

"Murmur Beyond Silence" by Eugen D. Popin. Between Heart and Intellection, Past and Present

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*still I try
to feel myself, here and now,
with natural sensations
one derived from the heart
and the other from intellection*

(FROM "ANNIHILATION")

Abstract: In his latest poetry volume, *Murmur Beyond Silence*, Eugen D. Popin offers us a mythico-religious literary journey through some of the essential spheres of life (nature, family, love), as well as poetic commentaries on Romania's communist regime and the war now being waged against the human species. The volume was published in Romanian in 2021 and in English in 2022.

Keywords: heart; intellection; family; nature; love.

Eugen D. Popin was born not long after the end of World War II, in 1951, in the village (now town) of Ciacova, Banat, Romania. It is a land where multiple ethnicities and linguistic influences meet, and which the writer has referred to as "a sort of multicultural European oasis." In the region's dialect one finds German, Hungarian, Serbian, Slovak and Bulgarian idioms. Up until 1989 Popin lived in communist Romania, where censorship was applied to writers and pressure was put on artists to participate in the ideological Proletkult movement, which involved glorification of the proletariat, the political regime in place, and the country's leader. Many intellectuals emigrated, if at all possible, or resorted to subterfuges in an attempt to escape the ideological straitjacket. Some applied subtlety or a fable-like register to their works. Popin, who first published in the literary magazine "Orizont" ("Horizon") in 1982 and had his

editorial debut—not without difficulties—in 1985, was subjected to the usual rigors. He had already taken note of the regime's cultural demands, and in response had developed a somewhat cryptic style of writing. He maintained this style later on, in times of more creative freedom, which lends his poetry a slightly recondite aspect. Faced with the disillusionments and pressures brought by the neo-communism installed in Romania in 1990, Popin emigrated to Germany, where he has resided ever since.

This substantial collection comprises eighty-seven poems on some of the most important and poignant themes of all: family, nature, love and the memory of it, language and literature, and the trials of our partly elusive and illusive passing through life. Included among these are poetic commentaries on life during communism, the evil unleashed upon the human race in recent years and the dystopian realities which threaten to annihilate us.

The space in which human life is lived is an enigmatic mythico-religious one where earth and sky, divinities and mortals meet. The aesthetic elements employed, images with a focus on shadows and murkiness, reveries and solitariness, create unclear boundaries and thus indeterminateness. Things appear to melt or flow into one another: people into other people or into landscapes, landscapes into nights, nights into days, past into present, waters into shores... The suggested vagueness of nature parallels and reinforces the vagueness of life.

The poem which gives the volume its title (p. 23) introduces us into this eerie atmosphere, with the narrator discovering a murmur beyond silence and self, in non-movement. The same atmosphere is found in the next poem, “unveiling” (p. 24), in which the narrator observes a fluid landscape:

the body of the day
is translucently
trickling
into unboundedness

In “the interior of silence” (p. 28) the narrator poses a philosophical question about the nature of our being in the world, which relates to the core credo later enunciated in the book: stripped of all things belonging to the material plane, can we take our place in Unendingness?

do
we
suffice
to ourselves
so as to flow
alongside
unendingness

“dimension” (p. 33) contains a physical object which embodies perplexity and ambiguity: a cold and dark labyrinth with moving walls which “appear and disappear.” The narrator is forced to “fumble around” and collects only “solitudes” in the process of moving away from, or toward, his self.

“Pont au Change” (p. 34) is a poem of remembrance which strikes this particular reader as a painting in words, reminiscent of the old and much-debated dictum *Ut pictura poesis* from Horace's *Ars Poetica* or, going back further, the observation of Simonides of Keos (according to Plutarch): *Poema pictura loquens, pictura poema silens*. The multiple references to light (growing dark, pale light, extinguished fire, shadows) parallel one of the key elements in painting: the play between light and dark. A chiaroscuro landscape is exactly what I visualize when reading this poem.

“controlled descent” (p. 36) and “perception” (p. 37) offer a melancholy take on human life, with the former expressing the idea that we go, unawares, “a-wandering / in our own existence” and the latter positing that we get caught in the maelstrom and get pulled to the depths. The idea of *straying* reappears in other poems.

In “feverishness” (p. 38) the narrator describes the encounter with the former self, suggesting the tension of incorporating the no-longer-extant into the current self:

[...] the distance between
then and now
folds up
inside our being
contrary to logic
without sensations

The pithy, near-aphorism “limits” (p. 58) seems another comment on the nature of our being, while also being a puzzle (it contains an implied *when* that remains unanswered):

we re-become
silence
love
incandescence
undulation

It is noticeable that even when the external landscape is one of tranquility the inner space is one of disquiet. It is unease and unrest that permeate this volume.

The love poems touch on a wide range of affective truths: fulfillment and its

negation, refusal to yield or concede, hesitation, error, regret, resignation, continued quest for comprehension. Love shows up here primarily as an experience of the past, *apperceived* and possibly *transfigured*, in places, through the distance created by time's passage and through thoughts and senses deepened by lived life. There is, as before, a sense of ambiguity and ineffability to many of these poems.

In "mold" (p. 69) the narrator recalls "walks / laced with disillusion" on "streets / steeped in unfulfillment". The landscape evidently borrows the feelings of the protagonists, becoming humanized. Everything here is a hindrance, as suggested by the "blind windows" and "stuck blinds." The narrator's thoughts, in recollecting, raise questions about the interpretive possibilities that arise when an experience is shared with another... Among others, what does the other 'half' of the experience look like?

all these
appear to have gathered up in my *self*
or maybe it's ours
I, however, feel
only my half of it
which is silently crawling
out of the just-passed instant

"recurrence II" (p. 73) depicts love as a resting in another's *duration*: an ontological term that encapsulates human existence. Interestingly, the protagonists are barely-there presences, the predominant element of the poem being time (duration, from time to time, cinders smoldering still). Here, too, we encounter ambiguity, through the suggestion that human beings themselves might be only time—thus flowing things, as depicted elsewhere.

In "replay I" (p. 74) the narrator abandons the ideas he holds of his lover ("the conviction / that nothing can be / more phenomenal / than your arms / stirring up the dark / and the restlessness of our bodies") and reaches a place of apparent resignation... The title of the poem, however, opens up the possibility of incongruity between the expressed and the unexpressed, implying a potential desire for repetition.

"interior" (p. 81) gives voice to a thought many might have had, namely that it is natural to erase people from memory but one can choose not to do so. Here, the person dwelling in the memory is a "frolicking" presence that occasionally leaves behind, on an unexplained terrace, "roses' thorns / and roses' petals": dichotomy of stinging ache and softness. Roses also feature in "imperfect spiral" and "oneiric," both of which oppose the past to the present, speaking of illusion, self-deceit, *imperfection*.

naturally
we are no longer the same
yet we deceive ourselves with the same
futile reveries
and base exonerations
far away
terribly far away
from ourselves
(from "imperfect spiral", p. 83)

displayed before ourselves
we are, concurrently,
the natural and the unnatural
searching and straying
wound and thorns...
(from "oneiric", p. 84)

"mea culpa" (p. 85), another look at the past, offers the key to the affair described therein and claims that it is impossible to assign blame... while the title, as in "replay I," refutes the body of the poem.

it so happened that we wished to measure
with no means of measurement
how much love fit inside us

"post festum" (p. 87) explains why the narrator goes rummaging through the past (now found "at the edge of the world") and holds on to a legion of anxieties and trifles:

I'm searching, *still*, for the epilogue

How much of the love experience can be clarified and how much remains elusive or half-understood? It is, most likely, impossible to say. According to the writer, we owe ourselves the attempt at the elucidation of our beings. He expresses this idea in "pneuma" (p. 51) and "imperfection" (p. 52), the latter poem even suggesting that this is the primordial task of human existence and constituting itself into the author's central credo:

we owe *ourselves*
the search for
the *clarifying* of our beings
everything else is waste and undoing

Family is seen, like love, through the lens of memory, as the narrator's parents and grandparents are no longer alive. In "mutiny" (p. 99) the writer inveighs against those who would tear him away from his forefathers and their land and language, thus articulating his indissoluble links to the ancestors. Remembrances have sacred and mythical tones (hellhounds appear in "instant") which make the family into a psychic *axis mundi*, a center of the being. Sometimes the line between the alive and the departed is blurred, as when the poet sees his grandmother "illuminate / *the path*" (in "instant", p. 101) or his mother smile brightly after he places a posy of gerbera flowers on her tomb, "illuminating the instant" (in "ineluctable", p. 103). Perhaps the most touching poem in this section is "recurrence III" (p. 108) in which the narrator goes searching after the ones who gifted him "this world / unending / beautiful / foolish" and no longer are... Visiting his former home, he encounters desolation and things conspicuous by their absence:

the front yard
is deserted
the dog
isn't wagging his tail by the fence
the pigeons
aren't cooing in the barn
the cats
aren't chasing after birds
nor are the roses
in their proper place
only I
brooding
and lonely
disturb
the eternity behind me

The commentaries on life in communist Romania ought to serve as a warning about the darkness and evil of totalitarian systems—already too often imposed on the human species. In "resurrection" (p. 112) people are "captive inside a fiction" and living in profound, irrational fear. The false giant who orders darkness (a command opposite to *Fiat lux*) is an anti-God, "demonic" figure. In "my cardboard barricade" (p. 113) the narrator is trapped in a system that enforces "the ethics of duplicity" and sees, around him, "the metastasis of / human malignancy." Seeking to extricate himself from the unpalatable reality, he constructs a "cardboard barricade" and winds up becoming the "very cardboard" in which he sought refuge.

Having outlived the deeply problematic reign of Ceaușescu, the writer now sees dark clouds gathering on humanity's horizon and makes his views clear. In

“annihilation” (p. 115) he says we are offered “twisted truths” and are being asked to “condone / the arbitrary.” In “ingenuity” (p. 125) he describes the false Corona pandemic and urges us to push aside “the engineered fear” and confront “those / who *wish to be* more than they are.” In “decipherment” (p. 126) he says that we are faced with “the most perfidious coup against the being” and, through the epigraph, sounds another warning: “Whoever falls asleep in democracy wakes up in tyranny.” (Anna Ohnweiler)

“desecration” (p. 127) presents us with the image of a butterfly whose wings are cut off so that it may be adapted to “pedestrian locomotion” and “cohabitation / with all the other / *crawlers*.” Does this speak to the general un wisdom of our times, readying to destroy humankind? Might the butterfly stand for wisdom itself? It seems worth calling to mind the “Tom O’Roughley” poem of W.B. Yeats:

And wisdom is a butterfly
And not a gloomy bird of prey.

In “syllogism” (p. 128)—a seeming pendant to “desecration”—it is the human being itself that is amputated and turned into a hominid without self, will or faith so as to be a perpetual serf in a system of tyrannical structures ruled by a merciless class that subscribes to the dogma *homo homini deus est*. A question that’s intimated here: How close are we to precisely this outcome?

I do not see, in Popin, serious resemblances with poets from the Western world, at least those known to me. I do see parallels—in the aspects of religious sentiment, exploration of the self, view of poetry as a path to deep understanding of that self—with a compatriot who was a long-term collaborator and friend of Popin’s, Andrei Zanca, who passed away this very year, 2022. There is a shimmery interiority in both, explored at what is often marked or described as the edge of the world. The two appear to be kindred spirits in their affectivity and perception of the world, who end up looking similar on the page for this very reason. With its emphasis on stillness, quiet, and interior flow of thought and emotion, their poetry contains something of the old Asian philosophy of detachment from the phenomenal world. The senses are acknowledged, for much of life comes to us through them, but the intellect intervenes to clear away the maculate, meritless and superfluous and center the being in the Eternal.

Uniting all the themes and placing human existence (with its noble, essential inner spaces) in the larger space of cosmic life from which we came is a recurring motif of Popin’s literature: the river, flowing in ripples or rapids between calm shores and through changing psychic landscapes. In “blazing” (p. 94), dedicated to writer-friend Miron Kiropol, Popin describes the human being itself in unbodied terms. (Earlier, human beings were *duration*.) We, too, flow:

we are
translucency
daybreak
unquenched
thirst
other times
the torrent
between
eternity
and
shore
the stone
the ash
the bridge
between
unseen
and incarnation

On the whole, this intelligent and affecting volume—between heart and intellection—constitutes a plea for the endurance of the human spirit and an invitation to the reader to ponder what might become of “this world / unending / beautiful / foolish.”

References:

Popin, Eugen D. *Murmur Beyond Silence*. Galați: Cappas Press, 2022.

BIONOTE:

K.V. TWAIN (1981-) was born in Galați, Romania. She spent thirteen years abroad, receiving her higher education in the US (Williams College, Harvard University), the UK, and Japan. She has published the novella *My Life with Salvador Dali*, by *Babou the Ocelot* and two poetry volumes: *Not Playing God* (2016) and *Sub Rosa: poems of love and distance* (2021). Her poetry has appeared in magazines from the US, the UK, Romania, Germany, and Japan. She is also a translator of the poetic oeuvre of Mihai Eminescu (1850-1889), Romania's foremost poet and cultural personality.

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