

Somewhere salvation. Responding to Romanian poets

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The purpose of the following paper is to provide examples of the author's responses (in English) to several Romanian poets from the second half of the XXth century (read in English translation). The poets concerned are Marin Sorescu, Ioana Crăciunescu, Ioan Morar, Liviu Ioan Stoiciu, Ion Caraion, Nina Cassian, Mircea Dinescu and Elena Ștefci. The author's observations and speculations are mainly interested in the theory and practice of translation, with all its various forms (ranging from close translation to mistranslation, deliberate or otherwise.)

Keywords: contemporary Romanian poetry, translation, adaptation, variation, 'poetry of response'

Institution's address: P.O. Box 3001, Taipa, Macao S.A.R., China , tel.: 853 3974 223

Personal e-mail: *KitKelen@umac.mo*

God preserve me from those who want what's best for me.
Mircea Dinescu

Two introductions are necessary for this paper; the first is of the 'poetry of response', the second of the author. What is a 'poetry of response'? It is foremost a poetry of practice, a poetry in process. In contrast with earlier epochs' bolt-from-the-blue myths of inspiration and the idea of poetry's ineffable sources, it is something of a postmodern truism that the text has antecedents – generically, thematically, however. So in 'response mode' we find poetry avowing an origin (though not an ultimate source), and probably likewise denying a destination. Favoured rather is the open-endedness of dialogue and hence a resistance to the product orientation (and focus on ownership) associated with publication and canonisation. The emphasis instead is on meaning as animated. In this case the meaning is made with words which favour reader and writer with the instability of crossing. While poetic 'responding' need not take place *between* languages, conversation

involving translation of some kind does seem exemplary, and perhaps one can think in terms of a continuum of response – from close translation to mistranslation (deliberate or otherwise), vague influence, via adaptation, variation, response. The purpose of this paper is to provide examples of the author's responses (in English) to several Romanian poets (read in English translation). The poets concerned are Marin Sorescu, Ioana Crăciunescu, Ion Morar, Liviu Ioan Stoiciu, Ion Caraion, Nina Cassian, Mircea Dinescu and Elena Ștefci.

Now to the author. The author is an Australian poet of Hungarian descent who has lived and taught in China for the last ten years and done most of his poetry response work focusing on classical Chinese poets, especially Tao Yuanming, Meng Jiao, Li Yu, Xin Qiji, Nalanxingde and various women poets of the Song and Tang dynasties. Much of the response work has resulted from collaborative translations, published as such.

To the method of this paper and the processes behind it. While some of the pieces below are responses to particular poems, more generally my texts



are loosely connected with the works of the Romanian poets; they 'bounce off' particular lines or themes or the modes of organization characteristic of the originals. The object of the paper then is to reveal these kinds of connection through the poems themselves while minimizing any 'critical' distractions. The author certainly has no intention of telling Romanian readers anything about Romanian poets or the value or importance of their work. All this can be taken as read. These are poets who demand and deserve response. This author is very grateful to the translators who have made this process possible by rendering the words of the Romanian poets in English.

(Presentation by Ana-Karina Schneider)

Before going further, I should explain what has particularly inspired me to respond to the Romanian poets. If I were pressed to reduce this to a simple formula it would be this: in Romanian poetry I consistently find guidance and humour, these concerning prospects for hope in desperate circumstances. (I should note here that I am mainly concerned with poetry of the pre-1989 era.) Before I say more of the process of response though, let me offer an example of both inspiration and response – the 'source' in this case being Ion Caraion's poem 'At the Rotten Sea' (translated by Marguerite Dorian and Elliott B. Urdang), again, short enough to cite in full:

At the Rotten Sea

Ion Caraion

We shall torture you, we shall kill you and we shall laugh
then we will be killed and others will laugh
we are old enough and shrewd enough
not to care
everything is truth
even the lie
everything is lie, even truth –
darkness begets itself

The poem in response:

even the sea rots out in the end

after Ion Caraion

trust none of the eternities

darkness is coming
and we will go under
the screams of defiance
are merely for proof

windows in my poor cell
grow smaller
weather drifts
further away

the spider counts me in her cobweb
I treasure this gathering to light
this sign
that someone builds for tomorrow



lost in translation

Many vaguely involved in this business (of and between poetry and translation) are fond of reminding us of those words (contentiously) attributed to Robert Frost, that poetry is what is lost in the translation. I and many others have some problems with this glib formula.

In my case the problem is that I think translation is where the poetry is. Or – to be clearer – it is in the space between languages that the poetic expression or experience may often occur. So – where there's translation there's poetry – of some sort, in some sense. It is for this reason I derive great personal satisfaction from working on poetry in English with students (and others) who are not natives of this (my) language. I have also found that experience (that conversation) tremendously useful/productive in terms of my own poetic output, hence the commitment to a 'poetry of response'. Let me express the idea in the following formula – *poetry in the modern/postmodern sense strives to do to its own language what the non-native speaker cannot help but do to the foreign tongue s/he is entering*. That is to say what poetry does is – in the terms of the Russian Formalists – to make strange, to de-automatise, to 'make the stone stony'.

Likewise the process of translation – of getting the ideas in the poem into the other language – is itself in this modernist/postmodernist sense a kind of making strange and so a poetic process. Translation in general, seen this way, has – and this is despite the best efforts of the mainstream of translators (those aiming for precision in the target language and fidelity to an original text) – an affinity with the poetic, because it makes things strange.

In another sense though, the formula attributed to Frost is right. What is poetic of the original poem necessarily vanishes when the substance of the poem (that is, in words of its language) is lost. Poetry is of that substance; it has no other home. The process of translation could in that case be thought of from two points of view – that of the making homeless of meaning, that of the making of a new home for meaning. Do meanings remain constant through such processes? I think they cannot. Rather than take the low road (shall we say, the extreme Whorfian position) suggesting the impossibility of translation, from these premises I would like to suggest that the process of translating a poem is misconceived to the extent demanded by a recognition that if the 'translated poem' is worth its salt, it is so because it is a new poetic creation. To resolve the question of the translatability of meaning, I should add – the new poem is a new poem because it is read in a new context. It takes only

a little extrapolation to recognize that what happens in the case of what we call translation is only an extreme form of what happens in the case of every reading of a poem. Every reading of a poem is in a new context (and in a new idiolect) and so it entails a new meaning. The twin dangers of solipsism and myopia are clear in such trains of thought.

So before taking the theory any further, I think it will be apt to describe the processes involved in this project and to consider some specific examples of response to the Romanian poets.

a practice of response

For the last two or three years my own poetic practice has been mainly along the lines of what I call a 'poetry of response'. Here is a brief account of what that process entails in practice. I can describe what I do in four stages.

1. *read and annotate* – I read volumes of poetry (solo volumes, anthologies) with pencil in hand. Often there's a lot of blank space so I fill this with notes, with fragments, hopefully towards poems. Sometimes these notes are closely related to the print on the page, sometimes the connection is completely obscure. In fact there are times when really it is the case that this just happens to be the piece of paper I'm writing on at the time. In that case the margin is my canvas, and perhaps the benefit here is merely that the printed page is less threatening than the blank. I could go further and say that being in the presence of poetry, of a kind generally worth responding to, is an inspiration in itself. Usually, however there is some kind of connection between the words already there and my own words appearing in pencil. Sometimes what I write is very rough, perhaps in the form of a stray line or two, sometime it is more like a section of a poem, or a complete idea for a poem. So as to not be unduly influenced by any one poet I work on a number of poets in the course of a day. How many depends on how much time I have. Currently I am working on around ten poets a day. Usually I only look at (and annotate) one or two pages of a particular book in each session. Thus it may take three months to get through a book (or a year in the case of a thick 'collected poems'.) The principle here is – *don't be influenced by anyone: be influenced by everyone*.

2. *type up* – In the second phase, on the computer, I type up the annotations I have made in other people's books. I also often add and subtract as I go and do a little more preliminary shaping in the direction of a poem. But I try not to push myself in the direction of finishing anything at this stage; I try to keep the



process loose with the object in mind of just typing up. This makes for a low pressure activity. Then anything extra in the way of progress towards a poem is a bonus. I try to leave at least a few months between the annotating and the typing up phase so that I can approach my own ideas with fresh eyes (and also sometimes have a second look at the original poem).

3. *on screen play* – Perhaps the less said about this phase the better; or perhaps it is just the case that it is in the description of one's 'poetic play' that the effort at self-conscious display becomes most fraught. Another approach would be to say that the 'play' is evenly distributed through all of the processes described. Then this phase is defined simply by the fact that the potential words of the poem are already on the computer screen and that play with them there might result in a poem. The point is to play with what's there – to add, subtract, arrange and re-arrange in the direction of making a poem. This is not to say that the process need be entirely dominated by the materiality of the screen. Reading aloud for rhythms is certainly a part of this phase.

4. *finish/arrange* – The aim here is to revisit (usually after a period of weeks if not months) what might have been a poem in order to see if it really is a poem (or a part of another poem, or of a longer poem, or a kind of raw material from which for instance other shorter poems might come). Much development still happens at this stage, for example through the pressures brought to bear on poems in-the-making by different kinds of filing. When a poem goes into a manuscript intended for children it may demand some kind of transformation. Likewise something intended for translation into a particular language may need to meet other criteria. Culling is an important part of the finishing process, and through culling the number of poems towards any particular manuscript is always being reduced.

So this (just described) is the four-stage process as it presently exists and this is the point to which the practice has developed thus far. One of the necessary characteristics overall is that of time between phases allowing the work to be seen anew. The 'refresh' principle. (It takes a little longer with poets than with computers.) Where is all of this activity bound? Well – the current practices have several years to play out and I am happy to say that I have no idea what comes after that. I was not doing anything like this five years ago and the odds are reasonable that in five years time my poetic practice may bear no relation to the model described. In other words, the present effort at self-consciousness takes the form of snapshot. Would I recommend the current practice to others? I think I would and for one reason in particular...Poetry is an

obsessive business and it doesn't become any less obsessive as the poet ages. The dangers of obsession include monomania, myopia, solipsism, onanism. Perhaps I exaggerate and perhaps not all of these are dangers. Nevertheless, exposure via direct response to the language and methods and thematic range of poets *en masse* is a way to guard against an inevitable narrowing of language and methods and thematic range. It is a way to keep one's poetry open in the manner of a conversation.

What have learned along the way about this particular process (or about my own practice, my own poetic potential)? One thing I have discovered is that the tighter and more complete the artefact with which I deal the harder it is 'to get in', to get under the skin of the already-printed poem. The easiest poems to respond to are ones that are loose in some way or incomplete or have loose threads – something to tug at that will give a little and so allow you to make something of your own. My intention is not to criticise the poems or poets I would put in that category (although I have found some bad poetry with good ideas [or lines] useful for the purpose. In the case of the Romanian poets I've read there have not been many loose threads and this has been a difficulty. Still the loose thread is almost automatically there in translated poetry. So I might rephrase the Frost attribution to say that what is lost in the translation is the completeness of the poem as artefact, as the thing it was. The translated poem may very well be better than the original, but it is nevertheless a kind of shadow of that original when considered in relation to it. (In this sense parallel text presentation may sometimes be distracting and dissatisfying, compared with seeing the poem just as it is rendered in the new language.)

There is something necessarily wispy, wistful, frayed about the translation that accompanies an original. That would be because it is the fabric of one world fallen into the arms (or the clutches) of another. In the longer term, perhaps the solution to the 'shadow' problem is to get the inter-cultural process of poetry off the translation treadmill and into the realm of true dialogue. That could be done by putting poems together in such a manner that their conversation can be heard and cannot be called translation.

a set of examples

My readers will need no convincing that Marin Sorescu is a hard act to follow. From my point of view, that would be because his poems do not leave many loose threads. Rather they are made out of loose threads; but the artefact made from the said thread is

as light as it is tight. Therefore it is hard for the poet/interlocutor to find a way in or a next word to say. Here is John Hartley Williams and Hilde Ottsofowski's translation of Sorescu's 'Transylvania on my mind'.

Transylvania on my mind

Transylvania, I think of you.
I draw you in like light, all
the years of your millennial existence –
my country on a single breath.

Transylvania, at every step
a flower smiles, there is a grave.
You make the wheel complete
on which the rebel leader broke.

Transylvania, I hear a bell
upon a cross, ringing out ideals.
You're the whole country's Sunday
bringing me to church.

I should say at this point that one particular reason for interest in this poem is that my family on my father's side lived largely in Transylvania prior to the Treaty of Trianon. So apart from exposure to Hollywood imagery, and the obligatory Bram Stoker clichés, there is some family mythology here for me as well. I started playing with a response to Sorescu's poem, as follows –

Transylvania

ancestral dark of heart – lost home
in text unspeakable, unseen
your broken bridges all borrowed from hell
but
the craggy battlements are Hollywood's
Bela Lugosi had too much hair gel
but you can't have too much garlic

blood already dried an age
on Vlad's impaling spikes
one day I will get past the tolling bells
that call to redemption

leave them to their own devices
and the gods make the forest
demanding least expected
devotions

hmmm – I'm not sure that I'm entirely happy with this draft but I'm hopeful that there is a poem in there. I suppose I'm somewhere between stages 3 and 4 of my process with this piece. I wanted to leave out the Christian content of Sorescu's and have a meeting of pagan Pannonia with the Hollywood product, as mediated by Vlad. But perhaps I was attracted to this poem because some years ago – before I'd ever read the Sorescu – I had penned a piece with very similar structure about Macao, China – the place where I reside in the here-and-now.

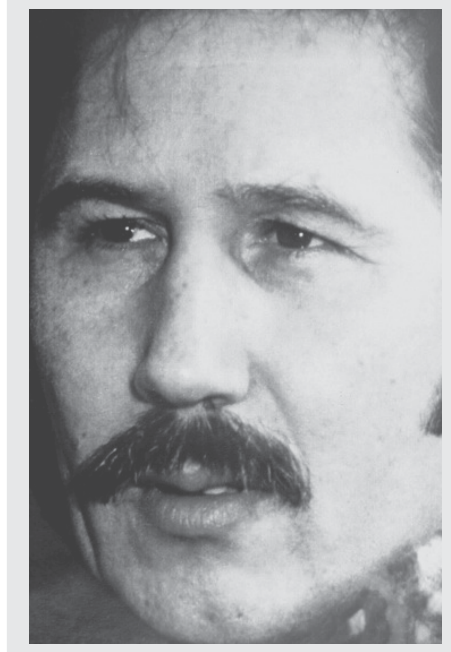
Macao: Apostrophe

Macao
I would like you to stop at the crossing for me
and without cursing
and not just for me
what-the-hell
for yourself

Macao
I would like you to smoke less
not to spit the bones out on the table
to clear your throat less noisily
what do you expect? I'm a *gweilo*

Macao
if your mobile goes off once more
in a concert
I'm going to crush it under my big cowboy boot
I know it will be noisy but think of my pleasure
and how we might then all hear the song

Perhaps a little lateral thinking is needed to go with
t h e





bounce of poetry across languages and across cultures. But I'm interested to – not so much find as observe – the conditions in which the rhythm or imagery of a particular culture may find resonance in another. (*Gweilo*, by the way, is a name for a foreigner in Cantonese – it literally means 'white ghost'.)

Let me follow with a part of Sorescu's poem 'Competition', which ends – in its English translation (Andrea Deletant and Belinda Walker) – with these two stanzas:

From the sea cheers are heard,
Waves carry banners.
Everything
Clamours to see us.
What more can I say?
It's a beautiful feast and unrivalled.

And we, moved,
For as long as the light lasts,
Stay standing
As for the national anthem.

I was intrigued by the idea of standing for 'as long as the light lasts'. In my poem following I wished to challenge the logic of standing for the anthem, symbol of that for which thousands lay down their lives (or so the lyrics often tell us):

anthem

after Sorescu

and when we've gone
and only when we've gone
what a turn they put on for us

the seasons –
they've never been
quite like this
and the weather
minute to minute
a splendour

how moist the soil
which leaves lift with
just this green of stalk
to hold

the air fit to breathe
fit for lungs
all the time in the world
to attend

now that we are of the earth

and in the earth again

quieten down
get past the weeping
senseless self pity
you won't need sight of eye to see

sunk wind
moon for night
how the clouds take

and then you lie down
for the anthem

Let me turn now from Sorescu to a six line poem of Nina Cassian, the English of which (translated by Andrea Deletant and Brenda Walker), I cite in full below:

Horizon

Nina Cassian

And yet there must exist
a zone of salvation.
Sad are the countries
who don't have outlets to water,
dull are the people who have no outlet for
themselves
towards another outlet, even greater.



My response (from which I take the title to this essay):

somewhere salvation

after Nina Cassian

we were the ones told to clean up our plates
so we turned the old forest to matchsticks
waste not, want not
now nothing's left
and so the old injunction's true

those who are not wanted
get wasted
but
I want this other roar
not of the sea
this wind will blow nothing away

trees struggle to have the city again
let there be a city of trees
such commerce in those branches
as offered for a song

I take my epigraph for this essay from Mircea Dinescu's poem 'Cold Comfort' (translated by Andrea Deletant and Brenda Walker)

God preserve me from those who want what's best for me

after Mircea Dinescu

law is what stands between
a good time for some
and grim truth for all

let me assure you I need protecting
without their good wishes
irony could get a grip
and that's a law unto tomorrow

a breeze through the glass
commands me stay

Returning now to prospects for hope in desperate circumstances, Here is another poem inspired by the train of thought in Ion Caraion's 'At the Rotten Sea':



kicking a dog to death and laughing

we laugh at
the clown falling over
the tripping hag
the great man down
the mother crone
martyr saint
we laugh at them – fools
see them all at their laughable worst
spat on, beaten, weeping,
just done, braced for the next blow
what a grimace, what a laugh
we laugh at dumb creatures humbled
laugh at the sun with arrows downed
laugh with gods' laughter
for all weak creatures
for all the weakness of creation
we kick a dog out of this world
and we laugh
we're not laughing at death
we're laughing with

last thoughts

It will be apt to end this paper not with conclusions per se but with a little wild speculation, of the kind befitting poetry. I've already laid claim to that characteristic scoundrel refuge of poets, that of indirection. I don't know where I'm going but I'm convinced that it's somewhere beyond the territory traditionally described as 'translation'. If the reader will indulge me a moment's reflection on my present living/working context – Macao, China... The Chinese/English parallel text invites the reader of both languages into a familiar distraction – that of checking and finding fault. The reader competent in both languages often doesn't actually read either poem



– rather s/he looks for a weak point to criticise. To combat this habit of not seeing poetry I hope to foreshadow a conversational practice between poetries of different languages that makes such bloody-mindedness impossible. That would mean placing related texts of the two languages side-by-side not as translation but in some other interesting relationship to be determined by their circumstances. This might be something along the lines of a dialogue or an argument, a progression or a digression. The point would be that efforts to call one text the translation of the other would be doomed. It is true that a text of this kind would have a very limited readership. And of course the translation style of parallel text will always be useful for the reader who knows only one of the languages, or for the reader whose competence in the other language is not such as to distract from the activity of reading.

Vis-à-vis the annotation technique – it's evolving – and I should perhaps admit that often these days I'm paying very little attention to the original poem. Sometimes I just read a first line and off I go. So, as previously suggested, it must just be something about being in the presence of poetry that does the trick. Perhaps it's the same as the way some people find it easy to pray when they're in a church and harder at home where the TV's probably on. This annotation/response technique then is a way of making literal the anti-writer's block idea that there's

'no blank page to begin with'. I'm sure there's an iconoclastic vandalism aspect to this thing too. Or maybe it's like a dog lifting his leg to mark territory. Whichever way, there's something gratifyingly naughty about it. The wider the margin the better of course and on this point, I shall close with a last debt of thanks to Marin Sorescu. He always gave me a wide margin!

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latest books

Dredging the Delta (book of Macao poems and sketches)
published in 2007 by Cinnamon Press (UK)
on-line orders through
<http://www.cinnamonpress.com/titles-uk.htm>

After Meng Jiao: Responses to the Tang Poet
published in 2008 by VAC (Chicago, IL)
on-line orders through <http://vacteam.com/-books.htm>

Christopher (Kit) Kelen is a well known Australian scholar and poet whose literary works have been widely published and broadcast since the mid seventies. *The Oxford Companion to Australian Literature* describes Kelen's work as 'typically innovative and intellectually sharp'. Kelen holds degrees in literature and linguistics from the University of Sydney and a doctorate on the teaching of the writing process, from UWS Nepean. Kelen's first volume of poetry *The Naming of the Harbour and the Trees* won an Anne Elder Award in 1992. In 1996 Kelen was Writer-in-Residence for the Australia Council at the B.R. Whiting Library in Rome. In 1999 he won the Blundstone National Essay Contest, conducted by *Island* journal. He also won second prize in the Gwen Harwood Poetry Award that year. In 2000 Kelen's poetry/art collaboration (with Carol Archer) *Tai Mo Shan/Big Hat Mountain* was exhibited at the Montblanc Gallery in Hong Kong's Fringe Club. And in 2001 another collaboration (essay and watercolour) titled *Shui Yi Meng/Sleep to Dream* was shown at the Montblanc Gallery. Both exhibitions were published as full colour catalogues. Kelen's fourth book of poems, *Republics*, dealing with the ethics of identity in millennial Australia, was published by Five Islands Press in Australia in 2000. A fifth volume, *New Territories* – a pilgrimage through Hong Kong, structured after Danté's *Divine Comedy* – was published with the aid of the Hong Kong Arts Development Board in 2003. In 2004 Kelen's chapbook *Wyoming Suite* – a North American sojourn – was released by VAC Publishing in Chicago. In 2005, Kelen's long poem 'Macao' was shortlisted for the prestigious Newcastle Poetry Prize and a re-edited version of *Tai Mo Shan* appeared in *Southerly*. In 2006 Kelen was a featured poet in a number of international poetry journals, including *The Drunken Boat*, *Segue*, *Softblow*, *63 Channels*, *The Poetry Kit* and *Sirena*. In 2007, Kelen edited a feature entitled 'Poetry of Response' which appears in *Jacket* magazine. Also in 2007, Kelen was winner of *Westerly's* Patricia Hackett Prize. The most recent of Kelen's eight volumes of poetry are *Dredging the Delta* published in 2007 by Cinnamon Press in the U.K. and *After Meng Jiao: Responses to the Tang Poet* published in 2008 by VAC (Chicago, IL). Apart from poetry Kelen publishes in a range of theoretical areas including writing pedagogy, ethics, rhetoric, cultural and literary studies and various intersections of these. In December of 2006 Kelen had an exhibition at Creative Macau (Macau Cultural Centre) titled: *Bridges and Boats*. The catalogue for this exhibition was CCI's 2007 calendar. Kelen is an Associate Professor in the English Department at the University of Macau, where he has taught Literature and Creative Writing since 2000. Kelen is the editor of the on-line journal *Poetry Macao* and poetry editor for the monthly lifestyle/current affairs journal *Macao Closer*.