

Can one fight geopolitical tides with imperfect weapons? Reckoning with the recent past in Ana Blandiana's *More-Than-the Simple Past*

Letitia Guran 

Department of Romance Studies, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, Chapel Hill, USA
lguran@email.unc.edu

Abstract: The present study focuses on Ana Blandiana's diary *Mai-mult ca-Trecutul / More-than-the Simple Past: 31 August 1988-12 December 1989* published in 2023, which chronicles the last year and a half of communist regime in Romania during which the author was banned from publishing. For its contemporary readers, the text raises a lot of questions as it provides invaluable context for mapping the dynamic and still controversial geography and temporality of an era that is neither far enough to be considered "the Past,"/settled history, nor close enough to be referred to as "recent past" by younger generations. As my essay demonstrates, this still contentious past defined by a collective trauma will probably continue to remain suspended in the insoluble ambiguity of a *neither-there nor here*, and a *never-entirely-then nor now* for those who lived it. Blandiana's title preserves the sense of this past's inherent undecidability, which evokes Derrida's *différance*, a trope which haunts not only historical interpretations, but discourse itself, whose most persuasive accounts hide a fundamental absence: a black hole at its very center.

Keywords: *communist regime; chronotope; Secret Police; Ana Blandiana; collective trauma; memorial literature.*



University of Bucharest Review. Literary and Cultural Studies Series
<https://ubr.rev.unibuc.ro/>
Volume 14 | Issue 2 | 2024 |



<https://doi.org/10.31178/UBR.14.2.8>
ISSN 2069–8658 (Print) | 2734–5963 (Online)
© The Author(s) 2024



Published by Bucharest University Press. This is an Open Access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>)

“I think that none of those whose lives and image were displayed on the dissection table of the Securitate [Romania’s Secret Police operating between 1950s and 1989] should remain silent. Every bit of this devilish experience, no matter how small, should be shared in the public sphere, and those who made it possible by abandoning their status of ‘fellow compatriot’ should be publicly exposed.”

(Gabriel Liiceanu, *My Dear Secret Police Informer*)

The context: competing symbolic spaces

In 2023, ten years after Gabriel Liiceanu called on those who had suffered the trauma of Romania’s Secret Police surveillance to share their experiences in the public space, Ana Blandiana, one of the authors known for being harassed by the infamous police apparatus, published *not* her Secret Police files, like Liiceanu and others did, but her diary/memoir covering the last year of Ceausescu’s regime when her books were banned and she was blacklisted from publication. As expected, even after more than three decades from the time when they were written, the diary-like entries of *More-than-the Simple Past* were a welcome contribution to reconsidering the trauma of Romania’s postwar era, all the while triggering calls from some quarters on Blandiana’s presumed “imaginary dissidence.”¹

Within the context of the “chronotope”² that the *More-than-the Simple Past* proposes, this particular reaction deserves attention, if only because it brings front and

¹ In “Ana Blandiana and the imaginary dissidence,” published in the *Daily* newspaper in March 2024, Mirela Roznoveanu claims that “[o]wing to the repute gained over the last three decades through *The Memorial of the Victims of Communism*, where she is a founding member, as well as being a president and board member of the *Civic Academy Foundation*, Ana Blandiana is one of the persons who control the public discourse in Romania. This authority position gave her the possibility of rewriting her own past. In her recent book *Mai-Mult-Ca-Trecutul. Jurnal / More-than-the Simple Past. A Diary 31 August 1988-12 December 1989* (Humanitas, 2023) the portrait of the writer who “resisted through culture,” featured on many occasions in Paul Goma’s books and diaries, disappears, substituted by the figure of the anti-communist fighter, so that rumors of Blandiana having benefited from the protection of the communist authorities may be discredited.” (<https://www.cotidianul.ro/mirela-roznoveanu-ana-blandiana-si-dizidenta-imaginara/> n. pg.)

Nevertheless, as my article proves, this reproach is unfounded. Blandiana’s position throughout her diary/memoir which chronicles the months when she was banned from publishing is never that she was a dissident, but that she was the victim of overzealous censors who, after the publication of *Intamplari pe strada mea / Incidents on my street*, a children’s book with poems that could be interpreted as alluding to Nicolae Ceausescu, had decided to ban it (and demand that bookstores return their stocks of the book instead of selling them). Blandiana finds out about this on August 31, 1988 when her sister Geta comes to Comana to let her know that her weekly collaboration with the magazine *Romania literara* (*Literary Romania*) was terminated.

² I use this concept in the sense employed by Mikhail Bakhtin when referring to the specific way in which literature represents time and space. According to *Literary Encyclopedia*, Bakhtin stipulates that “in different kinds of writing there are differing chronotopes, by which changing historical conceptions of time and space are realized. Thus, the ancient Greek novel is dominated by “adventure time”, in which the adventures of hero and heroine occur but which has no developmental impact upon their characters; like the space in which their adventures happen, it is effectively empty. By contrast, the time and space of the chivalric romance, though it retains elements of this adventure time, is dominated by the irruptions of the miraculous, which manifest themselves in narrative terms by the presence of “suddenly”.

center the disputed status of a series of concepts like *resistance-through culture*, *the ivory tower*, and others, which authors, public figures, journalists, historians, and scholars of life-writing have employed in mapping Romania's recent, communist, cultural past. The need to redefine such concepts today in any scholarly undertaking goes hand in hand with the effort to restore not only a sense of reliable history, but also to recover the specific temporality of dictatorship in Romania, and the symbolic geography of Bucharest, a capital deeply scarred by Ceausescu's megalomaniac projects. Compared to the plight of historians of the former Soviet Union whose archives were opened after 1991, only to recently become unavailable again to international researchers³, the readers of Blandiana's diary have the advantage of a first-hand autobiographical document. This saves them the agony/distress of having to resort to a prosopography⁴ as historians usually do for those individuals whose biographies are unrecoverable. My own approach in discussing the symbolic geography the diary sketches is to compare it with other sources, many of them firsthand testimonies, interviews, open letters, oral history accounts, and literary texts covering the last decade of Ceausescu's rule.

One such text could be Herta Muller's 1993 *Herztier*⁵, a novel published in Germany and dedicated to all those who were killed by Romania's Secret Police while attempting to escape the prison-house that the country had become during the 1980s. Blandiana herself published in 1993 *The Drawer with Applauses*,⁶ "a novel about the impossible escape, about getting used to living in captivity and about loneliness." (Radu 146) A polyphonous text, a novel within a novel, and also a meta-novel, *The Drawer with Applauses*, evolved from a manuscript initially titled *The Art of Escape / Fugue* which was conceived over eight years (1983-1991). The story chronicles the destiny of Alexandru Serban, a prose writer harassed and kept under surveillance by the Secret Police, who sends him to a re-education camp for writing a novel which chronicled the destinies of people persecuted and imprisoned by the Romanian communist authorities during the Stalinist 1950s era. Much like her fictional hero Serban, Blandiana took the courageous step of actually writing such a novel from 1983 on and produced a text where she exchanges the reassuring veils of Aesopian language for the blunt description of the "concentratory universe"⁷ of Romanian society during the 1950s.

<https://www.litencyc.com/php/stopsis.php?UID=187&rec=true>. Accessed 1 August 2024.

³ This happened mostly after the 2022 invasion of Ukraine when research partnerships between international and Russian scholars in the Russian archives became virtually impossible. (see Brandenberger 7).

⁴ Lawrence Stone famously described prosopography as a form of historical inquiry that investigates the common characteristics of a group of people whose individual biographies may be largely unrecoverable.

⁵ The novel was translated into English as *The Land of Green Plums* (1996) and as *Animalul inimii* (1997) into Romanian. It was analyzed, among others, by Valentina Glajar in "The discourse of discontent: politics and dictatorship in Herta Müller's *Herztier* (1994)".

⁶ This novel had successive reprints in 1998, 2002, and 2004.

⁷ The term "concentratory" derives from the French concentrationnaire, used by poets and thinkers in the immediate post war years to describe the "concentratory universe". This is society defined by a matrix of concentration camps – places where the law is suspended and within which anything can happen.

<https://www.benjaminhannavycousen.com/concentrationay#:~:text=The%20term%20'concentratory'%20derives%20from,which%20'anything%20can%20happen>. Accessed 1 August 2024.

The 2023 controversy surrounding the text which Blandiana calls “diary” stems from the very genre-assignment which carries implicit gnoseological connotations. For those commentators who signaled that the book is more of a “memoir” than a diary, if only because the metronome rhythm of a typical diary is supplemented in *More-than-the Simple Past* by the smooth temporality of the autobiography, the implication is that in the recent, presumably revised text, Blandiana purposefully rewrote the “original” entries to portray herself as a victim of the regime, whose “mere” *survival through culture*⁸ often discussed throughout the text via musings about her mission as a writer and about her misgivings about direct, political action, amounted in the end to a portrait of an intellectual resisting through culture.

At the center of the *resistance through culture* controversy which erupted in the public arena after 1989, when canonical, contemporary Romanian writers were chastised for not providing strong role models of public intellectuals, dissidents, and political martyrs like other Eastern European writers, was the fact that, in line with the concepts of high culture, of literary modernism, of Platonic, and 19th and 20th century German philosophy, such writers took refuge in the *ivory tower* of culture, instead of resisting politically the onslaught of the dictatorship which was trampling the values preached by the very texts they emulated and worse, by those they themselves wrote.

The concept of *resistance through culture* resonates with the famous but recently controversial theory launched in the public sphere by Gabriel Liiceanu’s *Paltinis Diary*⁹

⁸ Notably, in the diary Blandiana uses this term and not the much more controversial “resistance through culture” employed in the public discourse of literary critics, writers, and philosophers mostly during the 1980s and 1990s.

⁹ *Jurnalul de la Paltinis / Paltinis Diary* was initially published in 1983. In “Dissenting non-dissent: Resistance through Culture” Jonathan Lahey Dronsfield summarizes the philosophy behind Noica’s theory of “resistance through culture” as embodied by the position that “resistance to authoritarian repression and dictatorial regimes is best achieved by schooling selected individuals in that culture rather than through direct political action or publicly speaking out” (589). What Dronsfield misses out, however is that Noica’s ultimate purpose was not the schooling itself, but the preparation of new generations of students able to think critically, freely, despite the impositions of the dictatorship ranging from censorship to self-censorship. Those thus prepared could continue to produce “true culture”; though one is bound to ask: what for, if they could never publish it/ insert it in the public debate? In his article Dronsfield claims that “the culture propounded by Noica’s pupils is essentially patriarchal and, further, that this culture is complicit with the very tyranny it seeks to resist: philosophically, ideologically and in practice. This is evidenced,” according to Dronsfield “by the exclusion of women from the culture espoused” (592). Additionally, by focusing on a fairly recent debate between Liiceanu and Nobel prize-winning author Herta Muller, herself an exile from communist Romania, Dronsfield considers “two opposing philosophies of language which might best be described as “birth of the word is in the head” versus “birth of the word is on the page”, effectively restaging a problem going back to early defenses of liberty, for example in Spinoza and [John Stuart] Mill, the relationship between freedom of thought and freedom of expression” (abstract to “Dissenting non-dissent”). Dronsfield’s conclusion is that “[o]nly by understanding selves as linguistic bodies whose language is socialized and shared through affective relations to others and to oneself do we arm ourselves with the resources to resist censorship, repression and tyranny” (abstract to “Dissenting”). While one cannot but agree with such a conclusion, hasn’t the success of Liiceanu’s *Paltinis Diary*, one of the most read and sought-after books of the 1980s proven exactly that he engaged with his fellow citizens? After all, through the *Paltinis Diary*, both Liiceanu and Noica effectively shared their reflections, thoughts, and ideas with their contemporaries, confirming thus that only by so doing may a writer hope that his/her thoughts help improve people’s understanding of what was oppressing them and possibly suggest alternative political and cultural values.

(1983) which, inspired by Plato's method in his Socratic dialogues, recounts Constantin Noica's cultural "recipe" for students of philosophy, predicated on the uttermost importance of a solid classical education, rooted in the study of ancient Greek texts and those of major German idealist philosophers, in the original languages. Direct contact with the original texts of these thinkers was supposed in Noica's estimation to arm its practitioners with the tools necessary for a meaningful and fruitful professional inquiry and life. By extension, the theory resonated with the mindset of the 1960s generation of Romanian writers, who valued high modernism in poetry and prose as means to reconnect with the pre-WWII tradition, discouraged and disparaged by communist propaganda as tainted by bourgeois decadence, when not completely censored, and rejected outright from publication. The question that this theory of *resistance through culture* overlooked, however was how would freedom of thought be possible at all in a dictatorship enforcing censorship on any published text, and implicitly engendering self-censorship in the minds of anybody writing texts for publication?

Self-deceiving, and self-serving as the *resistance/survival through culture* and the *ivory tower* theories may seem in hindsight, it is equally problematic to dismiss them outright as long as their practitioners, from Andrei Plesu, Gabriel Liiceanu, to Ana Blandiana and a couple of other writers of the 60s, 70s, and even, the 80s generations, ended up being assiduously followed by the Secret Police which, apparently found their texts dangerous, or at least problematic. As such, the Secret Police officers compiled detailed surveillance files on these writers up until December 22, 1989, the date of Ceausescu's fall from power.

By contrast to Liiceanu, who in 2013 was able to publish his own Secret Police file retrieved from the CNSAS¹⁰ archive under the title *My Dear Informer*, writers like Blandiana, Mircea Dinescu, and Andrei Plesu, who had suffered punitive consequences for criticizing the regime, directly, in open letters¹¹, or through their poetry, were unable to see and retrieve their Secret Police files. Their cases which were still "operational/active files" in December 1989, when Ceausescu's regime fell, were destroyed following the explicit order from Vasile Malureanu, a Secret Police general.

In her 2021 interview about the state of the National Council for the Study of the Secret Police Archives' archive (CNSAS), Germina Nagat, chief investigator¹² detailed the tactics used to create such files and revealed the efforts to dispose of the most compromising of them once the fate of Ceausescu's regime seemed sealed. Speaking of the *architecture of oppression*, Nagat explained that the "total system of social control" perfected over the last decade of Ceausescu's rule, during the 1980s, was organized up to the most minute detail, thus turned into "a monstrous machine of oppression" extracting

¹⁰ CNSAS is Consiliul National al Securitatii Arhivelor Statului / National College for the Study of Secret Police's Archive was founded in 1999 and the archive started receiving files in an official manner only in 2005. According to Germina Nagat, member of the National College for the Study of Secret Police's Archive, it took ten years to former political prisoners like Ticu Dumitrescu, for the Secret Police archives to become available to those interested in consulting them.

¹¹ This essay will discuss later details about Plesu's, Dinescu's and Blandiana's letters and poetry.

¹² Since 1999, Germina Nagat was researcher and chief investigator for the National Council for the Study of the Securitate Archives (CNSAS).

For more info, read <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/europe/8401915.stm>. Accessed 1 August 2024.

denouncements from thousands of ordinary citizens through fear, blackmail, and ultimately leading to the atrophy of morality against the backdrop of the plight to survive in a crushing dictatorship.

As Blandiana's diary repeatedly mentions, after she was fired from *Literary Romania* magazine, she and her husband, Romulus Rusan had become the object of typical harassing Secret Police practices. These included the presence of surveillance vehicle and personnel on their street, opened correspondence, tapped phone conversations, and spotty access to reliable service on their landline. In post-1989 interviews, Mircea Dinescu, Doina Cornea, Dan Desliu, and other Romanian intellectuals who spoke up against censorship, surveillance, and Ceausescu's systematization policy recount similar tactics of intimidation being applied to them.

The question that many of those contesting Blandiana's status as a dissident writer ask is whether her children's poem about Arpagic¹³, the self-important tomcat can be construed as an indirect jibe at Ceausescu's personality cult? Could this poem, which appeared in 1988 children's book, *Incidents on my Street*, four years after the poems published in the *Amphitheatre* magazine in 1984¹⁴ had triggered Blandiana's second publication ban, and, finally, her 1989 memoir to Ceausescu¹⁵ (and other 22 institutions and individuals) demanding the right to work according to Romania's laws, be seen as acts of dissidence?

On March 21, 1989 the diary recounts a memorable scene when Blandiana receives a phone call from an unknown woman who disparagingly says that, in light of Doina Cornea's (actual) suffering, she, Blandiana only plays the dissident. The malicious accusation uses the same logic as those reproaching Romanian writers and intellectuals that, with few exceptions like Doina Cornea, Dan Desliu, Mircea Dinescu, and a couple of others, they have not raised their voices powerfully enough against Ceausescu's abusive plans to "systematize" villages (by demolishing peasant houses and building "modern" blocks of flats in their place), to erase old, historic neighborhoods and build the Victory of Socialism Boulevard and the massive House of the People (currently Palace of the Parliament), and, in general, to starve and humiliate the people of Romania. For such abuses, the (in)famous *resistance through culture* was not a strong enough reaction to count as an act of dissidence¹⁶.

¹³ To assist the 2009 readers in reconstructing Ana Blandiana's profile in the context of pre-1989 Romania, Ilarion Tiu reproduces on his website after his interview with the author, a fragment of her poem about Arpagic: <https://www.ilariontiu.ro/?p=2326>. Accessed 1 August 2024.

¹⁴ The four poems were called "Totul"/Everything, "Cruciada copiilor" / The Children's Crusade, "Delimitări"/Demarcations and "Eu cred"/ I Believe. About the incident, Blandiana recounts: "[i]n '85 the second scandal happened when something was published, kind of by mistake. I gave some poems to a student magazine, *Amphitheater*, telling them that I didn't think they could be published. They insisted that I give them some poems and I told them that the only poems I had were ones that I didn't think could be published." <https://linguaromana.byu.edu/2016/05/31/interview-ana-blandiana/>. Accessed 1 August 2024.

¹⁵ According to the March 3 entry in the diary (329) that is the day when, accompanied by Romulus Rusan, Blandiana leaves her memoir at the Central Committee for Nicolae Ceausescu, C. Olteanu, Gh. Florea, C. Mitea; at the City Hall for Croitoru; at the Academy of Social-Political Studies Stefan Gheorghiu for Dumitru Popescu; at the Writers' Union for D.R. Popescu, Balaci, and Ion Horea. St. Aug. Doinas, whom they meet, reads the letter and agrees with it.

¹⁶ As it turns out, a report from December 1989 entitled "Revolt against Silence: The State of Human Rights

In September 2010 Herta Muller, the 2009 Nobel Prize-winner for literature, a German writer born in Romania, whose books recount life under communism, famously debated Gabriel Liiceanu on the topic¹⁷. As a follow-up, in October of the same year, Andrei Plesu proposed an overview of the phenomenon called “resistance through culture” which nuances and clarifies some of its most paradoxical dimensions:

If, under unfriendly circumstances, you do your job conscientiously, if you “mind your business” unabated, by functioning in a parallel universe than the oppressive one which you lived under, you could boast that you survived decently, that you preserved your honor, that you did not “dirty” yourself, but you cannot claim that, though your daily life you “resisted” the authoritarian regime. (“Resistance through Culture” 14)

In his argumentation, at first Plesu seems play the devil’s advocate and by using a tongue-in-cheek recap of the most common claims made by the defenders of the resistance through culture ethics, he seems to deny that such a *modus vivendi* can be a proper act of resistance against a totalitarian regime. Additionally, when he further investigates that kind of “resistance” by applying it to other professions through a common-sense analogy, Plesu concludes that:

Since a surgeon who performed surgery well under communism cannot claim that he/she had “resisted” the regime through surgery, and since a carpenter who lived under dictatorship cannot claim that he “resisted” it by making reliable chairs, similarly, a writer who wrote good books (which, fortunately, happened, despite difficult circumstances) cannot claim, boastfully, that he/she had “resisted” through writing. Despite a certain nuance of passivity, the concept of “resistance” involves more than simple professionalism in carrying out one’s job. (“Resistance” 15)

Yet, by following the logic of a dialectical deduction, Plesu, paradoxically concludes that the well-done job, not touched by ideology in the humanities and the arts, which were

in Romania” prepared by the staff of the U.S. Commission on Security and Cooperation in Europe cites an impressive number of acts of dissent and partially-successful attempts to organize dissent against Ceausescu’s dictatorship. Petre Mihai Bacanu, Mihai Creanga and other journalists from the *Free Romania* newspaper, biophysicist Gabriel Andreescu, Ionita Olteanu editor in chief of *Economic Magazine* and other 29 political prisoners whose names were not known by the wide public, but are mentioned in the Report, join ranks with better known names like Mircea Dinescu, Dan Desliu, Andrei Plesu, Dumitru Mazilu, pastor Laszlo Tokes, the six communist party veterans (Silviu Brucan, Corneliu Manescu, Gheorghe Apostol, Alexandru Barladeanu, Ion Raceanu, Constantin Pîrvulescu) who wrote open letters to Ceausescu and other party officials, and with workers who declared their solidarity with Doina Comea or initiated their own actions of protest in various factories. <https://www.csce.gov/wp-content/uploads/2016/07/>. Accessed 1 August 2024.

¹⁷ A brief fragment of the debate captures the spirit of the conversation during which the two writers seemed often at odds. “Are those who respected their relationship with language, who did not let themselves enter the cabal which destroyed language, who never borrowed the official language, are they the “hangers on” you refer to? Don’t you think that every book – every clean, good, wonderful book – born during those times was a way of saying ‘no’ to the world in which we lived?” asked Liiceanu. Muller’s answer was a resounding “no.” <https://www.eurozine.com/when-personal-integrity-is-not-enough/> Accessed 1 August 2024.

under strict ideological control by the authoritarian party, involves an implicit, affirmative, and ethical dimension which promotes respect, self-respect, and engenders freedom. They are far from being simple forms of “hygienic self-protection, minor gesticulation, politically ‘insufficient’.” Furthermore, “To stubbornly protect your inner freedom and your dignity, to only produce ‘products’ that are valid in themselves not due to their aesthetic and philosophical compliance with the official ideology, amounts in the end to act of ‘resistance.’ A position not without risks” (“Resistance” 16).

This kind of resistance, minimalist as it seems, carried with it personal risks, which were accepted by all involved in practicing it. As their professional biographies prove, from time to time, when the censors deemed that they crossed a red line, such writers were banned from publishing, marginalized, excluded from various positions and institutions, and, ultimately their lives were upended: “always subject to random political circumstances, unstable, depending on the good will and whims of the (cultural) nomenklatura” (“Resistance through culture” 18). Plesu’s conclusion, based on his personal experience is both sobering and ironic. “[By resisting as such] you may gain a certain “underground” notoriety, but you cannot make a career. You are untrustworthy, kept under surveillance, kept “in place” (“Resistance through culture” 19).

Insufficient as such type of “resistance” may seem to those labeled by Plesu “apostles of the civic spirit,” and whose standards require nothing short of radical political action, there was value to be found in every little act of personal freedom and dignity, even if that did not amount to any definitive blow to the regime. The large number of Secret Police files in the CNSAS Archives, some of them active until December 1989, prove that the regime saw potential dangers even in humanists who, like Blandiana, Plesu, Liiceanu, and many others “survived through culture”. Their Secret Police files, diaries, and memoirs from that time (i.e. Mircea Zăciu’s, Dumitru Micu’s, Ion D. Sarbu’s, Liviu Antonesei’s, Florenta Albu’s, but also Matei Calinescu’s and Ion Vianu’s¹⁸ and others) testify about the various ways in which officers of the Secret Police attempted to intimidate and control them and their colleagues.

To get the full picture of how dramatic this tacit power struggle had become by 1989, one needs to read Blandiana’s diary in conjunction with a series of open letters directed by various dissenters, writers, and former high Party officials to Ceausescu, and/or to high representatives of state institutions. The diary mentions them feverishly, admiringly, and hopefully each time the metronome time of the daily grind is punctured by such extraordinary events, of which Blandiana and her husband find out by furtively listening to *Radio Free Europe*’s broadcasts.

Among such events, Blandiana recounts Mircea Dinescu’s no-nonsense interview in *Liberation* on March 17, 1989¹⁹ and his two letters to the President of the Writer’s

¹⁸ *Memories in dialog* includes autobiographical chapters written within the correspondence between the two authors during 1991-1992 and is a very important source text for understanding the pressures the Secret Police put on Romanian writers, some of whom, like Vianu and Calinescu, chose to emigrate. Their book was written in exile, after the fall of communism.

¹⁹ Interview transcribed in *Death Reads the Newspaper* (1989 in print; 2023 as an e-book): 69-76, https://doi.org/10.1163/9789004650060_048.

Union, Dumitru Radu [D.R.] Popescu.²⁰ The first letter, sent on March 21, 1989 following a surrealist encounter between Dinescu, his colleague, poet Dan Desliu, and Secret Police officers who had hidden microphones in a plate on the poets' table at the Writers Union's restaurant, is celebrated by Blandiana's diary in a cryptic note. On March 24 she notes that she heard on the radio (*Free Europe*, my note) "a scintillating letter written by Mircea Dinescu to D.R. Popescu about the plate with microphones taken away by Desliu" (*More-than-Past* 323), without providing details of how the two poets thwarted the plan of the Secret Police officers to retrieve the plate containing microphones used to listen to their dinner table conversations, by Desliu taking the plate and putting it into his briefcase.

The second letter from June 22, 1989, in which Dinescu unequivocally charges the leadership of the Writers' Union, and by extension the underlying political structures, with persistent abuses against writers' freedom of expression and freedom of movement is not mentioned in the diary, which, references, however Dan Desliu's persecution. As writers and those listening to *Radio Free Europe* and *Voice of America* found out, Desliu was forced by the regime to move to the outskirts of Bucharest, as were the five former communist dignitaries²¹ (*More-than-Past* 368). The latter, also cryptically mentioned by the diary, had sent their own letter of protest to Ceausescu at the beginning of March 1989.

About Dinescu, Blandiana notes in the diary on March 17, after she listens to his interview to *Liberation*, broadcasted by *Radio Free Europe*: "[...] I have the feeling that something may snap in my soul due to my admiration, [for his gesture-my note] similarly to how things snap out of anger or effort. I am / We are faced with a strong spirit, whose strength comes from his (inner) freedom and who is free because he has an incredible sense of humor. Listening to his effervescent text, all my suspicions/misgivings and objections seemed absurd, and any reproach I may have ever considered seemed inadequate in light of his gesture" (*More-than-Past* 317).

A few pages later, on March 21, following the phone call during which Florica Mitroi accused her that "she was playing the dissident" the diary includes an extensive meditation on the complicated relationship between outright political action and what Blandiana saw as her primary duty as a writer.

Was I, even in the least of measures, playing at being a dissident? Obviously, neither playing, nor being a dissident befitted me. Having never been either a communist, or a politician, this idea of fighting against a regime was in no way defining my attempt at judging and expressing things (in my own way). My duty

²⁰ The texts of his two letters to D.R. Popescu are also included in *Death Reads the Newspaper*, 65-68 and 77-78.

²¹ On March 11, 1989 six prominent, veteran members of the Romanian Communist Party (Silviu Brucan, Constantin Pirvulescu, Corneliu Manescu, Alexandru Birladeanu, Gheorghe Apostol and Ion Raceanu) sent a blunt, open letter to President Ceausescu criticizing the destruction of the country that his policies have caused and calling for an immediate renunciation of the systematization program, and for the restoration of constitutional guarantees on civil rights. (<https://www.csce.gov/wp-content/uploads/2016/07/>, 6-7). According to the news broadcasted by *Radio Free Europe* on March 11, 1989, Mircea Zăciu, Ion D. Sarbu, and Liviu Antonesei, all take note of the event in their diaries.

was to answer my own call, to tell the truth in my writing, and I had no qualms about having done it and continuing to do it. I was positive about it. But less so about *whether all this was enough*. Meaning, whether I should have done something more, because about what was in my possibility to do I had no doubts. What held me back was the certainty that everything beyond writing proper would turn against my writing. (*More-than-Past* 320, my emphasis)

No equivocation here. These lines deftly summarize the challenge: for Blandiana writing literature which “told the truth” while also doing what she knew best how to do, that is, writing, was the actual duty she, as a writer, had toward her contemporaries and herself. What she wonders about is whether writing not supplemented by direct political action at a time of uttermost crisis of freedom, was enough. The dilemma is further explored in the following paragraphs, but one question the author never asks is whether the kind of writing which she could publish in Romania during the 1980s and even before was actually telling the truth; the whole truth. The very interdiction to publish and to work for *Literary Romania* which followed the realization by the censors that the Arpagic poem may have alluded to Nicolae Ceausescu, and thus implicitly may have advanced a truthful, but problematic image of the dictator (who was perceived by Romanians exactly as Blandiana described the pompous, authoritarian tomcat), proved that truth-telling even through children’s literature was an almost impossible feat at the time. So, what was she hoping to accomplish by writing truth-telling literature that she could not publish? How could unpublishable texts be more consequential than writing open letters and having them broadcasted by *Radio Free Europe* which was listened to by so many?

[...] Doina Cornea, the French professor’s, suffering and Dan Desliu’s, the old ex-Proletkult poet, so different, in fact, did not trouble or torment me, though I was admiring them from the bottom of my heart and I was envious of them because these two people enduring the sufferings were able to choose their destiny without any qualms/self-doubts. They had in fact transformed their destinies, they had (re)invented them spectacularly and heroically, and by their choice they suddenly became useful to the highest degree to history, to their own sense of dignity, and to their own posterity. The person who tormented me, who made me agonize to the point of neurosis, who upended my daily life, and made me question everything again and forever was Mircea Dinescu, the poet who, between his poetic destiny (his poetic talent) and the political struggle, chose the latter without hesitation – and who, which would have been even more tormenting, did not think that the two do should not go together (whether he thought so out of naiveté or heroism). (*More-than-Past* 320)

The choice Blandiana evaluates here is that between one’s duty to his/her poetic talent which, in her estimation, requires retreat from everyday political struggles into a life of contemplation and culture, (the much-discussed “ivory tower” of high culture) and the need to openly engage in political struggle, as any other citizen. What she ultimately wonders about is when is the poet more *useful*: when *surviving through culture* by doing

well what she knows best or by fighting against dictatorship, like David against Goliath: despite all odds and risking it all? Ultimately, how should she do it: by speaking truth to power in literary works, most likely, unpublishable, or by speaking it directly in open letters?

As if to answer Blandiana's dilemma, Dinescu's second letter to D.R. Popescu (also broadcasted by *Radio Free Europe* in June 1989) takes his injunction against the President of the Writers Union many steps further, in a tone of desperation and urgency which replaces the fine irony from March. Dinescu begins by invoking examples of major Romanian writers who, like Vasile Voiculescu were imprisoned; assassinated, like Nicolae Labis, or forced to serve the communist regime, like Tudor Arghezi, and Lucian Blaga. It also mentions contemporary authors like Andrei Plesu, Stefan Augustin Doinas, Ana Blandiana, Alexandru Paleologu, Dan Haulica, Octavian Paler, Mihai Sora, Dan Desliu, Aurel Dragos Munteanu, Dan Petrescu, and Al. Calinescu, all blacklisted in 1989, whom he considers victims of Ceausescu's policy of instilling fear in those who sought express themselves freely, similarly to intellectuals from Eastern Europe who were taking advantage of "the atmosphere of de-Stalinization" beginning in the 1960s and carrying into the 1980s through *glasnost*²² and *perestroika*²³.

On behalf of his colleagues, Dinescu implicitly demands freedom of speech, of work, and of movement, all formally inscribed in Romania's Communist Constitution. In its most general sense, the letter demands respect for the basic rights of a profession which happens to work with words²⁴.

In sync with Dinescu's ideas and in admiration of his courage to write such a letter, Blandiana's diary substantiates the circumstances of the poet's rebellion and subsequent house arrest, which she knew first-hand as she sought to visit him and declare her solidarity. Interestingly, as she herself notes, Dinescu's courage attracted other acts of solidarity at the time, first from fellow-writers and artists Geo Bogza, St. Aug. Doinas, Dan Haulica, Octavian Paler, Andrei Plesu, Al. Paleologu and Mihai Sora, who wrote a letter siding with the poet to the same President of the Romanian Writers' Union, which she was not invited to co-sign.²⁵ As proof of increased solidarity among Romanian

²² "The policy or practice of more open consultative government and wider dissemination of information, initiated in the Soviet Union by leader Mikhail Gorbachev from 1985." <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/glasnost>. Accessed 1 August 2024.

²³ "The policy or practice of restructuring or reforming the economic and political system. First proposed by Leonid Brezhnev in 1979 and actively promoted by Mikhail Gorbachev, perestroika originally referred to increased automation and labor efficiency, but came to entail greater awareness of economic markets and the ending of central planning." <https://www.britannica.com/topic/perestroika-Soviet-government-policy>. Accessed 1 August 2024.

²⁴ After all, Blandiana's own memoir from March 3, 1989 which was "solved" by the time Dinescu sends his second letter (in June) was built around the same set of arguments. Blandiana had found out that her publication ban was lifted by March 24, 1989.

²⁵ On April 3, 1989 Blandiana notes regretfully that she was not invited to co-sign *The Letter of the Seven* (Geo Bogza, St. Aug. Doinas, Octavian Paler, Dan Haulica, Andrei Plesu, Al. Paleologu, Mihai Sora) for D.R. Popescu who was asking that Mircea Dinescu be re-hired by *Literary Romania* (330). According to Blandiana's diary entry on April 13 (336) which talks about Andrei Plesu's plight after he sends his letter of protest to mayor Croitoru at Bucharest's City Hall, she and her husband found out that Plesu's house was under surveillance and that the entry on his street was blocked by a Secret Police car. She also notes that

intellectuals, on April 10, 1989, soon after Dinescu's first letter and Desliu's persecution, an impressive number of Romanian intellectuals from exile²⁶ had sent a declaration of solidarity with Dinescu to *Radio Free Europe*.

Such instances of joint action among Romanian intellectuals were quite rare at the time and for that reason Blandiana's diary revives for the reader the trepidation and hope associated with rumors about these letters, whose existence could only be confirmed personally by their authors or by broadcasts from *Radio Free Europe* and *Voice of America*, which many Romanians listened to surreptitiously. The extraordinary quality of such texts, the diary makes us surmise, derived from their ability to generate a *performative*²⁷ space, within which political action and political dialogue became possible. For this reason, their value, their practical usefulness should not be underestimated today. This remarkable symbolic value may explain why both the authorities and the reading public considered them courageous, dangerous, even heroic acts of resistance. As a result, those who signed them were considered dissidents who shared an indomitable aura.

To fully reconstruct what writers like Blandiana and those charged to *only* resisting through culture, were up against, one should also consult the 2013 debate launched by Gabriel Liiceanu and the Group for Social Dialog (GDS) under the title "The Secret Police: From Terror to Total Surveillance" along with the Secret Police files of Romanian and foreign writers and academics like Jan Willem Boss²⁸, Dennis Deletant²⁹, and

Catrinel, Andrei Plesu's wife was reportedly seen talking across the fence with foreign dignitaries and drinking a coffee with a friend "on the steps because they were not allowed to receive anyone inside [their house-my note]" (*More-than-Past* 337).

²⁶ According to the news bulletin of *Radio Free Europe* from April 10, 1989 Victor Felea's diary mentions the names of the seven writers who declared their solidarity to Mircea Dinescu in a letter to the President of the Romanian Writers' Union. After that, the reporters read an exceptional declaration of solidarity with the Romanian writers persecuted by the Secret Police, signed by sixty Romanian writers living in exile. *The text of this declaration is quite explicit about the dire situation of human rights and of their advocates among Romanian writers*: "We, the undersigned writers of Romanian origin, living in exile express our full solidarity with the poets Mircea Dinescu and Dan Desliu, persecuted by the authorities for the doing their duty as citizens and writers and expressing their views about matters affecting their city. We also strongly protest against the police persecution endured by Dan Petrescu and Liviu Cangeopol, against the forced exile from the Bucharest of the philosopher and essay-writer, Andrei Plesu, and against the blacklisting of writers Ana Blandiana and Aurel Dragos Munteanu, the latter being thus persecuted for publicly protesting the policy of "systematization of villages," the wrecking of Romania's national patrimony, ethnicity-based discriminations, and the lack of religious liberties. These citizen-writers defend peoples' dignity and the freedom of expression in Romania. We declare our solidarity with them" ("Luni, 10 aprilie 1989"). <https://romania.europalibera.org/a/buletin-de-stiri-10-aprilie-1989/29870986.html>. Accessed 1 August 2024.

²⁷ The concept refers to philosopher John Austin's theory of language, according to which "[p]erformativity is the power of language to effect change in the world: language does not simply describe the world but may instead (or also) function as a form of social action." Austin posited that "there was a difference between constative language, which describes the world and can be evaluated as true or false, and performative language, which does something in the world. For Austin, performative language included speech acts such as promising, swearing, betting, and performing a marriage ceremony" (Cavanaugh 62).

²⁸ According to <https://carturesti.ro/carte/suspect-dosarul-meu-de-la-securitate-196639>, Boss's Secret Police file was published as *Suspect. My File at the Secret Police* (2013). Accessed 1 August 2024.

²⁹ Deletant spoke about his Secret Police file in 2007 at the Sighet Memorial summer school. <https://revista22.ro/dialog/dosarul-meu-de-securitate>. Accessed 1 August 2024.

especially Herta Muller whose file, discovered after 2009 confirms everything Blandiana and many other victims recounted about the surveillance practices used to intimidate them.

As it turns out, Muller herself became the subject of state-sponsored surveillance after she refused to collaborate with the Secret Police and especially after the publication of her first prose volume, a collection of short stories titled *Niederungen* (1982; Nadirs). These texts, censored by the Romanian government because they “depicted frankly the general misery of life in a small Romanian village similar to her own German-speaking hometown”, were eventually published in a complete version in Germany once the book was smuggled out of the country³⁰. Like Blandiana, who relapsed after her first and second reprimands, Muller was forbidden to publish again in Romania after publishing a second book of stories, *Drückender Tango* (1984; *Oppressive Tango*). Her choices were either to take ever more menial jobs, starve or immigrate to Germany. In 1987 she was finally granted this option.

As *Deutsche Welle* reporter and Romanian immigrant fellow-writer, Emil Hurezeanu notes, Muller’s Secret Police file was accidentally discovered³¹ after 2009. It consisted of three volumes filed under the code-name Cristina. The surveillance originated, according to the notes of the reporting officers, in Muller’s “tendentious depiction of Romanian social-economic realities, (...) especially in rural areas” and misrepresented and sometimes openly mocked the local state and party authorities. (*Ad Hoc Collection* n. pg.) In response to Muller’s allegedly unprincipled attitude, the Secret Police apparatus not only initiated Muller’s surveillance and harassed her by placing microphones in her house, but she was fired from her job as high school teacher and later from that of German translator (at a wire factory in Timisoara). According to the website *Herta Muller: Ad Hoc Collection* at CNSAS, the exhaustive collection of information about her personal and professional life found in the notes from German-speaking sources, some of whom were Muller’s close friends, was meant to be used to marginalize her professionally in Romania and Germany while leaving her without any means to earn a living in Romania. Manuela Marin, the author of the above website notes that

The turning point in the Secret Police’s informative surveillance of Muller came at the beginning of 1984 when they found out that a West German publishing house was interested in re-publishing her first volume. Thus, the following documents, mostly reports and informative notes covering the entire year of 1985, trace the growing concern of the Romanian secret police in the face of the enthusiastic reception of Muller’s novel in the German world. (*Ad Hoc Collection* n. pg.)

As if these techniques, which strike any citizen of a free and democratic nation as unconstitutional and profoundly repulsive, were not enough, the Secret Police also intercepted and translated Muller’s personal correspondence with the German publishing

³⁰ <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Herta-Muller>. Accessed 1 August 2024.

³¹ In 2009, Herta Muller said that her request to see her Secret Police file was left unanswered. (see Manuela Golea: <https://romanioliberal.ro/lifestyle/food/herta-muller-un-nobel-impotriva-securitatii-167045/>. Accessed 1 August 2024)

house which had published *Niederungen* (Nadirs) and with other cultural institutions that invited her to their events. On top of these, following her dismissal from her translator position at the wire factory, Muller was left without any means of earning a living in Romania. This treatment is eerily similar to that endured by other Romanian writers (Dan Desliu, Doina Cornea, Andrei Plesu, Mircea Dinescu) who publicly criticized Ceausescu's regime. As Blandiana's diary details, in their cases the zero-tolerance policy implied that the slightest "offense" against the regime triggered disproportionately severe responses.

In a powerful, brief fragment Muller herself details the intimidation techniques employed by the Secret Police apparatus which, we can safely assume, based on the available documents, had extensive plans about how to organize the surveillance of their "objectives".

The Secret Police apparatus used to insert itself in the most intimate strata of one's life. They did that not by threatening you directly, by openly accusing you, but by harassing you, and thus, by destroying any protective walls you may have built around you with the immaterial bricks of affection, friendships, and illusions/utopias.

The Secret Police personnel, adds Muller,

used to enter our house, 'naturally,' at will, while we were absent. Often, intentionally they also left signs of their passing such as cigarette butts in ashtrays; they moved paintings from the walls to the bed, and chairs around the house. The most frightening episode was one which unfolded during a couple of weeks. We had a fox fur on the floor and on this carpet, first we noticed that they cut the tail, then the legs, and finally the head which were left on the belly of the fox. (*Ad Hoc Collection* n. pg.)

This incident highlights what writers who were not beneficiaries of any kind of political protection and had not gained public notoriety from books they published during the liberalization decades of 1960s and 1970s had to endure in the mid-1980s. The fact that in the end, Muller's only way of survival, economically and as a writer, was to emigrate proves that by the mid and late-1980s, survival in Romanian society was only guaranteed through tacit acceptance of the rules imposed by Romania's ruling communist elite. In light of this context, the *mere* "survival through culture," by writing and publishing professionally-valid texts, which pushed the limit of what the regime was willing to tolerate in terms of freedom of expression, was an intermediary stage; one in which the building of a safe house of inner freedom prepared the ground for an eventual public critique of the regime over the course of the tightrope walking that living in a dictatorial regime had become during the 1980s.

To elucidate what Blandiana and all those who did not fall in line and even took positions against the regime were up against during the last decade of Ceausescu's rule, one only needs to refer to the best-known cases of Romanian dissidents: Gheorghe Ursu, Doina Cornea, Dan Desliu, Mircea Dinescu, or to the less-known, but not less traumatic situation of other people and intellectuals who, following intentional or unintentional acts of rebellion were imprisoned, interrogated, tortured, lost their jobs, were under Secret

Police's "house surveillance," unable to get out of their own houses, receive guests, work, or otherwise interact with people.³² Blandiana's *More-Than-the-Simple-Past* provides valuable information about what some of them (Mircea Dinescu) had to endure at the time. In so doing, the book contributes significantly to the geography of personal and collective memory of trauma caused by the communist regime after 1945 in Romania, and in particular by Ceausescu's authoritarian rule in the late 1980s. If, as Pierre Nora famously said, "[w]e speak so much of memory because there is so little of it left" ("Between Memory and History" 7), Blandiana's diary is one such *lieu de memoire* "where memory crystallizes and secretes itself" (7) and in so doing contributes to strengthening the historical capital of those who were persecuted, oppressed, and victimized by Ceausescu's regime.

Mapping the geography of dictatorship

"Between silence and the word, it is not the word that is perfect, but this is our weapon" (*More-than-Past* 295) is a phrase that encapsulates the philosophy that kept Ana Blandiana writing (almost) daily ruminations in what will become *More-than-the Simple Past*, her diary documenting the existential crisis of a banned writer (from August 1988 till March 1989), under Secret Police surveillance, and struggling to make ends meet along the rest of Romanian's population, who was suffering from food shortages under Ceausescu's policy of "healthy living"³³.

For the contemporary reader, the pace of the entries follows the throbbing and alternatively, dwindling rhythm of life during the last year of Ceausescu's dictatorship – until December 12, 1989 when, after the fall of the Berlin Wall and of the communist regimes in neighboring Eastern European countries, there was hope that the post-WWII communist order might crumble in Romania as well. Thirty-five years after the dramatic events that led to the overthrowing of Ceausescu's regime, Blandiana's diary entries congeal into a compelling narrative, *a-time-outside-time*, surreal and humbling, suspended between few but memorable acts of courage and solidarity, a time afflicted by fear and ruled by self-preservation, when not by frustration for lacking providential

³² Sears and Cristea. *Faces of Freedom, Lives of Courage* (2013). According to the book's description on Amazon.com: "*Faces of Freedom, Lives of Courage* is a fragment of communist Romania's history seen through the unique and shocking experiences of nine individuals. Leontina, a nineteen-year-old student who hides a letter addressed to *Radio Free Europe* that was thrust into her hands by an acquaintance who was being pursued by the Secret Police. This naivete leads to interrogation, beatings, torture and imprisonment in one of many of Romania's extermination camps. Razvan, a German professor who, at a great danger to himself, took pictures of the army firing on unarmed, peaceful demonstrators in Cluj-Napoca on December 21, 1989. Grigore, a law student in the post-war years, who was imprisoned by the Secret Police in an effort to eliminate 'resistance groups,' and beaten and tortured for a year before his official trial, which sentenced him to many years of hard labor. This book provides interviews of those above as well as 6 other individuals whose lives were drastically changed while living under communism and later under the vicious regime of Nicolae and Elena Ceausescu" (<https://www.amazon.com/Faces-Freedom-Lives-Courage-Thomas/dp/1625103859>. Accessed 1 August 2024.)

³³ This policy, consisting in fact of food rationing for milk, bread, butter, meat, sugar, and oil, and lack of gasoline, was one of never-ending shortages, evocative of war-time scarcity rather than of a prosperous, multilaterally-developed country.

leaders able to pull the country once and for all from behind the Iron Curtain. On top of ever-tightening evidence of geopolitical inevitability of fate, Blandiana's diary captures the profile of a transitional time, when unknowingly to most, the wheels of History were already set in motion and, we, despite our fears, anxieties, and lack of understanding, were about to play a part. The emotional language of the diary perfectly captures this volatile emotional geography:

I feel that my head will crack open and it's not unconceivable that something terrible may happen to me; that I may fall ill or die due to this exhausting, pointless effort to find a way to act, to find out what exactly I need to do, apart from writing—notes the author in one of the last entries in the diary, from December 12, 1989. Every action that seems reasonable is impossible while all the actions I can take are useless. Because everything I can imagine is only an individual solution, while the actual way to solve our predicament is a word rarely used in Romanian: *solidarity, solidarite, solidarita, solidarnost*" (*More-than-Past* 534).

Rousing as this rhetoric may be, December 12, 1989 is the first instance from the 533 pages of the diary that the author registers the urgency of doing something other than writing; of doing something at any cost. The December 12 entry marks the clear break from a time and space defined for Blandiana herself by an attitude of *probing*; an imaginary geography subordinated to the *regime of writing*, not of action. Paradoxically, for somebody writing in the 1980s when impositions of censorship and self-censorship (e.g. Matei Calinescu) had become stifling, Blandiana considers writing the strongest response a talented author may provide to such circumstances: not sacrificial action, nor exile. Time and again throughout the diary, the author ponders whether distilling life's experiences into literature was the only way (talented) writers were called to respond to the ever-degrading life circumstances in Romania, and the torturous answer always seems to be the same.

August 26, 1989: I read *Tolstoy* by Shklovsky and I keep running into my very own issue: the impossibility to choose without qualms between trying to change the world and to describe it; between fighting the evil and trying to capture it, by freezing it, and thus defeating it by not just letting it be or allowing it to pass unnoticed—if it will ever truly pass—as if it did not cause all the suffering which we very well know it has caused. What I am talking about is the impossibility of choosing serenely between *fighting* and *writing*, though I have always already chosen writing even if remorsefully, humbled that I cannot throw my life into the public arena, that I save it to offer it in daily morsels to the white monster, the blank piece of paper (*More-than-Past* 446-7, my emphasis).

This entry is symptomatic for Blandiana's dilemma throughout that last year and a half of Ceausescu's regime, when she herself became a symbol of dissent, somewhat unwittingly, as many were looking up to her as a role model. Was she supposed to take the next step and maybe write an open protest letter against the regime similar to that of

Doina Cornea in 1982; of Dan Desliu in March 1989, of Mircea Dinescu soon afterwards? The diary leaves such an option open by mentioning all these dissenting writers who were swiftly silenced after writing open letters to *Radio Free Europe*, to the President of the Writers' Union, to Nicolae Ceausescu (the letter of the Six communist dignitaries-March 11, 1989), or to other officials responsible for the systematization campaign in the country and the demolitions in Bucharest. As we now know, as a result of their actions Doina Cornea lost her job at as a French Professor at Babes Bolyai University in 1982, Andrei Plesu was unexpectedly transferred to a fictive position in Bacau in March 1989 after writing a letter to protest the demolition of monuments (to Mayor Croitoru), Mircea Dinescu was placed under house surveillance and cut off from any possibility of earning a living after his letter in March 1989; not to mention Dan Desliu who was beaten by Secret Police agents on March 14, 1989 after sending a letter to *Radio Free Europe* in which he was criticizing Ceausescu's personality cult³⁴.

Unlike most Romanians who found out about these events from broadcastings of *Radio Free Europe* and *Voice of America*, Ana Blandiana learned about them from fellow-writers, editors, and well-connected friends like Gogu Radulescu³⁵ with whom she, her husband, and a couple of other renowned writers from *Literary Romania* and some major publishing houses from Bucharest, visited. Most often what shapes the volatile geography of the diary are unofficial news/rumors shared by writers she encounters at the headquarters of the Writers Union, *Literary Romania* magazine, at *Family* magazine; by fellow-writers from Cluj and Oradea like Augustin Buzura, Ion Pop, Marian Papahagi, by journalists like Tia Serbanescu and Octavian Paler (*Literary Romania*), by Ileana Malancioiu from *Romanian Life* magazine who asks her to submit poems to the magazine even after she was banned; by Geta Dimisianu, at the time book editor at Cartea Românească Publishing House, by Zigu Ornea from *Minerva*; by Domokos Geza from *Kriterion*, or by Angela Marinescu, a "talented poet" marginalized due to her uncompromising character.

Despite occasional revelations, however, what structures the space-time continuum of the diary are repeated notes about uncertainty, about probing the "waters", about anxious expectation for feedback, and for actions which she could join in solidarity. Thus, on April 3, 1989, Blandiana notes that she would have liked to be asked to add her name to the letter of solidarity with Mircea Dinescu, signed by Geo Bogza, Stefan Augustin Doinas, Octavian Paler, Dan Haulica, Andrei Plesu, Al. Paleologu, and Mihai Sora since she was also outraged by the publishing ban against Dinescu, not unlike her own.³⁶

When it comes to sharing her own letter addressed to the President of the Writers'

³⁴ <https://amintiridincomunism.wordpress.com/2018/04/05/damnule-presedinte-scrisoare-deschisa-catre-nicolae-ceausescu/>. Accessed 1 August 2024.

³⁵ Gogu Radulescu was a member of the Central Committee of the Communist Party (1960-1989) and in the Romanian Executive Politburo (1965-1989). He was Blandiana and Rusan's family friend and one whose controversial political influence Roznoveanu claims was responsible for the couple's safe/privileged status among Romanian authors.

³⁶ The letter addressed to D.R. Popescu, the President of the Writers' Union, was a plea of support for rehiring Mircea Dinescu at *Literary Romania* (330) and Blandiana notes that nobody took such an action for her in August 1988, though, over time some writers had expressed their support privately.

Union, to *Literary Romania* and other central institutions and individuals³⁷ responsible for canceling her weekly rubric in *Literary Romania* and the publication of her anthology of poetry at Minerva, the diary never details the specific content. All we find out, indirectly, is that the letter described Blandiana's point of view about her situation *as she saw it*, not as many others misleadingly and possibly maliciously presented it.³⁸ In a 2009 interview with Ilarion Tiu, Blandiana revisits the topic and clarifies the details in a blank tone which makes the content of the memoir seem almost mundane.

In my letter I was saying that my banishing from publication was illegal, according to the laws of our country, because, thus those who did it, took away my right to work, which was an unalienable right. I am a Romanian writer who writes in Romanian and I should have the right to publish in my language and in my country, instead of just existing as a Romanian writer published abroad. I was asking that my right to work be granted; I was not taking about anything else.³⁹

Similarly to this approach, the diary plays down Blandiana's image as an opponent of the regime, who tried to critique it even obliquely, and portrays instead an author who considers that the best way she can play a part in society is by being able to publish, ideally literature; without making compromises or openly accepting censorship, but also without assuming a dissenting stance. In a memorable dialog with comrade Sonea, the party censor responsible for Blandiana's banning after the publication of the Arpagic's poem⁴⁰ in *Events from My Street* (in Romanian, July 1988) the author pleads for her right to publish, but not under any circumstances.

I want to publish, but I want to do it on my own terms; like I did it before. To be more precise: I want to get out of this crisis only in one way: the same way I got into it. If I have to become a different person, I prefer to remain where I am. I find my predicament bearable. In fact, before I forget: in my estimation, my ability to publish again can only take one path: by publishing the book that's waiting the final approval at Minerva Publishing House, but publishing it as it is, with all the approvals that it already received last summer, not sending it back for new (more ideologically rigid) re-readings, adapted to this moment. (*More-than-Past* 310)

³⁷ Twenty-two to institutions and individuals, in all, according to her diary entry on March 3. (*More-than-Past* 289)

³⁸ One may surmise such rumors by checking some internet sites about Blandiana as a dissident writer. Such sites present her as a privileged author, employed by the country's leading magazine, *Literary Romania*, with high political connections (Gogu Radulescu), with a second, summer-house at Comana where a few intellectuals, including G. Radulescu also had vacation cabins. Additionally, she was one of the canonical writers of the 1960s generation, published internationally, and traveling to international cultural events. (see <https://gazetadecluj.ro/faimoasa-disidenta-ana-blandiana-chiar-a-fost-cine-se-crede-ca-a-fost/>. Accessed 1 August 2024)

³⁹ <http://www.ilariontiu.ro/?p=2326>. Accessed 1 August 2024.

⁴⁰ To assist the 2009 readers in reconstructing Ana Blandiana's profile in the context of pre-1989 Romania, Ilarion Tiu reproduces on his website after his interview with the author, a fragment of her poem. (see <https://www.ilariontiu.ro/?p=2326>. Accessed 1 August 2024)

The status quo on March 15, 1989 when she registers the dialog with Sonea is that of an author who after being banned did not go begging to be forgiven, nor followed the advice of some to write a couple of well-meaning propaganda texts, but decided to keep a secret diary precisely as a way of memorializing the daily survival mechanisms under a regime whose grip was ever-tightening, economically, politically, and socially.⁴¹ Reading these often times mundane entries today, the readers experience along with the author the satisfaction of discovering the redemptive force of writing within the horizon of truth. Though nowadays everybody accepts that only a free society may guarantee the exercise of free speech, Blandiana's diary actually demonstrates it/performs it by taking us through the slow and grueling journey of writing down the particulars of living under a dictatorship for which there was no end in sight.

It is a strength of the diary, published thirty-five years after the overthrowing of Ceausescu's regime in December 1989, that Blandiana does not alter/revise her writing to make herself look prescient of political events that (almost) nobody who lived at the time could have predicted. I take her restraint in not polishing her private image in the diary in defense of her public persona as proof of the diary's authenticity. By advancing a "murky" profile of the writer, struggling to navigate duplicity and moral ambiguity, while practicing them to a certain extent due to inertia and the overall context which made everybody speaking/writing publicly complicit with the institutions of the regime, Blandiana's diary can be seen as a legitimate, deeply personal account of a complicated time in Romania's recent history; a time and space corrupted by an ubiquitous, mystifying propaganda machine, which *inserted gaps between words*, so to speak, and distorted images populating the public sphere.

In the end, the geography that the text allows us to map is that of a world whose values were in fact reflective of the generalized society crisis defined by food shortages, lack of access to essential goods, Secret Police surveillance, censorship, bureaucracy, and overall human degradation due to the constant practice of double-standards, double-talk, and cohabitation with the oppressor.

This general atmosphere of ambiguity, where everybody is unhappy about the double-speak, where we all think one thing and say another, more or less secretly; often the opposite of what we say publicly and what we publish officially. This situation which is a reflex of the overall cowardice creates a kind of universal complicity which makes possible our very cohabitation with the regime, reads another entry from 1989. (Ghiteanu n. pg.)

The psychology of co-habitation with the oppressor, the murky morality, the politics of everyday survival overdetermine the narrator's ability to pass clarifying judgments, "to separate the waters" once and for all in regard to most of the writers mentioned the diary, many of whom had become major public intellectual and political

⁴¹ Later on in the diary she also mentions her decision to *begin* a novel, which after 1989 will be published under the title *The Drawer with Applauses*. The subject of this book was Romania's political prisons, which Blandiana knew was a taboo topic under Ceausescu's regime.

figures after 1989.

In this sense, the diary reads more like a novel, where the reader is left with a cast of characters, most of them flawed and morally ambiguous since they have to negotiate every official/bureaucratic business with representatives of the communist party and possibly of the Secret Police, with the censors who were the gatekeepers/ intermediaries at every magazine, newspaper, state agency, university, and by and large, at every state institution. Thus, if authors like Blandiana wanted to continue to publish and earn a living as writers, they all needed to continue to entertain relationships with such individuals whose only role was to contain them and channel/censor the public discourse.

This moral murkiness is at the very center of the diary – and I would say that Blandiana’s main merit in writing and publishing it – derives exactly from her courage to preserve this document and release it into the world as such. The text advances, thus a disturbing image of Romania’s pro-democratic public intellectuals who fail to emerge as heroic, dissident figures due to hesitations, precautions, their self-preservation instincts, and an almost paralyzing inability to act in solidarity.

By contrast to this sad *commedia umana*, the diary highlights the alternative, redemptive geography of Comana, a refuge in the natural world of the garden, the yard, the woods, far away from the madding crowd; a location where, like Paul and Virginia, Blandiana and Romi/Romulus Rusan plant vegetables, fix their little house, pick up mushrooms, tend to a couple of stray cats, and thus join a rhythm of a somewhat sheltered, life. At times, the author calls the Comana evening routines “idyllic,” but in fact they are defined by hard, physical work, by the rhythms of nature and the seasons: planting pear trees, carrying sand with fertilizers from the front yard to the garden pail by pail, fixing the holes in the walls of the house before winter settles in, planting vegetables and flowers. At the end of most days, Blandiana notes that she did not get almost any writing done, that both she and her husband, Romi are too tired from the physical work to do anything else than listen to the radio (*Radio Free Europe*, most probably), to classical music, to fix something to eat, and to sleep.

Occasionally they visit with Gellu Naum, with his wife and friends, and with Gogu Radulescu, who also own houses at Comana, or they entertain guests at their own house. At times the diarist writes down scrupulously the contents of such visits, especially when marked by disagreements and arguments, and the reader relishes in the impromptu portraits of such well-known characters of the Romanian cultural and political scene like Geo Bogza, Gabriela Adamesteanu, or, conversely, Ion Horea.

In fact, throughout the diary descriptions of hour-long and often unsuccessful lines for eggs, milk, and meat, or for gasoline, alternate with those of magical natural landscapes breathing a state of order and grace, and with critical portrayals of contemporaries. In Ardeal, at Blajel where she is invited to visit with relatives of a family friend [Nicu Veza], Blandiana encounters well-off workers of the milk and meat factories from Medias whose prosperity is grounded in an “ethics” of stealing.

They all work in Medias...and of course they all steal: those working in the milk factory bring home sour cream, butter, cheeses; those working for the meat factory bring salami that nobody has seen in stores for ages, raw meat, and meat patties.

The technique they use is to wrap the products they take out around their waists. This way they manage to avoid the Cerberus' eyes and hands of the controlling agents (who, just in case, had been bribed in advance, anyway). Similarly to Comana, here stealing is not regarded as shameful; it is a matter of pride as it demonstrates ingenuity; in any case, none of these people who treated us with foods that no one has been able to find in the regular stores for at least a decade, seemed embarrassed by what they did. Quite the contrary: they were sure of themselves and of their right to act as they did. (*More-than-Past* 200)

This mindset is replicated almost identically by Horia Cosma, director of a factory in Oradea, whose mansion in the city and amazingly modern "country house" makes Blandiana liken his prosperity to that of a capitalist business owner.

The orchard, the vineyard, the vegetable garden, the greenhouse, the artificial lake set on the course of the river right in front of the private quay/wharf -- next to which there was a shower cabin and a graciously arching private bridge, connecting all these with the little forest across the river...they all evoke a stunning prosperity, denied to the vast majority of Romanians. (*More-than-Past* 298)

Despite all this prosperity, Horia Cosma's two children were already set to immigrate to the United States, in fact waiting for the American visa after receiving, without any problems, the approval from the Romanian authorities. The blatant double standard makes Blandiana burst into tears (237) on the spot and later comment that though the contact with such people can be interesting for her as a writer, the social code which demands that she treats them in a friendly manner makes her cringe. By contrast, the wild natural beauty of the woods surrounding Horea's⁴² house in the mountains, which she visits with the same occasion inspires her lyrically:

At the end of the forest, an alpine meadow emerged, as only in Paradise you may find one: green and soft, sprinkled with enormous mushrooms like those depicted by Sadoveanu. And beyond the meadow, five or six modest/poor-looking houses, set on the highest crest like precious crowns made of wood, in a risky balance on the forehead of the heights; and among them an obelisk marking the place where Horea's house stood. (*More-than-Past* 495)

It may be such a geography but also the presence of people whom she loves like her mother, her sister, Geta, and friends like Dumitru Micu, and a couple of others whom she trusts that prevent her from ever considering exile as a solution to the moral degradation she notices everywhere around her.

In the long run, her choice not to immigrate proved right, but it surely was not the *only* "right" one at the time. In a complete reversal from the position espoused in the

⁴² Horea was martyred while fighting for the rights of Romanians within the Austro-Hungarian Empire in 1785.

diary, after 1990 Ana Blandiana became a founding member of *The Civic Alliance*, the *22 Magazine*, and with Romulus Rusan co-founded the Sighet Memorial, all fundamental institutions of Romanian democracy. She also continued to publish poetry, essays, novels, and most recently the diary (25 books in total) starting with *The Drawer of Applause* (published in 1993, the novel evoking life in the Jilava prison) which she was writing while filling out entries in the diary. All these books did play a part in shaping the history of contemporary Romanian literature and probably even that of the emerging Romanian democracy, though, as it turned out, Blandiana's civic involvement made a much more lasting difference than her books during the past 35 years. In that sense, life in a free society and in an emergent market economy affected the privileged status of Romanian writers as the unique public voices and legitimate authorities of the people.

As a literary scholar faced with the unique document that *More-than-the Simple Past* is, one cannot but ask how has Blandiana's literature, which throughout the diary the author considered worth most of her energy and time, fared during the past three decades and how will it do into the future? Are younger generations looking up to the writer as a model or has the contemporary critique of modernist aesthetics and of its claim of autonomous discourse affected the aura of her texts as well?

Instead of answering this question with a chapter of literary history, let me point out that considering the explosion of memorial literature and its extraordinary appeal in Romania during the past three decades, a significant part of the public still seems to be partial to historic documents and to neo-realism and to dismiss allegorical texts rooted in metaphor and modernism, which were the allowed aesthetic choices until 1990.

The conundrum of the autonomy of the aesthetic associated with modernism had since long been debated in Romanian cultural circles, often in the footsteps of the Frankfurt School. I will not dwell on that substantial analysis except to say that rereading Martin Jay's *The Dialectic of the Imagination*, I was struck how well the reserve against the maximalist claims of modernist aesthetics regarding its inherent ability to withstand commodification, mirrored many commentators' reserves about writers in communist societies resisting instrumentalization by the official ideology and the propaganda machine. In Blandiana's case, as in those of many other *activist intellectuals*, what mattered was precisely their illusion that their texts escaped such instrumentalization. Yet, is a neat separation between the two even possible when every book published in Romania between 1948-1989 was subject to the scrutiny of official censors?

As it turns out, in the closed world behind the Iron Curtain where public communication was riddled with overt and covert propaganda, and by malicious rumors amounting to character assassination, spread by the Secret Police apparatus, there was a very thin line between "resistance" and "collaboration" if the writer/public intellectual was not already also set on the path to martyrdom. As the reader advances in the narrative, it becomes clear that the diary reflects the mindset of a writer able to masterfully play the complicated game of publishing in the main literary magazines which included negotiating with official censorship, and sometimes testing its limits. Nevertheless, endangering her own freedom or life seems nonsensical to Blandiana, who does not see herself as a dissident, but as a writer.

Thus, a great portion of the memoir is spent agonizing over the echoes of her own

actions in various circles of Romania's cultural life and simultaneously in the covert centers of political power whose malign decisions were feared for triggering strong and immediate consequences. Conversely, at various times Blandiana cites others writers' cases, Augustin Buzura, among them, as instances when friendly connections with party officials like Pavel Suian ensured the right protection for publication of courageous books. Apparently, the apparatchik Gogu Radulescu was Blandiana's and other writers' own protector (from the shadows) though the diary never engages in depth that problematic relationship, which the author acknowledges as controversial at times.

Paradoxically, the very fact that the diary's narrative is "punctured" by such gaps, like those represented by initials only instead of the full names of certain public figures, render it authentic and valuable – even though as a subjective, dated document of an era. In the end, the best way to summarize the contribution of this text which provides important facts and nuances to a pre-1989 chronotope, a space-time specific to life in Romania's totalitarian society, is by citing its author's own words: "When you add everything up, a life is made up of so many fragments/crumbs, yet under special circumstances, all of these may amount to a statue" (*More-than-Past* 189). It is up to us what we do with this statue from now on. The diary is just a source text for better contextualization.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

ORCID

Letitia Guran  <https://orcid.org/0009-0006-6507-2461>

Works Cited:

- "Herta Muller, a Nobel against the Secret Police Securitatii". *Free Romania* 09/10/2009 <https://romanalibera.ro/lifestyle/food/herta-muller-un-nobel-impotriva-securitatii-167045/> Accessed 1 August 2024.
- Blandiana, Ana. *Mai mult ca trecutul. Jurnal. 31 August 1988-12 Decembrie 1989*. Bucuresti: Humanitas Publishing House, 2023.
- Brandenberger, David. *The Purge of Stalin's Would-Be Successors: The Leningrad Affair, 1949-1952*, <https://facultystaff.richmond.edu/~dbranden/images/Leningrad%20Affair%20Summary.pdf>. Accessed 1 August 2024.
- Calinescu, Matei and Vianu, Ion. *Amintiri in dialog*. Bucuresti: Editura Litera, 1994.
- Cavanaugh, Jillian R. "Performativity". *Oxford Bibliographies*, 10 March 2015: 53-71, <https://doi.org/10.1093/OBO/9780199766567-0114>
- Dinescu, Mircea. "Moartea citește ziarul". *International Journal of Romanian Studies*,

- Vol. 7, no. 1b, 1989: 15-57,
https://doi.org/10.1163/9789004650060_048
- Dronsfield, Jonathan Lahey. "Dissenting non-dissenting: 'Resistance through culture'". *Educational Philosophy and Theory*, 55 (5), 2023: 586-95,
<https://doi.org/10.1080/00131857.2021.1933943>.
- Gabriel Liiceanu. *My Dear Secret Police Informer*. Bucuresti: Humanitas, 2013.
- Ghiteanu, Serenela. "O carte unicat". *Revista 22*. Oct. 17, 2023.
<https://revista22.ro/cultura/blandiana-o-carte-unicat> Accessed 1 August 2024.
- Glajar, Valentina. "The discourse of discontent: politics and dictatorship in Herta Müller's *Herztier* (1994)". *The German legacy in East Central Europe as recorded in recent German-language literature*. New York: Camden House, 2004. Print.
- Jay, Martin. *The Dialectical the Imagination. A History of the Frankfurt School and the Institute of Social Research, 1923-1950*. University of California Press, 1996.
- Liiceanu, Gabriel and Muller, Burkhardt. "When personal integrity is not enough."
<https://www.eurozine.com/when-personal-integrity-is-not-enough/> Accessed 1 August 2024.
- Liiceanu, Gabriel. *Jurnalul de la Paltinis*. Bucuresti: Cartea Romaneasca, 1983.
- Muller, Herta. *The Land of Green Plums [Hertzier, 1994]*, transl. by Michael Hoffman, Picador, first edition, 2010.
- Nora, Pierre. "Between Memory and History: Les Lieux de Mémoire." *Representations*, no. 26, 1989: 7–24, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2928520>
- Plesu. "Resistance through Culture" *Dilema Veche*, no. 348, 14-20 October 2010,
<https://dilemaveche.ro/sectiune/editoriale-si-opinii/situatiunea/rezistenta-prin-cultura-608309.html>. Accessed 1 August 2024.
- Radio Free Europe. "Buletin de stiri". April 10, 1989,
<https://romania.europalibera.org/a/buletin-de-stiri-10-aprilie-1989/29870986.html>
 Accessed 1 August 2024.
- Radu, Tania. "About the Impossible Escape". *Chenzine literare*, Bucuresti: Humanitas, 2014: 145-150,
<https://cdn4.libris.ro/userdocspdf/443/chenzine-literare.pdf>. Accessed 1 Aug. 2024.
- Roznoveanu, Mirela. "Ana Blandiana si dizidenta imaginara". *Cotidianul*. March 17, 2024. <https://www.cotidianul.ro/mirela-roznoveanu-ana-blandiana-si-dizidenta-imaginara/> Accessed 1 August 2024.
- Sears, Thomas and Radu Cristea. *Faces of Freedom, Lives of Courage*. Tate Publishing & Enterprises, 2013.
- Stone, Lawrence. "Prosopography." *Daedalus*, vol. 100, no. 1, 1971: 46–79. *JSTOR*,
<http://www.jstor.org/stable/20023990>. Accessed 1 August 2024.
- Tiu, Ilarion. "Autopsia unei interdictii" <https://www.ilariontiu.ro/?p=2326>. Accessed 1 August 2024
- U.S. Commission on Security and Cooperation in Europe. "Revolt against Silence: The State of Human Rights in Romania",
<https://www.csce.gov/wp-content/uploads/2016/07/> Accessed 1 August 2024.
- Willem Boss, Ian. *Suspect. Dosarul meu de la Securitate*. Editura Trei. 2013

Notes on Contributor(s)

Letitia Guran is assistant professor at the Department of Romance Studies, College of Arts and Sciences, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. She is a comparatist interested in global, transatlantic studies with a focus on post-communist studies, Eastern European literatures, African American identity and the Cold War. She has published articles and a monograph about the aesthetic dimension of Romanian American critical thought (*Crossing the Iron Curtain*) and has made contributions on transnational multiethnic narratives, diasporic identity, and film studies. Over the years, Letitia Guran has published essays on the works of Langston Hughes, Suzan-Lori Parks, and Coleson Whitehead and a monograph about African American post-Soul Artists. Her research on Langston Hughes and her exploration of digital humanities were recognized by a yearlong National Endowment for Humanities grant (2022-2023).

Citation: Guran, L. Can one fight geopolitical tides with imperfect weapons? Reckoning with the recent past in Ana Blandiana's *More-than-the Simple Past*. *University of Bucharest Review. Literary and Cultural Studies Series* 14(2), 2024: 90-114. <https://doi.org/10.31178/UBR.14.2.8>

Received: August 2, 2024 | **Accepted:** October 3, 2024 | **Published:** October 15, 2024

