

The Scholar and the Poetry

By Mirela Roznoveanu

Scholars have always shown an irresistible attraction to poetry and fiction writing. It has been present, evident or hidden, in scholars' writings from past civilizations to the modern era.

In 2014, Dr. Bill Dennison, a Professor of Marine Science and Vice President for Science Applications at the University of Maryland Center for Environmental Science (UMCES) published fragments of Isaac Newton's book *Philosophiae Naturalis Principia Mathematica* (1687) showing the inner cadence and the beautiful choice of words that made it poetically striking.¹ How many know of Galileo's poetical production, overshadowed by his work as a physicist, mathematician, and astronomer? Regarding Heidegger's thought, the lyrical component is considered strong in his later writings where the philosopher contrasts poetry with technology. In "The Thinker as Poet," a chapter of *The Origin of the Work of Art* (1935–36), Heidegger pointed out the function of poetry as the founding of truth.² Recently, the newly translated poems of Hannah Arendt³ "offer a distinct space where Arendt reflected on World Wars, loneliness, alienation, and homelessness – those conditions that came to define the 20th Century for so many." The examples could continue. Without any doubt, lyricism and prose fiction enrich the depth of scholars' work, as another way to express ideas and thoughts that the rhetoric of scientific disciplines does not always allow.

I began this way for a reason: there are still scholars embarrassed by their poetry or fiction writing. I have seen this especially in Romanian culture, where amazing scholars have been ridiculed, critically stoned to death for their ventures into poetry or prose. George Călinescu's poetry, fiction, and drama barely won grudging acceptance from mainstream criticism. Alexandru Piru, another famous literary critic and historian, wasn't so lucky: after publishing his novel, *Cearta* (1969), and his verses in *Jurnalul literar*, a public execution followed, continuing even today in commentaries on his work.

Noemi Marin, professor at Florida Atlantic University, is known for her scholarship dedicated to post-communist rhetoric, Eastern European political discourse, peace studies, and democracies in transition. She left Romania in 1990 and came to the U.S. where she opened a new path in the science of rhetoric. Her books, articles, and the books for which she has served as editor commend her as an expert on post-communist rhetoric. Her latest book, a volume of poems, undoubtedly a pleasant surprise for many, offers a startling window into the scholar's thought. It is in some respects a different tune from the same universe, that of her books on rhetoric, unfolding communism's tormenting, harsh, burdensome, alien, and repressive reality.

The first two sections ("Aerul depărtării"; "Apa timpului"⁴) of *Aerul Depărtării* (Bucharest: Tritonic Publishers, 2017) in my approximate translation *The Air of Remoteness* bring together poems written in Romanian, while the other two sections ("Through the looking glass/ Prin oglindă" and the concluding "#COD-A") include bi-lingual versions, side-by-side, with

¹ <http://ian.umces.edu/blog/2014/08/07/the-poetry-and-art-of-isaac-newton/> Accessed May 10, 2018.

² Martin Heidegger, *Poetry, Language, Thought*, translated with an introduction by Albert Hofstadter (New York: Harper & Row, 1971).

³ Hannah Arendt, *No Word Breaks into the Dark - The Poetry of Hannah Arendt*. Hannah Arendt Center for Politics and Humanities, Bard College, Annandale-on-Hudson, NY, October 20, 2015,

<http://www.bard.edu/news/events/event/?eid=129649&date=1445360400> Accessed May 10, 2018.

Hannah Arendt, *Poemas*, translated by Alberto Ciria Cusculluela (Barcelona: Herder Editorial, 2017).

⁴ *Apa Timpului* is Noemi Marin's first book of poetry published in Romania in 1995. Editura Didactica si Pedagogica, Seria Akademos.

translations by Oana Bonomo. What I sense here is actually the author's translation *edited* by Bonomo. Although written in Romanian, these poems, as I will argue, are composed with Marin's "English language" brain.

The poems in Romanian expose the immigrant's identity crisis, the fear of the unknown, filled with longing and anxiety. And yet, the poems about Romania seem to have been written by, or affected by, Marin's "English" mind and life. Someone who never left Romania and never got "translated" physically and mentally into another world cannot write with so much lucidity about the fear of living in a communist and post-communist world, and the hard process of being freed from fear:

*Mi se face frig: inima mea are colțuri de fier
pietrele dorului așteaptă
prin fîntîni
temătoare de fierberea proprie,
plimb gânduri prin crînguri de spaime
neliniștită mă adun printre imagini
oamenii îmi aduc chipuri
să mă adumbrească
mă bucur de oricine vrea să îmi dea un alt nume
iubirile mi le înșir pentru liniștea frîntă din oglindă [...]
sunt mereu ale altora
mereu mă înfrîng,
cine sunt? mi-am ascuns frica în sînul pămîntului/ [...]
și nu pot să o strig înapoi, mă înăbușă praful
amintește-ți de unde vii,
printre trupuri
vorbele trec năpădind
frica
din mine
caut în liniște
să-mi strig
eliberarea
—“Frică”*

The *heart with iron corners* is a powerful image of transformation and alienation. The lyric voice feels as if it is living on more than one side of time; the poetic being contemplates its mirror image in a parallel, distorted reality of the past life:

*Din partea cealaltă a timpului/ [...]
mă plimb printre cîteva dintre ecourile
persoanei mele,
în realitatea paralelă
unde copii mei și cu mine
zîmbim în același timp
întîlniri
printre ritmurile*

iubirii universale.
—"**Ecourile copilăriei**"

As it always happens, the newcomer in the New World experiences the mixing of languages and the building of another persona through the new adopted language:

*Limbile se amestecă
plecate, aplecate,
aruncate mereu
peste vorbe
Se adună înapoi
în lumea constrînsă
construită
reclădită
a vorbelor noi
vorbe înnoite
Imigrarea în limbă
se face mărunt
ca într-o călătorie sisifică
dinspre tine la tine
cu tine din tine
mereu în căutare
de vorbe
vorbe prin inimă
—"**Imigrare**"*

The concluding line of this poem, *Dumnezeu mi-a binecuvîntat mîna dreaptă, dîndu-mi scrisul drept lacrimă*—"God blessed my right hand, giving me the writing gift as tears"—has the power of a mission statement, that of documenting the tragedy of communism and post-communism in our time. The communist concentration camp is a world of Jesuitical hunting-down of those who do not obey totalitarian thought. The auto-da-fé, the burning at the stake, the public executions of those unfaithful to the communist doctrine were one of the communists' powerful tools to coerce:

*Pe mine m-au ars
pe rug
pentru tot ce-au uitat să-mi șoptească
Vreascurile miros patima
Iezuiții-mi pîndesc
arderea
cu nerăbdarea păcătosului
Pe mine m-au ars
pe rug
pentru tot*

*ce-au uitat să
trăiască
Trupul meu
își deșteaptă
porii
în fumul înscenării
Iezuiții-mi privesc
trecerea
cu spaima credinciosului
tăinuind muchii de mătănie
Pe mine m-au ars
pe rug
pentru tot
ce-au uitat să iubească
—"Focul"*

Marin's poetry reminds me of my own writing. What we both experienced and tried to express in both Romanian and English was very real. I will quote some of the parallel passages from my novel *Life on the Run* about the change of language as a physical change in one's body and the embodied sense of freedom:

[She] felt the fatigue of the foreign language, of the foreign personality. The loss of her mother tongue—a concrete part of her body, a very tangible organ—meant not only a biological injury but also great pain and frustration (...) it was as if she wore an artificial heart. Would she ever have a true English "heart"? Meanwhile, she was desperately building the new "language organ." How much time would pass before it crossed the threshold of her being, becoming second nature? How long would it take? Years? Decades? The mother tongue, her working tool, made bilingualism heartbreaking. (...) She labored to give birth to her true self in another language, freed from fear and the communist mentality.

Noemi Marin's poems translated into English preserve the lyric fluidity and give the perspective of transformation; however, the lyrical ego seems different. Even though we have the Romanian and English poems in parallel, the Romanian versions sound as if they were written with the English language command. The metaphors have nothing to do with the melodrama of dislocation and longing. There is no longing here for the former life.

The poem titled "*Enemy's Land*" has as its subtext the communists' connotation for the U.S.A: the land of capitalism, the communist's enemy camp. The word "enemy" in this case relates to Marin's return to her former country, where the poet is perceived as an "enemy" belonging to the enemy's land. The strangeness experienced in her own country of birth and the impossibility of reconnecting with those left behind give a tragic dimension to the poetic discourse:

*I come from the Enemy's Land
life forces dreams*

*on my eyelids
I talk to people
and they turn into
strangers
for my language
disappears
in their eyes
gulped by questions
of unrelated present
how can I speak with words
that are
pulling out
from my fringe of existence?
Do you relate, you?
I envision pictures of me
torn apart
by sketches of perspectives
watch out for the winds
of October
spelling words
over
lost leaves
coming to grip
with realities
in Autumn
In silence
I pray . . .*

The new life in exile is celebrated. Freedom is fully understood; the code of existence is woven with unexpected threads. The lyrical resounds differently, in abrupt lines conveying surprise and awe:

*—my life in the States—
different from all my previous
memories
on line, no line,
left in Romania
Here, now,
trying again to write
my name
Full of links
Digitalizing tolerance*

*New languages
New times
Life anew
Among and with others
So many others
Unknown yet
So much like me...
—"I am looking at my web-page image"*

"American me" the last poem, is written by Marin in English, with no translation or editing. The lyrical voice produces an existential polyphony keen to the classical music canon, the counterpoint-based compositional technique that employs a melody with one or more imitations of the melody played after a given duration:

*How can I live in or (im)possible links,
old lives, new loves,
all at a click of a button,
at a wink of my eyes,
around the corners of my fingers?
Living my American page-life
I catch myself smiling into infinite trails
of light and difference
My unique yet familiar voices of Me
melt inside sounds calling space
tuning in
to human beauty [. . .]
Tones and experiences
changing as we speak
never away from my Self
mapping my destiny
along infinite opportunities
as human love
Reflexive Images
Connecting Voices . . .
—"American Me"*

The multidimensionality of being, acquired through freedom, is the powerful message of Noemi Marin's poetry.