



*Circumstantial Poems, Plagiaries and Versifications /
Versuri de circumstanță, plagiate și mici însăilări*

Ana Olos

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Canadian Postcards

Elena Ștefoi

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It is probably safe to say that the English-speaking public's knowledge of contemporary Romanian poetry is very, very close to zero. Aside from its notorious lack of interest in literature from cultures outside the Anglophone orbit, there is the additional problem of a dearth of translations. This being the case, it is a pleasant and welcome surprise to be presented with not one but two volumes of verse by Romanian poets in English. And for Canadianists, the pleasure and welcome is doubled thanks to the strong Canadian element in both.

Ana Olos is a name familiar to many Canadianists in the Central European region. Professor Emeritus of North University of Baia Mare, she was founder and director of the Canadian Studies Centre there, developing it into one of the most dynamic and innovative in Central Europe, its spirit reflecting the impulse that has shaped all of Olos's work and that might be summed up in Ezra Pound's dictum "Make it new!" The Unconventional Meetings of Young Canadianists she initiated became a byword for originality and creativity. In *'Twas Nice to Meet Findley Angry*, drawing on the friendship she developed with the Canadian writer Timothy Findley and his partner, William Whitehead, she produced a remarkable and perhaps unique fusion of literary criticism, biography and autobiography. Her openness to new ideas and fresh approaches can be seen in all her writing and teaching.



Circumstantial Poems, Plagiaries and Versifications / Versuri de circumstanță, plagiate și mici însăilări is a bilingual collection of Ana Olos's poems; originally written in English – no mean feat – they have been translated into her native language by Olos herself. Certainly a deep reading of these poems would include an exploration of the relationship between the two language versions, but as someone utterly illiterate in Romanian I must leave this to others, and confine myself to the English version and its many merits. These are many, in particular the great variety of poems in terms of theme, mood and form; their playfulness (including verbal play) and pointed humour; their inquisitiveness and keen observation of the world around us; their honesty. Taken as a whole, the collection of poems is an intensely personal diary, both literally and figuratively: many of the poems are inspired by specific places she has visited, while all of them record the inner workings of her mind as it ruminates on life's paradoxes, its times of despair and its moments of joy. And the mind it reveals is deeply grounded in a long cultural tradition, questioning, speculative, prepared to be angry at the world it observes and to make judgments, but also to accept human limitations and human imperfectability, to examine its own weaknesses and prevarications. The poems are clearly the work of someone who has delved deep in the complexities and frailty of the human condition and emerged with a wisdom shaped by their understanding.

The above characterization might give the impression that Olos's work is "heavy," difficult, sombre. Far from it: one of its chief features is the deadpan humour, the self-irony, that both undercuts and reinforces her musings. This element is particularly frequent in poems that recount more directly, or are based on, personal experiences; part of her self-knowledge is clearly that one cannot take oneself too seriously. Nor are the many poems reflecting experiences outside her own country – roughly half of the sixty-six poems in the collection – in any way difficult to access. Rather, they reflect the curiosity of their author, her openness to the new, and the rich potential of cultural interaction. For perhaps obvious reasons, I was particularly taken by the poems relating to Canada – two sets originating in summer schools Olos attended in Ottawa and the West Coast, and "Salmon Series," a complex set of twelve poems taking the form of "recollections" from a stay in Canada. The latter in particular is marked by many of the typical features of Olos's verse, ranging from the self-mocking to the unpretentiously but deeply serious. The sharply observed moments that form the bulk of the series are framed by ruminations after her return, all of these intertwined in ways that make the series a minor *tour de force*.

Ana Olos is also present in Elena Ștefoi's *Canadian Postcards*, playing a subsidiary but important role. Or rather a triple role, as she is both the translator from the original Romanian of Ștefoi's poems as well as the author of both an informative Foreword outlining Ștefoi's career and the valuable accompanying "Close Reading of the Poems," a combination of factual information, cultural background notes and literary analysis



that serves to make them more accessible to their potential audience(s). Elena Ștefoi herself is one of the better-known contemporary Romanian poets, a prize-winning author of nine books of poetry. In addition she has been a prominent public figure in post-1989 Romania in the cultural world, the field of journalism and diplomacy. From 2005 to 2012 she served as her country's Ambassador to Canada, and it is her time there that gave rise to the poems in *Canadian Postcards*.

In speaking about the book, Ștefoi points out that these are not “postcards from Canada” - that is, not cheerful, informative messages sent to keep in touch with people back home (“Loved Niagara Falls – wish you were here ...”). Instead, they are “a tribute for all those of my family who have left this world (and whom I have brought with me, ‘on a single ticket / that of memory’ – trying to keep them close via flash-backs generated by a reality that they would have been glad to be able to know.” In practice this means that almost all the poems follow a similar pattern. They begin with a description of some particular place in Canada, and this serves as a trigger for memories – of family members, friends, experiences in the distant past – that in turn lead to a series of unfolding thoughts. This may sound simple, even mechanical, as when a pebble thrown into a pond results in a widening circle of ripples. In Ștefoi's hands, however, this model achieves a flexibility that enables her to travel both in space and in time, exploring her memories, recalling families and friends, speaking candidly of deeply personal, even painful, experiences, meditating on the passing of time and on its losses, achieving reconciliation. The poems start from a specific point here and now, reach out in vast arcs encompassing very disparate experiences and great stretches of time, and then return to their starting point, marking a quiet completion.

The Canadian places that make their appearance in Ștefoi's verse are varied. The great majority are to be found in Ottawa and its surroundings, where she of course spent most of her time during her seven years as Ambassador: specific parks and streets and bridges, the Rideau and Ottawa Rivers, Parliament Hill and its famous cat shelter (now, alas, no longer there), the Museum of Civilization. Others include the far North, the Prairies, Vancouver. What is fascinating is how Ștefoi links these places to her memories. A particular flower reminds her of that same flower at a distant point in her past, setting off a series of memories and associations. A scene in an Ottawa park is suddenly transformed as she imagines long dead members of her family mingling with the locals, enjoying its amenities. By contrast, the pleasures associated with the Rideau Canal conjure up in her mind the opposite, the forced labour that was used to construct a canal between the Danube and Black Sea in the 1950s. The “here and now” in Canada absorbs the “there and then” of Romania, freeing her to deal with her past. And this even affects her future: in “Between Two Canals” she imagines, as the last day of her life approaches, how “the best part of me will return to Ottawa, / at least for an hour, to run with my eyes in the sun, / at peace with all and everything, along



the canal.” In her poems, then, Canada, specific places in Canada, take on the symbolic form of “a luminous space” that enables her to conjure up the past, to relive its joys and deal with its complexities and horrors, a space that is a place of healing.

Both *Circumstantial Poems* and *Canadian Postcards* are in themselves memorable poetry collections. For a Canadianist, of course, there is the added interest of the subject matter of many of the poems, relating as it does to Canada and so offering insight into the reception and understanding of Canada by foreigners, its impact and place in their imagination. For me as a Canadian, and a Canadian born and brought up in Ottawa to boot, there is also the very special pleasure of seeing through others’ eyes places that are deeply embedded in my own cultural memory, many of them from as far back as my childhood. So I am prepared to admit the possibility that my praise of these two poetry books is overdone. But I don’t think so.