

## Prose Poems in a Romanian Context

by Radu Andriescu

I wrote my first prose poem in 1984-85. I had been writing and publishing longer poems in lines for a while already. Graphically they were not very imaginative – just long line after long line, no stanza breaks, for pages on end. Those long poems were very heavy with baroque imagery, and I don't think I'd really be able to enjoy them now. But at the time I was very proud of my outstanding deeds, and I was a bit taken aback when I got only the second prize in the competition sponsored by *Amfiteatru*, an important literary magazine at the time. The first prize was awarded to Cristian Popescu.

Soon after this, when I started the very long poem that would become my first contribution to a book of poetry, I was already trying to simplify the imagery of my concoctions, but I was still being highly metaphorical, recording the flight of ideal naked bodies over fertile fields to Edenic gardens. A few years after publishing that very long poem (thirty-three pages! my editor advised me to cut the unusual poem into eleven sections, each of them with a title, so as not to shock the reader with my humongous “poem”), I discovered the “Hymns to the Night” by Novalis, in translation — a photocopy my father was working on at the time. I realized that my “Stretches” were very similar in tone and imagery to the German Romantic's work. In fact, Novalis had been much more imaginative in mingling prose sections with pieces in short lines. It was by all means less boring . . .

That long poem of mine was differently received by critics and writers on the one hand, and on the other by readers who had little to do with the more fashionable trends of the time. The common readers – physicists, doctors and such, people I knew and who could give me some feedback — were delighted by the unusual text. Critics and writers considered it an oddity, poetry out of its own time and place — especially out of its political space. The bohemian American poetry of the countercultural 1960s had been assimilated by our younger poets of the Romanian '80s, and simultaneously, postmodern — and textualist — theory had been discovered and promoted by some of the writers who were familiar with the transatlantic poetry. Of course, in that period absolutely nobody was aware, here, of the American language poets. American poetry was synonymous with the “new American poets” of the '60s. To this day, in fact, the language poets are barely acknowledged. In Mircea Cărtărescu's (our “pole-position” postmodern poet/novelist/critic), 500-page *The Romanian Postmodernism (Postmodernismul românesc, 1999)*; he has just two short lines about “the poets around L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E magazine,” with Bernstein, Kinnell, and Silliman the

only names mentioned). When they are spoken about, it is with Cărtărescu's formulaic "obsessed with the concreteness of the linguistic material, by the pleasure of language games."

At the time I published my long poem, it was impossible to challenge an already very fashionable anti-modernist, "underground mainstream" myth — Modernism being viewed as politically maculated, conservative, etc. — and certainly not with Romantic poems, however "revolutionary" in form they might have been.

Cristian Popescu was experimenting with myth, too, but his was a more reasonable, trendier, and better approach to myth: he was documenting the history of the Popescu family and he was turning it into a solipsistic myth consistent with the playful tone of what was to become standard Romanian postmodernism. Realism — or in Popescu's case I might call it a special brand of magical realism — plus humor and parody and self-irony equals Romanian postmodernism as it came to life in the 1980s. Popescu was younger than most of the "canonical" postmoderns of the day, but he created a very consistent body of work in only a few creative years before his premature death. And his physical end was bound to boost the parodic myth of the Popescu family. A group of friends, critics, and writers, such as Dan-Silviu Boerescu and Cătălin Țîrlea, continued for a number of years to build up the "merry myth" of the Popescus. When they became involved in projects that had less to do with literature — Boerescu, for instance, became editor in chief of *Playboy Romania* — the story of Cristian Popescu and of his colorful clan started to fade away. The emergence of very many young poets around the year 2000, gifted rebels trying to break away from absolutely everything that had been done before, cast an even denser shadow over the Popescu family tree.

Iustin Panța's situation was somehow different from Popescu's or mine. He lived in Sibiu — Hermannstadt is the German name of the town — which is in the Carpathians in the western part of Romania. He had also gained important symbolic capital as one of the two major editors of a distinguished Romanian literary magazine, *Euphorion*. At poetry festivals — I think he attended more festivals than Popescu and I together, partly because of his being linked to a prominent magazine — he was a silent but charismatic presence. As in the case of Cristian Popescu, he was very consistent in building a system of references that soon became a trademark: the story of the Panța family, rendered in a less parodic, colorful manner, a story focused only on himself, his wife, and his child. Transylvanian literature is generally more reserved, less flamboyant. Facts tend to remain facts, the most important spices being the author's own thoughts. Striking imagery is relevant as long as it denotes the author's inner life. Words are used with more economy by Transylvanian poets. When prose poems become the chosen medium, the clash between economy and the need to fill space in longer texts can

become one of the puzzles and attractions. To be silent, yet wordy — that was Panța's challenge, from my point of view.

Prose poetry has never become popular, or intellectually acceptable, in Romania. Political considerations (the kind of considerations that language poetry implies) are of no use here. No reader, professional or occasional, will accept the *sentence* as a serious prosodic alternative to the line, with everything it implies. One of the most important of the few recent extended domestic critical approaches to Romanian prose poetry, Mihai Zamfir's *The Romanian Prose Poem (Poemul românesc în proză, 1981)* still refers to poetry in the form of prose as an "abnormal situation," a "bastard species," or "collateral species," a deviation from the norm that offers an improbable future. This approach is consistent with general European critical dogma that in literature a clear-cut distinction between arts, genres, and species is fundamental. Any artistic form that starts as a cross-section between given literary conventions is doomed to fail. Linnaeus would be proud of such logical (if problematic) taxonomies.

Prose poetry is now rejected on different grounds. For the more conservative critics of the 1970s and the early '80s, it is a "bastard" species — abnormal and accidental. For the postmoderns of the Romanian Eighties, it is irrelevant and marginal, even within the contestatory margins of poetry, bearing no ideological relevance. For the younger poets of the new millennium, advocates of the fracture between culture and reality, it is plainly boring, bookish at best. It is no wonder — and sad as well — that Iustin Panța's name is hardly mentioned anymore. When he died in a car crash, the relevance of his work seems to have died with him. Moreover, conceptual attempts to deal with any poetical form in ideological terms are of no consequence in post-communist Romania. A literary-left perspective is irrelevant for a culture that strives to embrace liberal values, and in a sense, the only leftist perspective has to be extreme, that is, anarchic. From a political point of view, the American bohemia of the 1950s and '60s has been assimilated and domesticated without any sort of avant-gardist or groundbreaking connotations. At best, it was an underground attempt to undermine, or simply flaunt, the unstated rules of the more conservative establishment of the period — counterculture as lifestyle or lit style, not as opposition.

And yet, visible or invisible, prose poetry does exist. No anthology of recent Romanian prose poetry has been published so far, but there are now a couple of anthologies in translation. First came *Speaking the Silence: Prose Poets of Contemporary Romania* in 2001, translated and edited by Adam J. Sorkin and Bogdan Ștefănescu and including texts by nineteen contemporary Romanian poets. And now there's *Memory Glyphs*, gathering three poets from the western, eastern and southern parts of the country. Now, if these poems are of any value . . . What can *I* say? That, dear reader, is for you to decide.