
A G O R A

“The Romanians” versus

Ana Blandiana

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Insults and Threatening Letters

“Wash the dishes, do the shopping, cook and stay at home like any woman with a sound mind.”

THIS STUDY examines and catalogues the insults and threatening letters Ana Blandiana received in the period between 1990 and 1995 (I have worked on a batch of 50 letters); these can be interpreted as samples of the core physical and moral values specific to a part of the Romanian people. In this case study, I shall deal with the threatening messages Ana Blandiana received (which have been made available to me in the original), because I consider them as a corpus of texts that deserves analysis in order to deconstruct thus the outbursts of the violent linguistic imaginary from the Romanian post-communism, which has been marked by the after-effects of communism and by a visceral release of repressed content. Like the poet herself, other personalities from post-communist Romania have also received threatening letters, so much so that this case study, which focuses on the messages addressed to Ana Blandiana, aims in fact to examine the Romanian mentality as regards the elite intellectuals who have been more

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or less involved in politics. Most of the defiling letters received by Ana Blandiana were the consequence of the marathon manifestation in University Square in 1990 (April 22–June 13), where the poet addressed the protesters as they had been qualified by Ion Iliescu, the president of the country: “hoodlums.” After November 1990, the threatening letters that were sent to Ana Blandiana were also tied to indictments brought against the Civic Alliance organization.

The addressee received four types of letters: a. letters of reprimand, admonition and punishment (which may be mild or severe); b. letters of abjuration, contempt and anathema; c. letters of defilement (in a lewd and excremental register, they are the psychologically most brutal); d. letters containing the threat of physical aggression. The letters (in some cases, not actual letters, but missives and postcards) are sometimes clearly signed, at other times their signature is indecipherable, sometimes there are signed with a collective noun, or they may simply be unsigned. They are written in an illiterate style, rich in clichés (the “wooden tongue”), or in an idiosyncratic style (when the sender wants the recipient to know who has written the message). (When I cite from the messages sent to Ana Blandiana, I shall transcribe the senders’ grammatical, punctuation or any other errors without interfering with them. Even though it might have been tempting to do so, I have not subjected the roughest and grossest letters received by Ana Blandiana to a graphological examination.) Sometimes, it is obvious that there is some regularity and standardization of their submission, in the sense that there are phrases, images, or indictments that are identical, reproduced word for word, in various texts; these messages contain leitmotifs and use a contrapuntal technique in resuming the accusations. Therefore, one may presume the existence of some “gray eminences” that considered the ritualistic sending of such letters (made after an evident recipe, which also operated in parallel in the media subservient to the power of that time), in order to intimidate the recipient. The method is typical of totalitarian political systems, which resort to the secret police. One should exclude the fact that in this action of public misinformation they used old networks of Securitate informers, who were trying to intimidate victims with standardized threatening letters. However, it should be noted that the senders were not always manipulated “robots,” who simply carried out assignments: they were also ordinary people and even intellectuals, who let off emotional steam in a vulgar manner for whatever personal reasons, which were camouflaged underneath their political outrage.

Letters of Reprimand, Admonition and Punishment

IN LETTERS of reprimand, admonition and punishment, the main accusation brought against Ana Blandiana is that of betraying poetry and, then, of betraying the Romanian people. Blandiana's so-called betrayal of her profession and her involvement in politics are presented as deadly sins. A number of the senders write to her in order to try to "amend/correct/cure" her, because, amongst others, Blandiana did not stay on the side of Ion Iliescu, Romania's president, who on 22 December 1989 had appointed her on the National Salvation Front (NSF) Board, unsuccessfully attempting to persuade her to run for vice president. The poet is considered a traitor, she is accused of having spoken in University Square because she was "bribed with foreign currency"; consequently, the words "Shame, shame, shame" are smeared in red over her book, which has been translated into English, and torn into strips. Betrayal would also come from the fact that Blandiana does not tell the truth about the "filth" in University Square. The conclusion is often that the poet has "forsaken" her people, loving only herself narcissistically; so much so that she can no longer represent the Romanians. Accused of political myopia, the poet is rebuked thus: "Wake up to reality" or "we'll pull you by your ears and you'll wake up." A sender rebukes her for forgetting her profession as a poet, which should have consisted in devising banners that should urge "to work, peace, prosperity"; for example, "we want to work in peace, the country's wealth to increase" (this sender may have been a copyist of slogans on the banners carried on 23 August and 1 May during the communist period). "Return to us," writes one of her former fervent admirers, beseeching Blandiana not to leave the Romanians orphans from a poetic point of view! "Ana-Ana," an anonymous grandmother admonishes her in would-be parental manner, as she wants the poet to return to her calling. Sometimes, the verdict is harsher: Blandiana is summoned to become a housewife again ("back to the pot"), out of an easily detected female envy (be like me, the Romanian housewife desires) or out of gregarious misogyny, which will not accept that women may have political views: "Wash the dishes, do the shopping, cook and stay at home like any woman with a sound mind." There is no shortage of even coarser orders: Blandiana had better stop "shattering" the peace and "darkening" the lives of others.

Another accusation brought against her is that she is "poisonous," either through the purported defilement of those whom she addresses in University Square, or because she is deemed to be "sick" (physically and morally). As a "poisoner," she is seen to act particularly on the souls, instigating to destabilization as the "unclean heathen" that she is; or, in turn, she is "poisoned" by the impurities in University Square—phlegm, urine, beastliness—as a grandmother

tells her. The mother of a “hoodlum” in University Square labels her a corrupter of minors, promoting the “decay” of the “mire” in University Square, which is populated by “imbeciles, idiots, beef heads.” Another time, she is declared “stinky” and “dirty” or even “the stray bitch” of University Square. As the “mother of the hoodlums,” Blandiana is said to have usurped, in fact, the rightful place of their natural parents. She is projected as the “guru of the gypsies, double dealers, and of the immoral” in University Square or even as a drug addict. She is considered befuddled and without a sense of reality, which means that she is often asked, “When was it that you lost your mind?” Another mother describes her as a “deliriously insane figure” (while speaking in University Square), with “her wheels out of joint.” Or she is indicted as “distorted,” with a lost “inner compass,” afflicted by a “nervous shock.” Other nuances in this regard include: “psycho,” “handicapped,” “schizophrenic” and a “fucking idiot” or “a raving lunatic.” The criminal register is implicitly subordinated to the previous one, since Blandiana is said to be a “she-hooligan,” an “ordinary tramp” and an “old hoodlum,” that is, the patron saint of the “hoodlums” to be eradicated from University Square. So is the small bestiary which is dedicated to her: a “stuttering moggy,” a “lost sheep” (“bleating” in University Square), a “sow,” a “rabid viper,” as well as a devouring dragon that lures the young people to University Square or an absolute monster (in an apocalyptically drafted letter). A brief anonymous note bestializes her amorphously as follows: “You chive! You should be ashamed of yourself, I can’t even compare you to any animal, foul creature that you are.”

Sometimes even Mihai Eminescu is invoked in the criminal charges of her having betrayed poetry, supplemented, at times, with the intention of lyrical cancellation (she is addressed, now and again, as a “fine mess of a poet” and a “semi-literate”): the national poet would be disappointed, it is thought, if he were to read Blandiana’s poems from the school textbooks. Or, in another hypostasis, Eminescu would “whip beat” the poets of today (including, it is suggested, Blandiana herself), who are mere impostors. Blandiana is also accused, then, as a “traitor of her nation” and as the daughter of a legionnaire priest (a former political prisoner). The alleged betrayal of her nation is hyperbolized in the charge of being a legionnaire herself (as with the other demonstrators in University Square, “Hoodlamland” was often demonized and accused by the neo-communist power in April–June 1990 of being dominated by a “legionnaire,” “fascist” spirit, etc.): the one who is alluded to here is the priest Gheorghe Coman, Blandiana’s father. As a “notorious legionnaire,” he is said to be at least symbolically guilty for the political assassinations carried out by the legionnaires; through the father, the daughter is by default guilty of the same, it is insinuated, for she is called “a great legionnaire’s daughter.” At another time,

Blandiana is incriminated alongside Nicolae Manolescu or Petre Mihai Băcanu as the “offspring of legionnaire beasts.” From her family, Romulus Rusan, Ana Blandiana’s husband, is also not forgotten and is mentioned, sometimes with the appellative “grumpy.” It is obvious that the accusers were trying to intimidate and demonstratively sensitize Blandiana through the two men who mark the life of any woman, her father and her husband. Defilement was tested on both, so much so that Blandiana was tarnished not only through herself but also through the ones close to her. Family connections had to be soiled, so that the accused should appear as highly blamable, fit to be judged by the people. “In the eyes of the people you are no longer worth a dime,” writes a disappointed man to Blandiana, whom he considers a “washout” in patriotism.

Another charge that appears very often is that Blandiana is the subordinate (a marionette) or the sister of Doina Cornea (another disparaged personality, especially in 1990). The latter is usually labeled as “schizophrenic”; at the bestiary level, Doina Cornea is declared a “sheep,” a “goat,” a “moth” or a “bitch,” “barking” along with Blandiana, until both “will have their muzzles down to their feet.” In a letter with apocalyptic overtones, coming from Iași, Blandiana and Doina Cornea are projected as monstrous priestesses: “You are now like the priestess of Nemesis, ‘mild’ Doina Cornea, ugly as all the creatures that are part of the gallery of monsters cursed by the peoples from which they have arisen.” The same sender (a mother) considers the two to be female vampires, because they incite to bloodshed. In another letter (signed by purported academics from Iași), Doina Cornea appears as Blandiana’s mentor, a “sclerotic” with “the reins of her mind lost a long while ago,” portrayed as the “evil spirit of our times,” “a seditious witchlike apparition,” “so hated by the entire nation that if they knew this they would immediately end their own lives.” Doina Cornea’s distorted portrait is comprehensive, since the author of the letter is after something else: Ana Blandiana’s contamination by her elder “sister.” Speaking in University Square, Blandiana is beginning to look like Doina Cornea, hence the abovementioned portrait. “You were sinister, you stuttered,” the defendant is told; she is consequently advised to seek treatment for her mental condition and repent.

Besides Blandiana, the Civic Alliance is often indicted on similar grounds. First, Blandiana, whom some of the senders address using the word “comrade,” is slanderously accused that she handled the “communist education of women in the MIA [the Ministry of Internal Affairs],” being labeled as “shameless Ceaușescu worshipper” and a “great communist.” According to this logic, the Civic Alliance is said to rally members who supported Ceaușescu’s dictatorship and individuals who are “brainless,” “unbalanced,” “lechers,” “Jews,” “despicable,” “henchmen.” Other personalities known for their anti-communist stance in the ’80s are categorised as “Securitate members” and “Ceaușescu adepts.”

From time to time, references to her physical appearance appear in the letters. Ana Blandiana's former youth and beauty are often invoked, compared with her old age, which is seen by the slanderers to be repulsive and "crazy." The poet is always told that she is "disheveled" (here operates a cliché linked to the image of the non-conventional woman who does not conform to the communist model of the woman with a masculine bob, or with her hair caught in a bun, of the matronly type). Blandiana is considered rebellious even at the capillary level; hence, the eternal accusation of being "shaggy" (at a mental level, the same cliché functions for the "bearded men" in University Square, who also do not fit the masculine pattern proposed by communism, that of the clean shaven, short-haired activist). This was, moreover, in many cases, on 14–15 June 1990, the criterion for the arrest and ill treatment, at the hands of the miners or fake miners, of many young men and women in Bucharest.

Letters of Abjuration, Contempt and Anathema

THE SECOND set received by Blandiana is that of letters of abjuration, contempt and anathema. Declaring herself "ravished" by the poet's gesture of addressing the "hoodlums" in University Square, a sender threatens to turn her back on Blandiana's books. An old-age pensioner, however, informs Blandiana that, given her political myopia regarding Ion Iliescu, she has come to be hated by most Romanians, matching only the Ceaușescu couple in respect of this hatred. The sender states that he even knows Romanians who curse Blandiana. In a partially illiterate style, a woman from Sibiu literally puts a curse on Blandiana, beginning her epistle letter as follows: "Ingrate Otilia Valeria Coman said Ana Blandiana"; and she concludes thus: "We/it is an emphatically collective we, with a seemingly deliberate priestly value, our note/we wish the curse of the 12,000,000 Romanians would get you/these are the Romanians who voted for Ion Iliescu, our note/and you would not have any joy in life." Another time, there is an avalanche of curses: "God's wrath upon you, until when will you disturb our peace?" or "God's scourge be upon all the denigrators of our country and their families too!!!" Accusations come from a collective body that consider themselves to represent the Romanian people itself: "We, who are the many, the fair and the honest, no longer love you." Another sender, suspecting that Blandiana would not follow his advice that she should withdraw inside poetry, threatens her very harshly: "children in strollers will be spitting at you"; through such verbal aggression the poet's absolute indictment was attempted, picturing her as disavowed even by the country's newborn babies—this gesture sought to demonstrate Blandiana's alienation from and her repudiation by all

the Romanians, starting with the youngest. On another occasion, projecting her as a monster, an apocalyptic mother from Iași (with a propensity towards evil incantations, as we shall see) believes that Blandiana should be cursed, not just in any way, but “tenfold, a hundredfold, a thousandfold.” Hence, she wishes her to have sleepless nights, fear, tears and, *nota bene*, to wander like a ghost, forever unredeemed: “Let your soul burn, lady, may you no longer find peace, may you seek deliverance and never find it, lady.”

No wonder that in this register and in this set of letters Blandiana is projected as blasphemous. Her blasphemy, however, is not at a religious-Christian level (even if the accusers rely on this understanding), but at a political level, since the poet is not enrolled, for instance, in the cohort of Ion Iliescu’s fans. Regarded as a monster in several funereal and apocalyptic letters, Blandiana’s symbol is considered to be a black flag with the skull and crossbones. That is why the poet is deemed to no longer be human, or the idol of yesteryear (“you’re no longer a myth, a belief”), but an “angel of darkness.” God will punish this rebellious and fallen angel (giving her her due) or, on the contrary, He will forsake her completely: “I do not think you stand so well with the Romanians’ God anymore.”

Letters of Defilement in a Lewd and Excremental Register

A THIRD SET is that of the letters of libidinal and excremental defilement. The power, which in 1990 still resorted to the disinformation services, presented University Square as a place of lust and debauchery, with professional prostitutes among the crowds of suspected drug addicts, depraved people and parasites. The allegations brought against Ana Blandiana in the threatening letters are vulgar (even gross), and they come from both men and women (even though the number of male accusers is greater). A woman from Iași accuses the poet, from one woman to another, that she has decayed from the status of “sacred” to that of “debauched” (even if the terms are merely suggested, without being used as such) through self-profanation: Blandiana is accused of having “stripped” in the light of the torches from University Square; consequently, she represents “a painful embarrassment for us, the country’s women!” A woman from Bucharest considers that Blandiana is erotically frustrated, hence her involvement in politics and her alleged hatred of the newly established body of Power (the National Salvation Front); the cause of this allergy is supposedly the fact that the poet was erotically rejected by a political leader! (This could be Ion Iliescu or Petre Roman, who aroused in 1990 a true erotic frenzy amongst female voters.) Without calling her thus, the same charge of being a prostitute is brought against her by another woman from Bucharest, since Blan-

diana was once famous, the sender insinuates, for her nymphomania (!); the accuser invokes the poet's participation in a literary circle where, without wearing underwear, she sat with her legs astride. The same slanderer, with a slightly changed name, but with the same address, believes that the beards of the young protesters from University Square excite Blandiana, who is a perverse corrupter. An engineer from Târgu-Jiu coarsely admonishes the poet, calling her a "high road whore" in search of male sexual organs in University Square. There is, then, another, different style of sexual allegations. An alleged German company ("Die Zukunft und Lust"), which wants to open a brothel in Romania, writes to Ana Blandiana, suggesting that she could be hired as a prostitute and asking her to respond to this proposal under the "Classified ads" column in *România liberă* (an equally blamable newspaper, according to the senders of these letters, given the support it gave to University Square). The same company (the "Future and Lust" Society, and a sender signing Egon Ambrosius or Ambrozie Mahat) will return with three more letters, renewing the invitation that Blandiana should practice prostitution. The allegations are more politically involved this time: thus, the poet is reproached that, by establishing a museum of the communist prison in Sighet, she has done nothing but camouflage her prostitute activity underneath her political activity, the museum in Sighet hiding, in fact, a brothel. In addition, Blandiana is warned that her competing prostitutes and their pimps might liquidate her if the poet continues to work for too many brothels, including Sighet (here is a clear death threat linked to her involvement in the act of recovering memory, reflected in the museum of Sighet). In the last letter, the poet is praised for having been known also as the dissident-prostitute during Ceaușescu's time; as regards the Civic Alliance, this is said to hide in fact the "Harlots' Association." Only once is Blandiana targeted by the typical Romanian swear word (judging by the sprawling and disjointed writing, it is clear, however, that the letter belongs to a weirdo or to one who mimics being a weirdo). The filthiest letter written in this lewd register labels Blandiana as a "fucking bitch," making direct references to perversions. The poet's mouth is described as a perverted sexual organ. The symbolic target are Blandiana's anti-Iliescu and anti-NSF speeches: since the speeches themselves could not be concretely punished, the one who received the punitive mire was the mouth portrayed as a sexual organ. The purpose of these letters is clear: to pollute and harm Blandiana by mocking her body.

The excremental register also stimulated the coarse slanderers: after the lewd register, this is the second register that seems to have had an orgasmic effect on the accusers. I shall gradually present, in this sense, the defilement of Ana Blandiana. In an anonymous letter, Blandiana is considered an "old hag" who has left her "manure" (her words of protest, that is) in University Square. The

accuser aims, in this case, at two targets: on the one hand, to insult the poet for her so-called decrepitude, which invalidates her physically as a woman (in another anonymous letter, Blandiana is categorized as “shitty”), and on the other hand, to invalidate her political attitude (against the neo-communists in power) by perverting her protest words into “droppings.” Another short anonymous letter uses the technique of scatology: the “guilty” mouth that utters anti-Iliescu speeches will be punished and defiled. The ritual and the “pleasure” of the defecation of an entire county (which is why I talked about some kind of orgasmic effect at the level of the accusers) appear to be strictly related to Blandiana’s body turned into what such a ritual requires: “Your mouth, which occupies your whole face, deserves to be filled with our excrement!” The excremental attack is also waged by a “former fan” of Blandiana, who declares that she no longer recognizes the poet’s “purity” of yore, insisting on filling her mouth with “squalor”; the goal is to make sure that Blandiana will no longer utter anti-NSF and anti-Iliescu speeches. A man, this time, also a former admirer, also laments about Blandiana, whom he sees as fallen and disappointing: “You used to be a dream, you were a myth, you were a LADY! Why did you get into a cesspool?” Holy, Lady, Poet, Dream, Myth, Angel, for all these the slanderers found an extreme substitute to satirize Blandiana: the cesspool.

Letters Posing the Threat of Physical Aggression

THE FOURTH set is that of the letters threatening her with physical aggression or prosecution. After her first appearances in University Square, the poet received a letter signed by “academics” and “students” from Iași, in which is threatened with thrashing if she should travel to the Moldavian city (in 1990, Iași was one of the key cities that supported the National Salvation Front and the candidature of Ion Iliescu). The threat has, therefore, in this case, an electoral background. A letter sent on the very day of 15 June 1990, that is, on the last day of the violent Mineriad, directly threatens the poet: “I regret so much that I didn’t have the opportunity to ask the miners who were in Bucharest to pay you a visit.” Could this man or woman from Bucharest have been one of those who applauded the miners mauling the students and the intellectuals in the streets of the capital? The fact is that the sender prefers not to personally smear their hands, but to have a tool at hand for this (the bullying miners). Another anonymous letter, from 17 June 1990, comes from a sender who declares himself “cooled off” by the fact that Blandiana was attacked by the miners (the poet had been abroad during the Mineriad, but women who looked

like her were molested, so that the “cooling off” of the sender is fictitious, but all the more so psycho-analyzable); he suggests eventually, on a visceral, choleric note, that Blandiana and others like her (personalities who spoke in University Square) ought to be shot. In another letter, Blandiana is directly threatened as being responsible for 13 June 1990: “We shall ask for your conviction.” The tone and the wording are reminiscent of the ’50s, when they called for harsh penalties for the so-called “enemies of the people.” Also characteristic of the pattern of these letters are the symbolic gestures of “killing” Blandiana in effigy, as can be seen in what follows. Thus, in a letter with an illegible signature, the sender returns to the poet a photo clipped from a newspaper (a photo where Blandiana was “grinning,” as the sender indictates). The gesture is, symbolically, a form of decapitating the poet and of killing her, as I have already said, in effigy. Frequent are the senders’ desires that they should never hear Blandiana’s name spoken again or that they should avert their gaze from any of her photos or her books. “I would appreciate very much if I no longer heard the name of Blandiana pronounced either on TV or on the radio,” writes another sender who repudiates her. Next come the messages in which Blandiana is attacked and assaulted through her books: thus, in an anonymous letter from Iași, the poet is told that one of her books was spat on in the bookstand—the gesture is aimed at desecrating the book as a fetish. In another message, again an anonymous one, the sender announces that if he had any of Blandiana’s books in his library, he would burn them in the street. The gesture is obviously symbolic, as the little arsonist inquisitor who writes to the poet is, in fact, performing the symbolic gesture of burning the (politically) “heretical” Blandiana at the stake. A woman claiming to have been disappointed by Blandiana’s much-clamored political myopia regarding the NSF and Ion Iliescu writes her a few repudiating lines on a page torn from a book of poems. In this case, the gesture is also symbolic, as it concerns the gutting, the disembowelment of Blandiana, since the page torn from the volume is, in the register of effigy killing, the very body of the poet. Oftentimes, in this type of letters there appears the deliberately sad or, on the contrary, aggressive remark that “Ana Blandiana has died” as a poet and as a human being. The suggestion is, however, that through her political gestures of not accepting the new Power, Blandiana apparently committed suicide. Finally, a doctor from Iași says that she will not burn the poet’s books, but will throw them away (believing, perhaps, that the burning of books is a noble gesture), while an engineer from Târgu-Jiu threatens to use Blandiana’s books as toilet paper. In the latter case, this is again the fecalization technique, but applied through a fetish.

I SHALL CONCLUDE with a remark that has been demonstrated throughout this case study. In the Romanian mentality, splashing mud at a country's personalities (especially cultural personalities, who adhere to a political view that is not to the majority's taste) is one of the favorite methods of lowering idols to street level, not just in any way, but by having them defiled. More or less anonymous letters, whether they are written by guided groups, or they belong to real people aggressively expressing their viewpoints, believing that they are speaking on behalf of the "real" people, are an example of the collective release of repressed feelings that occurs in times of transition, as they are called. If there are, indeed, "gray eminences" of such ceremonial defilement, then the stake is twofold: those personalities may be mocked at in magazines and newspapers, but their bullying has an even greater effect when it is done through letters sent to their personal addresses. Thus, in addition to the public and official offences, those personalities also have their privacy and private space violated, the prejudicial effect being enhanced, and their linguistic ravishment becoming complete. □

Translated by CARMEN BORBÉLY

Abstract

"The Romanians" versus Ana Blandiana: Insults and Threatening Letters

This study examines and catalogues the insults and threatening letters Ana Blandiana received in the period between 1990 and 1995; these can be interpreted as samples of the core physical and moral values specific to a part of the Romanian people. In this case study, I shall deal with the threatening messages received by Ana Blandiana, because I consider them as a corpus of texts that deserves analysis in order to deconstruct the outbursts of the violent linguistic imaginary from the Romanian post-communism, which has been marked by the after-effects of communism and by a visceral release of repressed content. Like the poet herself, other personalities from post-communist Romania also received threatening letters, so much so that this case study, which focuses on the messages addressed to Ana Blandiana, aims, in fact, to scrutinize the Romanian mentality as regards the elite intellectuals who have been more or less involved in politics.

Keywords

Ana Blandiana, Romania, post-communism, Romanian mentality, insults and threatening letters