

A FAILED NATIONAL PLAY? LUCIAN BLAGA'S *ZAMOLXIS* AND THE "ROMANIAN SOUL"

Lucian ȚION

Babeş-Bolyai University of Cluj-Napoca
E-mail: tionfiul@yahoo.com

A FAILED NATIONAL PLAY? LUCIAN BLAGA'S *ZAMOLXIS* AND THE "ROMANIAN SOUL"

Abstract: National theatre was at the forefront of nation-building efforts in Europe at the end of the 19th century. New nations instrumentalized traditional motifs such as legends, myths of origin, and fairytales for their alleged part in shaping "national character." In this paper I analyze how Lucian Blaga, an iconic playwright and philosopher of romantic-nationalist inspiration, used folklore in *Zamolxis, Pagan Mystery* (1921) in Romania to mythify the national self-image. Employing a deconstructionist, postcolonial reading of the play, I analyze the use of myth and its role in the construction of the national imaginary. I also situate this process in the geopolitical context of the late 19th and early 20th century Eastern Europe, a place in which several newly created nation-states instrumentalized culture to compete with one another for the legitimization of both territorial claims and political supremacy.

Keywords: nationalism, Romania, theatre, cultural identity, Lucian Blaga, postcolonial.

Citation suggestion: Țion, Lucian. "A Failed National Play? Lucian Blaga's *Zamolxis* and the "Romanian Soul." *Transilvania*, no. 2 (2023): 70-80.
<https://doi.org/10.51391/trva.2023.02.06>.



Following dramatic periods of cultural and political upheaval such as the Enlightenment, the revolutionary year 1848, or World War I, Europe was repeatedly subjected to profound shakeups that caused a re-evaluation and—more often than not—a re-creation of the numerous national and cultural selves that made up the Old Continent. In such periods of uncertainty, the search for a 'national soul,' paired with the digging for 'roots' became a powerful drive that ended up not only defining the identity of a particular culture, but also finding in this alleged identity legitimization for that culture's very existence. Interestingly, it was the periphery of cultural and political systems that had the most difficulty in absorbing the seismic waves caused by revolutionary epicenters. In Enlightenment Europe it was Germany that underwent most cultural changes in response to the dominance of French and British hegemony between the 17th and 18th centuries; while in the 19th century the margins would shift again towards the North and the East, remitting Scandinavia and Russia—newcomers on the cultural scene—to most

dramatically feel the transition to modernity. Finally, in the era following WWI and the collapse of European continental empires such as the Austro-Hungarian, the Ottoman, and the Russian, it was Eastern Europe's turn to endure the shock of change. Consequently, a movement for national "awakening" sporting purportedly unique national differential traits started to reverberate in all territories situated along the fault lines that separated these empires. This led in the early 20th century to the creation of several nation states from the Balkans in the South to the Baltics in the North.

Creating the National Soul

With new statehood came redefinition, soul-searching, and sometimes, downright invention. Anthropologist Margaret Ziolkowski describes the frantic search for authentic Russian literary traditions that drove 19th century poets to point out their nation's uniqueness. Following in the footsteps of predecessors like James Macpherson in Scotland and Elias Lönnrot in Finland,



(creators of the spurious “Ossian cycles” and Kalavala, respectively),¹ Russian literati “uncovered” the so-called *bliny*, or poetry songs, purportedly extant in oral traditions, which described the heroic deeds of forerunners. Ziolkowski shows not only how these *bliny* were at times manufactured into what she suggestively calls “fakelore,” but how these largely invented popular songs were later used even in the Stalinist tradition to continue the process of nationalization.

In a scramble for national authenticity which had already started in the 19th century, so called ‘folklore collectors’ such as Vuk Karadzic in Serbia or Vasile Alecsandri in Romania rushed to the countryside to ‘discover’ in peasant folksongs and shepherd ditties alleged nationally-defining character traits, which would later lead to several nativist cultural movements.² In Romania, Gheorghe Asachi purportedly discovered a folk ballad that described the ethnic origins of the Romanian people,³ and Vasile Alecsandri roamed the countryside in search of traditional songs and folktales that could be used to ascribe a particular Latin character to the Romanians. The writings of these ethnographers and the politics of their successors would contribute to the cultural foundation of the nation state, and such Eastern Europeans endeavors, for the most part, continue to inform and influence the identity politics of many Eastern European cultures today.

As pointed out, Eastern European national movements came on the heel of Western ones. It was in the West that folklore was first politicized and made to play the role of cultural paragon for the new concept of ‘the nation’. If figures such as Elias Lönnrot in Finland or James Macpherson in Scotland were proven by later scholarship to have at least partially falsified the epic poems they collected, which were supposed to reveal the ‘authentic voice’ of their nations as preserved by their respective oral traditions, theatre on the other hand proved more successful. Indeed, dramatic writing played a significant part in establishing a sense of national identity in the West, and it is due in large part to authors like Friedrich Schiller, Herman Heijermans and Henrik Ibsen that the idea of the “national play” as representative of national character came to life in 19th century Europe.

Whether to fight the Habsburg domination in Switzerland, to protest the poor living conditions of sailors in Holland, or to satirize tradition itself in Norway, these playwrights employed elements of folklore in an attempt to link either local history, the natural environment, or some rudimentary form of peasant culture to the newly celebrated *Volksgeist* of romantic nationalist origin.⁴ In reflecting on connections between theatre and nationalism, Francis Lamport posits that certain Western plays attempted to command a sense of ethnic or superior civilizational authority. Lamport highlights the political role of theatre when referring to Schiller’s *Wilhelm Tell* by stating that, even though a

mythical character, Wilhem is expected to carry out a “historic, patriotic mission,” and he is constantly referred to by Schiller as the “savior of the nation.” (Lamport, 164) Similarly, despite the tremendous impact of the playwright’s influence on the development of modern theatre, *Peer Gynt* remains Ibsen’s most popular play in Norway due to its heavy reliance on Danish and Norwegian proverbs and fairy tales. It is the employment of these motifs in Ibsen’s play, literary historian Asbjørn Aarseth argues, that led to its being interpreted by later generations as painting the ‘soul of the nation’ in the local colors of satire, irony, and wit, even if Ibsen’s original portrayal of his culture was meant to be anything but flattering.⁵

Finally, Herman Heijermans’ use of the sea in *The Good Hope* is meant to reinforce the image of the Dutch as a hard-bitten, pugnacious nation, which doesn’t hold back from sacrifice, yet struggles against injustice. Through use of such nation-related imagery, these theatrical texts became over time—via positive local reception and representation—political markers meant to solidify the Holland’s image as both self-reliant and self-absorbed. At the same time, they contributed to enforcing a certain stereotype in the national imaginary that would from heretofore link the national image to descriptive qualities, which, whether intended or not by their writers, would be forever linked to what would become the national ethos.

In their desperate attempt to catch up with Western modernization, the relatively younger states of *fin du siècle* Eastern Europe had a harder time trying to use theatre in their attempt to nationalize culture. As such, the works of 19th and 20th century Eastern European playwrights were not only relegated to obscurity in comparison with their Western counterparts, but their failure to represent the new nations in theatrical representations collaborated a sense of failure to establishing national identity in the region.

The Failure to Identify Romania’s “National Soul”

Drawing on Western European experiences, I contend that the struggle for the creation of national selfhood in Romania—an ongoing obsession of Romanian intellectuals following the failed 1848 revolution—came to naught in the interwar years, and it is this failure that prompted a national identity crisis that spanned most of the 20th century, and indeed, persisted into the 21st.⁶ Furthermore, I claim that the failure of folklore to serve as national self-identification, a literary process attempted by the luminaries of Romanian romanticism Vasile Alecsandri and Mihai Eminescu⁷, is best embodied in the dramatic work of Romanian poet, playwright, and philosopher Lucian Blaga. I state that the reason Blaga’s theatrical play *Zamolxis, Pagan Mystery* fails to associate the nation with philosophical mysticism, as

the author intended, is that Blaga's work is a postcolonial expression of self-orientalism. I conclude that Romania's identity crisis in early 20th century Eastern Europe was triggered by the forceful imposition of the colonial gaze in response to the need of cultural self-identification. Instead of infusing Blaga's work with meta-textual meaning, this process reduces it to an act of artistic and literary failure, and relegates it to the realm of (nationalist) identity politics.⁸

In 1918, freshly redrawn after WWI, the borders of Romania were enlarged considerably. Not only were Transylvania and Bessarabia, disputed territories that were until then part of the Austrian-Hungarian and Russian empires respectively, annexed by the new Romanian expansionist state, but a non-Romanian population of Hungarians, Russians, and Jews counting roughly a third of the total was also incorporated into enlarged Romania as a result. Coupled with the fear of expanding Bolshevization, urbanization, and the spread of modernity, this led to anxiety concerning ethnic identity, a concept which, due to the cosmopolitan character of the previous empires occupying the space, never presented itself as a problem until that moment.

Lucian Blaga, a native of the Habsburg possession of Transylvania born in 1895, who, like many Eastern European intellectuals at the time moved to Vienna during the war years to obtain his PhD, returned to enlarged and independent Romania after WWI to publish a series of philosophical works of strong German idealist and romantic influence. In these he theorized along semi-ethnocentric lines the existence of a certain 'Romanian soul' defined in relation to the alleged uniqueness of the Romanian landscape. Interested in the occult as well as the divine (which he construes as separate entities in a larger value system of cognition), in his seminal philosophical work, *Spatiul mioritic* (an autochthonous, untranslatable term⁹ used to link local pastoral rurality to the purportedly unique ethno-cultural traditions of the Romanians), he corroborates elements of rural mysticism with a metaphorical style to arrive at definitions that attempted to instill the 'Romanian soul' with a general sense of self-reflexivity and an alleged inborn penchant for fatalistic romanticism.

Applying some of these philosophical concepts to his dramatic work, Blaga espouses a semi-religious cosmology centered on "The Anonymous One," a godlike figure described as the mysterious starting point of creation, and generator of "differentials," which in their struggle for self-preservation ultimately led to the birthing of man and life in genera¹⁰ (*Trilogia cosmologica*, 489). Furthermore, Blaga endows Zamolxis, a pagan Thracian deity which had been recently re-discovered in the 19th century by nationalist historians, with both mysticism and wisdom, and directly connects him to the "Anonymous One," which is made to acquire a central role not only in the process of creation in general, but

particularly in the creation of ethnic consciousness, as made manifest in the play's subsequent interpretations.

Written in 1920, thus in the midst of nationalistic furor, in a period when numerous intellectuals were being seduced by extreme right-wing movements which claimed a spiritual connection with either Christianity or ancient civilizations of the Balkans, and which over-emphasized the "primordial" local culture over foreign cultural influences, Blaga's play promoted in a less violent manner a similar return to the values of an autochthonous, albeit mysterious civilization which had purportedly played a vital, yet forgotten role in the making of the 'Romanian soul.'

Blaga's Self-orientalism

Referencing an ancient myth of uncertain origin as a foundational episode of the Romanian identity narrative brings to mind the central thesis of Edward Said's writings which unarguably states that "knowledge of the Orient... in a sense *creates* the Orient."⁽⁴¹⁾ Applying Said's conceptual framework to the identity crisis experienced by Eastern Europe in the 19th and 20th centuries makes it apparent that the newly "discovered" ethnographic knowledge of Romania's purported remote past, such as that "collected" by 19th century folklorists, plays the same role here as Said's so-called knowledge of the Orient. In attempting to fill an epistemological void related to the undisclosed role of the Other in shaping Romanian history and culture, nationalists like Blaga employed folklore-derived foundational myths supposed to have taken place *in illo tempore* and appropriated them to explain the national self.

This occurred in full knowledge of the abstruse origins of Zamolxis (which mirrored those of the Romanians themselves). Enshrouded in confusion, Zamolxis' name was passed down to the present mainly through a few disjointed references in Herodotus and Strabo. Herodotus referred to him as a former slave of Pythagoras who was venerated as a god upon his return to the Getae, whom he fooled with his knowledge of astronomy into believing they would acquire immortality if they followed his lead. (Herodotus, Book IV, 96) Besides confirming Zamolxis' identity, Strabo additionally focused on the human sacrifice rituals performed by the Dacians, an ancient Thracian tribe roughly living in the territory of today's Romania, whom Strabo described as being in perpetual communication with their god through bloodletting. According to Strabo, the Dacians used to throw a man onto a spear in order to task him with sending a message to the gods. (Strabo, Book VII, ch. 3, 457)

Drawing on this mythical figure of Zamolxis and reifying his own "Anonymous One" as creator of ineffable mystery, the author does no more than project over uncertain 'Romanianism' the idealized quality of exotic wisdom purportedly found only in historical sagas of the



local past. The only difference between Blaga and Said is that what designates a geographical category (the Orient) in the writings of the Palestinian-American scholar is meant to denote time (*illo tempore*) in the writings of the Eastern European author. This constitutes not only a manifest case of self-orientalism, but the attempted creation of national selfhood *ex nihilo*.

Blaga's play begins seven years after Zamolxis had been exiled to an underground cave by the very people whom he tried to convert to the monotheistic cult of the "The Anonymous One." Returning to his people in the guise of a wandering beggar, Zamolxis is informed by the high priests that the religion he preached before his exile had taken such strong roots in the imagination of the masses that his sudden reappearance might risk rebellion. To save Zamolxis from his own kind, the priests conspire to turn him into a god, and thus preserve control of the crowds. Zamolxis agrees to the plan for the sake of the survival of his religion. However, unbeknownst to him, the priests decide to turn his image into a statue, and place it in a row of other currently worshipped deities by the common folk. When Zamolxis, finally aware of the trick that had been played on him, but too late to beat a retreat, shows up at the dedication ceremony pronouncing his human nature, and teaching that philosophical knowledge and communion with "The Anonymous One" is superior to blind veneration of sculpted rock, the crowds, taking offense in their faith, beat Zamolxis to death in a violent, orgiastic ritual, using slivers of stone taken from Zamolxis' own statue to kill him.

It is my argument that Blaga's intentions to criticize crowd mentality and populism in the final act of the play have quite the opposite effect. Instead of showing the vulgarity of crowd mentality, Blaga in fact reveals the way in which mystification is essential to identity-building, indeed revered as necessary in the process, even if not altogether honest. What this means is that while Blaga apparently meant to belittle the harmful effects of mass ignorance, he in fact glorified the newfound wisdom of nationalism (raised to the status of religion), and mystified his own authorial image as architect of national identity. This interpretation is also favored by Dan Dana, who claims that "[t]his Zamolxis is no other but Blaga himself, who, confronted with the mystery of existence, is in search of a cultural style and of hypotheses which will later come to fruition in his philosophical system." (336)¹¹

The fact that this effort is described as unsuccessful in the play via the protagonist's tragic ending strengthens the reading of the play as legitimization of a process meant to bestow identity onto the Romanian people. Furthermore, it reinforces the importance of nationhood in the face of the potential failure to recognize the power of this new concept. By attempting to pass an ancient myth about religious wisdom as a forgotten attribute of national identity awaiting recognition, Blaga not only

aspires to reveal the greatness of ethnic 'Romanianism,' but also attempts to popularize the Romanian national self as superior to other contestants for cultural and political supremacy in the region.

The Quest to Establish Romanian Selfhood and Statehood

Starting in the early 19th century, an increasingly larger number of Romanian nationalist writers, politicians, and academics in disciplines ranging from history to literature and philosophy, under the sway of German romantic nationalism—which was gaining ground in the East—began to adopt a more self-centered position in the debate on Romanian ethnogenesis. Entering an open polemics with linguists and historians from surrounding countries, they began to steadfastly promote a new theory¹² regarding the genesis of the Romanian people as the ethnic mix between ancient Dacian tribes and Roman colonizers. Derided by scholars such as Jernej Kopitar and Franc Miklošič who saw Romanian language at best as an osmosis of Latin elements superimposed on a Slavic background, proponents of ardent Romanian nationalism such as Samuel Klein, Gheorghe Șincai, and Petru Maior (later branded together as representatives of the so called *Transylvanian School*) devoted the better part of their lives to prove the pure Latin origin of Romanian, going as far as claiming that Romanian was the closest in morphology and syntax to its ancient Italian "sister", which—unlike pure Romanian—was adulterated by the unclean interference of Middle Age poets such as Petrarch and Dante who contaminated it, and thus, destroyed its beauty. (Close, 19)

Primarily a political movement—like most nationalist programs in Europe at the time—the *Transylvanian School* was born out of the century-old struggle for the control of Transylvania, a disputed province North-West of the Carpathian mountains which had been under the control of the Hungarian monarchy since the first millennium AD. Despite Hungarian control, the Romanian population in Transylvania had been rising steadily over time, to the point where in the 19th century it crossed the 50% benchmark, and moved to claim additional rights, to the aggravation of Hungarian authorities. Until that moment, Romanians in Transylvania were still perceived, despite their considerable numbers, as a "tolerated nation" in the context where real power was shared in a representational system between Hungarian noblemen, the German guild masters, and the Szekely minority.¹³ In mid-19th century, this domination was justifiably beginning to be seen by Romanian nationalists as the personification of the yoke of colonialist oppression, which made the case of Transylvania a winning ticket for anti-colonial movements, which were gaining pace all over the continent. The 'jewel in the crown' for the poor, quasi-feudal neighboring Romanian monarchy,

which acquired a preliminary autonomy from the Ottoman Porte in 1878 after the Russian-Turkish war, Transylvania became a hotbed of Romanian nationalism, and consequently, linguistic and emancipatory struggle from foreign domination.

To impress their case more strongly on the French (who were perceived in the epoch as “the champions of the national principle” (Boia, 54), and who showed sympathy for the Italian, Romanian, and Polish national causes), the Romanians recurred to the ancestry argument, or the right of the first occupant over a given territory. Since side-effects of nationalist struggles included the mushrooming of territorial disputes all over Europe, which screamed for immediate solution, “the invocation of ancestral figures appear[ed] as a decisive argument: stronger than anything that current reality might offer in terms of argumentation.” (Boia, 41) In the case of Romanians, the ancestral argument led directly and unequivocally to the Dacians.

The Dacians (or Getae as they were known by the Greeks) were a people recorded fragmentarily by Herodotus as related to the more numerous and better known Thracians, as well as by Roman historians such as Strabo and Pliny, and later Dio Cassius in the wake of the colonization of Dacia by Rome in 106 AD. Based on a Roman presence in the province of Dacia¹⁴ of less than two centuries, namely from the end of the Roman-Dacian wars in 106 AD to the retreat of Roman occupation in 274 AD, Romanian Enlightenment thinkers created a so-called theory of Latin descent, which imagined the birthing of the Romanian language from a *mélange* of local Dacian tongues (of which no words survived) and Latin. Based on this linguistic argument, Romanian ideologues further styled the so-called “continuity theory,” (Grancea, Boia) which professed that Romanian presence was continuous on territories making up the country today since pre-Roman times, and thus later claims to any territory that was part of Romania were unfounded. Retorting to this politicized argument with an equally tendentious one, German and Hungarian scholars responded with the “immigrationist thesis,” which saw Romanians as having formed as an ethnicity somewhere South of the Danube, in a probably Romance-speaking environment, and later migrating to Transylvania after the turn of the first millennium, by which time Hungarian presence in the area was already consolidated.¹⁵ (Boia 47) As arguments in the increasingly bipolar divide were difficult to prove for either side due to scarce historical evidence, their contradicting claims generated a historiographical war that spanned over two centuries, and shows no signs of relenting to the present.

Since the continuity theory claimed immobility as an integral part of its argument, this saw the appearance of a historiographical discourse which painted Romanians as a sedentary, traditional, and peace-loving people (despite the distinctively different reality of ancient

migrations), in opposition to the allegedly violent, uncultivated, invading Hungarians who hailed from the remote steppes of the East. In 1879 liberal prime minister Ion Brătianu went as far as to deliver a speech in parliament in which, in Orientalist fashion, he alluded to the primitive makeup of migratory Hungarians, which were stopped by the Romanians in their westwards invasions. In this way, the Romanians painted themselves as protectors of Europe against un-civilization. (Boia 156) Entering the ethnic origin debate in the years immediately following WWI, when Hungary suddenly lost control of Transylvania, Romania played this nobility card. At the Versailles peace talks following the end of WWI, Brătianu, who was called “a forced humbug” and a “bearded woman” by a member of the British legation, (MacMillan) perpetuated this stereotype in order to boost the alleged sedentary roots of the Romanians, and therefore mask the expeditionary aspect of Romania’s repossession of Transylvania.

The elapse of almost two millennia between the Roman conquest and the ‘reawakening’ of national sentiment in the late 1800s offered Romanian nationalists, despite a conspicuous lack of historical sources, the vague, uncertain, but plausible structure on which to build an argument. Even if sources on the Daco-Thracians ceased to exist long before the disappearance of the Western Roman Empire, by virtue of a well-constructed campaign of mystification and re-actualization, in the late 19th century the Dacians became synonymous with the early Romanians in the fragile Romanian imaginary. This movement gave Lucian Blaga the impetus on which to build his nationalistic theory and the definition of national selfhood. Following in Brătianu’s political footsteps, Blaga made the figure of ‘local’ Zamolxis into the pseudo-father of Romanian ethnicity, who would appear spiritually and morally justified to lord over a land both mysterious and romantic; a land whose mellifluous natural appearance coincided with that of the ‘Romanian soul’ in Blaga’s heavily romanticized outlook of German inspiration.

It is not accidental that Lucian Blaga himself focuses in his play on the violence of the crowd, which rises to strike its own prophet in quasi-parricidal fury. Theorizing what from a postcolonial angle can only be seen as an anti-colonialist protest, some of Blaga’s literary critics celebrated the violent nature of this crowd, whom they identified with the Dacians, in virtue of maintaining the unique character of their religion. Others yet, particularly postsocialist scholars fed by renewed anxiety over political control of the country in the turbulent ethnic conflicts of the 1990s in Eastern Europe, emphasized the similarity between the cult of Zamolxis and the figure of Christ, in view of their successive death and resurrection, going as far as attributing Jesus a Thracian origin, which, according to them, would explicate the presence of the resurrection myth in Judaism (Grancea).¹⁶



The myth of resurrection was of course wide-spread in peripheral Eastern Europe, particularly in the context of early 20th century preoccupation with ethnic origins and foundational narratives. Corroborating Said's Orientalism with what historian David van der Oye calls a "second Oriental Renaissance" taking place in the late 19th century in Germany and Russia, Blaga's work can be seen as part of a wider cultural movement occurring in several cultures that were (sometimes violently) born out of the defunct empires of Central and Eastern Europe in 1918, which re-evaluated their political identity in view of the threatening advance of industrialization and urbanization (Oye, 1). In Romania's case, namely in a cultural space characterized mainly by an agrarian lifestyle until late into the socialist period, (Georgescu) and in which claiming cultural equality to the imperial ambitions of older surrounding cultures proved impossible, Romanian nationalism used the Orientalist discourse, as set forth by Said, in two different ways; even though they were sometimes in blatant contradiction with one another.

First, Romanian ideologues used "othering" and the "style of thought based upon an ontological and epistemological distinction made between the "Orient" and (most of the time) "the Occident"" (Said, qtd. in Oye, 21) to distinguish themselves from the non-European 'Other' in virtue of their claim of belonging to the great Roman civilization of the past.¹⁷ Furthermore, they underlined the Latin-based language they spoke, which allegedly made them superior to the rest of the Southern and Eastern Europeans who hailed from the barbarous, Slavic cultures populating the Balkans. (Todorova)

Secondly, and surprisingly, Romanian nationalist discourse equally employed Orientalism to claim a unique, non-European (or rather proto-European) heritage that created a self-image in which Romanians appeared not as much as geographical Orientals, as an offspring of an antediluvian people. This image bestowed upon Romanians a sort of extra-temporal Orientalism in the sense criticized by Said, which allowed them to see themselves as inheritors of a distinct culture characterized by mysticism and mystery, which was projected onto the now defunct Daco-Thracians.

A Postcolonial Reading of Lucian Blaga's Theatrical Play

There are, of course, plenty of reasons to look at Blaga's dramatic, as well as philosophical work, from a purely aesthetic point of view, unrelated to the national context in which it was created. In fact, most critical works dedicated to the author during the communist era take this anti-historicist approach to focus on a structuralist analysis of the mystical and metaphysical themes of his oeuvre. I argue, however, that such a critique, in virtue of its emphasis on traditionalist themes and local folklore

(among which the highlighting of the Thracian paradigm is indispensable) submits to the same postcolonial reading I described earlier. Given, moreover, the predilection of major Romanian critics to read Blaga's work from a politicized perspective, makes it nearly impossible to ignore the nationalist reading of his work.

To demonstrate, I refer to the following examples: In response to Blaga's *Spațiul mioritic* in 1937, Constantin Noica, a right-leaning philosopher of the inter-war years, in an article suggestively entitled *A Philosophy of the Romanian Soul*, aims to demonstrate the qualitative value of a culture unjustly considered "minor" in unequivocal terms: "...our folkloric culture, albeit minor, shows signs of achievements comparable to those of the major cultures," because, Noica reasons, "we do not want to be [considered] the perpetual villagers of history!" (Noica qtd in Nistor, 98) Another introduction to Blaga's dramatic literature, this time by literary critic Eugen Todoran in 1970, sees the author's work as "a conclusive expression of the maturing process of Romanian culture in a crucial phase of its development, namely after the reunification of the Romanian territories into a national state, when the spiritual horizon was enlarged by the confluence of the waters of the three Romanian provinces, which for centuries longed for a common and communal expression." (Todoran in *Blaga*, Teatru, v)

Finally, the eulogistic lucubration of literary critic Vasile Bancilă identifies in the "Blagist attitude" a "cosmic peasant fund," which conditions the "ethnic epiphany" of Blaga's philosophy and the "ethnic apriorism of the creative being," based on "metaphysical Romanianism." (Bancila qtd. in Nistor, 100). Despite Blaga's protests against the "militaristic ethnicization" of his discourse (qtd in Nistor, 108), his "stylistic matrix of the Romanian spirit" as well as his "Romanian dimension of existence," (concepts popularized in *Spațiul mioritic*) while in themselves harmless (if awkward) attempts to define Romanianism in philosophical terms, have been widely misread and embraced by epigones who popularized them to degrees that led to a dangerous essentialization of the notion describing the 'Romanian soul.' To exactly what degree this essentialization was later used by fascist ideologues in the inter-war period leading to WWII, is a field that necessitates further research and analysis.

Leaving aside their racist undertones, theories linking Romanianism to a unique expression solely attributable to the "Romanian soul" (as it becomes evident in the way such scholars chose to read Blaga), highlight the increased tendency—apparent from the early 1900s onwards—to aspire toward a recognition and validation of Romanian culture, which undoubtedly sprung, as Lucian Boia confirms, from a brutal inferiority complex. (Boia) Under its auspices, it was difficult, if not impossible for literary work in general (particularly work that treated such sensible matters as the ethnogenesis and the distant past), not to be considered of "national" importance, or

to be packaged wholesale as part of the ‘millennial saga’¹⁸ of affirmation of Romanian exceptionalism.

It is important to understand that the so-called Romanian exceptionalism came in the context of a region-wide interest and preoccupation for ‘national character’, which ultimately made this exceptionalism completely unexceptional. As Margaret Ziolkowski shows, the major quest of Russian culture to explore its cultural roots in view of its own purported exceptionalism happened at around the same time. (Ziolkowski) Akin to late 19th century Russian scholars Oldenburg and Shcherbatskoi, who founded a school of Buddhology arguing that Indian culture is superior to Russian Greek and Roman inheritance (van der Oye, 17), Blaga’s resurrection of Zamolxis in a country which was similarly torn between autochthonous Orthodox Christianity and Latin influences, attempted a similar practice. Looking for the source of its own exceptionalism not geographically, but *temporally* elsewhere—in tune with the ‘Dacification’ of Romanian identity politics taking hold in the academia in the 1920s—Blaga unearthed the Zamolxis myth in order to create a national self-image that allowed Romanians to think of themselves as exceptional. Moreover, attempting to enrich the so-called “national soul” with elements that were different from the over-utilized tropes of Latinization and Dacification, Blaga sought to bring into the picture a mythical element meant to infuse the spiritual energy the country was lacking up to that moment. Emphasizing this aspect, Grancea equally identified spiritualization attempts in the processes of Dacianization and Romanianization at the time: “The racial superiority of the Dacians had to be primarily reflected in their spirituality [to the point where] radical Dacists [wanted to] transform Zamolxism into an ideology, or a moral and religious code” (Grancea, 109)

Just as urbanization and industrialization helped create the anxiety that fed nationalism in the 19th century in the understanding of anthropologist Ernest Gellner, the postsocialist period is poised to redouble that anxiety from a different perspective. Due to the nationalist indoctrination of the romantic, fascist, as well as the nationalist-communist periods, the confusion surrounding Romanian national identity continues to plague cultural discourses in postsocialism. Cultural theorist Ovidiu Țichindeleanu posits that postsocialist Eastern Europe undergoes a racist and intolerant moment fed by the uncritical and re-ideologized readings of cultural phenomena that are due to the massive penetration of capital on markets that had been heretofore inaccessible. (Țichindeleanu, 259) If it is capitalism that replays the role of 19th century industrialization, Blaga’s self-colonialist gesture is seen today as repetition of a movement seeking integration into forms of culture and capital development that are seen superior to one’s own. Țichindeleanu correctly sees this process as specific not to Romanians alone, but to

third world cultures in general. These cultures tend to internalize the colonization process, that is, to see it alongside Bulgarian theorist Alexandre Kiossev as self-colonization and, as Țichindeleanu posits to “culturally align their political-economic space to the periphery of global capitalism.” (263)

As literary scholar Anca Băicoianu suggests, despite some reticence to include postsocialist societies in the postcolonial paradigm, it would be inadequate to isolate Eastern European geopolitics and cultural phenomena, even though some reconceptualizing of postcolonial approaches is in order. Just as the present tendency to re-Europeanize Eastern Europe in order to make the region belong to the sphere of global capital is evident today, the interbellum equally saw manifest drives to integrate peripheral underdeveloped cultural and economic areas into the global flux of economic and cultural capital that would allow minor cultures such as Romania access to the world market of both goods and ideas.

Blaga’s creative act can also be read politically despite the criticism brought against Peter Brook’s stage production of *Mahabharata*, which took place in 1985. Imputing this staging a certain degree of intellectual theft, theatre scholar and practitioner Rustom Bharucha accused Brook of Eurocentrism and neo-colonialism. Because Brook employed religious motifs deemed sacred in various religions of the Indian subcontinent, Bharucha claimed that Brook attempted to universalize and therefore decontextualize a philosophy that was native to the cultural area in which it originated. In an article in which she partially defended Brook’s multiculturalism (the British director employed 21 actors of diverse racial backgrounds from 16 countries), theatre arts scholar Maria Shevtsova explains that globalization permits cultural borrowings and flights of motifs and ideas between cultures that are in flux, particularly in the postmodern period. As we have already seen in relation to the work of Ibsen, Schiller and Heijermans, even though Blaga’s play belongs to the modern rather than to the postmodern tradition, it is evident that the Romanian playwright employed cultural practices then in vogue in Western Europe, allowing the flux of ideas to travel eastward and influence the culture and politics of his day.

Ironically, however, viewed from a postcolonial angle, both Blaga and the Romanian ideologues of the early 20th century internalized the Orientalist discourse to shape themselves precisely into the Orientals they refused to identify with. This discourse, as argued by Maria Todorova, contributed not only to the confirmation of the exoticism of the Orientals, but also helped create the Balkans “into merely a sub-species of orientalism” (Todorova, 454) before the Westerners even created the Orient. Todorova further argues that the Balkans’ own fear of the “oriental other” and of “geographical neighbors, e.g. the Ottoman Empire and Turkey, as well



as regions within the area itself and portions of one's own historical past," (455) strengthened the identification of the Balkans as a space even more mysterious than the Orient itself. The Orient proper had been, *unlike* the Balkans, better explored, and thus idealized, by Western writers since the 18th century. The Balkans, as Todorova correctly identifies, were known at the time for the Balkan Wars of 1912–1913 and the "barbarities committed on this distant European peninsula" (456), and acted as further motivation for Europe to assign the barbaric label to this part of the world. If Blaga's "pagan mystery" did nothing but reinforce this nascent stereotype less than a decade after the end of those atrocities, the Balkan Wars of the 1990s and the anxiety of capital were poised to reconfirm both the self-orientalism of the Eastern Europeans as well as their orientalization by the Western Europeans.

Nationalism, Self-orientalism, and Bakhtin's Re-accentuation

In describing the process of "Orientalization," Said defines the modern Orientalist as one who "rescued the Orient from the obscurity, alienation, and strangeness which he himself had properly distinguished. His research reconstructed the Orient's lost languages, mores, even mentalities, as Champollion reconstructed Egyptian hieroglyphics out of the Rosetta Stone" (Said, 122). Similarly, unbeknownst to him, while creating the new image of Zamolxis, Blaga reached the counter-intuitive conclusion that only mystified material endures. Whether the real Zamolxis had the capacity to teach the Dacians anything is irrelevant, as historical evidence of his existence—let alone his teachings—are largely absent. The resurrected Zamolxis, however, as Dan Dana correctly observes, posed a new and different question to the newly created Romanian identity. Positioning national character "between construction and revolt," Dana identifies this character's inherent double-faced personality: On one hand, "by privileging the notion of *Mystery*, [Blaga] favors the irrational, the illogical and the unconscious in order to come closer to the hidden essence of the universe" (335). On the other hand, as Dana appropriately put it, Blaga "oscillates between the Apollonian and the Dionysian: in this sense, Zamolxis preaches a cult that is more Apollonian in nature, but ends up being worshipped (and killed) by the Bacchanalian dances of the idolatrous crowds" (336).

Conceding that religion is a superficial mass phenomenon fit for plebeians, Blaga prophesizes the very failure of the audience to properly understand his mystified version of identity construction, which leads to its rejection by the masses. Since his attempt to introduce the Zamolxist element as a potential basis for national character (re)construction represents Blaga's own penchant for idealism in a society and culture too consumed by crisis, self-doubt, and uncertainty, it is

these latter and intrinsically anxiety-ridden attributes that are going to win over (and crush) the attempt to re-formulate identity.

In light of a rarely attempted postcolonial reading of nationalistic discourses in Romania, all that is left of Blaga's idealistic undertaking is a larger identification with the Daco-Roman construct proposed by his predecessors, which became part of the national imaginary thanks solely to a highly speculative linguistic argument. Thus, despite giving Zamolxism and its pseudo-science an undeserved boost (Dana), Blaga failed at consolidating the Zamolxist myth into a myth of origins, and thus, equally failed at establishing *Zamolxis, Pagan Mystery* as the national Romanian play in the fashion of Western dramatists before him.

Aside from his ideological failures, this is equally owed to the over-intellectual and over-philosophical nature of the material in relation to the consumption capacities of audiences not yet prepared to meet the challenges and ramifications of Blaga's philosophy. Due to its heavily poetical and stylized form, Blaga's theatre didn't prove dramatic enough for large scale consumption, which would otherwise be required for the popularization of theatrical material, his plays being generally cumbersome and awkward feats which failed to convince the public: "Too much poetry, Ibsenism, that is the conflict of ideas, mythologization, a certain expressionist schematism [...] prevent Blaga's theatre from being represented on stage" (Calinescu qtd in Blaga, IX).

Despite glorious reviews written during the nationalist-communist era, which almost invariably glorified productions of autochthonous provenance irrespective of reception (such as the one of V. Mindra, which comes second in lyricism only to Blaga's play itself), *Zamolxis* remained an obscure and seldom-performed play throughout socialism. For example, at the Transylvanian National Theatre of Cluj, a theatre which ironically carries Blaga's name, only one of his plays were performed there during the duration of the socialist regime, but five productions of his lesser-known plays were staged in this theatre thereafter⁹. *Zamolxis*, Blaga's best known play aside from *Mesterul Manole*, was never staged there. Ironically, *Zamolxis* was staged instead at the Hungarian National Theatre of the same city in 1924 (in Hungarian) by legendary theatre and film director Jenő Janovics. Even though records related to the play's reception are not readily accessible, the production's apparent success due to its Bucharest tour of 1925 speaks more of the play's universal than national appeal, which may have proven more philosophically than theatrically successful in the nationalist context of the 20th century as an escape from that very nationalism.

Discharged of its ideological baggage, *Zamolxis* could become an accessible payoff on the (highly aestheticized) motif of man's thirst for the divine. In fact, most nationalist literary products, if taken out of their

politicized context make for a more universally accessible and culturally enriching experience. Ironically, the vehement nationalist insistence to promote Romanian literature and other postcolonial Eastern European cultures as “representative” or “indicative” of a certain specificity whose exact scope and purpose eluded most of these promoters, is the very stumbling block which precludes the absorption of Romanian literature, for example, outside of the national cultural borders. And it is this unaddressed postcolonial angle that, particularly because of its century-long association with nationalism, fails to allow an interpretative transformation of most such literary material.

Finally, while setting off to associate the ‘national soul’ not with abstract or heroic imagery, but with the professed existence of an actual individual such as Zamolxis, Blaga retraces Bakhtin’s concept of re-accentuation, which the latter describes as the attempt to reinterpret the language of a literary work through its restaging, as it were, in a different time and context from the one in which it was originally intended. In his *Dialogic Imagination*, Bakhtin describes the danger critics face in the process of deviating from the interpretation of language as it was intended by its original author. The more distant we are from such a language, Bakhtin argues, the more difficult the process of re-accentuation when an author uses the tradition available before him. Even though he admits the existence of re-accentuation as a healthy literary process via which literary cultures borrow from one another, and ultimately perpetuate culture through centuries (420), he warns against interpreting the equivocal moments of history through the eyes of the present, as “it is precisely

in the most sharply heteroglot eras, when the collision and interaction of languages is especially intense and powerful, when heteroglossia washes over literary language from all sides” (418).

Not only has Blaga used the Zamolxian “language,” as Bakhtin would call it, to pin a spiritual identity on the proto-Romanians whose relation to contemporary “national character” is vague at best, if not altogether absent, but nationalist interpreters of Blaga’s work have similarly re-accentuated his oeuvre to expand Zamolxism’s spiritual qualities into the political domain. Throughout these consecutive processes of interpretation and re-accentuation, going back to Said, it becomes increasingly clearer that the use of ancient myth for the re-interpretation of political circumstances sets off deeper challenges than those intended by their initiators.

At once trying to distinguish themselves from the Oriental in order to claim belongingness to Western Europe, while at the same time unconsciously identifying with the Oriental in a process confirming the labeling of Eastern Europe as “barbaric,” Romanian nationalists like Lucian Blaga and his followers underwent a double process of re-creation and re-accentuation which ironically estranged Romanian culture, against the intentions of their promoters. Blaga’s *Zamolxis*, while failing as an ideology to create the “Romanian soul,” highlights the mechanisms that undergird the performative nature of nationalism, while exposing the crevices that point to an unacknowledged postcolonial identity.

Notes

1. In her book *Soviet Heroic Poetry in Context: Folklore or Fakelore*, Margaret Ziolkowski describes the convoluted history of Macpherson’s purported discovery of the figure of Ossian, and his remolding into a Scottish bard, as well as the ferocious indictments of later critics who charge Macpherson with forgery. A similar process surrounds Lönnrot’s attempts to compile *Kalevala*, an alleged Finnish epic which turned out to borrow heavily from both Swedish and Russian sources. Ironically, in his endeavor, Lönnrot was attempting just the opposite, namely to distance Finnish national character from that of the Swedes and the Russians, and by doing so to establish a sense of cultural identity.
2. Aside from standardizing the Cyrillic alphabet, Vuk Karadžik (1787–1864) played a significant role in laying the basis for the use of vernacular Serbian as a literary language as distinct from church Slavonic. His linguistic reforms were later used for the legitimization of Serbian nationhood in its struggle for emancipation from the Ottoman Empire. Vasile Alecsandri’s ethnographic work (1821–1890) would be extensively used by literary societies and philosophers to both clamor for the independence and unification of Romanian principalities, as well as define “national character.” His publishing of the folk ballad *Miorita* would have a great impact on the shaping of Romanian thought, with Blaga himself using it as a source of inspiration for a large part of his nationalistic philosophical work, as I show in this paper.
3. *Trajan and Dokia*, later considered by George Călinescu one of the four fundamental Romanian myths.
4. A term alternatively translated as “spirit of the people” or “national character,” *Volksgeist* was first used by Hegel, but it is Johann Gottfried Herder who is credited with having extolled the virtues of nationhood and identified them with the young German culture of the 18th century. For his insistence on defining as unique the creative essence of a particular ethnic community as expressed through vernacular language, Herder has later been dubbed by various scholars, as Isaiah Berlin attests, “the father of nationalism.”
5. Aarseth convincingly makes this argument in *Peer Gynt and Ghosts*, which also initiates an in-depth discussion on the



connection between national spirit and folklore in Ibsen. In a similar move with what I shall argue happened to Blaga's play, albeit with opposite effects, Ibsen's satirizing and ridiculing of the concept of Norwegian identity has been ironically embraced as an acceptable and even desirable portrayal of 'Norwegian spirit' in the decades leading to the 20th century and thereafter, negative qualities notwithstanding. However, here, as well as in the works of the other Western playwrights it is evident that it is the play that creates the 'spirit', and not vice versa. It should also be noted that even though embraced as quintessentially Norwegian today, *Peer Gynt* was written in Danish, since at the time of publication in 1867 Norway didn't exist as a political entity, a fact that adds further layers of interpretation to the play's reception in the 20th century.

6. Although it is beyond the scope of this paper, I also argue that the failure to define nationhood in Romania after the turn of the century also facilitated the rise of populist movements leading to the country's embracing of a fascist ideology in the 1930s, as well as a possible resurgence thereof in the first decades of the 21st century. For a more detailed account of this process see "The Use of Language in the Making of Romanian Nationalism from Dimitrie Cantemir and Mihai Eminescu to the Iron Guard and National Communism."
7. For his romantic nationalism, Mihai Eminescu (1850-1889) has been elevated to the status of 'national poet' in Romania soon after his death. In the 20th century a veritable 'Eminescu cult' was employed by both right-wing and pseudo-leftist regimes to further advance nationalism.
8. This play by Blaga is one of his few works to have been translated into English. However, I believe that the 2001 edition published by the Center for Romanian Studies and translated by Doris Plantus-Runey as *Zalmoxis: Obscure Pagan* doesn't do justice to either work or title.
9. The term "mioritic" is a derivative of the *Miorita* ballad collected by Alecsandri in the 19th century, which describes the romanticized death of a shepherd, and embraces the mystical union between man and cosmos that runs its course through the natural environment. In the ballad this is depicted so romantically as to become fatalistic in character.
10. "Marele anonim" is another difficult term to translate. It can be literally rendered as 'the Great Anonymous One,' but I simplified it to 'the Anonymous One' for convenience. In his philosophical work, Blaga uses "Fondul Anonym" to refer to a similar concept coeval with a quasi-divine source of creation. This term has been rendered by some English scholars discussing Blaga's work as "the Anonymous Fund."
11. Dana is one of the few scholars of "Zamolxism," a nationalist academic discipline that took hold in Romania during the second half of the 20th century, whose goal was to conduct research on the figure of historical Zamolxis and its implication for the nationalist social sciences that took hold during the nationalist-communist period.
12. The theory itself was not new (as it had previously been promoted by the ideologues of the *Transylvanian School* movement) but the virulence of the 19th century movement was.
13. People of Tatar descent who acquired the Magyar language after being colonized as border guards in Transylvania by the Hungarian kings in the Middle Ages.
14. Which, even though historically represented only a fraction of modern Romania, for reasons unclear is currently accepted as synonymous with its current territory.
15. According to Romanian historian Lucian Boia, the historians in charge of the 'immigrationist theory' are Johann Christian von Engel and Franz Josef Sulzer (Boia, 47).
16. As mentioned above, Zamolxism became something that many scholars today would identify as a pseudo-science, with a large number of academic works dedicated to the connection between Zamolxis and the Romanians. However, infatuation with the Gaetic god also spurred some historians of religion such as Mircea Eliade to conduct comparative studies research. In his book on Zalmoxis, Eliade, while validating the autochthonous nature of the Dacian cult, nonetheless launches in some very pertinent comparisons with various other Indo-European religious traditions highlighting the synchronous and multicultural character of mythical narratives.
17. Nataša Kovačević claims this discourse is still alive today in the countries making up the former Yugoslavia, in which ex-Yugoslavs insist to think of themselves as European in distinction to the "Orientals" among them. See Kovačević.
18. Various nationalist writers regard the creation of "Greater Romania" in 1918-1919 as an accomplishment of an "age-old dream" shared by Romanians who had been separated by the political boundaries of Moldova and Wallachia (up until 1878) and Transylvania, and which were joined together after the Versailles peace treaties of 1919 after tremendous pressure put upon the Great Powers by the Romanian legation. (MacMillan)
19. The repertory of "Teatrul National Cluj Napoca" is available online at <http://www.teatrulnationalcluj.ro/>.

Bibliography

- Aarseth, Asbjørn. *Peer Gynt and Ghosts*. London: Macmillan Education, 1989.
- Bakhtin, M.M. *The Dialogic Imagination*. Austin: University of Texas Press, 1981.
- Berlin, Isaiah. *Three Critics of the Enlightenment: Vico, Hamann, Herder*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999.

- Băicoianu, Anca. "Is the 'Colonial' in 'Post-colonial' the 'Soviet' in 'Post-soviet'? The Boundaries of Postcolonial Studies." *Dacoromania Litteraria* II (2015): 90-100.
- Blaga, Lucian. *Téatru*. Bucharest: Minerva, 1970.
- Blaga, Lucian. *Opere: Trilogia cosmologică* [Cosmologic Trilogy]. Bucharest: Minerva, 1988.
- Boia, Lucian. *History and Myth in Romanian Consciousness*. Budapest: CEU Press, 2001.
- Close, Elizabeth. *The Development of Modern Romanian*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1974.
- Dana, Dan. "The 'Zalmoxis' of Lucian Blaga, between construction and revolt: an aspect of the debate on the 'national specificity' in interwar Romania." *Caietele Echinox* 12 (2007): 334-353.
- Eliade, Mircea. *Zalmoxis, the Vanishing God: Comparative Studies in the Religions and Folklore of Dacia and Eastern Europe*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1972.
- Gellner, Ernest. *Nations and Nationalism*. Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1983.
- Georgescu, Florin. *Capitalul în România postcomunistă*, vol. 1 [The Capital in Postcommunist Romania]. Bucharest: Editura Academiei Române, 2018.
- Grancea, Mihaela. *Dacismul și avaturile discursului istoriografic postcomunist* [Dacianism and the Avatars of the Post-communist Historiographic Discourse]. *Studia Politica: Romanian Political Science Review* 1 (2007): 95-115.
- Herodotus. *The History of Herodotus*, vol. I. <http://www.gutenberg.org/files/2707/2707-h/2707-h.htm#link4noteref-91>.
- Kiossev, Alexander. *The Self-Colonizing Metaphor*. <http://monumenttotransformation.org/atlas-of-transformation/html/s/self-colonization/the-self-colonizing-metaphor-alexander-kiossev.html>.
- Kovačević, Nataša. *Narrating Post/Communism: Colonial discourse and Europe's Borderline Civilization*. London: Routledge, 2008.
- Lampont, Francis. *Virgins, Bastards and Saviours of the Nation: Reflections on Schiller's Historical Dramas*. In *Schiller: A Birmingham Symposium*, edited by Nicholas Martin. Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2006.
- MacMillan, Margaret. *Paris 1919: Six Months That Changed the World*. New York: Random House, 2003.
- Mindra, V. "Piesa românească în premieră." *Revista Teatrul*, no. 1 (1977): 26-31.
- Nistor, Eugeniu. "The Mioritical Space of Lucian Blaga." *Studia Universitatis Petru Maior Philologia*, no. 3 (2004): 98-109.
- Said, Edward. *Orientalism*. London: Penguin, 1977.
- Shevtsova, Maria. "Interculturalism, Aestheticism, Orientalism: Starting from Peter Brook's Mahabharata." *Theatre Research International* 22, no. 2 (1997): 98-104.
- Strabo. *Geography*. <http://www.gutenberg.org/files/44884/44884-h/44884-h.htm>.
- Todorova, Maria. "The Balkans: From Discovery to Invention." *Slavic Review* 2 (1994): 453-482.
- Țichindeleanu, Ovidiu. *Contracultură. Rudimente de filosofie critică*. Cluj: Idea, 2016.
- Țion, Lucian. "The Use of Language in the Making of Romanian Nationalism from Dimitrie Cantemir and Mihai Eminescu to the Iron Guard and National Communism." *Acta Universitatis Sapientiae: European and Regional Studies* 20 (2021): 63-92.
- Van der Oye, David Schimmelpenninck. *Russian Orientalism: Asia in the Russian Mind from Peter the Great to the Emigration*. Yale: Yale University Press, 2010.
- Ziolkowski, Margaret. *Soviet Heroic Poetry in Context: Folklore or Fakelore*. Newark: University of Delaware Press, 2013.