

## THE TRADITIONS OF ROMANIAN PHILOSOPHY\*

(...) *A* national community placed at the margins of Western culture, pertaining to it, but not quite able to synchronise its intellectual or socio-economic development with that of the West, while definitely unwilling to accommodate itself to non-Western modes of existence and thought – such were the circumstances that invited the discovery of philosophical discourses in which some key Western dilemmas and concepts could be qualified. Romanian philosophising was and remained largely Western in its orientation, but Byzantine and Russian (or Soviet) influences are acknowledged. Even more powerful was the sense that the experience of the Carpathian-Danubian area entitled the intellectual members of this community to speak not only for the values of a continuously progressing West, but also for a humanity that was pre-Western or even pre-Christian, a humanity that had not yet advanced from a “culture of shame” to a “culture of guilt” (in the terms of E. R. Dodds), and a humanity whose ways of behaviour and thinking were more “natural,” and still widespread over large parts of the globe. Unconsciously first, but (at least from the 1930s and 1940s on) often consciously, Romanian philosophers saw themselves as bridges over the wide chasm separating Western and non-Western intellectual behaviour and as mediators between both sides. (...)

Throughout the seventeenth, eighteenth, and nineteenth centuries the attempts to find common ground between Eastern and Western metaphysical values abound, no less than the attempts to preserve or to revive seemingly dated intellectual traditions. Thus in the seventeenth century, in Jassy, the capital of the principality of Moldavia, an Aristotelian school of some distinction flourished, centred on the study of the writings of Theophilos Koridaleos (1570-1646), who tried to combine the preservation of a genuine Aristotelianism (that was then beginning to fade from European philosophy) with modern forms of thought. Another example can be found at the end of the eighteenth century in Blaj, the ecclesiastical capital of Greek-Catholic (or “uniate”) Romanians in Transylvania, where a traditional Catholicism was blended with Enlightenment (Wolfian) philosophy and with a Romantic revival of national pride. (...)

Only around the middle of the nineteenth century were Western models for institutional teaching and writing adopted in a general and systematic way in the Romanian principalities. It is interesting to notice that even though great efforts were expended in following the lead of mainstream rationalism as prevalent in Western Europe at the time, a number of particularities and of displaced accents indicate that the attempt to bridge differences such as those between tradition and modernity, or irrational and rational approaches to reality, was not abandoned. Thus Vasile Conta (1845-1882), although he was an

evolutionist who adopted the philosophical language of Comte and Spencer, devised an original "law of universal undulation." (...)

It is also worth observing that in the Romanian intellectual life after 1848 literary critics played an exceptionally important role. In every generation, one or two literary critics emerged who acquired enormous prestige and whose directives on literary orientations were widely seen as judgements on society's value choices and even authoritative commentaries on the rhythms and models of its development. The discourse of literary criticism often subsumed to itself societal debate, philosophical quest, value judgements, and even (encoded) political choices. The reason is that inside Romanian culture, aesthetic values preserved a rank and prestige superior to political or ethical values. A society deeply split into instinctive allegiance to archaic existential patterns and status on the one hand, and rationalist, contractual and modernising urges on the other, could agree that the aesthetic discourse provided an acceptable middle ground. (...)

In the 1930s and 1940s, a number of prominent Romanian philosophers wrote their most important works or developed their ideas (even when these saw print somewhat later). Although they were not organised as a group and they differed in their sources and outlooks, these philosophers, the most important among whom were Lucian Blaga (1895-1961), Mircea Florian (1888-1960), and Constantin Noica (1909-1987), defined a rather coherent set of features and questionings. These authors may be said to represent the most original Romanian contribution to pure philosophy. Reading their works also helps us highlight retrospectively the development of Romanian thinking and reflectiveness in the last century. Others who may be said to be affiliated to the Romanian school of philosophy worked primarily in the West. They include the pessimist sceptic Emil Cioran; Mircea Eliade (1907-1986), the philosopher of religion; and the philosopher of science Stéphane Lupasco (1909-1988), who tried to uncover common structures for mathematical, spiritual, and biological realities. Associated with the same general questioning and lines of inquiry were Mircea Vulcănescu (1904-1952) and the mercurial and controversial Nae Ionescu (1890-1940), who influenced many of the above. Several key themes or dilemmas can be listed as typical for these philosophers, albeit without the pretence to offer an exhaustive picture. The first and most ambitious of these is an attempt to redefine consciousness or revise the usual philosophical identification. A number of Romanian philosophers expressed doubts about and unease with the streamlining of subjectivity by rationalist concepts and empirical guidelines as practised in Western intellectual life at least during the last two centuries but, in a way, also since the time of Scholasticism. It is important to point out that these post-Cartesian and post-Baconian (Western) modes of intellectual activity were given credit with having sired a tremendous civilisational surge – technological progress, social welfare, hopes of peace and justice unknown earlier – all goods that cannot be dismissed or ignored. However, the emptying of interiority and the reduction of human potentialities (imaginative and spiritual, as well as even in the areas of variety and freedom) were considered an excessively steep price for the Western gains. Many Romanian philosophers therefore struggled to devise alternative epis-

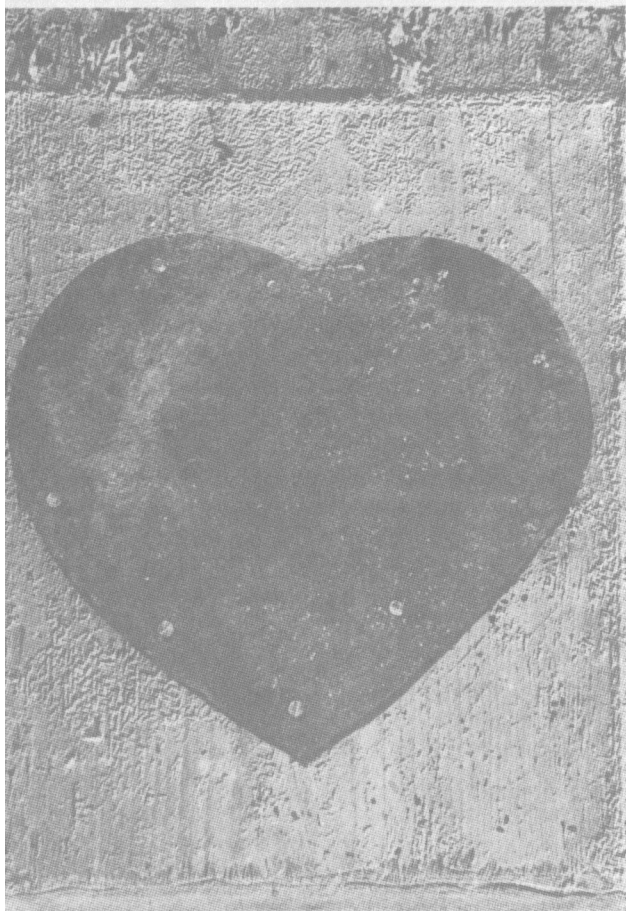
temological modes that would escape the simple two-dimensional game of affirmation and negation, or sameness and difference, through an epistemology of plurality, or, alternatively, through a decentralised philosophy of culture. The most systematic effort of this kind was made by Lucian Blaga, who devised a post-Spenglerian philosophy of culture, in which he emphasised the sharp limits of Eurocentrism and expanded it with a broadly conceived stylistics of religion and religious patterns. (...)

Clearly this whole attempt at reformulating our understanding of consciousness and our epistemological choices was predicated upon prior decisions such as a revised balance between rationality and the irrational, mystery, absence, and silence. (In the writings of Blaga and Noica such connections and revisions are eloquently advocated.) It is also – albeit less clearly – predicated upon a certain positive valuation of harmony and wholeness, the kind of philosophical stance that was less than frequent in Western philosophy since the age of Romantic idealism. Old-fashioned as such a quest might seem, it provides the writings of Romanian philosophers with a certain piquancy, precisely because it runs counter to many other of their purposes, and thus builds counterintentional eddies and internal deconstructions which are not devoid of interest.

Indeed, while the opting for harmonious solutions and a conviction in the ultimately beautiful nature of reality (more than once accompanied by unabashed affirmations of the relevance of aesthetics for both epistemology and ethics) is quite characteristic of Romanian philosophy, the search for an epistemology of the particular, the contingent, and the heterogeneous is at least equally prominent. (...)

Perhaps even more important than these features was the tenacious effort to delineate an ontological status for things such as transition, nuance, shade, distinction, and imperfection. With Mircea Vulcănescu and Constantin Noica this effort took the form of some truly brilliant linguistic analyses. Their close examination of the grammatical peculiarities of the Romanian verbal system (modal and tense forms) led them to epistemological and philosophical conclusions regarding alternative human relationships with reality based on possibility and uncertainty more often than on mimetic precision and moral rigour. (...)

There is no gainsaying the ambiguities surviving in this configuration of ideas. In many ways the Romanian philosophical démarche was hampered by an undoubted antimodernist sting. A certain regret for the past and a desire to preserve or recapture mental structures, emotive implications, and cultural values as traditionally constituted is incontestable. It places Romanian philosophising half-way between the moderate conservatism of Central European philosophy (from St. Clemens Maria Hofbauer to Freud, Wittgenstein, and Musil) and the more radical antimodernism of Russian and Third-World, anti-Western ideologies of the last hundred years. As opposed to the latter, however, the emphasis of Romanian philosophers is seldom placed on social and political philosophy, but much more often and more clearly on the examination of epistemological and axiological issues, even when in their personal lives some of the thinkers here enumerated showed



*varying degrees of attraction to extreme right political positions, if only for a while. (...)*

*The existential urgency can be inferred also from the fact that Romanian philosophical writing in the last 30 years remained largely anchored in the same kind of problematics: the ontological weight of nuance, substituting compromise for contradiction, incompleteness, heteronomy, the philosophy of culture as an instrument for adjusting the balance between contractual judgements and the claims of interiority. (...)*

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