized reproductive acts were called the "creative" acts of divinity, being regarded in analogy with the "creative" acts of the *human being*. Therefore, we may see a ridiculous and clumsy anthropomorphism which dominated the perception of the creative acts of Divinity. We might better say, that the creative acts of divinity are not creative of nothingness, nor applied acts to a given materials. Moreover, they are improperly called "creative acts", because they are in essence *reproductive* acts. The reproductive possibilities of the Great Anonymous are censored by acts of preventive cancellation of maximum extension: it is the only through which the Great Anonymous can save the centralism of his existence. The will of the Great Anonymous is not directed to creation, having as objective, though, the prevention of a greater generation amplitude. The divine will is only the substratum of an ample operation of cancellation or of systematic *degradation* and *decimation* of the "possibilities". The original care of the divinity is not "creation" but the *extinction and shut-down of a possible theogonical process*.

Any creative act (improperly so called) of the Great Anonymous is, from the point of view of possibility, a global act of replication, being, from the point of view of realization, a maximum act of extinction, following centralist reasons. The disanalogy between the Great Anonymous and every direct and indirect result of his creative acts is *overwhelming* and *irreparable*. Because of that, it appears

that the purpose of man is entirely different than emulating the likeness of the one who has orchestrated his mutilation ...

© Humanitas, 1997 – for fragments from *Diferențialele divine* [Divine Differentials], by Lucian Blaga

Emil Cioran and *The Twilight of Thought* (1940)

Emil Cioran (1911–1995) was a Romanian-French philosopher and essayist, considered one of the finest stylists of the French language and arguably the most important nihilist of the 20th century. Born in Râșinari, near Sibiu, he studied at the Universities of Bucharest, Berlin and Paris. His colleagues at the University included Mircea Eliade (a renowned historian of religion, who taught at the University of Chicago), Eugène Ionesco (the founder of the theatre of absurd, who moved to Paris and began publishing in French) and Constantin Noica (an important Romanian philosopher, influenced by Husserl and Heidegger, who was persecuted by the Communist regime and spent six years in prison). They were part of the *Criterion* group, a cultural association which gathered the elite of the Romanian culture in 1927, though also having a far-right orientation.

Cioran was heavily influenced by Schopenhauer, Nietzsche and Kierkegaard and some of the German authors of *Lebensphilosophie* like Klages, Spengler and Simmel. In 1940 Cioran left Romania for France and started publishing in French only. He won the Rivarol Prize with his Parisian debut *A Short History of Decay* (1947). Some of his best known works written in Romanian include *On the Heights of Despair* (1934), *The Transfiguration of Romania* (1936), *Tears and Saints* (1937) and *The Twilight of Thought* (1940). *On the Heights of Despair* (1934), his Romanian debut, is a shocking text, built upon the ideas of death and suffering, containing a mixture of *Lebensphilosophie*, dadaism, existentialism and nihilism. *The Transfiguration of Romania* (1936) is a justification of Nazi revolution and totalitarianism and was censored by the author in the 1990 edition. *Tears and Saints* (1937) is a text which produced a literary scandal, hurting the feelings Romanian "fundamentalist" orthodoxy, mixing mysticism with nihilist impressions (we have here a sample: "My Lord, without you I'm mad, and with you I shall go mad!").

The Twilight of Thought (1940), chosen for this translation, is a text previously unpublished in English, which could be considered as a link between Cioran's early work in Romanian and the later 10 books published in French. The title is a pastiche of Nietzsche's *Götzen-Dämmerung* (1888), which is itself a Wagnerian pastiche. The liaison with Nietzsche is not random; if we studied Nietzsche's last five books, all written in 1888, under extreme mental agitation, we would find a similar territory (one could say "war zone")

to the nihilist empire of the young Cioran. Besides the fact that Nietzsche is a major influence (Susan Sontag even argued that if we considered the writings of Nietzsche and Schopenhauer, Cioran would hardly be original), we must appreciate the fact that it is almost impossible to conceive philosophy (or anti-philosophy, as Cioran would say) at the extreme temperatures of despair, melancholy, angst and contemplation of death. We have here a phenomenology of the emotions, which is called to give a detailed description of existence (which gives us a sort of personal truth), something that Cioran has in common with the French existentialists. Cioran expressed himself mainly in essays and aphorisms, believing in the paradigm of the philosopher-artist, exposed by Nietzsche and Kierkegaard. Cioran said that he would have loved to be a poet: his style meant his wish came true. We could say that from a poetical point of view, he is influenced by the Dada movement and the late Symbolists, but that's just part of the main picture. His style is that of a Post-romantic; I believe that comparisons to Shelley, Hölderlin and Leopardi describe better the tension and ambiguity of his work. Another important feature that must be mentioned is that Cioran assumes extreme paradoxes and believes in a premeditated use of contradictions (from a stylistic point of view, his writings are a mixture of oxymoron and metaphor), because, he thinks, this is the way we remain true to life and ourselves.

Aphorisms

It is said that Diogenes was a money-forger. – Any man who doesn't believe in the absolute truth is entitled to forge everything.

Diogenes would be a saint, if he was born after Christ. – The veneration for saints and 2000 years of Christianity ... where could all this go? We would have a tender Diogenes. Plato called Diogenes a mad Socrates. We can hardly save Socrates ...

There are so many people separated by death by its very nostalgia! In it, death creates from life a mirror to admire itself. Poetry is but the tool of funeral narcissism.

The world is a universal Nowhere. That's why you'll never actually go anywhere ...

If I were Moses, I'd extract regrets from rocks with my staff. Anyhow – this is a way to quench the thirst of the mortals too...

The mediocrity of philosophy resides in the fact that the mental process takes place at a low temperature. When you master your fever, you arrange your thoughts like puppets;

you pull the strings of the ideas and the readers use their illusion. But when you look inside yourself and you see only arsons and shipwrecks, when the inner landscape is a gorgeous devastation of burning seas – then you really begin to spit thoughts, tormented columns of epileptic inner fire.

If we didn't use sufferance as a tool for knowledge, suicide would be an obligation.

Pallor is the color of thought imprinted on the human face.

All humans separate me from humans.

Time begins to disquiet you, long before you will have read any philosophers, looking closely at the face of an old man, in a moment of fatigue. The wrinkles cut by sorrow, hope and illusion blacken themselves and seem to lose their trace in a background of darkness, hardly covered by the "face", the hesitant mask of a painful abyss. Each wrinkle seems overwhelmed by time, by a rusty becoming, by an aging duration. Those wrinkles look almost like the dead body of Time. The human face is used by the diabolic passing as a demonstration of futility. Could anyone look at it with serene eyes?

You could swallow up enormous libraries; still you wouldn't find more than three-four authors, who deserve a reading and a re-reading. The standard authors are some illiterate geniuses, which must be admired and if we have to, studied, but which fundamentally never tell us anything. I would like to step into the history of human spirit with the brutality of a butcher adorned with the most refined cynicism. How long will we appreciate so many creators that didn't know anything, naughty and inspired children, lacking the maturity of happiness and unhappiness? A genius that didn't get through the roots of life should be cherished only in moments of indifference.

Life is as ethereal and funeral as a butterfly's suicide.

If unhappiness didn't contain a secret lust, we would have the women deliver at the slaughter house.

"My heart is like wax; It is melted within me." (Psalm 22)
Do your thing, God, until I bang my bones in your head!

Each man is his own beggar.

Life and I are two parallel lines that meet in death.