

Time and Metaphor in Emily Dickinson and Ana Blandiana

ANCA PEIU

Affiliation: Department of English
University of Bucharest, Romania
Email: anca.peiu@lils.unibuc.ro

Abstract

For so many years on end my job of teaching some of the best American poets has rendered me nostalgic for my own memories of Romanian poetry, whether classic or contemporary. Especially whenever I have had a chance to teach students Emily Dickinson, I fell under the spell of an affinity between her short striking poems and those of Ana Blandiana, whom I have devotedly admired as an amateur reader ever since my adolescence. They both have enchanted me by the same playful tone and, seeming, simplicity of poetic expression while conveying metaphysical messages by means of the most unexpected imagery, which all correspond to Paul Ricoeur's concept of the "living metaphor." This is why my paper title alludes to Ricoeur's celebrated volumes about *The Rule of Metaphor* and *Time and Narrative*, in which I have always found reliable support for approaching the best lively books of poetry and narrative of the entire world literature. I hope I will not fail either my guidance or my purpose here.

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Poems of Grass

Although, at first sight, a parallel between Emily Dickinson and Ana Blandiana may seem farfetched, it is mainly sustained by the gift they both share of telling "all the truth and tell it slant," as Dickinson would say (2009, p. 506). This particular gift of conveying the essential truth(s) about life, and death, in an unassuming, even lighthearted tone, which, in Paul Ricoeur's terms translates as the "living metaphor":

With metaphor, the innovation lies in the producing of *a new semantic pertinence by means of an impertinent attribution*: "Nature is a temple where living pillars ..." *The metaphor is alive* as long as we can perceive, through *the new semantic pertinence*—and so to speak in its denseness—the resistance of the words in their ordinary use and therefore their incompatibility at the level of a literal interpretation of the sentence.

The displacement in meaning the words undergo in the metaphorical utterance, a displacement to which ancient rhetoric reduced metaphor, is *not* the whole of metaphor. It is just one means serving the process that takes place on the level of the entire sentence, whose function it is to save *the new pertinence of the odd predication* threatened by the literal incongruity of the attribution. (Ricoeur, 1984, p. ix; [emphases added])

Like Dickinson's, much of Blandiana's metaphysical poetry relies on outdoor settings and symbols from the world of plants. The poem I have in mind here is "Întâlnire"¹

Nu te speria.
Va fi atât de simplu totul
Că nici nu vei înțelege
Decât mult mai târziu.
Vei aștepta la început
Și numai când

Vei începe să crezi
Că nu te mai iubesc
Îți va fi greu,
Dar atunci voi pune
Un fir de iarbă să crească
În colțul știut al grădinii,
Să ajungă la tine
Și să-ți șoptească:
Nu vă speriați,
Ea este bine
Și vă așteaptă
La celălalt capăt al meu. (Blandiana, 1978, p. 96)

The feminine first-person lyrical voice teaches her partner how to survive the shock of her, merely *temporary*, disappearance and then also how to ultimately die. She offers him a date in an afterlife as natural and full of promise as the only kind of life so far known. There is so much more to it than what we usually call a declaration of love.

The playful tone, the delicacy of this intimate dialogue, and the surprising metaphysical meaning of this poem may as well ascribe it to Emily Dickinson. The fact that it actually

¹ Don't you worry now./ It will be all so easy./ That you won't even understand/ Until very much later./ You'll wait at first/ And only when/ You start thinking/ I love you no more/ You'll find it hard./ But then I'll have/ A leaf of grass grow/ In the secret corner of our garden./ And whisper to you:/ Don't you worry now./ She's just fine/ And waiting for you/ At the other end of/ Myself. (Blandiana, "Dating," my translation)

belongs to Ana Blandiana may puzzle many readers. Because Blandiana's verse is unmistakably Romanian in its imagery and suggestiveness, it always shows her affinity with Lucian Blaga's own source of living metaphor. The likenesses can only deepen this astonishing sense of kinship between these two lady poets: on the one hand, Emily Dickinson—an American poet who, judging by her mid-nineteenth century lifespan, should have been a romantic, which she was actually not at all. On the other hand, Ana Blandiana—a Romanian poet who, judging by her own lifetime, should have been no more than a postmodern writer, and yet she is so much more, not only as a poet. Although, for more than the last three decades, Ana Blandiana has also been an exemplary civic conscience in Romania, in this paper, I shall focus on her poetry.

Just like Dickinson, Blandiana, with all her sensuousness of metaphor, remains for me a *poet of the mind*—and one whose gift of metaphor works as an argument for Ricoeur's notion of living metaphor. On the other hand, just like Whitman, Blandiana is a *poet of the city*, in other words, *poeta vates*, too. Just like both American poets, she conveys a certain sense of religiousness, yet so remote from conventional limitations and obscure mysticism, that it remains unmistakably one of her trademarks. In addition to these, in all these particularities of her metaphor, Ana Blandiana is a direct follower of Lucian Blaga, as we have already established. Thus, pagan/pantheistic "nature" imagery also works as "time" imagery with both Romanian poets, related to each other by their deeply spiritual belonging to the Transylvanian poetic (sense of) "space."

Dickinson is too skeptical in her poetry to be associated with Transcendentalism. However, her entire universe relates her to Emerson and Thoreau due to notions of *selfhood* and *nature*. Moreover, if only in virtue of *the miraculous perception*, we can still discern the bond between the witty "recluse of Amherst" and her contemporary company of serene thinkers. Although Emily Dickinson rather abhorred Walt Whitman, her understated lyricism often communicates with his exuberant or despondent cantos. It is precisely here that *the leaf of grass* metaphor has a central part.

From 1855 on, *the leaf of grass* has been identified with Whitman's signature as a poet of all human mortal conditions, therefore as a *poet of the time*, besides his being a *poet of reality* and a poet with a social conscience, in other words, *poeta vates*. Dickinson, on the other hand, is primarily a poet of the mind, besides her being a *poet of reality* and hence also one of *time*, like Whitman. Moreover, surprising though as this may seem, in Dickinson's homely garden, *the leaf of grass* is also typical—not only as a *messenger* between the living and the dead—as a metaphorical *sign of the time*, as we may see in her poem 333, "The Grass so little has to do":

The Grass so little has to do—
A Sphere of simple Green—
With only Butterflies to brood
And bees to entertain—

And stir all day to pretty Tunes
The Breezes fetch along—
And hold the Sunshine in its lap
And bow to everything—

And thread the Dews, all night, like Pearls—
And make itself so fine
A Dutchess were too common
For such a noticing—

And even when it dies—to pass
In Odors so divine—
Like Lowly spices, lain to sleep—
Or Spikenards, perishing—

And then, in Sovereign Barns to dwell—
And dream the Days away,
The Grass so little has to do
I wish I were a Hay— (Dickinson, 2009, p.157)

In Dickinson's view, *the Grass* is much more dignified, despite its unassuming existence, than even "a Duchess." "The Grass" can afford to stay elegant even after it passes away: its "perishing" merely enhances its fragrance. Also, its carefree leisure is the utmost luxury envied by this first-person lyrical voice, which surprises the reader with an ambiguous utterance in the final line that remains characteristically open.

The "Duchess" of poem 333 prompts us to the "Queen" of poem 285, "The Robin's my Criterion for Tune":

The Robin's my Criterion for Tune—
Because I grow—where Robins do—
But, were I Cuckoo born—
I'd swear by him—
The ode familiar—rules the Noon—
The Buttercup's, my Whim for Bloom—

Because, we're Orchard sprung—
 But, were I Britain born,
 I'd Daisies spurn—
 None but the Nut—October fit—
 Because, through dropping it,
 The Seasons flit—I'm taught—
 Without the Snow's Tableau
 Winter, were lie—to me—
 Because I see—New Englandly—
 The Queen discerns like me—
 Provincially— (Dickinson, 1997, p. 131)

The question arises who Queen Victoria was to the sharp mind of Emily Dickinson, who watched her from the other side of the Atlantic, from her cheerful New England garden, which she tended with her loving green fingers. The Queen is just a “provincial,” another country cousin, no better than herself to the queen. It all depended on the point of view, despite the English language they both shared.

In the same line of thought, following Emily Dickinson's familiar *robin*, Wallace Stevens's symbolical imagistic blackbird—in “Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird” (Stevens, 1972, pp. 20–22)—may counterbalance the splendid nightingale, the romantic prima donna of John Keats's “Ode to a Nightingale.” Stevens's blackbird has a true poetic precursor in Dickinson's “Robin.”

Instead of British royal roses and lilies, Emily Dickinson turns flowers like “Buttercup” and “Daisies” into her lyrical American coat of arms. There is a stronger sense of kinship between these modest flowers and any poetic instance of grass imagery.

However, this secret intimate garden shared by the couple of “friend and dear friend”—as Wallace Stevens puts it in his poem “The World as Meditation” (Stevens, 1972, p. 381)—can also be the graveyard in Emily Dickinson's as well as in Ana Blandiana's, and for that matter in Lucian Blaga's lyrical land. In Dickinson's poem 449 “I died for Beauty,” the grass is replaced by moss. In Blaga's poem, “Gorunul,”² the oak tree is replaced by a tree that soon may yield the planks for the poet persona's coffin. Dickinson's poem 449, “I died for Beauty,” is characteristically brief:

² “The Evergreen Oak-Tree”

I died for Beauty—but was scarce
Adjusted in the Tomb
When One who died for Truth, was lain
In the adjoining Room—

He questioned softly “Why I failed”?
“For Beauty”, I replied—
“And I—for Truth—Themselves are One—
We Brethern are”, He said—

And so, as Kinsmen, met a Night—
We talked between the Rooms—
Until the Moss had reached our lips—
And covered up—our names— (Dickinson, 1997, p. 216)

This poem comes even closer in its message to the one by Ana Blandiana, quoted above. Moss stands for night’s darkest hour, for the North, too. It may be the nocturnal counterpart to daylight *grass*. If in Blandiana’s poem, a leaf of grass establishes a never-ending dialogue between a bereaved lover and his dead sweetheart, in this particular Dickinson poem, moss stemming from somewhere deeper than their mouths, deletes their names inscribed upon neighboring tombstones, thus receiving them back into the dust. Moss alone has the power to help quiet down two restless believers in the classic secular ideals of Truth and Beauty.

However, Dickinson’s famous poem 712 “Because I could not stop for Death” is best echoed in Blandiana’s funny “Dating” poem. Although not employing any grass imagery, apart from “the Fields of Gazing Grains,” that is, the rather homely alliterative name for the classic Elysian fields:

Because I could not stop for Death—
He kindly stopped for me—
The Carriage held but just Ourselves—
And Immortality.

We slowly drove—He knew no haste
And I had put away
My labor and my leisure too,
For his Civility—

We passed the School, where Children strove
At Recess—in the Ring—
We passed the Fields of Gazing Grain—
We passed the Setting Sun—

Not only is Whitman's metaphorical definition of the grass inspired by Emerson's notion of the *miraculous perception* in his essay "Nature":

To speak truly, *few adult persons can see nature*. Most people do not see the sun. At least they have a very superficial seeing. *The sun illuminates only the eye of the man, but shines into the eye and heart of the child. The lover of nature is he whose inward and outward senses are still truly adjusted to each other; who has retained the spirit of infancy even into the era of manhood.* (Emerson, 1990, p. 18; [emphases added])

But it also reconfirms Emerson's belief that "the poet" and "the child" are privileged by their insight into the mysteries of nature.

Nonetheless, like Whitman's poet-persona in the above quoted lines, Saint Augustine's metaphorical definition of time, in his *Confessions*, Book XI, as quoted and discussed by Paul Ricoeur in *Time and Narrative*, amounts to little more than just his own acknowledging the fact that "he did not know" what time it actually was. Very much like that of the child, it is the poet's/philosopher's privilege to admit/confess he still has so much more to learn before answering so many essential dilemmas, among which there are *the paradoxes of temporality*:

Were it not for this hesitation, we would not understand why, after the apparently victorious argument against identifying time with movement, Augustine once again falls back into a confession of his utter ignorance: *I know that my discourse on time is in time; so I know that time exists and that it is measured. But I know neither what time is nor how it is measured.* "I am in a sorry state, for *I do not even know what I do not know!*" (Ricoeur, 1984, p. 15; [emphases added])

In 1865, one decade after Walt Whitman's first edition of his *Leaves of Grass*, including the very first version of his "Song of Myself," the Romantic German composer Johannes Brahms wrote "A German Requiem" ("Ein deutsches Requiem"). This ample work is named as such to emphasize the vernacular German language of the lyrics stemming from *The Holy Scriptures*, that is, *the Lutheran Bible*. This version corresponds to King James's Bible. Brahms himself confessed he was "an agnostic and a humanist" (Swafford, 1999, p. 317). Therefore, though sacred, his "A German Requiem" represents much more than just religious music: "I confess that I would gladly omit even the word German and instead use Human" (San Francisco Choral Society 2021).

The second movement of this rather “human Requiem” (“Ein Menschliches Requiem”) develops upon lyrics taken from *The Holy Scriptures*, Peter: “For all flesh is as grass, and all the glory of man as the flower of grass. The/ grass withereth, and the flower thereof falleth away”³ (Oxford Lieder, 2021).

As Transylvanian poets, both Blaga and Blandiana are quite responsive to German culture. Yet, perhaps due to a certain protestant cast of mind, American poets Whitman and Dickinson also resort to the same symbols from the natural world, particularly to the humble yet enigmatic *leaf of grass*. In all his numerous studies devoted to Whitman, Harold Bloom contended that “Song of Myself” actually reads as Whitman’s bold/ secular/humanistic reply to the biblical “Canticle of Canticles”/ “Song of All Songs.”

As a good friend to Whitman and a devoted disciple to Emerson, Thoreau urged his contemporaries to rediscover “nature,” in order to rediscover the value of “time”:

Let us spend one day as deliberately as Nature, and not be thrown off the track by every nutshell and mosquito’s wing that falls on the rails. [. . .] *Time is but the stream I go a-fishing in*. I drink at it; but while I drink I see the sandy bottom and detect how shallow it is. Its thin current slides away, but eternity remains. I would drink deeper; fish in the sky, whose bottom is pebbly with stars. (Thoreau, 2004, p. 187; [emphases added])

For our Romanian poets, though modern and postmodern, such as Blaga and Blandiana, this Romantic view of an essential link between *nature* and *time* remains predominant. In such poems as Blaga’s “Pamântul”⁴, “Gorunul”⁵, “Mugurii”⁶, “Stalactita,”⁷ and, last but not least, “Eu nu strivesc corola de minuni a lumii”⁸ the two themes complete each other.

Likewise, in Blandiana’s poetry, her poems still keep reminding me of Emily Dickinson, as far as style, size, and deliberate simplicity of tone are concerned. Perhaps Sylvia Plath, as a contemporary poet, is even closer to Ana Blandiana. However, Plath herself once confessed in a letter to her mother that “any similarities between her poems and those of Dickinson were purely intentional” (McNeil, 1997, p. xxv).

³ Denn alles Fleisch, es ist wie Gras, und alle Herrlichkeit des Menschen wie / die Gras Blumen. Das Gras ist verdorret und die Blume abgefallen. (Oxford Lieder, 2021)

⁴ “The Earth”

⁵ “The Evergreen Oak-Tree”

⁶ “The Buds”

⁷ “The Stalactite”

⁸ “I will not crush the world’s wonders’ corolla”

Let us consider here another one of Blandiana's poems, "Condiție":

Sunt
asemenea
nisipului clepsidrei
care
poate fi timp
numai
în
cădere. (Blandiana, 1978, p. 83)⁹

It may read as a belated tribute to Ezra Pound's Imagism; or as a haiku. It is a synecdochal/metonymic/self-reflexive poem of Time and Loss. Since the hourglass, an archaic timekeeper, reflects the allegorical meaning of the poem, it is just by returning to the first line that the reader discovers the price of being concentrated in this frail image. The glass of the hourglass is itself made of sand. It also contains sand to measure up the duration of Time. Furthermore, the lyrical first-person persona reflects itself in this infinite *mise en abyme*, reminding the anonymous reader of Jorge Luis Borges and his "Book of Sand"—the symbol of the most desirable book, inexhaustible, always new, always surprising. In this case, it is a mysterious, unique book, with leaves of sand if not of grass.

Another poem by Ana Blandiana is "Trebuie numai să aștept"¹⁰:

Boala este mai aproape de mine
Decât am fost eu vreodată.
Așa cum putrezirea
E mai aproape de fruct
Decât sâmburele lui.
Așa cum sâmburele așteaptă.
Numai trecerea verii
Să se desfacă din fruct,
Eu trebuie numai s-aștept
Viața să treacă (Blandiana, p. 135)

⁹ I am/ like/ the hourglass sand/ that/ can be time/ only/ by/ falling. (Blandiana, "Condition," my translation)

¹⁰ Sickness is closer to me/ Than I have ever been./ Just like rotting/ Is closer to the fruit/ Than its seed./ Just like the seed waits for/ Only the summer to pass,/ That it should part from the fruit,/ I only have to wait/ For life to pass... (Blandiana, "I only have to wait," my translation)

The previous self-reflexive *time-poem* of the hourglass is continued in this elegy, another *waiting poem* taking its readers back in the open, in the poet's old garden/ orchard/graveyard. See also Blaga's poem "O toamnă va veni"¹¹ (Blaga, 1974, p. 72). Just as death remains the absolute reliable certainty, so do aging and decay. It is just a matter of time, as the cliché goes. Yet poets have better ways to say this. To prove this, let us remember Blandiana's poem, "Eu nu cânt frunza"¹²

Eu
Nu cânt frunza,
Când numai frageda moarte
Pe care-o ascunde,
Ca pe-o țară îmbătătoare
Și fără sfârșit
În care cine pătrunde
Uită să se mai întoarcă și moare,
Ca să poată merge mereu
Mai departe
Și mai fericit
Plantele doar,
Pentru că nu sunt în stare
Să povestească
Ce văd,
Sunt lăsate să se întoarcă mereu
Din țara aceea copilărească
De care
Un misterios prăpăd
Ne desparte
În van.
Eu
Nu cânt frunza,
Când numai frageda moarte
În care
Visează o dată pe an. (Blandiana, 1978, p. 211)

¹¹ "A Fall Will Come"

¹² I/ Won't sing the leaf, / Only sing the soft death/ It conceals/ As some enchanting country/ And never ending/ In which whoever may come/ Forgets the way back and dies/ To be able to go further on/ Further always/ And ever happier./ Plants only/ As they are unable / To tell/ What they see/ Are always allowed to come back/ From that childish land/ Separated from us by/ Some mysterious disaster/ In vain./ I / Won't sing the leaf/ Only sing the soft death/ In which/ It dreams once a year. (Blandiana, "I won't sing the leaf," my translation)

The separation of Blandiana's confessional "I" in a line of its own twice in the above-quoted poem, bringing it full circle, establishes a safe bridge within her innermost lyrical mood yielding this repressed elegy.

Perhaps this is the poem that best illustrates my argument here, that is the fortunate connection/communication between Blandiana's verse and, on the one hand, Lucian Blaga's (especially in such poems as "Eu nu strivesc corola de minuni a lumii" and "Vei plânge mult sau vei zâmbi?"¹³, Blaga, 1974, pp. 2–3 and 66–67) and, on the other hand, Emily Dickinson's and Walt Whitman's. Here is perhaps the best known and beloved poem by Lucian Blaga, "Eu nu strivesc corola de minuni a lumii"¹⁴:

Eu nu strivesc corola de minuni a lumii
 și nuucid
 cu mintea tainele, ce le-ntâlnesc
 în calea mea
 în flori, în ochi, pe buze ori morminte.
 Lumina altora
 sugrumă vraja nepătrunsului ascuns
 în adâncimi de întuneric,
 dar eu,
 eu cu lumina mea sporesc a lumii taină—
 și-ntocmai cum cu razele ei albe luna
 nu micșorează, ci tremurătoare
 mărește și mai tare taina nopții,
 așa îmbogățesc și eu întunecata zare
 cu largi fiori de sfânt mister
 și tot ce-i neînțeleș
 se schimbă-n neînțeleșuri și mai mari
 sub ochii mei-
 căci eu iubesc
 și flori și ochi și buze și morminte. (Blaga, 1974, pp. 2–3)

¹³ "Will you cry much or will you smile?"

¹⁴ I will not crush the world's wonders' corolla/ and will not kill/in mind the mysteries I meet/
 in my way/ in flowers, eyes, on lips or sepulchers./ Some others' light/ may stifle the enchantment of all
 that's recondite and hidden/ in depths of darkness,/ whereas I,/ I with my light enhance the mystery of
 world—/ and just as the moon with its white beams/ won't shrink, but shivering / for ever more enhances
 night's mysteriousness,/ so will I, too, enrich the darkened vista/ with wondrous thrills of sacred awe/
 and all that's recondite/ will turn into some ever ampler secret/ under my eyes—/ for I love/ flowers, too,
 and eyes and lips and sepulchers. (Blaga, "I will not crush the world's wonders' corolla," my translation)

From this point of view, Blaga's poem reads like a modern manifesto of the miraculous perception, carried further on by postmodern Blandiana. It is the same notion of miraculous perception that Romantics such as Ralph Waldo Emerson, Henry David Thoreau, Walt Whitman, and, last but not least, Dickinson had also formerly believed. A metaphorical vision of time also insinuates itself into this poem once the lyrical persona mentions "graves": again, coming through from "flowers" to "eyes" and "lips," finally, to "graves" just like in a poem by Dickinson. Even Whitman, in the final lines of his "Song of Myself," closes the poem with a similar idea:

I bequeath myself to the dirt to grow from the grass I love,
If you want me again look for me under your boot-soles.

You will hardly know who I am or what I mean,
But I shall be good health to you nevertheless,
And filter and fiber your blood.

Failing to fetch me at first keep encouraged,
Missing me one place search another,
I stop somewhere waiting for you. (Whitman, 2013, p. 78)

As a true poet of reality, anticipating Wallace Stevens, Walt Whitman replaces *the priest* with *the poet*, whose responsibility is now to help people go on with their lives. Good survivors can always count on their poets.

A Sense of Belatedness

In my view, Emily Dickinson and Ana Blandiana speak the same metaphorical language in which there are no terms for cheap sentimentalism. Metaphysical meanings are suggested gracefully, even with a smile between the lines of both poets. Even in their somehow fateful *sense of belatedness*, the two lady poets communicate above/beyond words, if one may say so.

As we know it today, Emily Dickinson's astounding heritage of 1,775 poems first got published in a compact edition as late as 1955 due to the committed research of an eminent scholar, Thomas H. Johnson, who brought them all together in chronological order. In her life, merely one percent of her poetry was reluctantly published in various literary magazines. In addition to publishing, she used to send poems instead of messages to friends and family members. Because Dickinson's poetry was unlike most of the fashionable/conventional poets' works of her own time, she was seldom welcome

in the pages of 19th-century literary reviews. Yet, as she happened to be a poet with a proper debut *postponed* until 1955, Dickinson strangely became Blandiana's contemporary, in terms of profession, almost seventy years after her own mortal life had ended.

On the other hand, in the terrible communist Romania of that mid-20th century decade, on account of her father's being a priest, Ana Blandiana was several times rejected as a young candidate for academic philological studies. Fortunately, she did not give up; however, this harsh, early life experience must have taken its toll upon her metaphorical vision and way of writing poetry for the rest of her life.

As a true contemporary reader, I feel grateful to them both.

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