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### On Ana Blandiana's *My Native Land A4*

Ana Blandiana is the pen name of Otilia Valeria Coman, probably Romania's greatest contemporary poet. Coman continued the political opposition to Ceaușescu's totalitarian regime that she learned from her father, so soon a pseudonym was necessary if she were to enact her faith that poetry is a form of resistance to what history makes of us. One aspect of her greatness is to understand not only the tyranny that so readily issues from political authority but also the modes of complicity that seduce people into cooperating with it. An even more compelling aspect is her grasp of why her strand of poetry, her poetics of silence, demands an integrity forged on opposition to that tyranny. The blank page (A4 is a standard European stationery) stands as a perennial reminder of how freedom emerges even within repression.

Yet I am most moved in her book by the delicacy and scope realized time after time by her profoundly analogical imagination. This imagination is as visible and as powerful in her prose as in her poetry. Consider the essay from 1999 with which the translators conclude the volume. Blandiana's basic claim is that "the ultimate purpose of a poem should be to re-establish silence." This claim may seem like a cliché of Eastern European pseudo-mysticism, but Blandiana makes a brilliant case with the appropriateness of her examples, which produce intricate and surprising analogical turns. The silence of lyric, says Blandiana, stands out against the epic's ways of offering "an immense river of words" without even "the slightest room for doubt." This comparison is quite inventive. The epic introduces a striking contrast not only to her own poetry's lyricism but also to an entire culture in which all aspects of assertive generalization have become highly suspect.

But if poetry today has largely turned from the power of assertion to the power of suggestion, then we are likely to have some questions about suggestion's actual power. That is, until Blandiana puts the case this way: "[T]he higher the ratio of inference to speech, the closer the verses come to poetry.... Where nothing is said, all can be suggested." Her prose may be built on the discipline of trying to say nothing, but she considers it—and proves it—capable of saying a great deal with concision and bite. These are not

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unfamiliar sentiments. But they are rarely stated with such concise scope. So while the idea of art as non-being is familiar from Kasimir Malevich, the idea of the artwork as a “tenuous and imprecise boundary between existence and non-existence” is pure Blandiana, born of the intense realism that demands non-existence as a means of surviving.

Blandiana recognizes that in poetry it’s words that mediate, shape, and define what silence becomes possible: “We witness how words withdraw into themselves—as a snail, disappointed by what it discovers, retracts its antennae—in a process that has no end, like time.” The double simile here leaps first into the psyche of the snail and then into the figure of time as endless process. This is an analogical double turn that makes the sentence itself quite a voyage of discovery, establishing a rhetorical form for what lies beyond words.

### §

In Blandiana’s poems, a lean, sharp style and recurrent devices like the simile define structural contrasts that make the poetry dwell in a place of difference, and hence a kind of non-being, by its awareness of competing poles of desire. This place of difference is very difficult to maintain. (Some of the poems collapse into generalized assertion; some into precious ways of maintaining an aura of poetic value.) For Blandiana, the best way to maintain the force of difference is to create rhetorical figures that comment on poetry’s own fragility. It is as if preserving fragility while giving it structure (and so intelligence) were the one way poetry could both acknowledge and finesse the forces of destruction that the world brings to bear on the space of silence. For the remainder of this review, I will track what I see as the four basic motifs Blandiana elaborates in her poetry, all of which build imaginative states significant for how they stage awareness of their own fragility and make it possible to celebrate fragility’s particular kind of power. Let me begin with what I consider her most successful poem exploring the resources of delicacy, then turn to poems where she puts that delicacy to work in more aggressive contestations with destructive forces—from God to the state to simple human greed.

This is “Wonder,” a marvelous use of impersonality to generalize an intricate psychological sense of how delicacy can handle the demand for explanation and interpretation. Here Blandiana shows how simile can reign supreme. The poem works hard to find ways for language simply to present figures without having to interpret them:

It comes in with a swagger.  
It leaves with a shrug.  
That timeless time  
When wonder flashes into a mind.

Wonder—like a beach ball lost in the sea  
That the waves keep bringing back  
To the shore,  
Only to take it away again—  
Without allowing us  
One brief respite of meaning.

We have to ask whether a “respite of meaning” is desirable, or if wonder is wondrous in the full sense by managing to provide an alternative to the space of meanings. That concern also generates more specific questions. Why does wonder swagger and leave with a shrug? Why is the experience timeless? What is the significance for the poem of the simile’s switch in register from abstract assertions to concrete images? That switch provides the poem with content and intensity while resisting the bluntness and self-assurance of “meaning.” The crucial distinguishing features here are the work of overt simile and that of the simile embedded in personification. For these figures put into action a capacity in language to present imaginative activity without conceptual determination. Blandiana’s poetry creates fields of playfulness that simply revel in their own intricacy without having to add up to any straightforward assertion. The beach ball takes on an analogical presence that expects nothing except perhaps a capacity to fascinate: it provides “One brief respite from meaning.” And the specific figure also constitutes a version of this timeless rhythm, oscillating between the swagger of bold presence and the shrug of resignation. The beach ball is meaningful without bearing meaning because it affects the present tense of those who can be fascinated by it, while also allowing people to adapt to its absence without complaint and without feelings of frustrated entitlement. Wonder just occurs as a flash, and perhaps only to those who recognize the absolute difference between presence and meaning. Where metaphor projects an ideal marriage of the imagined and the real, simile is like that beach ball offering only concrete analogies that half deny the domain of concepts that bring them into play. In Blandiana’s poetry simile refuses demands of the imagination on the real in order to provide a continual sense of the tentative place the imagination occupies as it warily seeks to occupy some piece of the world for which it’s worth risking the threat of social interaction.

The next poem I discuss introduces a second, very different attitude, and a very different, much more severe version of Blandiana’s intricate psychology. Here the issue is not the poetics of silence but the kind of moral morass that occurs when it seems that the laws of nature prevail over whatever potential there might be for human freedom. The overt subject of “Animal Planet” is theology. The poem asks how we can worship a god responsible for both

the violence of our nature and the moral principle of turning the other cheek, which ensures that the violence necessarily prevails. But the deep subject is how these laws of nature acquire free reign through tyranny in all its forms. The poem has little room for simile: power imposes laws of identity whose force is to let metaphor absorb details into protracted allegoresis:

Less guilty, though not innocent,  
In this universe where  
The laws of nature decide  
Who should kill whom  
And whoever kills most is king.  
How admiringly they film  
The placid and ferocious lion as it tears a fawn to pieces!  
And whenever I close my eyes or switch off the telly,  
I feel that I participate less in the crime,  
Even though the candle of life  
Will always need blood to go on burning—  
The blood of another.

Less guilty, though not innocent,  
I sat at table with the hunters,  
Nevertheless, I loved to caress the long and silky  
Ears of hares  
Lying in stacks, like a tumulus  
On top of an embroidered tablecloth.  
Guilty, even though I didn't  
Pull the trigger,  
And I covered my ears  
Horrified by the sound of death  
And by the smell of the shameless sweat of the hunters who fired the shots.

Less guilty, though not innocent,  
In any case more innocent than you,  
The author of this pitiless perfection,  
Who set up this design  
And afterwards, taught me to turn the other cheek.

No wonder that Blandiana has to add another poem, "Prayer," in order to assert the possibility that the son be seen as not at all resembling this father. Here the best one can do under the domination of the father is to hope that one can be less guilty than other people, though everyone must admit some fascination with violence and some wish for harm to others. The force that

produced this order, then, has a great deal to be guilty for—not just for the murderous laws of nature but for the unhappiness of those who can only aspire to be less guilty. More sinister yet, the desire merely to proclaim oneself “less guilty” also submits to the trap set by the “author of this pitiless perfection,” simply because it still buys into a hope that there can be a moral order. Not only does the agent have to feel guilt, but a guilt underwritten by a morality that precludes any hope for change and condemns her to the status of a willing victim for “the hunters.” Turning the other cheek puts humans in the impossible position of always having to judge themselves as inadequate. They become prey for their own self-conscious judgments.

My third poem suggests the only possible way out of that trap for Blandiana. Given her wariness about any orientation toward action, she must stress the relationship between two aspects of an alternative course. Writing must emphasize how awareness provides witness sympathetic toward conditions of human suffering. And writing must also afford a constructed site where silent knowing replaces anxious and intemperate speaking. For Blandiana, like Arthur Schopenhauer, art frees knowing from willing and allows for dwelling in something like pure contemplation. And in that contemplation writing gives access to the domain of the son rather than that of the father, and here faith is still a human possibility. The opening poem of the volume, “In the Frescoes,” puts the case for such faith in these terms:

In their hands, the founders carry  
Heavy monasteries,  
Like expendable capital  
In the exchange office of the afterlife.  
Young monks  
With PhDs from Cambridge  
And ageing peasant women  
Venerate liturgical ornaments  
And crawl on their knees  
Across flagstones with Cyrillic inscriptions:  
Loudspeakers  
Transmit the mass  
As far as the yard, crowded with tents,  
As far as the roadside where  
Parked cars  
Are waiting to be blessed;  
While faith—  
Like the swallows  
That circle and dart inside the cupola  
Frightened by the bells—

Reels in fear,  
Crashes into the painted walls  
Of the Pantocrator,  
Descends,  
And obediently alights in the frescoes.

This poem is impersonal narrative, Blandiana's preferred form because it allows her to cultivate broad scope for her scenarios. Each of the main clauses provides a situation where the appearance of faith seems to expose practical motives that actually deny what they seem to serve. First we see the fresco itself, dominated by the optimistic greed of the founders, then the various classes of self-abnegating worshippers, and then the loudspeakers transmitting the mass to another confident group waiting to be blessed. With the sudden imaginative leap to the simile of the swallows, the poem suggests that faith can take on a kind of reality once it finds its natural analogue. Yet even after the swallows arrive we have to ask why faith descends "obediently," since to obey in this world is to act like those who make a travesty of faith.

Blandiana suggests that faith must be obedient because it has learned through the swallows to align itself with natural being instead of human duplicity. Faith is obedient also because it can recognize the implications of the contrast between what the frescoes represent as religious ideal and what the human behavior entails as people impose their own predatory motives on the images art creates. So at the beginning of her volume we see the same situation that Blandiana stresses in her essay at the end of the book. The more art is deformed because of its relation to actual audiences, the more we have to be able to see its vital meaningfulness as a condition of silence and non-being, where imagination can penetrate a variety of motives because its mode of awareness has no will. This awareness, mediated by the swallows as pure acceptance of the world, can recognize how faith still can reside within the frescoes because of their obedience to states of vision rather than states of practice. The more clearly we see the nature of human motives, the better we are positioned to experience the value of what does not have any designs on the world except to be able to live in its own silent fullness.

"Requiem," an elegy for the poet's mother (the translators call it the volume's central poem), exemplifies Blandiana's fourth basic concern. She wants sheerly imaginative constructive activity to afford well-defined sites of reflection and to manifest them as actual sites of experience. And she manages to create this imaginative realism by relying on the force of repeated deictics. The word "Here," inventively deployed, simply insists on our having to treat what we imagine as real, or what we experience as seamless with our imaginative life. "Here" and "This" call attention to how life takes form in art while art gives immediacy to existential situations. The world beyond language

suddenly becomes present in the activity that language itself is pursuing. “Here” comes to suffice as both an actual situation and an enabling linguistic framework. Such correlations approach the mystical: it becomes impossible to say whether the ultimate reference is a state of the body or of the mind breaking through to imaginative self-reference. Or, to make the same point another way, deictic language can reach out from art back into the world, demanding self-consciousness of art’s own distinctive powers to refer to the world.

In the richest and most challenging possible use of the syntheses embodied by deictic language, “Requiem” expresses the speaker’s hope for incorporating death into life and so reconciling her life with her mother’s death. Since I cannot deal with the entire poem, I am going to make up a composite quotation from its twelve sections to highlight how the motif of silence intensifies the flexibility of “Here” in the poem. Then we should get a useful picture of how Blandiana envisions her mother moving from dying body to continuing presence, continually using direct address to treat her mother’s memory and her place in an afterlife as sources of both location and inspiration. And then we will also achieve for a moment the silence necessary to appreciate how this poem seeks the bonds that speaking might create:

‘If you don’t feel at home there,  
Remember Novalis.  
And, above all, don’t forget  
To tie a knot in your handkerchief  
To let me know  
When you’re coming back.’

[...]

The fact that I can’t see you,  
That now we can’t meet any more,  
That I go to  
Pick up the phone we used to talk on  
And stop my hand in midair—  
None of that means that you aren’t here.

[...]

‘I dreamed that you were dead  
And that you called to me from there,’ I said.  
‘Don’t cry, don’t cry’  
You tell me  
‘There is here.’

[...]

Be my anchor  
In the clay.  
Weigh me down with the grass  
Here, in the present  
That has already passed away.  
Be my anchor  
And ask...

[...]

'Write,' you told me.  
And I took pencil and paper  
Thinking you wanted to dictate something to me.  
'Write,' you repeated.  
But you were as silent as an icon.  
So I have begun to write  
Your silence.  
Your silence that everything flows from,  
Like blood flows from a wound.

That closing simile is simply marvelous. It shifts focus to a general impersonal situation that subsumes the personal. But it also in effect penetrates the personal to the most intimate possible site of feeling one's own blood issuing from a wound. Yet it is the silence between mother and daughter that is flowing, full of life and now full too of words that deepen the unspeakable bond, anchored in pain and received in joy.

Finally I want to note how the volume's closing poem, "Country of Unease," returns to deixis, this time in the figurative force of "This," in order to recapitulate what substance the art of silence can aspire to. Here Blandiana shows that writing itself can give a significant body to the places of the imagination's dwelling. This is a native land, despite all the alienation that locates it in the self and the self in it:

This is the country of unease,  
Always about to change its mind  
Any second now  
Without, however, giving up hope of  
Some indefinite possibility.  
This is my native land



[...]

This is the country of unease:  
Will I manage some day  
To decipher these traces that no one can see  
But that I know are there, and waiting  
For me to write them out  
In my native land: A4?

I am not sure that this is a land in which one can live. I am sure from Blandiana that it is worth the effort to dwell in the space where one sees, as here, the shapes of all the oppositions that torment the self, and where one can manage a kenosis of care.

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