ANA BLANDIANA

Romania's leading poet on politics and faith.

(The Tablet)

Romania's pre-eminent living poet was just 17 when her work was banned for the first time. As the daughter of a so-called enemy of the people, she knew that she had little chance of being published under her own name, so adopted the pseudonym Ana Blandiana; but her cover was soon blown. Publishers were warned that her writing was not to appear anywhere.

"The following four years were probably the most difficult of my life," she says, "because I wasn't even allowed to go to college. I couldn't find a place in society, I didn't know who I was, and I doubted my own poetic talent." While her friends went off to university, she found herself working as an assistant to a stonemason. But when the ban was finally lifted, in 1964, her poetry showed her to be uncowed. "I came back victorious from/ The adventure of being honest," she wrote in *The Return*.

At 83, her name is synonymous with defiance and integrity in a country with a sad history of repression and corruption. The day after the fall of the Communist government in 1989, her poem *Dies Ille, Dies Irae* was published on the front page of Romania's leading newspaper. Seven years later she was asked to run for president, but declined – unable, she says, to imagine herself in charge of the army and security services.

Given her combative life and formidable credentials – her published works include 17 collections of poetry, 11 of essays, two of short stories and a novel – one might expect an intimidating figure, Instead, she is a warm, smiling presence, much given to laughter even when discussing serious matters. The only time her face falls is when asked about Romania's future in the light of turbulent recent elections: she is optimistic "only in the sense that it couldn't be worse than it is now."

She was born Otilia Coman in Timişoara in 1942. Her mother was an accountant and her father an Orthodox priest whose sermons drew large congregations, much to the government's displeasure. "My childhood was marked by my father's repeated arrests," she says. "In our home, as in many others, there was always a suitcase packed with warm clothes in case the police came to take him away. It was also marked by poverty; by parcels assembled at great sacrifice and sent to him in prison but always returned; by my mother staying up at night to paint small pictures for sale; by the harassment I suffered at school."

The Stalinist regime under which the family suffered came to an end in the mid-1960s with the death of its leader Gheorghe Gheorghiu-Dej. His successor, Nicolae Ceaușescu, was liberal by comparison – to begin with. "Liberty is extraordinary when you first discover it," says Blandiana. "There was an explosion of creativity, and for eight years every kind of art flourished." But a visit to China and North Korea in 1972 opened Ceaușescu's eyes to the lure of autocracy – "He discovered how marvellous it is to become a god" – and a new era of repression began.

She faced other challenges too. In 1977 an earthquake hit the Bucharest apartment she shared with her husband Romulus Rusan, leaving him buried under the rubble. Miraculously, he survived; in her poem *Thank You* she voices her gratitude to the forces of nature and "shards of icons" that spared his life.

In 1984 Blandiana published four poems about the hopelessness of existence under Ceaușescu in the magazine *Amfiteatru*; its distribution was cancelled within hours. In 1988 a satirical poem comparing Ceaușescu to a bullying tomcat brought heavy-handed reprisals: she was watched night and day by the secret police, her telephone was cut off and her books were banned from libraries.

Poetic resistance, she says, "helped us stay alive and keep our sanity." But in the decade following Ceaușescu's fall she produced little work: "History

became more important than writing." She became president of the Civic Alliance, an organisation promoting democracy and human rights, and of Romanian PEN. She and Romulus Rusan also oversaw the transformation of the notorious Sighet Prison into a memorial for the victims of Communism. Sadly, she regards Romania's new political class as "nothing but a travesty of the old *nomenklatura*," constantly blocking attempts at proper democratic reform.

In other respects, too, the post-Ceaușescu age has disappointed. To her, the West's championing of liberty feels lazy and bored after decades of what she calls "consumer-society fatigue;" thanks to the "poisonous vulgarity" of the entertainment industry, "resistance through culture is even more necessary than it was during Communism." And as someone whose freedom of speech has been hard won, she is horrified by political correctness and cancel culture – "in my opinion, the greatest threats to democracy and the rule of law."

The poetry her work most strongly recalls is Rilke's. Like him, she has a highly personal and idiosyncratic relationship with God: "Lord, who embraces me in compassion/ Like a strait jacket," she writes in *Requiem*, while in *Death in the Light* she laments

The endless loneliness in which
I can sometimes feel you coming near
Only to struggle and break away.
Is it a sin, Lord, to hold you like a trap
Inside of me to be able to caress you?

The final lines of her *Fifty Poems* collection go so far as to pose the question, "Does the soul take refuge in us/ From God?"

For Blandiana, Rilke is the greatest poet of the 20th century, "because he managed to penetrate the heart of the mystery – which is simultaneously the mystery of poetry and the mystery of the divine. I learned from Rilke to intuit

not only the definition of poetry, but also the unmediated relationship with God. To me, the proof of His existence is the fact that I never feel alone."

Her father was so committed to the Church that he refused to take payment for conducting baptisms, weddings or funerals. Her own connection to institutional faith is much weaker: "I believe that all religions worship the miracle that lies at the heart of everything."

In her eyes, the world is a place of struggle for humans and the forces of heaven alike. In *No Choice* she imagines herself in a celestial court, a helpless defendant in "the great trial/ The one that ends by sending us to live on earth." In *The Borderline* she searches in vain for the line between good and evil "Just as, when a child, I searched for the edges of the rain," while *Alternative* finds God sitting on a perpetual see-saw, with Satan as the counterweight He has created. Angels appear frequently in her poetry, but not in the immaculate form we expect: in *The Fall* they arrive in the desert "dragging their wings on the ground", excluded from heaven "not because of sin/ But because they're just worn out." *Old Angels* presents them as "Too sad to bring good news,/ Too thin to wield the sword of fire."

Suffering and pain, she says, constitute the main material of poetry. But, she adds, "There is a certain happiness, because you know the tragic dimension of life, but also know that you can go beyond it." Though the universe of her poems can be bleak and hostile ("A predator star is lurking/ In the brightest moment/ Of the acid sky"), there are moments of transcendence to compensate, as in *A Vase with Wild Daisies*:

…Sweet sky at sunset
Like the flocks of sheep
That used to come home;
Love for everything that was,
For everything that will disappear,

Love without meaning,
Love without frontiers –
Shadows of poplars, fence posts round the field,
Wild daisies
In a vase.

The most personal of all her books is *Variations on a Given Theme,* a collection of love poems which appeared in 2018, two years after her husband's death. "I wrote the poems without thinking I would publish them, and even without thinking they were poems. It was my way out of the tragedy, a book of love that dissolves the boundary between life and death; it is the most metaphysical of my books. It was the first time that I could confess my love with complete freedom, because until then we were always inseparable, and I was embarrassed to do so with the addressee so close."

She has published three more books since, one of them a journal she kept during the last two years of Ceaușescu's dictatorship. She came across it while tidying a cupboard during the pandemic, and re-read it with astonishment: "It was a description of a world that was unbelievable even to me, the one who had described it – an image infinitely more terrible than the one I remembered, which time had sugar-coated in the interim."

As one who has lived through turbulent times, what advice would she give those facing today's political storms? "Let's continue to believe in the values that Europe has made the basis of civilisation for the last 30 centuries – Greek philosophy, Roman jurisprudence, Christian love of one's neighbour. In the relentless clash of civilisations Europe loses not because it lacks resources, but because it does not have enough faith in itself."

The challenge of writing poetry is a recurrent theme in her work. Has she ever wished that she were not a poet? "No – it's like asking me if I ever wished I

weren't alive. The burden of writing does not include the possibility of giving it up: the burden of writing lies precisely in its relentlessness.”