

IMAGES OF THE SOUL IN LUCIAN BLAGA'S POETRY

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ABSTRACT. In the interwar period, marked by the negative experience of increased degradation of human condition, the need for moral reconstruction promoted by the then poetry strongly manifested as a search for refuge and also an expression of human access to divinity, to change, to spiritual regeneration. The concept transmitted by this poetical thinking is that man becomes an *axis mundi*, a possibility and a meeting place with God. For now, the mission of the poet, among others, will be that of pursuing, of trying and asserting the possibility of liberating the soul through meeting/reunion with divinity, thus outlining a new status of that who creates poetry, namely the *homo religiosus*. Lucian Blaga is amid these poets who offer a range of spiritual manifestations against divinity and define, from a philosophical perspective, the possibility of recovering the divine lost by disobedience.

KEY WORDS: soul, spiritual, poetry, liberation, divine

Introduction

In the interwar literary space, the need for communication with divinity lead to the activation of an ideal horizon, in which the troubled soul sought refuge, thirsty for peace and freedom. Thus, with this escape it became real the only chance for the soul to avoid the adverse effects of a psychological trauma often encountered in the chaotic world, where the soul is rather a prisoner of its own quest for its their sacred identity, while at the same time being lost in disobedience and devilish arrangements. In Blaga's poetry we are surprised to find that structure of the soul that connects the two parts of the Being: the *summumens* (Supreme Being) and the *ens commune* (Being in its entirety), whereby the soul is defined as an expression of this tendency towards perfection, or the ontological and gnoseological ideal of the fallen man. Blaga brings into question the components of this registry, highlighting two of its values: God and Being (with its profane/earthly condition of man). The bridge between God and man towards cooperation is the soul, which aims at overcoming its condition and limits on its way to attain the ecstatic state, often with the help of poetry.

It is difficult not to appreciate that in this interwar period, marked by the negative sign of war and the degradation of human condition, a strong

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need for moral reconstruction begun to be promoted in poetry, a realm which will become a refuge for and also man's way to gain access to divinity, to change, and spiritual regeneration. The perspective comprised by this poetical thinking is that man becomes the *axis mundi*, a possible meeting place between man and God. This idea is explicitly present in a poem by Romanian writer Ion Minulescu, titled *Drum crucial/The Crucial road*: "Pe scara sufletului meu/M-am întâlnit cu bunul Dumnezeu—/Eu coboram mânăhnit din conștiința mea,/Iar El urca surâzător spre ea!...// Și ne-am oprit la jumătatea scării/Încrucișându-ne în climpa-ntâmpinării/Săgețile perechilor de ochi, ca de-obicei—/Ah! Ochii lui cum semănau cu ochii mei!// Pe scara sufletului meu/M-am întâlnit din nou cu Dumnezeu—/El cobora solemn din conștiința mea/Iar eu urcam surâzător spre ea!..." And in the English translation, "On the scale of my soul/I met with God—I descended my conscience pained,/While He climbed smiling at her.// And we stopped halfway the ladder/Crossing ways in the momentous meeting/Arrows pairs of eyes, as usually—/Oh! His eyes looking like mine!// On the scale of my soul/I met again with God—/He solemnly descended my conscience/While I climbed smiling at her!..." (Minulescu 1969).

For now, the mission of the poet, among others, will be that of pursuing, of trying and asserting the possibility of delivering the soul through meeting/reunion with divinity, outlining a new statute that of creator of poetry, namely, that of *homo religiosus* "person who had a religious responsibility, and lived an intense religious life" (in Ancient and Mediaeval tone, see Dancă 1998: 82) or "a man who participates intimately in the life and power of God" (in nowadays tone). Certainly, the poetical stances vary; however, the predominant attitude will be of dependence of and humility before the Creator (perhaps as an exception, though, we could name here Arghezi's denials coexisting with his adoration and exaltation of divinity).

As a poet, Lucian Blaga valued almost exclusively the philosophical lyric, that which "transcribes moods and triggers meditation; without, however, retaining anything conceptual, it mixes intimately with the speculative concerns of the writer" (Crohălniceanu 1963: 23). Through his expressionist aesthetics which invades the creative process, the poet gives voice to his spiritual unrest, which receives cosmic proportions and oftentimes is inclined towards spiritual sensitivity, while it is also tormented by longing and humiliations, providing different essential data, clarifying inner realities of the human subject.

In Blaga's poetical vision, the soul is a bridge, the connecting element between God and people, the eagerness to overcome the boundaries which deny him the ecstatic state translated into poetry; the soul activates through chosen words, thus becoming sensitive and heavily processed. In what follows we will look at such stages of the soul in Blaga's modernist lyric.

Soul Expansion in Blaga's Vision

In Blaga's vision, the soul is almost incompatible with its hosting material, the body, which in turn trammels the spiritual eagerness, seen from the expressionist perspective. We are thus witnessing the poet metamorphosed in titanic amplitude, constrained only by the huge inner tensions emerging from his own reason. As a result of the phenomenal nature of the soul, he proposes to replace the tight and perishable body with cosmical incarnations, directly proportional with the cosmic energies that bring out the spiritual life. The desire to exacerbate the ego resides in the imperative that invokes all geology in order to unleash itself, like in the poem *Give me a body made, oh mountains*, a desire motivated by the fact that "your weak clay/Is too tight for the vigorous soul/I am wearing" (Blaga 1988: 46). If the mountains would give him a body, the ecstasy of the soul would receive appropriate expressions and love and hatred will gain grandiose dimensions: "When I love,/I stretch all the seas to the sky/like some strong, wild, hot arms/ skyward,/to embrace it/to break its midst,/to kiss its shining stars."

Carried by the wave of inner fulfillment, in the end, the poetic self resigns and concludes that "Only thee I have my passerby body" so the "tremendous soul" remains the first condition, the eternal being temporarily hosted in this perishable material (Blaga 1988: 46).

The poem *Soul, rubble of sins* integrated in Blaga's volume *What the unicorn hears* (Blaga 1988) is considered a gnomic lied, a dialogue with the soul, by which is transmitted the poet's conception, that the human soul is an oxymoronic land, opened to contradictions and clumps of unpredictable and unprecedented:

Soul, rubble of sins,
you are nothing and you're all.
Wheel of stars is in you
and a world of beasts.

You are nothing and you're all:
air, birds traveling
smoke and dwelling, times past
and future earths.

Your way is not outside.
The ways are in yourself.
Here your sky is born
Like a tear in your crying. (Blaga 1988: 246)

The title is the key that ensures the revealing of the hidden meaning: in sincerity and humility is recognized the real condition of the soul, seen as a

“rubble” composed, not of gravel, but of sins, suggesting their multitude. The assertive/declarative formulation is followed by oxymoronic juxtapositions “nothing” and, quite unexpectedly, “everything”. This kaleidoscopic image of the soul outlines the celestial “wheel of stars” and the telluric “world of beasts”. The man gathers in his soul those essential living coordinates of time and space, past and future (“times past” and “future earths”), but also essential living states like the “air” accompanied by the cyclical movement of “birds traveling”, that is coming and going, bringing and taking with them feelings, attitudes, and beliefs/unbeliefs alike. The past can be represented by the image of the “smoke” evaporating outside the dwelling place and thus leaving behind only the shade/representation of what it used to be.

But the soul can be transformed into a corner of Heaven, built through repentance and regret “Here your sky is born/Like a tear in your crying.” By adopting this attitude, man will not turn to material geographical areas, but to where God has its headquarters “Your way is not outside/ways are in yourself.” Human soul, revealed through the metaphor “rubble of sins”, has yet the possibility to accede to the inner sky, in sharp contrast with the struggling and limited condition of the telluric (Blaga 1988: 246).

The Soul as Carrier of Divine Miracles

From the perspective we view the spiritual component in Blaga’s poetry, we find a new hypostasis, that of the carrier/bearer of miracles, of the divine manifested in the twilight moment of life, “and I know I also wear/in my soul stars many, many/and milky ways,/wonders of darkness” (*I expect my twilight*). We find the calm and the serenity that characterizes the approach of death, which is another concept that in Blaga’s words “does not allow previsions” (Blaga 1996, II: 288). Fears, horror, and desperate cries are suddenly transfigured in time of retrieval, meeting with the self merged in the universe. Serenity and tranquility are both given by the belief that this twilight is not the real end, that the moment of death is only a pretext for perceiving the stars worn in the soul, but which however are not easily perceivable because of the light: “I have much sun in me/that’s why I do not see them” (Blaga 1988: 18). Therefore, the twilight is the great passage toward a superior state/existence dominated by light, by the sacred: “To me the whole sky is dark/and the stars to rise in me,/My stars,/That still I never /have seen.” Therefore, this appetite for darkness which the poet himself shows, his leaning towards the night (see the concept of miracle as magic in Blaga 1996, II: 127-128) which is the manifestation of light through the stars of the soul, reveals that sort of light that dominates through the miracles of darkness stored in the body, through awareness, though not seen:

“and I know I also wear/in soul stars many, many/and milky ways,/wonders of darkness.”

There is also a stance opposite to frenzy and expansion, “characterized by a quasi-absence of ego dynamics”... In a state of calm contemplation and “serene abandonment of the self” (Pop 1981: 23), the soul expresses its faith-gained experience, which is to be able to move the mountains, in accordance with the Bible: “From the eaves of clean-eternity/fall moments as drops of rain./I listen and my soul asks:/But mountains—where are they? Mountains/to move out of the way with my faith?/I do not see,/I want them and call them—and they’re not!” (Blaga 1988: 19)

The questioning attitude lies not so much in the soul's curiosity, but especially in the irrepressible desire to fight, to confront the temptations offered by life, even if they are challenges, hardships or sufferings. In the same expressionist tone, the message conveyed is that the soul wants, and even calls for a direct confrontation with the mountain range—a metaphorical and hyperbolic vision of the obstacles, that says openly that it will break the track: “Mountains,/which to move away with my faith?” The force required by this direct confrontation is defined by faith, housed in the immensity of the human sanctuary, for the presence of divinity. We capture the fulcrum of this attitude, reflected in the biblical text of Matthew 5:20: “If ye have faith as a grain of mustard seed, ye shall say unto this mountain, 'Move from here to there' and it will move; nothing shall be impossible.”

The challenge of the soul, its invocation is thus expressed in a tone slightly arrogant, full of himself, positive about his victory (*but the mountains—where are they?* see Blaga 1988: 19), which implies an inquisitive look that scans the surroundings, searching, puzzled and anxious, in the same time, for the start of confrontation. The expansiveness continues on a precipitated tone, intense, and yet simple (Crohămlniceanu 1963: 73) and challenging: “I do not see,/I want them, and call them—They’re not!” The voice, which has its origins deep within, is actually an expression of inner turmoil, of longing, of unstoppable momentum that wants to be a winner and requires a proof of reality, an evidence of the involvement of divinity, so “the ultimate reality (...) asks of the man to approach it. The satisfaction of this ardor is accomplished by the ultimate reality, largely as a revelation that transforms human anxiety into that certainty of existence of whose presence the poet is clearly aware. Where there is man, there is also faith, since man had the revelation. Humanity is not possible without faith. On the other hand, there is no faith without revelation” (Stăniloae 1942: 56).

The Soul as the “sunset” realm

The presentiment of death, revealed in the poem *The Oak* contributes to establishing a particular spiritual climate invaded by peace and tranquility.

The serenity and the calm before the inevitable is no reason for fear or lamentation, but rather an opportunity to experiment wellbeing, where peace is a material representation (see also Blaga 1996 III: 104) and it becomes liquefied: “and in sweet echoes/I seem/that drops of silence come flowing through my veins, not by blood.” Some of Blaga’s scholars believe that these surprising associations of images in Blaga’s work are meant to nurture the spiritual climate surprised in such stanza. The analogies on which he stops are sometimes strange, referring to the fact that “He imagines peace liquefied streaming down like splash comes” (see Crohmălniceanu 1963: 77). Invaded by the warmth of peace which he bathes in, the ego realizes that its housing body will be soon a coffin made from the trunk of the oak, in which it will still reign the peace, “peace/shall I taste it between his boards/I feel perhaps by now.” However, the serenity of the soul is caressed by the elements of nature, “caress me with your playful leaf”. The silence installs itself gradually in the soul that is aware of the end of matter and the supremacy of the spirit, existent in small quantities but everlasting “I feel your leaf my dripping soul” (Blaga 1988: 13).

This insinuation, this feeling or metaphor of the end suggested by the idea of the edge, the ending, the terminus is achieved by thinking, which in relation to the extra-spiritual environment will create some confusion, as illustrated in the poem *A man leaning over the edge*. The edge may be of a stretch of water, of a sea or even of “the poor thought”. The end is invoked with serenity and commitment, with the assuming of the man who lives in earthly exile, dreaming of the heavenly homeland, with the awareness of consequences that are ready to manifest through annihilation: “Come on end, spread ashes on things./No path is long anymore./no calling me away./Come on end” (Blaga 1988: 66). This perception related to one’s end is reflected by the soul’s detachment from matter, secluded somewhere in the deep by its uncontrolled fall: “My soul falls into the abyss” and slowly slips “as a ring/off the finger weakened by disease.” The soul, detached from the material follows its road to peace, toward the eternal, leaving nothing behind.

Keeping up in the same register, there comes another aspect of the soul which nears completion, see poems such as *The end*. The completion of creation coincides with the completion of existence: “With this sheet I close the doors and pull out the keys./They’re somewhere down or somewhere up.” The idea of withdrawing one’s soul is perceived as turning the sunset in a world once open: “thy soul toward the wall/and tear toward the sunset” (Blaga 1988: 102).

Situated in a contrasting position, Blaga’s soul is caught in a state of fatigue and suffering, see for instance the phrase “I was so tired/and I suffered” from his poem *The cradle*. The artist openly expresses his belief that

this suffering is generated by his own soul: “I think I suffered from too much soul” (Blaga 1988: 40). In contrast with the the light of stars seen in broad daylight (the sun), the poet’s weary soul utters rhetorical interrogations: “Sun/how can you feel the crazy joy/of rising?”, while he bents over his childhood cradle, thus explaining the quantitative expression “too much soul”: “I was so tired/of spring/of roses/of youth/and of laughter.” The poet is tired of life, beauty, colors, fragrance and everything that defines the beauty of his earthly existence. With arms outstretched and nostalgic callings, however without any hope that he would rediscover the lost time, the poet tries in vain once immersed in the cradle that spoiled his long gone childhood: “Distraught, I was looking in the old cradle/with the hands of myself/like a child” (Blaga 1988: 41). This final line suggests the philosophical idea comprised by the phrase *fugit irreparabile tempus*.

The poet’s condition, his soul separated from his body, is nevertheless rendered in hopeful tones thanks to the popular metric, and thus it does not stress his state of sadness and regret, and the impression that at some point in time everything will come to an end. The natural development of life leaves space for accepting one’s predestination, so “the soul bends to fate/the mourning beats it, not ripping it apart”; the end, in this instance, does not lead to the disintegration of the mind.

In a different stance, the Blagian soul finds itself in a state of permanent awakening, for instance in Blaga’s poem *Insomnia* (Blaga 1988: 343), where in a corner of his mind the insomniac glimpses the playful twinkle of the stars: “My soul is always awake./Viewing the stars in the porch.” Thought is also a slave of insomnia, walking outside as a *lunatic* to find its rest; however, the material elements of nature are also against his strive by not allowing him to find peace because “he has no lake eyelid”.

The Wandering Soul and Love

The poet proposes a different stance of the soul as manifestation of the eros in his poem *In the grain field*, where an earthly being. “a girl/with long eyelashes like ears of barley”, spreads the serene of the sky and the song of mirth summer, while he lies, lethargic “in the shadow of poppies” with no desires, hidden passion or regrets. What he feels is “flesh/and clay only”, but the warm arrangements of this song are waking vibrant in the depths of the soul. In silence, “the poetic ego lets itself spoken by the woman’s song... which appears to be a symbolic substitute of nature itself in its display like a “chthonic cradle” (Pop 1981: 85). The role of this girl’s song is to awaken him from his apathy and inactivity, thus generating his spiritual rebirth towards love: “She sings/I listen/on her warm lips my soul is born” (Blaga 1988: 42-43). As for the psychoanalytical message of this line, which stand above the poet’s nature, some repressed wishes can be deciphered here,

and the girl in the grain field helps to trigger his erotic impulse, “embodying thus in line with the overall vision that what psychoanalysts call ‘the imaginative return to the womb’” (Pop 1981: 86).

The relationship established between the soul and the feeling of love for “her” is also surprised in the poem *Say it slowly, not loudly* (Blaga 1988: 385). The fullness of mind is possible only in two, otherwise the fervor of the couple is suppressed: “When we are single/The souls are not within us.” In relationship with his love, the poetic ego always provides alternatives: their liveliness is achieved only when the two are together, when they choose each other’s company: “Our souls are in us/when we are two.” There can be no commitment here, says the poet, only accepted free will expressed in the direct interrogation: “Do we stay together, you and I?” An emphatic tone is definitely stressed at the end of the poem, where the poet does not allow an alternative: the two are their living souls when they are together, “otherwise no!”

In the poem *Would you cry a lot or rather smile* we capture the sincerity and openness towards communication as a hidden trait of the soul. The poetic ego confesses to his lover, rather bluntly that in his depths the soul is not only the possessor of light and beauty, but it also prepares her for the morning wake-up call, when her dream is destroyed and she discovers that they “have gathered also mud in the soul”. Surprisingly, the soul does not even come to regret this reality: it is not sorry for himself, but rather meditates at the disappointment of the beloved woman: “I do not repent../but I think of you”. This designs a clean and pure soul, an ideal and dreaming soul: “that my soul is so clean/wanting your thought/believing it, with the love of your heart.” His curiosity concerning the girl’s reaction and feelings is captured in his interrogation: “Will you then complain a lot, or forgive instead?” Certainly, he expects to benefit from his lover’s understanding and tolerant spirit, especially in the morning, when he will confess to her, “without a shadow of repentance”, that his soul, also hiding lots of mud, is the fertile ground cultivating purity and beauty, hereby defined by the analogy with the lilies. The interrogation at the end of the poem is meant to restore the calm and the tranquility of the beloved by a consolation excuse: “Don’t you know/that only in the mud lakes on the bottom water lilies grow?” (Blaga 1988: 30)

The soul in Blaga’s poetry is better caught in the depiction of the lost and disoriented, such as in his rather descriptive poem *To the sea*. The moment of contemplation, at the sea side, when eyes and mind are manifesting analytical, creates the breeding ground for the escape of the soul who can not find his way home, “I/sit on the shore and my soul is gone from home./It was lost forever on a pretty path and can’t find/his way back” (Blaga 1988: 15).

The soul is located in the depths of being, showing tenderness and sadness in poems such as *The tear and the sunshine*. Tear, an expression of a suffering soul, finds its place “on a tender white petal”, resembling a grain of dew. In the sunlight, under the influence of the sunshine, the question arises: “I feel ye heat, you’re not a grain of dew.../where are you from and what are you?” The origin of the tear is located deep down, on the wing of the hot remembering that dwells in the secret place, known by nobody, “I am a bit of soul/and I am/Like drops of hot springs:/always coming from the great depths!” (Blaga 1988: 178)

Conclusions

In what Blaga's lyrical perspective is concerned, the soul as well as its diverse manifestations stand for those elements which make any sort of relationship with divinity possible. It is therefore through these manifold spiritual attitudes that some of the humankind attempts at overcoming their boundaries are ascertained as real and genuine. Such attempts seem to be the very pretext for their particular feelings and dispositions which are subsequently converted into poetry and art, at least in Blaga's case.

This spiritual sensitivity spreads its countless shades and becomes hypostatized as to better express the artist's poetical quests. That being said, there is at times a case for an expansive soul in Lucian Blaga's work, a soul eager to burst and overflow beyond any impeding limits; and yet, some other times this soul is but an oxymoronic realm which holds within everything or nothing, a carrier of divine wonders and at the same time the expression of a living faith, so alive that it could even move the mountains.

This kind of experience brings a certain peace and tranquility in the poet's soul; however, visible signs of tiredness, anxiety, suffering, and also wandering keep showing in his demeanor. As an alternating theme, the way his soul relates to love is yet another lyrical proposal which, contrary to our expectations, is not a means to seek a renewed connection with divinity, but a step toward the woman he loves. As with all the other philosophical insights in Blaga's poetry, this sensitivity present in a soul torn by longing, quarry and humiliation is in his art a clear evidence of his strong connections with the expressionist aesthetics.

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