

MYSTERY AND SPACE TRANSLATING THE POETRY OF LUCIAN BLAGA

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ABSTRACT

The present article describes the process of translation of a selection of the poems of Lucian Blaga into English, and investigates some of the challenges that this task presents the translator. The discussion begins in generic terms, and includes some remarks on the character of the Romanian language, as perceived by the translator, continuing then with a more detailed analysis of lines and verses from sample texts. All texts are quoted from *Blaga Opere 1. Poezii* (Blaga, 2012a). Other works by Lucian Blaga that contributed to my understanding of his work are included in the bibliography.

The stimulus to translate the poetry of Lucian Blaga can be formulated simply as follows: Romanian literature is largely unknown in the English-speaking world. It is an immensely rich tradition, comparable with other great European traditions, German, French, Italian and English. A knowledge of it is desirable to arrive at a more complete understanding of European civilisation and culture. Insight into rural life and into human existence beyond the urban space is particularly rich in Romanian tradition, and a knowledge of the Romanian literary tradition grants us access into a world seldom depicted in other European traditions, this being the world of a people who derive their living from the earth.

The sample poems and translations in this article lend themselves to five categories; the monastic world, folk culture and Christianity, the rural space, poems of the night, and *ars poetica*. Within these categories, we find lexical items that occur repeatedly in Blaga's work, and on which he builds the edifice of his lyric world. Several examples from this lexicon are discussed.

KEYWORDS

Mythological space, vernacular, core lexicon, rural, mystery.

INTRODUCTORY REMARKS, FRAMEWORK AND CONTEXT

Having discovered the poetry of Lucian Blaga in 2009 while working at Adam Mickiewicz University, Poznań, Poland, I began reading his work in French translation (*Les Poèmes de la Lumière*, Éditions Minerva, Bucharest 1978), and discussing it with members of the Department of Romanian in Poznań, Poland. I thus became aware of the cultural resonance in the poems, a resonance that prompted me to visit Romania in an effort to learn more about the source of the poems, and the context in which they were written.

Attending the Lucian Blaga International Literary Festival in Alba Iulia three times between 2009 and 2013 enabled me to discover the heritage associated with Lucian Blaga both locally and nationally in Romania. Exchanges with others at the festival, at the University in Alba Iulia, and in other Romanian-speaking environments, brought me closer to a position from which I could begin to translate the work with confidence.

Having established the above, we proceed to consider the Romanian language, the idiom in which Lucian Blaga wrote, and to become acquainted with the character of this language.

Romanian is essentially a popular language, a vernacular that developed organically over time with little prescriptive or institutional interference. The language absorbs the lexicon of the linguistic communities that co-exist and succeed one another over time, Slavic, Hungarian, Greek, German and Turkish¹. Although Romanian in the 20th century adopts swathes of idiom from French, these innumerable Gallicisms, prevalent in the spheres of politics and journalism, for example, make little impact on the poetry of Lucian Blaga.

While many 20th century scholars in Romania enjoyed an education in Latin and or Greek², the language itself, unlike other literary idioms in Europe, is largely uninfluenced by the Hellenism and classicism that was prevalent in literary circles in Europe in the 18th century. Also, the influence of 19th century romanticism on Romanian, while palpable, is an influence less profound than on European writing in general³. Because of these things, the experience of reading Romanian is closer, in its immediacy at least, to the experience of reading Shakespearean English, for example, an idiom still young and vigorous, richly figurative, and not yet touched

¹ The idea of lexical purity is reflected in language policy in several European cultures since the emergence of the idea of the nation-state. French, German and Irish are three cases in point.

² This remark reflects the impression given by senior academics whom I have met in Romania and whose level of classical education is comparable to level in other European countries two or three generations ago.

³ Cf. Mihai Zamfir, *Scurtă istorie – Panorama alternativă literaturii române*, Volumul 1, Editura Polirom, Iași, 2012.

by abstraction, or to reading Welsh or Gaelic⁴, the major Celtic languages, from various periods before the 20th century. Also, the hand of the state and of state bureaucracy weighs relatively lightly on the Romanian literary idiom, in a way more reminiscent of Europe before the 1800s. Long unchained to a standardising apparatus, words in Romanian seem to retain their vitality and elemental force in a way atypical of the major state-dominated languages in Europe over the last century.

APPRECIATING THE LYRIC WORLD OF RURAL ROMANIA

To appreciate the world of Lucian Blaga on its own terms, we must discard ways of thinking associated with our own cultural space, insular and western European in the case of the present author, and learn to see the world as Blaga did. To do so, we enter into a mythological space still vibrant in Romania in the 20th century. This space stands in contrast with the largely post-mythological space of Western Europe and contemporary Britain. To live in the mythological space is to be part of a world animated by symbols and tradition, and to share with other forms of life. Time here is not linear, not a hostile force that exhausts human life (Eliade, 1969). It is cyclical, and being cyclical is benign. Emanating from within this mythological space, the poetry of Lucian Blaga is an expression of the things human culture was built on during the centuries and millennia that precede the mechanisation and industrialisation that characterises our era. This mechanisation and industrialisation is one of the catalysts in the demythologisation of the modern world.

In the older world, the animate world, all things were an expression of the intrinsic vitality of things that constantly renewed themselves, a process man too was part of, and a thing he celebrated with rite and ritual. Mechanisation and industrialisation changes this state of affairs profoundly. The natural rhythms of growth, decay and rebirth are replaced with ideas of progress and acceleration. The natural balance that enables the world to renew its vitality is soon overwhelmed by ideas of exploitation and productivity.

In this way, the latent meaning of things is replaced by a material value assigned to them. And the latent significance of objects that occur in the world is replaced by the idea of an aesthetic value attributed to them. Latency of meaning and significance in the mythological space is replaced in this way by the blatant material and aesthetic value of things in the post-mythological space. The poetry of Lucian Blaga is an expression of the former.

⁴ Cf. Dafydd Glyn Jones(ed.) *Canu Twm o'r Nan' Deilen Newydd*, Bangor, 2010; E. O'Connell, S. Ó Tuama, *An Clóchomhar Tta* (eds.) *Caoineadh Airt Uí Laoghaire*, Dublin 1999.

THE MONASTIC WORLD

The great cathedrals of England, France and Germany epitomise a view of the world as held by the medieval Christian mind in Western Europe. These edifices reach out to the sky in longing. They cast huge shadows and humble the beholder. Their message is clear: feet rooted to the earth, man is a lesser being than the all things celestial and high. Such cathedrals do not exist in Romania. Here, as elsewhere in the Balkans and the Orthodox world, there are other models; the low-roofed monastery, for example, a place where the faithful wait with dignity for divine grace to descend amongst them. In the poetry of Lucian Blaga, we meet some of the inhabitants of this Orthodox monastic world. Here, rupture between the medieval and modern epochs is of no major significance. The Orthodox world retains much of its early resonance. It has not undergone the fragmentation that causes the *malaise* of the west.

Sample Text 1

From *Călugărul bătrân îmi șoptește din prag*, (Blaga, 2012a: 103)

On the Threshold the Agèd Monk Speaks to me in a Whisper.

The monastery is the scene of *Călugărul bătrân îmi șoptește din prag*. Three simple lines from this poem serve to illustrate how the tension in the Romanian can easily be lost in English.

- i) Vreau să-mi dau sufletul
- ii) Viața mea a fost tot ce vrei
- iii) Umbra lumii îmi trece peste inimă.

Literal translations of these three examples yield:

- i) I wish to give up my soul.
- ii) My life has been everything you wish.
- iii) The shadow of the world passes over my heart.

To honour in translation the tension and tenor of the original lines, we suggest the following:

- i) I wish to relinquish my soul.
- ii) My life has been all you might wish to call it.
- iii) Over my heart, the shadow of the world now passes.

FOLK CULTURE AND CHRISTIANITY

Inhabiting the margins of the human in the poetry of Lucian Blaga, we find shapes and shadows, figments of the subconscious perhaps, not spirits as such but simply

other beings. These are not always hostile to their mortal neighbours, but seem to represent some danger, at least to the innocent.

Sample Text 2

Fiiica pământului joacă | Earth-Daughter Dances, (Blaga, 2012a: 114)

We take the first couplet of *Fiiica pământului joacă* to illustrate ways of arranging the order of ideas in the original to create increased resonance or greater tension in the translation:

Spre diminețile tale râd
soare vechi, soare nou.
Through your mornings I laugh
Old sun, new sun.

Or:

Sun of old, sun risen anew
For your every morning I will laugh.

THE RURAL SPACE

A reading of European poetry, from romantic to modern, enables us to discern four views of the rural space: the view of the native metropolitan poet for whom the rural space is distant, and alien to varying degrees; the view of the metropolitan poet who migrates to the rural space, spends some time there, enjoys inspiration there, but remains a stranger to the human society there; the view of the rural poet who migrates to the metropole and writes there of his native place as he remembers or chooses to remember it; the view of the rural poet who remains in his native environment poetically, and writes of the experience of living there (Johnson, 2013: 137-152). Lucian Blaga is a voice who expresses this fourth view.

Sample Text 3

Pluguri | Ploughs (Blaga, 2012a: 98)

The opening verse of *Ploughs* illustrates how the Romanian, if translated literally, often falls short of exciting the imagination. English expects its poetry to harbour several dimensions, while the Romanian, in Blaga's case, for example, is confident in the clarity and therefore in the transparent nature of the style it adopts. *Pluguri* begins:

Prietene crescute la oraș
fără milă, ca florile în fereastră,
prietene care încă niciodată n-ai văzut
câmp și soare jucând subțiri înfloriți
vreau să te iau de mână,
vino, să-ți arăt brazdele veacului.

First, we translate directly:

Friend raised in the town
Without affection, like the flowers in a window,
Friend who have never yet seen
Field and sun dancing under flowering pear trees,
I wish to take your hand
Come that I may show you the furrows of the age.

In a further draft, the tension is increased:

You, my friend, child of the unendearing city,
Friend, raised like the flowers in a window box
Who have not yet seen field and sun cavort underneath the flowering pear trees,
Let me take you by the hand
And show to you the age-old furrows.

Sample Text 4

Sufletul satului | Spirit of a Country Place, (Blaga, 2012a: 108)

Continuing with poems where Blaga writes of the rural space, we come to *Sufletul satului*. The opening lines read:

Copilo, pune-ți mânila pe genunchii mei.
Eu cred că veșnicia s-a născut la sat
Aici orice gând e mai încet,
și inima-ți zvâcnește mai rar,
ca și cum nu ți-ar bate în piept,
ci adânc în pământ undeva.

A direct translation would yield:

Child, place your hands on my knees
I believe that eternity was born in the village
Here somehow thought is slower
And your heart beats slower
As if it were beating not in your breast
But somewhere deep in the earth.

A further draft brings us closer to a translation worthy of the original:

Place your hands upon my knees, my child,
Eternity was born I think into a country place
All thought seems slower there
Slower too the beating of the heart

As though the breast were not its source
But a place deeper within the earth.

Sample Text 5

9 Mai 1895 | May the 9th 1895, (Blaga, 2012a: 218)

May the 9th 1895 is Blaga's date of birth, and in a text so entitled, he sings of his village, Lancrăm, whose name resembles the Romanian word for 'tears'.

Sat al meu, ce porți în nume
sunetele lacrimii,
la chemări adânci de mume
în cea noapte te-am ales
ca prag de lume
și potecă patimei.

Here, the issue of rhyme arises, in two ways, neither forced nor artificial; between the substantives 'nume', 'mume', and 'lume' in the first instance, and between two genitive forms in the second, 'lacrimii' and 'patimei'. In translation, the rhyme is discarded, and the key-phrase 'te-am ales' is deferred to create a sense of culmination:

You, my village,
Whose name evokes the sound of tears
This was the night on which,
Heedful of the deepest mother-callings,
As threshold to the world, as passion's causeway,
You are the one I chose.

POEMS OF THE NIGHT

An affinity with the hours of darkness is a theme that occurs repeatedly in the poetry of Lucian Blaga, and this is reflected in the choice of poems that feature in the samples presented in this paper.

Sample Text 6

Pleiadă | Constellations, (Blaga, 2012a: 223)

Gazing at the sky in wonder, as a child, the poet finds the following couplet, naive as suits the scene, reminiscent too of light-hearted rhyme in popular culture, and weightless, despite the reference to the cross:

Vânt le iscă, vânt le duce
cineva le pune-n cruce

This couplet might be translated literally as follows:

The wind causes them to appear, the wind carries them away
Someone has formed a cross with them.

Here, none of the character of the Romanian couplet has been preserved. Given the limitations within which the translator finds himself working, and the better to set the lines in motion in English, we suggest the following:

The wind sets them spinning, then sweeps them away,
A hand, unknown, forms with them a cross.

However, ‘to form a cross’ in the original Romanian expression is to be taken not so much literally as figuratively, and means ‘to consider something dead’, ‘to make the sign of cross as on a dead body’, or ‘to accept that something is gone’.

We amend the translation in an effort to preserve both the literary and figurative meanings:

‘The wind sets them spinning, then sweeps them away,
Somebody thumbs the sign of the cross on their forehead.’

Sample Text 7

Mi-aștept amurgul, | I Await the Dimming of the Light (Blaga, 2012a: 21).

The question of literary cliché, obsolete forms, archaisms and outdated lexicon comes to the fore when translating the poetry of Lucian Blaga into English. In *Mi-aștept amurgul* (Blaga, 2012a: 21), the opening lines read:

În bolta înstelată-mi scald privirea
și știu că și eu port
în suflet stele multe multe
și căi lactee,
minunile-ntunericului.

The first phrase might be translated by ‘celestial vault’. This is unsuitable, placing Blaga and his poem in an earlier century, the 18th or 19th, and creating a misleading impression of his thinking. The translation must be more neutral, and modern. We find ourselves considering ‘starry pool’. Also, the phrase ‘stele multe multe’, ‘many many stars’, we translate with ‘innumerable stars and galaxies’, thus giving Blaga’s text an educated feel in English, rather than an unsophisticated one.

ARS POETICA

Four poems from the work of Lucian Blaga that we have translated into English and that express a vision of the world in the form of an *ars poetica* are *Biography* (*Biografie*, Blaga, 2012a: 127), *The Wonders of this World are a Crown of Petals I will not*

Crush (*Eu nu strivesc corola de minuni a lumii*, Blaga, 2012a: 9), *From the Sky There Comes the Singing of a Swan* (*Din cer a venit un cântec de lebădă*, (Blaga, 2012a:107), and *A Moment from the Great Passage of Time* (*În marea trecere*, (Blaga, 2012a: 96). To translate these poems well is to recreate the poetic world of Lucian Blaga in a language, English, in which such as world has never existed.

To construct his world in these four poems, and others like them, Blaga draws on a number of key-words that echo through his work and form the core lexicon on which he builds his edifice. In *Biografie* these include ‘lumină’ (light), ‘umbră’ (shadow), ‘cântare’ (singing), ‘străin’ (strange, foreign), ‘mirare’ (wonder), ‘taine’ (secrets, mysteries), ‘strămoșii’ (ancestors), ‘poveste’ (story), and ‘somn’ (sleep).

In *Eu nu strivesc corola de minuni a lumii*, these items of thematic vocabulary that occur in *Biografie* are repeated, notably ‘taine’, a word that occurs three times in the poem. Other words from Blaga’s poetic lexicon we find in *Eu nu strivesc corola de minuni a lumii* include ‘sfânt’ (holy), and ‘mormânt’ (graveyard). In *Din cer a venit un cântec de lebădă*, ‘taine’ (mysteries) occur again, and we find the familiar terms ‘cântec’ (song), ‘călugării’ (monks), and ‘pământ’ (earth). The poem *În marea trecere* includes ‘umbra’ (shadow), ‘poveste’ (story), ‘pământ’ (earth), and also ‘adânc’ (deep), ‘sânge’ (blood), and a form of ‘tăcere’ (to refrain from speaking).

None of these words are problematic so far as a direct translation is concerned. Two points need to be made however. Firstly, unlike Romanian, where the repetition of a lexical item in a text seems not to cause its impact to be weakened, English is a language in which the use of several synonyms for a given idea is often desirable for stylistic and aesthetic reasons. Secondly, Blaga’s core poetic vocabulary does not distant his texts from the vernacular language, but takes the vernacular Romanian of the people of his village, and hundreds of similar villages, and elevates and intensifies the meaning of its words. Regarding the first point, repetition and synonyms, the translator is faced with an apparent dilemma: translating the Romanian word with the same English word each time, and weakening the word each time, or introducing synonyms that give the impression that the original text is lexically far more complex than is the case.

We take the word ‘taine’ as a case in point, and return first to *Eu nu strivesc corola de minuni a lumii*. Lines 2 to 3 in the original read: ‘și nu ucid cu mintea tainele, ce lentănesc în calea mea’. A direct translation yields: ‘and do not kill with my mind the mysteries I find along my way’. We suggest: ‘and never will my mind bring death to the mysteries I discover along my way’. In line 10 we read: ‘eu cu lumina mea sporesc a lumii taină’, ‘With a light of my own I lend grandeur to the mystery of the world’. In line 13 we find ‘taina nopții’, ‘the mystery of the night’. We note in line 15 the romance equivalent of ‘taină’, a word of Slavic origin, in the phrase ‘sfânt mister’ i.e. ‘holy mystery’, where here the adjective is Slavic in origin.

Returning now to *Biografie*, we quote line 13: ‘fac schimb de taine cu strămoșii’, ‘I exchange mysteries with my ancestors’. Before spending time in a village in Gorj,

Oltenia, I thought I had understood this line. The translation I had made was correct, but, unknown to me, as I sat in the library, the original line hides a layer of meaning that was revealed only a result of immersion in an environment similar to that in which Lucian Blaga spent his childhood, a traditional village, ‘sat’ in Romanian. After the midday meal, on a warm afternoon in autumn, a group of neighbours gathered together in the village where I was staying to talk and exchange memories. ‘Hai să stăm la taină’, one of them said, ‘let’s sit and talk together [about the things we share, past and present]’. In *Biografie*, I now realised, Blaga sits with his ancestors, as with his living family and neighbours, exchanging with them memories of things that bind them together, and thus rejuvenating them.

The second word from Blaga’s poetic lexicon we wish to comment on briefly is ‘poveste’. Like ‘taină’, ‘mystery’, ‘poveste’ is Slavic in origin, and means ‘story, tale, narrative’. However, none of the English words available to us resonate as the Romanian does. ‘Story’ in English is a label on a broad category, and invites further explanation. The word is sometimes associated with children, sometimes with news reporting, sometimes with things vaguely covert. It is not a word on which a poet can build his edifice. ‘Tale’ in English is associated with the culture of a former day, may imply an element of fantasy, and is removed from present-day preoccupations, inhabiting the margins of the contemporary world. ‘Narrative’ today is a term in vogue, and one on the verge of redundancy through overuse: in no way can it accommodate the things imply by Blaga’s ‘poveste’. Translating ‘poveste’ will result inevitably in compromise.

Lines 5-6 of *În marea trecere* read: ‘Frunzare se boltesc adânci / peste o-întregă poveste’. We suggest the following translation: ‘Leafy branches throw a steep arch / Over this undivided scene’.

Line 17 of *Biografie* reads: ‘poveștile sângelui uitat de mult’. Here, Blaga speaks of things forgotten, and thus the word ‘tale’ is appropriate in this instance. We suggest: ‘Tales of my kin, long since forgotten’.

We mentioned the word ‘sat’ above. Along with ‘taină’ and ‘poveste’, ‘sat’ is one of the key-words in Blaga’s poetic lexicon that defies the English-language translator. Its simple equivalent is ‘village’. However, ‘village’ in British culture means something quite different to ‘sat’. Whereas in Britain, the village often implies a nucleus towards which things gravitate, and assume importance the closer they may be to the nucleus, the Romanian ‘sat’ is a linear development, a series of small-holdings, often lining a valley. To use ‘hamlet’ in English would create confusion in other ways, ‘hamlet’ being quaint, a word evoking idyllic paintings and peaceful rural scenes from pre-industrial times. ‘Sat’ requires the translator to use ‘village’ on occasion. We suggest ‘a country place’, as in ‘Spirit of a Country Place’ (*Sufletul satului*, (Blaga, 2012a:108)

We conclude these remarks on translating the poetry of Lucian Blaga with the closing lines from the poem *Cuvântul din urmă* (Final Words), (Blaga, 2012a: 121):

Cu cânele și săgețile ce mi-au rămas
Mă-ngrop,
la rădăcinele tale mă-ngrop,
Dumnezeule, pom blestemat.

A direct translation yields:

With the dogs and the arrows that are left to me
I bury myself
In your roots I bury myself
O God, cursèd tree.

While acceptable in several ways, this translation seems unsatisfactory due simply to its brevity. This brevity in itself is not a fault, but the consequence of brevity here is that the lines have been uttered, or read, before they have time to create their effect. This may be due in part to the fact that ‘tree’, the last word in the translated poem, is monosyllabic, whereas, in the original, ‘blestemat’ has three syllables. Also, ‘blestemat’, the adjective, or past participle of the verb, carries the meaning in the original, a disturbing, dark and complex meaning, whereas ‘cursèd’ in the translation precedes the substantive and is partially eclipsed by it.

We now consider the following solution:

With my remaining dogs and unspent arrows
I shall lay down in the grave,
Underneath your very root, O God,
I shall bury myself under your cursèd tree.

Grammatically, the English here does not go quite as far the original, where ‘pom blestemat’ qualifies the vocative ‘Dumnezeule’. The effect of the suggested English translation is however similar to the effect the original has on the reader. Another possible avenue is to restructure the verse as follows:

With my remaining dogs and unspent arrows
I shall lay down in the grave
[And] underneath your very root
I shall bury myself, O God, you cursèd tree.

To conclude these remarks on translating the poetry of Lucian Blaga from Romanian into English, we can now state and restate the following:

Translation of this work involves the issues a translator will face when translating lyric work in general. These issues are linguistic, but also cultural. Therefore, as

well as the questions of the relative frequency and infrequency with which lexical items tend to occur in the original and in the target language, of register, and of the secondary meanings of words that will affect the resonance of the text, translating Blaga into English also involves accommodating a Balkan view of the world married to an intellect steeped in German philosophy (Blaga, 2012: 109). Furthermore, experience of life in the milieu from which Blaga derives his poetry, the traditional Romanian village, is requisite for a fuller understanding of the poet's world and therefore of his work.

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