

Two New Romanian Books, reviewed by Peter Thompson

Contributed by Peter Thompson

MEDEA AND HER WAR MACHINES (U. New Orleans Press, 2011, 102 pp.), by Ioan Flora. Translated from the Romanian by Adam J. Sorkin. MOUTHS DRY WITH HATRED (Longleaf Press, 2012, 36 pp.), by Dan Sociu. Translated from the Romanian by Adam Sorkin and Dan Sociu. Medea and Her War Machines is a chance for Adam Sorkin to show off his blazing chops as a translator, and for poet Ioan Flora (1950-2005) to blaze away with a lyric of war and weaponry. From the opening poem "Deadly Nightshade" to the title piece, we are hauled from one smoking battlefield to another while the shreds of war-myth fluttering around us hint at the meaning of it all. This is a compelling way to organize the book—so much so that the poems which do not evoke slaughter or "diplomacy by other means" may seem a bit orphaned. But these, like the following sequence from one of the more violent poems, show us the quiet counterpoint, the greater purpose of the book—and perhaps, as Flora says in another book, a "sign of transgression beyond death" (The Flying Head): The blue sky showed no intention of falling, and if it fell, in any case, French knights were prop it up on the points of noble lances. Flora, along with Liliana Ursu, Ioan Es. Pop, Marin Sorescu and a few others, is one of Romania's greats, and fits in the first echelon of modern poets—poets who avoid the prosaic and narrative to generate this kind of imagery from a complex knot of meaning that invites many readings. Here the tang of the metaphysical is in the air. Similarly, in "Deadly Nightshade," another dimension, or at least a duality, is invoked, as we begin to contemplate the soul of the warrior chief though the ages; we lapse, or the Battle Commander lapses, into the sane: a pleasant and anodyne rummaging through plant nomenclature. In poems such as "The Argonauts" strange juxtapositions create a radical uncertainty, allowing both myth and metaphysics to play, along with a wry smile. Above it all Medea, with her "broth of herbs," hovers as a proximate cause and inscrutable end. This is a substantial and beautifully designed book, the twelfth in the translation-heavy Engaged Writers Series from University of New Orleans Press. It appears just after Flora's untimely death, and caps a long series of awards both for him and for Adam Sorkin (this book was co-translated with Alina Căcrăţc). It contains, as Sorkin points out in a very useful introduction, sections inspired by Barbara Tuchman's *A Distant Mirror* (1978). This historical masterpiece has informed both the violence and the pervasive medieval stench in Flora's poetry. An example: Scythes, rams, catapults for stones, catapults for feces at full foul boil. Most important here is the easy rhythm of these images. Their co a satisfying and at times colloquial way. Read any of this aloud for a while and you are struck by the Poundian weight of the rhythms. It is here that, along with Flora's gift, we see Sorkin's. The master translator (no one is more prominent as a translator from Romanian) has some freedom, in these natural lines, to develop rhythm (that is, rhythms that work just as well in English). At the same time, his responsibility increases—to tighten and shape, so that rhythms which are close to "spoken" do not become prosaic or flatly discursive. *Mouths Dry With Hatred*, by Dan Sociu (translated by Adam Sorkin and Dan Sociu with Mihaela Nita), is unambiguously modern. Sociu is younger than Flora (and refers to the latter in one poem as one of the "most energetic" of the "old men"); he is a member of the loose group known as the Generation of 2000. This is the first volume of Sociu's poetry translated into English. The original version was published (2005) as *eXcessive songs*, and it won the Romanian Writers' Union Prize. Sociu has won other national awards. Once again, we are in good hands with Adam Sorkin as translator. Here we don't have to worry about the quality of the translation—and, as an aside, isn't that editorial hesitation why so few translations get published, and reviewed? What some see as a neo-classicism in Sociu this reviewer reads as an earnest and sentimental plea for the world to be less brutal—close to the nostalgic underside of Kerouac (a writer whom Sociu translates). As noisome as much of the imagery is in this book, it has a sweet aftertaste. At first take, the quality we feel is the grotesque. The hideous—not to mention the venal, the bribes—is narrated with a striking sparseness. Some of the humor and mental jump-cuts give the impression of a postmodern gloss on the ugliness we all live with. Certainly, the poems comment on the poverty and anomie of recent years in Romanian urban life. What we are left with, though, is somewhat more noble: a terse stoicism about the grotesque. Some moments are purely lyrical: Now you want to own everything you've got heart bowels your insides as in a dovecote amidst shit and darkness And what they expect moments in Bukowski (a major influence on Sociu). But other poems have a different kind of perfection—the equanimity of a message that brushes against another dimension (this one begins with its title "While I'm arguing with a stupid office worker"): I keep trying to think of something else: the Americans sent it raised its head to the sky, only with its nose down to the engages another register ("come sleep beside me on the concrete floor/two aborted fetuses found in a trash bin"). While some poems (like "one day we yelled and yelled at each other") are effective despite seeming unfinished, uncertain, unhinged, and while at times Sociu's grim urban cornucopia does not accrete to something more than jejune, in "Mouths Dry With Hatred" the pitch of emotion shows us how much the little brushstrokes—all the vile details—matter to Sociu. They begin to matter to us. Sociu is a poet of remarkable honesty. While Sorkin's faultless colloquialisms and impeccable rhythms make all of this work, his skills as a translator are most evident in the "Excessive Songs." The longer lines, with more complex emotion and imagery, show both veteran translator and young poet at their sure-footed best.