Historical and Personal Time in Mariana Marin’s Poetry

Abstract

Romanian poet Mariana Marin (1956–2003) made her debut in 1981 and published her last collection in 2002, an interval that covers about one decade of communism followed by one decade of transition to democracy. Like a litmus test, her poetry, known for its existential radicalism and authentic textualism, reflects the cultural acidity of despotism and its crippling effects on individuals. Her courage to express the truth in poetry situates her among the poets interested not only in their own private aesthetic experiences, but also in the role of literature as a form of protest and a cultural instrument. Contrary to what some contemporaries living in diaspora or in Romania said about her, she did not consider herself a political dissident, but a nonconformist writer, member of the 1980s generation. She wrote against the fossilization of the communist regime, marked by limitations, oppression and imposture, trying to conceive an imaginary universe that reflects and transforms these realities by adopting a concise style accessible to any reader. This paper aims to explore the ways in which Mariana Marin combined her acute sense of history with her unique
perspective of personal time in several poems published before and after 1989.

**Keywords**

Romanian literature, Mariana Marin, protest poetry, historical time, personal time

In November 2001, Svetlana Cârstean interviewed Mariana Marin after the latter returned to Bucharest from a sanatory in the mountainous town of Moroieni, where she had been treated for tuberculosis. Their conversation started from a line included in her first book: “She had read everything about illness at 17/ (it seemed an opportunity to her).” (*PC*, 13, Sorkin)\(^1\) It was an occasion to explore the poet’s relationship with her medical condition, which revealed her early fascination with nineteenth-century literature that illustrated love relationships marked by tuberculosis. In her youth, she used to like such stories of romance and suffering, a fact reflected throughout her work. In the interview, however, after her recent experience of pain and treatment, she seemed to have become aware that, when cultivated, such preferences might influence one’s life in other ways than the most favourable. “Words Attract Reality” is the very title of the interview. This is only one intimate aspect of Marin’s way of living on the edge. Novelist and poet Mircea Cărtărăscu (2020) confirmed this view: “For Madi, poetry was a matter of life and death. Poet was not that who wrote poems, but that who lived in poetry, who lived their poetry until its last consequences” (90–91).

The same interview also tackles her involvement in the hunger strikes organized before the Romanian Communist Party’s 14\(^{th}\) Congress from November 1989 with the purpose of making the party members choose somebody else instead of Ceaușescu. Thinking

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\(^1\) In order to quote Mariana Marin’s poems, this article uses two sources. Some poems come from *Paper Children*, a collection translated into English by Adam J. Sorkin, shortened *pc*. Other poems come from *Zestră de aur* [The Dowry of Gold], shortened *dg*, and are translated from Romanian by the author of this article.
about that tense period in retrospect, Mariana Marin wondered what would have happened to her and what her fate would have been had the regime not fallen soon after. Without her job as a teacher and followed by the state secret police, she went through a period of hardships before seeing her new work published because of the censorship practices of the time. This difficult chapter of her life was part of her social way of living on the edge. However, in spite of her nonconformist poetry and lifestyle, she mentioned in the same conversation that she felt she had not been involved in any serious subversive activities like other dissidents, who had personally lost much more than her as a consequence of their actions. Moreover, in 1990, when she was called by the representatives of the new regime to engage in politics, she refused to do so since she felt her political role as an opponent to the former status quo had ended. Instead, she preferred to focus on her editorial projects: having her work translated into French, giving interviews, interviewing her congers, editing their work and, of course, writing more poems. According to Adam J. Sorkin, her first translator into English: “Marin is not at heart a political poet. She is, however, unmistakably, an angry one” (PC, xiii).

Mariana Marin’s attraction to liminal experiences both in private and public life is evident in her poetry, emerged first in times of the communist dictatorship, marked by uncertainty and surveillance, and later during the turbulent transition from a centralized to a democratic system. She saw how women’s role changed from being silenced in the totalitarian regime, in which the collective needs of society were much more important than the individual self, to being neglected in a democratic regime not yet fully developed to assign and guarantee a positive role of the women poets in society. In her critical comparison of Sylvia Plath’s and Mariana Marin’s poetry, researcher Cristina Pipoș (2014) explained why confessional poetry suited the Romanian poet best. Her penchant for liminal situations went hand-in-hand with an attempt to find balance between herself and the absorbing world. She did so by playing upon the use of pronouns, developing themes like love, private space, women’s condition, social realities, illness, death etc. and aiming to retrieve the values of the new and transformed femininity. As a confessional
Monica Manolachi

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poet lost in a world she felt rigid and hostile, she mastered the art of fictional truth inspired by autobiographical details: she chose to describe her own anxieties as a way to escape from the limitations of the totalitarian regime.

Interestingly, all her collection titles have a temporal component, either explicit or implicit, intimating a biography deeply touched by the wing of history. A Hundred Years’ War (1981) operates as an ironic title that contrasts a recognizable belligerant epoch and a personal battle for meaning and truth: the allusion to the former is meant to intensify the latter. She was a member of the Monday Literary Circle, led by the literary critic Nicolae Manolescu during the peak years of repression and censorship. She struggled to make her voice heard and become part of the major anthologies of the time such as Five (1982) or The Anthology of Young Poets (1982). One of her works of that period, The Secret Annex (1986) is a reference to Anne Frank’s wartime diary, reminiscent of the situation in which a little girl and her family finds refuge in an attic and documents her experiences without any possibility to escape. By exploring the effects of Nazism as the other totalitarian regime that marred European culture in the last century, the poet referred obliquely to her own condition. In a communist country that placed traditional families on a pedestal, Marin’s parents divorced when she was three and she was raised by her mother and her maternal grandmother, which must have shaped her as an introvert and contributed to her poetic association with Anne Frank’s destiny. The Studios (1980–1984) (1990) contains poems hard or impossible to have been published in the 1980s, but which Adam J. Sorkin included in Paper Children (2006), the first translation of her poems into English. The title alludes to all the works kept private as in a painter’s studio during infelicitous times. Marin’s poems are texts she had written but had to keep hidden because of the political restrictions. The Mutilation of the Artist as a Young Woman (1999) is a look back into the recent past to explore once more her own condition as a damned poet and the circumstances which made that possible. Her last collection published before her untimely death, The Dowry of Gold (2002), is an anthology containing most of her previous poetry, supplemented with twenty-one new poems, a testimony of a woman’s poet fight for the freedom of expression.
in times of despotic and turbulent political practices. The reader is given the possibility to compare the different versions of the same poems taken from The Secret Annex and The Studios. A few of them will be compared in what follows.

When Mariana Marin published A Hundred Years’ War (1981), she was awarded the Romanian Writers’ Union Prize for a debut in poetry. The trope of “a hundred years’ war” is a leitmotif not only in this volume, but also in the subsequent ones, and may gain different meanings in different contexts. As the literary critic Cosmin Ciotloș mentioned on the first page of Cenaclul de luni: viața și opera (2021), a history of the Monday Literary Circle, the belligerant approach was a characteristic strategy of most of the 1980s poets: their work expressed “generous solidarity, camaraderie, polemic loyalty and youthful voluntarism” (7) and attempted to cultivate a new poetic language. This circle operated as an underground formation at the University of Bucharest between March 1977 and 1983 and Mariana Marin was part of it.

The poem “The Bloody Utopians” was dedicated to literary critic Nicolae Manolescu. It occupied the first place in the collection A Hundred Years’ War and announced a dramatic change regarding the poet’s role in society:

Reader, don’t be afraid!
I have left the hunched convention of the passing time behind.
I am laughing about the tower clock, the wrist watch,

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2 Ciotloș (2021) aimed at presenting the context in which the circle was possible, its contact with the cultural reality of the time and “the revival of a group sensitivity” (10). In the chapter about Mariana Marin, entitled “When the moral of the story is not necessarily at the end”, the literary historian pointed out the contemporary excessive interest in the poet’s biography and moral attitude at the expense of the stylistic innovation and aesthetic value of her poetry. Indeed, she became “almost a badge of the tragic version of our dissidence” (177). However, the critic argued, she was mainly interested in writing poetry in new ways. She did not learn from the German ethnic poets only how to be brave and how to write brief poems, but also “a modality of coding and packaging the truth in ways other than parables, a modality sufficiently adaptable to produce poliphony” (179). He gave evidence that the poet distinguished with great care the role of irony and of word play in the works of the Romanian versus the German poets, highlighting that the latter were more intransigent, more experienced and more exact in using them.
the golden watch, the iron watch...
Elsewhere will the poor bird we bought for poems carry us.
I am the ashes under its wing and I am not afraid of ashes (DG, 11, author translation).

Unlocked from the tower of time, poetry reverberates like a young woman’s beautiful laughter. There is no fear, no mere free will, but the authentic and legitimate need to deconstruct a death-driven inherited history and put forward a life-oriented poetry that can act as a catalytic when its socio-political substance becomes antiquated. The direct address to the reader is meant to raise consciousness and operates as a warning at the gates of a new world.

If poetry is the poet’s way to reality and a way to connect people, then Mariana Marin’s relationship with reality and with others is tense and dense. From the same volume, “The 10th of February, Saturday Evening, Now” is a recollection of one of her birthday parties. Although she was known for keeping her door open to friends, the poet attempted to connect with the memory of herself on an important day of her life calling attention to the gap between her social and her private self:

She awaited her guests’ arrival in the large living room.
None of her sharp gestures had its head bloodied.
No orange had ever been cut so beautifully.
Nothing that could make a deadly leap into fiction.

(It’s been said before:
a woman, a mirror, three immortal parrots,
a firearm, a wicked will, fruit-painted clocks,
a ball gown, a lead soldier, a goatskin,
a red zeppelin, a fair whistle, an implausible caftan.)

The description is almost exact.
I’m missing, memory of the 5 4 3 2 1 floors slowly counted by the Egyptian eye, freshly painted (DG, 22, author translation).
The distinction between the third person singular in the first stanza and the first person singular in the last stanza, separated by a generic woman surrounded by objects in the middle stanza, suggests both the need for social detachment and for playing with her own reality. In an epoch when the functioning of the political system was based on an institutionalized type of duplicity and falsity, the poet found freedom in exploring her own self. The parentheses and the feeling of absence hint at women’s rather voiceless position in the 1980s Romanian society. The young woman is prepared to receive her guests, but she lies in wait, defending the fictional world in which she resides.

The duplication of the self is even more anatomic in the poem “Appeal in the Dissection Hall”: “You wake up with all your organs at your side. / You are looking around, but nothing happens. / It’s a room with no mirrors – they say. / Someone like you is drawing near to the window” (DG, 20, author translation). The 1980s are known for food scarcity, long queues for basic products, restrictions regarding running water, gas and electricity. In these circumstances, trying to envisage herself as someone else may equal the attempt to conceive an alternative way of seeing the world instead of going like sheep in the same direction that could lead to socio-economic disaster.

In contrast with other poets of the 1980s, who preferred to keep quiet, write Aesopian poetry and not approach critical issues in public, Mariana Marin was among the few who had the tendency to tell and write the truth about the epoch. When Pipoș (2014) analyzed her love poems, for example, the critic placed them in the larger context of the time: “For Mariana Marin, love poems are confessions about the lack of communication with the other, about the solitude of living as a couple under the glass bell of communism, where the absence of feelings and a repetitive lifestyle are dominant.” (17) In “Love poem”, the second from The Secret Annex (1986), the poet stated it cogently: “The same as Andersen’s Snow Man / fell in love one day / with the blazing fire of a stove, / that’s how I am searching for the truth.” (DG, 74, author translation). Apparently a poem speaking of lovers’ separation, its main idea is so expressive that it can be applied to any context.
For example, as far as her art is concerned, she knew very well what the role of poetry was and became critical when it was used for other purposes. She noticed the decaying condition of the process of poetry production – “A rotten mantle which poets have put on / for so many hundred years, / that’s how words seem to me at the end of the millenium” (DG, 75, author translation) – but she still affirmed her strong attachment to it as a means of connecting real and imaginary worlds:

However, this rotten mantle is so large to me
that I stumble in it with delight every day.
Here is where I grow my own secret wings,
where I am good earth, green grass, stunning, tall,

for the dark beast of stars
from the other world (DG, 75, author translation).

The poets of the 1980s are known for their ludic and ironic discourse. Literary critic Ion Bogdan Lefter (2005) remarked the transforming power of intelligent irony and warned against the risks of using and interpreting it carelessly (59–61). In this context, Mariana Marin’s poetry is atypical, more tragic, more straightforward and more polemic, departed from the plain textualism of the decade: “Those who dig the text of another / will fall in it // textually // death will come and will not have any eye.” (DG, 215, author translation) In his Critical History of Romanian Literature (2008), Nicolae Manolescu recalled that her first reading at the Monday Literary Circle was a failure, because she was different than the others and felt refused, hence the personalization of her poetic wars. Manolescu did justice to her poetic creed, quoting precisely those poems that – like a scalpel – were meant to remove whatever might have harmed her crystal-clear views: worthless concessions; writing in the style of others in order to be accepted; weak or even unfounded criticism; the objectification and silencing of women etc. According to the critic, it was Florin Mugur, the editor of The Secret Annex, who suggested her to introduce references to Anne Frank’s diary so the censors could see it was an anti-Nazi, not an anti-communist collection. She accepted his
ideology-based proposal, yet not without divulging – with a pinch of salt – the editorial trick in one of the poems, “Roots”:

How easy words come to me, Anne,
when I write about you,
about your diary named Kitty, about your sister Margot.
What a pain has it been until now!
The thing is to have a feeling,
a right cause and the wish to live.
Then the poem thrusts its roots in the ground,
separating with a hazel-nut small rod
what exists from what we are
and then bringing them together.
The poem is a democratic being.
A moral being.
Its head grows
even under marching boots (DG, 103, author translation)

Manolescu (2008) labeled this editorial move as “a compromise solution” and wondered “whether this proceeding is morally acceptable” (1330). In any case, she could not continue the same arrangement for another collection before 1989. However, she dedicated her volume from 1990 to Florin Mugur when the poems from The Secret Annex were published uncensored, slightly changed, rearranged, supplemented with several new poems and under a different title, The Studios. It took her another decade to have her next collection published in 1999. In spite of these effects of censorship on her work, Mariana Marin followed her principles rooted in inherited beliefs expressed, for example, in the poem “Tradition” from The Secret Annex:

A tradition binds me to you, Anne.
A tradition below sea level
just like this Dutch landscape now stirring my imagination.
Rembrandt’s anatomy lesson
replaced by the anatomy lessons
of others, friends missing in these oppressive times.
And the friends too: replaced by reading
until snap! the optic nerve serves
somewhere in death’s recesses.
A black tradition which Andersen (Don’t forget!)
once strewed for us with rice, small beetles,
butcher shops filled with sunlight and dance.
In spite of all who wished it dead,
the spirit caresses our hair spread out below sea level
and so we awaken together again, the vertical ones,
present at something Rembrandt would never have painted
unless snap! the optic nerve... (*PC*, 115, Sorkin)

The last but one poem in the 1986 collection inspired by Anne Frank’s
diary, entitled “In the Secret Annex”, explains the essence of the
volume very briefly:

Between you two no more than this remains:
just these paper children
that cross the street each morning.
The refusal to continue the species in any other way,
to be another house of death
in another house of death (*DG*, 130, author translation).

The poem was published with a different title in *The Studios* (1990) and
translated as “House of Death” in the American edition from 2006:

Between us no more than this remains:
just these paper children
we take across the street each morning.
A refusal to continue the species in any other way.
My refusal in times like these
to be yet another house of death (*PC*, 19, Sorkin).

The comparison of the two versions reflects a change of pronouns
from “you two” to “us” in the first line and from “the refusal” to
“a refusal” and “my refusal” in the second part. The result is a change
from a detached attitude to the identification with the characters of
the poem. The speaking character draws nearer to the truth, which
becomes more personal. The truth behind the metaphor of the “paper children” is double. One the one hand, it speaks about her denial to publish censored poetry and probably her fear of having children in a world hostile towards women writers. On the other hand, from a socio-political angle, it echoes the criminal effects of the anti-abortion Decree 770 initiated in 1966, which caused the death of thousands of women and the increase in the number of orphans before 1989. Since such issues were not really discussed in the public sphere and the media in the 1980s, the poet tried to find – it is not known whether consciously or intuitively – an adequate language to approach them in poetry. Some contemporaries belittled her inclination to express moral ideas apparently to the detriment of language innovation, an aspect which she included in her poem “A. F. Speaking”: “Where is the generation / to tell me / how I confound the ethics with the aesthetics?” (DG, 117, author translation).

Another hacked poem is “Family Life”, a critique of the pro-family propaganda of the epoch, which impresses through its brevity. The version included in The Secret Annex (1986) reads: “Reality has crept in under the door again today. // What silence under your nails! / What a riot of words! // The clock of your inside is eating” (DG, 119, author translation). The uncensored version from The Studios (1990) ends differently:

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Reality has crept in under the door again today.
What silence under your nails!
What a riot of words!

The clock of your inside is rattling.
Embraced,
the Beast and the Snuffling are devouring us again” (DG, 146, author translation),
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The last line of this version has a double meaning in the Romanian original: “Bestia și Fonful din noi iar se înfruptă”. The other meaning is: “the Beast and the Snuffling inside ourselves are eating again”. Before 1989, “the Beast and the Snuffling” might have been very easily associated with the dictatorial couple. After they were assassinated
in December 1989, the line implies everyone’s gluttony and a lifestyle that does not take into account the written word, an idea conveyed by the two exclamations.

The poem “Elegy” from The Secret Annex becomes “Elegy I” in The Studios. When comparing the two versions, one can notice that the name of Anne disappears from the second version and one line is added in parentheses. Anne’s disappearing results, again, in drawing near to the poet’s personal truth, in refusing editorial subterfuges. The “you” of the poem brings the reader closer to its substance, producing a mirroring effect. The insertion of the new line – a reference to the 1989 dramatic historical events compared to a small skin sore – suggests the inner struggle that marked a whole generation, confused and paralyzed by the ideological excesses of the only party:

You no longer know, Anne,  
why it’s so hard to keep on living.  
Just as in the Middle Ages when disturbances of the mind  
were assumed to result from disturbances of the stomach,  
you are now looking for a cause  
in something that gnaws and gnaws deep inside  
without ever managing to reach you (DG, 86, author translation).

You no longer know  
why it’s so hard to keep on living.  
Just as in the Middle Ages when disturbances of the mind  
were assumed to result from disturbances of the stomach,  
you are now looking for a cause  
(a suppurating boil supposing itself a revolution)  
in something that gnaws and gnaws deep inside  
without ever managing to reach you (PC, 3, Sorkin).

The reference to Anne Frank’s diary may bring to mind the sacrificial legend of Master Manole\(^3\). Considering Marin’s editorial adventure

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\(^3\) The sacrificial myth says that, tasked by the king, together with his masons and following a divine dream he had, Master Manole built the Monastery of Argeș
of using Anne Frank’s diary for her own work, what is noticeable is the poet’s double attitude. She accepted the compromise at first, but later she partially rejected it, showing a few directions of how to be different, how to create without sacrificing a body. Unfortunately, she could not escape the sacrificial pattern of the myth completely, her suffering, illness and untimely death placing her life and work in the same paradigm.

A similar change of perspective through the replacement of pronouns is produced when the poem “The Crab” from The Secret Annex (1986) turns into “The Crab of History” in The Studios (1990):

Death’s flower – your indifference, Anne.
With perseverance you retreat from the world like the crab.
You permit him
to go on being right,
to bury you in night’s silence,
to take his pleasure in your smell
when the ink bottles are uncapped
and your beaten words, death’s flowers, are pierced
with nails (DG, 123, author translation).

Death’s flower – our indifference.
With perseverance we retreat from the world like the crab.
We permit him
to go on being right,
to bury us in night’s silence,
to take his pleasure in our smell
when the ink bottles are uncapped

in Southern Romania by walling in his pregnant wife Ana, a condition without which the construction would have collapsed. In order not to build another similar monastery, the king had them all stranded on the roof. Trying to escape, they fell to the ground and died. When Mircea Eliade (1994) interpreted this particular sacrificial myth, he argued that Ana did not die, but she was transformed, her fleshly body turned into an architectural body, a camouflaged metamorphosis meant to flesh out the artistic product. In recent years, American critic Thomas J. Cousineau (2023) applied this perspective to various Western literary works, turning it into what he termed the “Manole Complex”, understood as a series of “disguised stagings of archaic building rituals” (17).
and our beaten words, death’s flowers, are pierced with nails. (PC, 87, Sorkin)

Once again, the deletion of the name of Anne shows that the indifference is not only hers, but ours as fragile human beings, a choice which better expresses the poet’s concern with social responsibility. It is not only Anne who “retreats from the world like a crab”, but the average men and women; it is not Anne who permits the crab of history to go on being right, but each and everyone of us; it is not Anne who lets herself buried in the night’s silence, but you and I; and the “smell” and the “beaten words” are not only hers, but ours as witnesses of atrocities happening nearby. The addition of the word “history” in the title indicates her interest in humans’ role in contributing to the chronicle of events, including personal stories. The word “crab”, a crustacean that moves slowly and sideways, may be an allusion to the instinctive conservative forces that determine history or the lesser known path chosen to avoid conflicts and yet produce change.

A poem that deals with abortion in a slant way and could not have been published before 1989 – therefore, it cannot be found in The Secret Annex – is “Induced poem”, a title alluding to the illegal practice of induced abortion. A two-page narrative poem, it describes the process of inspiration, the way in which poems come to mind and the exterior conditions in which they become possible: the author’s body, the author’s home, the socio-cultural context. It includes two voices of the same personality, a “she” and a quotation of a feminine “I”, two self-portrayals, in fact. Here is a fragment from the middle:

Therefore, it was this induced poem
which this impudent woman poet,
neither dressed nor undressed,
waited for it daily to come to her window.
The cold signals beneath her temples
began to send us messages then:
“This poem darkens me.
I am trying to bring its scheleton
to all the letters studied,
but they disappear
and remain in their starry dust
like fresh coriander” (DG, 10, author translation).

The soliloquy ends by exposing some of the difficulties of writing a poem: the poet seems possessed by the poem, the poem may seem too elusive, too despressive or too easy to others. Inducing the birth of the poem – separating it from the poet before its ripening moment – communicates what might seem excessive, unacceptable, a surplus, the same as in the case of abortion.

The above examples of (un)censored poetry – or simply the changes the poet made – may demonstrate her uneasiness and struggle to escape the sacrificial framework of the Manole Complex and her need to publish the poems anew in a volume with a different title, The Studios (1990), to underline that her poetic intentions were slightly different.

The Studios contains the poems from The Secret Annex, many of them modified as shown above, along with new poems that could not see the light before 1989. All of them verbalize despair and helplessness, shattered ideals and resignation in the context of a threatened biography. Among the poems remained intact is “Elegy ii”, which deals with the limits of interpretations, the crisis of language and its capacity to convey clear and relevant messages related to the surrounding decaying reality:

Do you wring the poem’s neck
when you discover it inscribes itself even without you?
An agonized revolt without aim.
Do not fear:
someone will always be around
(some moist sticky mouth)
to whisper in your ear
the truth about tomorrow
and history from way back then (PC, 41, Sorkin).

The Mutilation of the Artist as a Young Woman (1999) is perhaps her most dramatic collection, in which the disharmonies between her inner
self and her social self, between the past and the present, between body and spirit are made more manifest. Her protest against conformism, inaction, lies and corruption is not simply what the French call engagé: “we should not show our lucidity just like that / in front of the blind world" (DG, 213, author translation). After the catastrophic fall of the dictatorship, she oriented her poetic protests against any coercive systems, against whitewashing, complacency and hypocrisy in general.

The first “Elegy” in the book seems to be addressed to an international readership, familiar with the destiny of famous women poets from elsewhere (the group is completed with Veronica Micle, the lover of Romantic poet Mihai Eminescu):

The mutilation of the artist as a young woman
at -15ºC. Neither Sylvia Plath’s gas is possible
nor is there any soap for Veronica Micle’s rope.
From time to time, the faded memory of Tsvetaeva,
the silence in which Akhmatova drowns
and the misery, the squalor of that Jerusalem
from which Else calls me.
Yes, Sappho, our land has grown fatter
since you abandoned us.
Your famous ugliness and Emily’s gentleness
have only brought to me these thorns
that fasten my talent and my life
like handcuffs (DG, 216, author translation).

The first line may be an allusion to James Joyce’s first novel, The Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man (1916), as the book was available in Romanian in Frida Papadache’s translation when Marin wrote her poems. The replacement of “portrait” with “mutilation” and the use of the generic masculine in Romanian (“mutilarea artistului la tinerețe”) suggest an identity crisis that is both individual and, as the poem suggests, collective, no matter the gender. In contrast with the seven figures of legendary women poets, Mariana Marin included three elements of communist reality associated with the 1980s: insufficient central heating services, hence the low temperature, the gas
being off from time to time and the shortages of basic products like soap. The implication of the second and the third lines is that one could not even commit suicide like Plath or Micle, so high was the level of poverty. Elements like “the faded memory”, “the silence” or “the misery” echo the condition of women writers in the 1980s Romania, a decade when school handbooks rarely included works by women writers. In the end, Marin’s attachment to the images of the famous women poets is so strong and painful that she feels damned like a convict guilty of the crime of telling her truth as they did in their time.

The brief poem “In 1986 about 1848” deals with the topic of revolution. Conceptual in style, it touches the heart of the matter: by referring to the 1848 Revolution and to a particular forgotten victim figure, the poet questions the meaning of revolution and its relevance in the mid-1980s:

Why didn’t anyone tell me in school how Daniel Rosenthal died?

So, at 30 years old, I find out:
he was tortured, preferring to die rather than betray his revolutionary friends.
Here’s a sentence that would have fit well in a history textbook.
News is slow to reach us here.
From now on, I’ll understand the 1848 Revolution better (DG, 224, author translation).

Budapest-born Daniel Rosenthal was the painter of a famous work, *Revolutionary Romania*, a portrait of Maria Rosetti, the English wife of C. A. Rosetti, two figures who played an active part in the Wallachian Revolution from 1848. Dressed in a Romanian folk costume, her figure was a personification of national ideals. During communism, few people knew who the model really was since nobody questioned the source of the image and the media did not comment on the transnational context in which it was created. Given the relatively closed frontiers and the existence of the Iron Curtain before 1989, it
would have been against the nationalist cultural politics of the time. One century and a half later, Mariana Marin’s poem cast light on the transnational background of a national project. Since nationalism was exacerbated during communism and many people risked their life when they tried to leave the country, her poem operates like a jigsaw puzzle in which the player managed to assemble sufficient pieces in order to understand the big picture.

Written before 1989, “The Can” approaches obliquely socio-economic aspects like food, education and civic responsibility:

Here I am in 1988, opening a can of beef from the time of proletcultism. I look inside: something pink turning gray lurks within. I start to dream: what kind of beef was it and whose? Who slaughtered it? Where is the name of the one who locked it in the can? What thoughts did those people have who could have even had higher education? I have higher education too.

And so we complain on each other’s shoulders like this (DG, 228, author translation).

The first three lines are subtly ironic, hinting at a reiteration of the ruthless 1950s Soviet practices in the 1980s Romania. The four questions are apparently naïve, but their detectivistic nature brings police interrogations to mind. The tension of the poem, built on the contrast between dream and reality, on the disparity between zootechnical studies and literary studies, is released in the last two lines when both engineers and literates find they experience the same problem: food scarcity.

A more personal poem, “Red and Black” tackles the transformation of the poet when the surrounding reality goes astray. The poet
repudiates the person she used to be when she fell pray to censorship practices of whose possible effects she was not aware:

I can no longer reread my old poems.  
The one who wrote them has abandoned me.  
I’ve driven her away with my own hand.  
I couldn’t bear to see her rolling  
in this reality without churches  
and without God.  
I replaced myself with another,  
but when the hour of vespers comes  
I choose a green stretch hidden in my mind  
or the bark of a tree  
and make the pagan sign of the cross.  
Sometimes reality catches me in the act  
and thrusts its red five-pointed stars down my throat.  
I barely make it home,  
where I vomit them out one by one,  
flushing them away forcefully.

And all of them, all (as it’s said in our ancient lore)  
flow into the great big black sea (DG, 236, author translation).

The poem shows how she reinvents herself, faithful to her artistic beliefs, but she can hardly predict the force of reality that determines her to accept practices she does not like. It is not any kind of reality, but one of “red five-pointed stars”, an allusion to the influence of the Soviet communism. Vomiting the stars suggests a journey from innocence to experience, while their flow into the sea might be a panta rei therapeutic approach according to which everything flows, nothing remains unchanged, and traumatic recovery might be possible. Last but not least, the values of her last volume, The Dowry of Gold (2002), are the poet’s anguish, hope and faith in the revival of human spirit, articulated again and again through a haunting type of poetic discourse. In the preface to the anthology, critic and journalist Costi Rogozanu (2002) highlighted the pedagogic significance of her poetry in the sense that it shows readers how to forge
a responsible attitude and feel one has gained “a new sensitivity, good both for travelling by bus and for reading in the library” (7). Warning against narrow readings that place her among the political poets or butcher her poems in literary histories, he ended his eulogy by sketching a memorable portrait:

It must be said that Mariana Marin goes on being brave without necessarily having a “political attitude”. The interviews she gives in various publications are a model of nonchalance and direction. She is one of those people from whom you can learn to get rid of hypocrisy and routine. There is an amazing coherence when you experience her poetry and a face-to-face discussion with her. She is a phenomenon that you must know about. (8)

The last poem in the anthology and of this analysis, “Elegy” is relevant for understanding the consciousness of her own destiny as a woman artist and the premonition of her own death occurred several months after the publication of The Dowry of Gold:

I hurry towards death
without a specific purpose,
without a wedding dress,
without the dowry of gold.
Without me.
I am serene and bitter
when I hurry
across my country.
As if it were tomorrow (DG, 312, author translation).

The same as in a sacrificial ritual like the Legend of Master Manole, the poet accepts her fate and follows her artistic call unflinchingly. Like Master Manole who does not question the urging whisper coming from above and believes in the efficiency of the ritual to create a long-lasting work of art, the poet hurries to afterlife, full of hope for the power of her poetry.

Risking her life for poetic language has not remained unnoticed. Three new anthologies of selected poems were published
in Romanian over the last decade: *Scrisoare deschisă: poeme rostite la radio* (1991–2002) (Casa Radio, 2014), *O singurătate feroce* (Tracus Arte, 2015) and *La întretăierea drumurilor comerciale* (Cartier, 2023). Meanwhile, her work has become available for international readers either in author anthologies – a chapbook entitled *The Factory of the Past* (Toad Press, 2008) translated by Adam J. Sorkin and Daniela Hurezanu; a Romanian-Italian bilingual edition *Zestrea de aur/La dote d’oro* (Pavesiana, 2013) translated by Clara Mitola; the previously mentioned *Paper Children* translated by Adam J. Sorkin and his team – or in collective anthologies like *Mujer en la aduana: 10 poetas rumanas contemporáneas* (Huerga y Fierro, 2022) translated into Spanish by Angelica Lambru. All these titles demonstrate that, two decades after her demise, her readership has increased and the national and transnational influence of her work has become more and more visible.

**Bibliography**


**Monica Manolachi** – a senior lecturer of English and Spanish at the University of Bucharest. Her research interests range from Anglophone poetry and postcolonial studies to Romanian literature in translation. Her doctoral thesis, *Performative Identities in Contemporary Caribbean British Poetry* deals with cultural hybridity in the work of Derek Walcott and other twelve poets. One of her latest articles is: “‘Food is Always A Sign of Life’: The Role of Food in Contemporary Prose by Romanian Women Writers”. She is also a poet, editor and literary translator.