

## Book Review. Time Travels in a Bilingual Lyrical Dialogue: Rodica Marian's and Michaela Mudure's Book of *Poems/Poeme*

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The classic title *Poeme/Poems* of the book may hardly give its reader any special clue about either its contents or its author. Yet this will soon enhance the reader's delight in an exquisite metaphorical discovery. The anthology contains twenty-eight poems by Rodica Marian, one for each day of a moon cycle, taking no more/no less than a month on a human/earthly calendar. The poems' selection belongs to Michaela Mudure, who also translated them into English. These belonged originally to Marian's numerous volumes of verse honored with well-deserved prestigious prizes and first rank cultural acknowledgements. The elegant graphic presentation also recommends this book as one special gift for booklovers, due to Călin Stegorean's refined works: he is the visual artist who signs the rare "seven drawings and cover design." Again, no more/no less than the days of a week down here, in our well-measured earthly life.

From this very first step towards our approach, *a sense of timing* will prevail over the bilingual lyrical journey. Ineffable yet *limited in time* is the poet's trip within her own (sub) conscience and memory; around the world she loves to visit on her own, to its most exotic places (from Machu Pichu to Shiraz, from Santorini to Petra, the ancient Jordanian citadel, and so on); then back home to her beloved Transylvania—that unique place on the Eastern-European crowded cultural map, whose native people are born polyglots.

The basis of the affinity shared by poet and translator is their *bookishness*. Both devoted philologists, with outstanding careers, Marian and Mudure both resort to the lenses of poetry in their double quest for an expression of (solitary) *selfhood* within the world. If we may say that Marian is a *poet of the mind*, no better translator than Mudure could have fulfilled this job. If we may say, on the other hand, that Marian is a *poet of reality*,

no better translator than Mudure could have answered this challenge. Both poet and translator are well acquainted with this small/wide world, both fond of brave travelling. Yet a shared propensity for frank *introspection* is what makes their dialogue ever deeper.

As a professor of American literature, Michaela Mudure must have meanwhile kept at the back of her mind that famous blunt warning from Transcendentalist Ralph Waldo Emerson's "Self-Reliance": "*Travelling is a fool's paradise. Our first journeys discover to us the indifference of places. [...] I affect to be intoxicated with sights and suggestions, but I am not intoxicated. My giant goes with me wherever I go*" (Emerson, 1990, p. 167; my emphasis).

Marian turns to metaphor complex instances of selfhood, under the spell of Hafez, the absolute Persian writer. Shiraz is often evoked in her poems, yet in a familiar context, as if "confessional." The first time Hafez and his tomb at Shiraz materialize metaphorically in this free verse volume is in a poem entitled just like that, "The Tomb of the Poet": "I had always known, it seems to me, that the pages of the book by Hafez/ Must not be called out when one needs to get some new teachings/ Nor because of the anxiety of destiny" (Marian, 2021, p. 27).

Nothing in this first person lyrical persona's voice, so straightforward and at such a safe distance from pompous dramatizing, can prepare the reader's expectation for the poem's shocking final image:

From the top of the pole two disemboweled sheep, not yet shorn, were hanging,  
The living sheep, tied somewhere lower to the same pole, looked up at the bowels  
Of its ilk, with meek attention, reconciled and intensely curious,  
Calmly consenting to what may have seemed to it like another life. (2021, p. 29)

This closing savage picture is juxtaposed to the previous one, within the same poem, of the graceful calligraphic ghazels of Hafez "mirroring in the faience with superb patterns" (p. 27). It may suggest that life (and death) will remain inexhaustible for the eyes of a true poet. The ancient calligraphic ghazels encrusted in the poet's tombstone can still be traced back to the life vibrating all around it. What better tribute to a universal poet like Hafez, whose enigmatic spirit still bothers us, belated readers?

If the poetic self has any "story to tell," this could only convey a metaphorical *solipsism*, depending upon a strictly *subjective sense of time-passing*. For another illustration, here is a fragment from the poem "Rediscovery":

This meeting takes place in the past a calendar heading  
of my mobile phone, not too sophisticated, nor  
too out-dated technologically,  
seriously and repeatedly warned me, whenever I would  
count how many days were still left to the end of a month  
and every time I rushed, with the zest of my common sense,  
as a grammarian, to correct  
the tense from the syntagm,  
but every time the innocent heading  
kept giving me food for thought and I no longer dared  
to challenge the error. (2021, p. 39)

To any scrupulous “grammarian”, the gap between such concepts as *time* and *tense* must be serious. Yet to the poet with a keen eye on any metaphorical source, this apparent logical error may still “give food for thought.” Not even today’s so-called “artificial intelligence” can do anything about our *a-temporal* sense of some everlasting *presence* at the back of our minds:

Only the mother’s voice, clear, clear,  
more luminous than glass, more transparent than dew,  
its grave, crystalline tone,  
I may have heard, only in my childhood,  
that voice so intimately known, of course,  
[...],  
that voice is coming by itself,  
alone, without any trace of the being  
it has left behind,  
and now, right now, it is calling me  
in a very joyful tone, ‘Mummy, mummy!’ (2021, p. 41)

For a “grammarian”-poet, like Rodica Marian, there is no running away from her *mother tongue*. Hence, even in her lucidly acknowledged *absence*, due to “natural causes,” the poet’s mother can never be too far away, in either *space* or *time*.

In Marian’s lyrical universe one may also encounter such incredible creatures as the “Transylvanian seagulls.” Therefore, it is quite significant that these imaginary birds can fly from such a poem as “The Seagulls from Transylvania” (2021, pp. 60–63)

to the poem “Self-Portrait” (pp. 68–69). If they may exist at all, if it be only in her vivid metaphor, then these “The Seaguls from Transylvania” must belong to *the poet’s own portrait of herself*:

This Transylvania is  
 Both the mountain shuddering with memory  
 And the fairy tale of the eyes suggesting the morning,  
 And especially *the mild anxiety of some seagulls*,  
 By their generations’ adage,  
 Becoming smaller and more grey  
 than their ancestors,  
 Living signs of the millennia,  
*Of the seas fatally squeezed into rivers,*  
*In whose names there is a constant whisper:*  
*The Someș, the Mureș, the Criș, the Criș, the Criș . . .*  
 How could I not have recognized,  
 Even if I had not known what they were,  
*The thin quest of these Transylvanian seagulls*  
*Gravely questioning the waves of my Criș River*  
*And floating almost weightlessly,*  
 As the poplar’s seeds fall;  
*Who can know if the absolute*  
*Is not the forgotten song*  
*Of the Transylvanian seagull?* (my emphasis)

This beautiful poem reminds me inescapably of the twelfth imagist miniature-poem within Wallace Stevens’s now classic “Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird”: “The river is moving./ The blackbird must be flying” (1972, p. 22).

The same silent dialogue between *the bird* and *the river* occurs in both poems. Each one of the poets seems to afford—by empathy—a *bird’s eye-view* over their dear rivers ceaselessly floating on. Marian’s river moreover renders one “of the seas fatally squeezed into rivers”—hence she may dream of some seagulls as *living fossils* of a lost seascape where today there are only hills. Perhaps only Bela Bartok’s “Six Folk Romanian Dances” can still evoke this longing for a land so fluid, beyond any (didactic) explanation: indeed, the original country of “the absolute” squeezed itself within “the forgotten song/ Of the Transylvanian seagull”—as the poet said. Or, perhaps, as Emily Dickinson would put it in her poem 285:

The Robin's my Criterion for Tune—  
Because I grow—where Robins do—  
[...]  
Because I see—New Englandly—  
The Queen discerns like me—  
Provincially— (1997, pp. 15–16)

The *Transylvanian tune* in Marian's poems may be just as "provincial" as Dickinson's "Queen" in her funny short-sighted view. Yet it is part of an archaic Romanian idiom, still miraculously in good everyday use.

There is much more to say about this book of *Poems* by Rodica Marian transposed in an impeccable English version by Michaela Mudure. But perhaps from now on it is the privilege of its further readers to discover so many more of its genuine metaphorical values and merits.

## References

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