

GLASGOW REVIEW OF BOOKS

Ana Blandiana and Hölderlin's Eternal Question

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In March, 2016 Ana Blandiana was awarded the European Poet of Freedom Prize in Gdansk, the Polish city of freedom and birthplace of Solidarnosc. The award was given for her collection *My Native Land A4*. Translated into five languages (English, Spanish, Italian, Polish and Catalan), it has thus been recognized as one of the great European books on liberty. Meditative and philosophical, intimate and public, Blandiana's verse explores the motif of freedom in many of its aspects.

Blandiana's poetry fascinates with its metaphoric directness, philosophical depth and desire to express the inexpressible. Her conviction that existence is rooted in mystery turns many of her poems into riddles:

poetry is born out of the desire to express what cannot be expressed, out of the obstinacy to define what everybody knows is indefinable, out of the need to offer something which people do not even understand that they are in need of, out of a disquietude so difficult to bear that it becomes an affliction and whose intensity can only be compared with the happiness [...] which one attains time to time.[i]

Translating Blandiana was an adventure on which we embarked because she lured us with the tantalizing limpidity and immeasurable depths of her verse. In the Romania of the seventies, her poems were an act of hope and courage and she was seen as a legendary figure of unblemished idealism. An aura surrounds her name; one critic has referred to her as "the most noble name in Romanian letters". Those who have come to know her are stunned by her charisma, optimism and altruism. Those who have listened to her poetry readings – in the eighties she gathered masses – have experienced a mystic moment in which, despite language barriers, poetry is communicated before it is understood.

The poems selected here come from two earlier collections, *The Sun of Hereafter* (2000) and *Ebb of the Senses* (2004) – to be published next year by Bloodaxe in one volume. These poems were written after the fall of the Iron Curtain while Blandiana was actively involved in the public sphere as President of the Civic Alliance (1990-2001), a non-political organization that made possible Romania's integration into the European Union. Both books share the same thematic unity and mark a turning point in Blandiana's poetic evolution: they lead towards a new conception of poetry as a meditation on being that culminates in 2010 with *My Native Land A4*, whose hermetic title refers to the European paper size A4, the boundaries of which define the only possible identity of the poet. Poetry becomes her epicenter and place of exile.

The Sun of Hereafter and *Ebb of the Senses* decry the numbness of contemporary consciousness and the void at the center of a culture that embraces materialistic consumerism. For Blandiana, the writer is not so much a creator as a witness of the world he lives in, although she defines poetry as “not a series of events, but a sequence of visions.” Hölderlin is a central presence in *Ebb of the Senses* and the poet's life and work present many points of interest for Blandiana. In his famous elegy ‘Brot und Wein’ (1801), written shortly after the French Revolution (1789-99) and the Reign of Terror, he is looking for the meaning of the poetic word and the role of the poet in history: “wozu Dichter in dürftiger Zeit?” (“What use are poets in times of need?”). This essential question has challenged poets ever since and represents a crucial issue for Blandiana, which she addresses in many of her poems and essays.

Blandiana visited Hölderlin's house in Tübingen in 2000 and this experience is reflected in her poems. Hölderlin appealed to Blandiana in many ways. He was a Romantic poet with a tragic fate: after the death of the woman he loved, he went insane. He was hospitalized by force and his mother gave her consent to the violent psychiatric treatment applied to him. He fell into the hands of a doctor, Ferdinand Autenrieth[ii], who invented a mask to prevent the screaming of the mentally ill, prefiguring the fate of many East European dissidents. Like them, he was denied paper (writing was believed to be a pernicious excitant) and he wrote poems on top of previous ones. Both his family and his friends, Hegel and Schelling, abandoned him. Not only did his family not support him, but they schemed to deprive him of his inheritance and successfully petitioned that his upkeep be paid by the state. Hölderlin was placed in the care of a carpenter, Ernst Zimmer, who appreciated his poems and treated him humanely. They both died in the same year. The symbiosis between poet and carpenter ^{Save} appeals to Blandiana who, like Frost, considers that the poet works with words as a craftsman works with physical objects. She admires the unpretentious solidarity and humility of both.

Hölderlin and Blandiana share a sense of belatedness, a “metaphysical sadness” (as the Romanian poet and philosopher Lucian Blaga said) in a world in which gods are absent and the lyric ‘I’ longs for their return. In ‘Brot und Wein’, Hölderlin is aware that “we come too late”, since “the gods still live, / But up over our heads, up in a different world.” Their absence, or their mysterious return, is also a constant theme for Blandiana, in whose cosmology gods are born out of the “wound at the end of the world / From which are still dripping, / Unknown to one another, / Hypothetical gods.” In Hölderlin's elegy, bread and wine become signs of the “return” of the gods “who were once / With us, and who'll return when the time is right” to unite the Greek mystery traditions of Dionysus and Demeter with Christ, the last of the old gods and the first of the new. The night in his poem announces the end of one era and the advent of another, in which poets have to rise not only to the greatness of ancient writers, but also to the heights of Christ's revelation. Like Hölderlin, Blandiana also affirms the continuity between Hellenism and Christianity. She is also concerned with the fate of the gods and the way they are replaced by others, especially Apollo, the god of poetry, who announces Christ.

Blandiana's poems are written from an apocalyptic perspective in the light of “the sun of hereafter” that outlasts Christ's crucifixion. The landscapes and the time are those of the end of a dramatic change in which the world becomes unrecognizable. The poet perceives herself



as “the light, / Shining to the transparent end of the world / In search of the place / Where I could be alone enough / To put myself out” (‘Landscape’). She speaks from the vantage point of an ending in which the landscape becomes transparent in the light of a new yet more ominous revelation. Hölderlin’s question as to the poet’s role in times of hardship remains to this day a vital issue which addresses the very essence of poetic existence even two centuries after it was formulated. History has more often than not been adverse to poets and poetry. Hölderlin’s inquiry speaks to the relationship between poet and power, poet and freedom. In an essay whose title quotes Hölderlin’s line, “wozu Dichter in dürftiger Zeit?”, Blandiana argues that both poet and poetry prove unsettling and subversive and their role is to resist what Mircea Eliade called “the terror of history”.

In Adorno’s opinion, after Auschwitz writing poetry was barbaric.[iii] However, Blandiana reflects on the poet’s role not only in the dark times of a dictatorship but also in the new era of post-Communist materialism. For Blandiana, the function of the poetic word, understood as a metaphor of all forms of artistic expressions, is that of an antidote to an ideology aimed at the denigration of life and the human being. Maybe culture is not as efficient a means as political action, but it prevents an intellectual blackout by holding on to precisely those values that the system wanted to annihilate in order to triumph. The poetic word assumes the heroic mission of countering an ideology that destroys the individual through systematic brainwashing so as to create the “new man”.

Blandiana continues the tradition of those poets who, like Boris Pasternak, understood the importance of the poetic word, “That lines of verse are able to kill, / To choke you to death with blood” (1931). Mandelstam went to the camps because he wrote the epigram, ‘The Kremlin Highlander’ (November 1933); while Anna Akhmatova, for whose poem ‘Requiem’ (1935-1961) her husband was killed, her son imprisoned, released and threatened with execution and she herself exiled, was silenced and placed under surveillance. Akhmatova writes “if only you knew out of what darkness poetry is sometimes born”. Like her, Blandiana draws attention to the fact that in prisons and concentration camps people resisted and survived by composing poetry, which in the absence of paper and pencil, they memorized collectively by mnemonic techniques. They did not write for fame, nor did they conceive literature as an aesthetic game or a commodity. They gave voice to their suffering and by doing so tried to lend meaning to the “terror of history” or “to fill the desert with inviolable voice”, as Eliot would have put it.

In Romania, during the two waves of terror, 1945-1953 and 1958-1962, writers and intellectuals were sentenced for imaginary crimes, such as reading a book published in the West or wanting to publish a book abroad, or simply typing up a manuscript. Examples are the German-language writers’ group consisting of Andreas Birkner, Wolf von Aichelburg, Georg Scherg, Hans Bergel and Harald Siegmund, and, in particular, the Noica-Pillat group of intellectuals. Following a series of interrogations and arrests beginning in 1958, this group of writers was tried in 1960, a few months after Boris Pasternak was awarded the Nobel Prize, to the chagrin of the Soviet authorities. In the absence of political leaders the Communists feared that writers could become opinion leaders, a privilege allowed only to party members. The Romanian authorities wanted to prevent a second “Pasternak” in their own country. The trial involved 300 intellectuals, of which 23 were accused and 23 were forced to act as witnesses for the prosecution and were later involved in other framed trials (two died during the interrogations). Among the accused was the famous philosopher Constantin Noica, the poet Dinu Pillat (whose father, the Modernist poet Ion Pillat, was the first to translate Eliot’s *The Waste Land* into Romanian), the writer Al. O. Teodoreanu and others who were to become famous after their release: Nicolae Steinhardt (a writer of Jewish origin, later theologian, and author of *The Diary of Happiness*), Sergiu Al. George (Orientalist), and Alexandru Paleologu (essayist, literary critic, diplomat). Their trumped-up charges included: maintaining correspondence with the Romanian writers Mircea Eliade, Eugen Ionesco and Emil Cioran, who were living and publishing in the West and branded by the Communist authorities as “enemies of

the people"; having read their books published in Paris – such as Eliade's *Forêt interdite* (Gallimard, 1955) and Cioran's *La tentation d'exister* (Gallimard, 1956)[iv] and his essay "Lettre à un ami lointain", addressed to Noica and published in *Nouvelle Revue Française* (1957); and having frequented literary *soirées* where they read and discussed Noica's manuscripts "Narrations by Hegel" and "Anti-Goethe", which the author intended to publish abroad at the Parisian press *Plon*. They were prosecuted for their "hostile" and "subversive" attitude towards the Communist government which they were accused of intending to overthrow. The leaders of the group, Noica and Pillat, were sentenced to 25 years of prison, loss of civic rights and of all their possessions. The lightest sentence was a 6-year imprisonment for typing a manuscript on Hegel and Goethe.

The testimony of the poetic word with its quest for truth is ultimately an affirmation of the nobility of the human spirit – as the writings of Nadezhda Mandelstam, Anna Akhmatova, Paul Celan or Nicolae Steinhardt and so many others have proved – which counters the unspeakable inhumanity of the Gulag or the Holocaust and the hatred resulting from a toxic ideology. Paradoxically, in the "face of the extreme", to use Todorov's term,[v] idealism is an unavoidable dimension, for literature becomes the last and only bastion of human dignity and the fundamental values of the human spirit.



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Blandiana belongs to the generation of the sixties, which rebelled against the enforced rules of "socialist realism" (itself an oxymoron) and cultivated a hermetic, intimate and aesthetic poetics. Like Wittgenstein and Nicolae Steinhardt, Blandiana believes that ethics and aesthetics are one. In a totalitarian regime, the mere affirmation of the aesthetic acquired strong subversive connotations and represented a political act, just as the simple, humble act of "living in truth" in Havel's words, was a heroic deed with deep political implications. Anna Akhmatova referred to herself as the "mouth through which a hundred million scream". Like hers, Ana Blandiana's poetic word summed up the destiny of a people who recognized their fate in her poems.

Today, poetry is a minor and marginalized genre, but in a dictatorship poetry was the genre par excellence. Poetic expression is by its very nature metaphoric and hence indirect and incomplete, since as Blandiana explains, metaphor is a comparison with one missing element which has to be supplied by the reader. This makes poetry and the fantastic the most appropriate forms of communicating those truths that are not tolerated by the dominant ideology. Through its indirectness, poetry pierces the wall of censorship more than any other genre; poems become manifestos because they establish a tacit complicity between reader and poet, who meet halfway in the liminal space of the said and the unsaid. As Blandiana remarks, in a dictatorship poetry contains "the last molecules of freedom" which people breathe in order to feel free; moreover it also brings together all that cannot be expressed freely in such other domains as history, theology, philosophy. Thus, poetry embodies the last bastion of a nation's collective soul. Blandiana's poems represent the first samizdat of Romanian literature; they were anonymously handwritten and circulated underground, and, on occasions unknown people expanded them. This is another definition of poetry and life: "A single caesura in the line / Would end this magic that dissolves the laws of hate / And throw them all – the lonely and the wild – / Back into the swampy pit of the instincts." [vi]

And what is the poet's role and that of poetry in times of freedom? As Blandiana reflects, in Western countries there is no repression, yet poets still enter into a power relationship against dominant hegemonic forces. Comparing the two systems, Blandiana concludes that times of hardship are more

propitious for poetry: "being free is much more difficult than not being so, since, paradoxically, freedom of speech diminishes the weight of the poetic word." In consumer societies, poets are ignored or marginalized, hence "[t]he imprisoned Havel was more important than Havel the president". In the new context in which the new freedom brought with it a prevailing consumerism and marketplace ethics, resistance through culture is understood as a rediscovery of spiritual values that have been eliminated for pragmatic purposes. Against this new form of commodification of life, Blandiana rephrases Malraux's dictum that "the twentieth century will either be religious or will cease to exist" into "the twentieth century will either be spiritual or it will cease to exist."

After a century that was torn by ideologies of hate, whether directed against a race or a class, following the fall of the Berlin wall and from the vantage point of the twenty-first century, Blandiana answers Hölderlin's question by placing poetry at the center of the world. She interprets the proliferation of so many poetry festivals in our time as a reaction against the excess of prevailing materialistic consumerism and a need for spiritual elevation: "sensitivity to poetry is a matter of spiritual perfection" ('Spaima 264'). She specifically mentions UNESCO's attempt to create the World Academy of Poetry in Verona, whose goal was to place poetry at the center of the world. Blandiana believes poets are not Shelley's "legislators of the world" but its liberators. Thus, despite all objective evidence, she can still answer Hölderlin's question with hope: "The poets are those who, in a world violently governed by Ugliness and Evil, raise the torch in the name of Beauty and Goodness, transforming poetry into an aura of love and an almost magical shield against hate. This explains, in fact, the confusion produced sometimes between great poetry and mysticism. Unfortunately, the poet is not the creator, but a witness of the world through which he passes. If the world had been created by poets it would have looked different." Poetry understood "as vision and quest for the world's essence not only gives a greater meaning to our world, but it provides the very Meaning capable of rescuing us from emptiness/triviality" since "sensitivity to poetry is a matter of spiritual perfection" ('Spaima 264').

Notes:

[i] Ana Blandiana, *Spaima de literatură*, București: Humanitas, 2004, 237.

[ii] David Constantine, *Hölderlin*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1990.

[iii] Adorno, Theodor W. "Cultural Criticism and Society" (1949), *Prisms*, Tr. Samuel & Shierry Weber, Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1983, 34.

[iv] Eliade, *The Forbidden Forest*, Indiana: U of Notre Dame P, 1978. Tr. Mac Linscott Ricketts and Mary Park Stevenson; Emil Cioran, *The Temptation to Exist*. Chicago, U of Chicago P, 1998. Tr. Richard Howard.

[v] Todorov, Tzvetan, *Facing The Extreme: Moral Life in the Concentration Camps*, New York: Henry Holt & Co, 1997.

[vi] Ana Blandiana, "Biography" *My Native Land A4*. Paul Scott Derrick & Viorica Patea, Hexham: Bloodaxe, 2014, 48.

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