

**Ioana Petrescu, *Persuading Plato* (Ginninderra Press, 2012)**

Translingual writing is an aspect of literary production that is receiving increasing attention from scholars worldwide. In a recent issue of *L2 Journal*, editors Stephen Kellman and Natasha Lvovich argue that although translingual writing – that is, writing across languages, or writing in a language that is not the author’s first – may be as old as the earliest forms of alphabetic script, its practice has become especially widespread in contemporary culture.<sup>1</sup> With the mass movements of peoples through the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, the works of writers who have chosen to write in a language which is not their first provide scholars with diverse sources for critical reflection on literature, language, identity and place. It is surprising, therefore, that the term ‘translingual literature’ has limited currency in Australia, a nation in many ways defined by the multicultural composition, if not the multilingual capabilities, of its peoples. Is this apparent lack of interest in the translingual dimensions of Australian writing a symptom of the lingering assumption that Australian writing is monolingual, regardless of the linguistic background and heritage of its writers? (A notable exception to this lack of attention to translingual literature among Australian scholars is to be found in the work of Mary Besemeres, to whom I am grateful for pointing me towards the issue of *L2 Journal* cited above.)

This is a question I found myself asking as I read Ioana Petrescu’s poetry collection *Persuading Plato*. Petrescu’s work is a prime example of translingual as well as transnational literature. The forty-one poems in *Persuading Plato* move between Romania, the country of the author’s birth, and South Australia where Petrescu has lived since 1996. In between Romania and Australia, Petrescu also lived and studied in Germany and England, suggesting she had at least three languages before migrating here. Although her first poems were written and published in Romanian, Petrescu switched to writing in English when she came to Adelaide to undertake a PhD and where she also became involved in the Friendly Street poets group. In her nearly two decades in Australia, Petrescu has lectured in Professional and Creative Writing at the University of South Australia, edited five anthologies of poetry and has had her own poetry published both in Australia and overseas.<sup>2</sup> *Persuading Plato* is her third collection of poetry. By every indication, Petrescu’s switch from writing in Romanian to writing in English has been a success; her career as academic, editor and creative writer attests to that. Yet her migration to Australia as an adult is a fact of her life’s trajectory. Her poems draw attention to this. And so as I read this latest collection I couldn’t help wonder what traces might be found of the poet’s movement across languages.

The first poem, ‘Tear gas (Romania 1991)’, is set in a railway compartment where the narrator is engaged in conversation with a miner who had marched on the capital the previous year, participated in riots, and ‘got carried away’ (9). The rioters had ‘smashed windows and doors, beat up policemen, / declared war on intellectuals, raped women in miniskirts / “because that’s what they want, don’t they?”’ (9). The quotation marks indicate the words belong to the miner. As the two people speak, the poet realises that, despite the feeling of solidarity she has for the man, ‘if he’d seen me / wearing a miniskirt in the university street, / he and his mates would have beaten me up’ (10). The tear gas of the title references both the experience of the miner during the riots and, in the final

<sup>1</sup> Steven G. Kellman and Natasha Lvovich. ‘Introduction to Special Issue: Literary Translingualism: Multilingual Identity and Creativity’. *L2 Journal* 7 (2015): 3-5. <https://escholarship.org/uc/item/9tp862z8>

<sup>2</sup> For Petrescu’s biographical details, I have drawn on the AustLit entry at: [www.austlit.edu.au/page/A14549](http://www.austlit.edu.au/page/A14549).

line, the irritation the poet now feels: 'His eyes aren't swollen and itchy any more. Mine are.' (10) What goes unremarked – unmentioned because it is obvious – is the process of translation embedded in the poem. The dialogue in Romanian is conveyed in this poem to its Australian readers in English. The poet is evoking an episode in her country of origin, and recalling, in a conversation, its violence both actual and threatened. The poem three pages later, 'Revolution Scenario, Romania 1989', also infers a link between language and violence with its description of women locking 'their screams inside' and in its lines, 'words hang on men's lips / like wet cigarette butts, / stain their breath and tongues' (13). I read these opening poems not only as representations of the upheaval of the poet's separation from her country of origin, but also as an indication of some aspect of her separation from her first language, including the fear and violence that mark that separation.

Migration and relocation to Australia do not mean a complete separation from one's first language. Later poems indicate movement between countries and languages. Near the end of the book are two poems for the poet's parents, the first titled 'Poem for my mother who died of cancer in 2007' and the second 'His collarbone', one of the most beautiful in this collection. In 'His collarbone', the poet is attending the burial of her mother. The priest pours oil on her coffin, though the poet says, 'I don't know why, / I haven't been to church in years' (62). The poem continues:

There are two bags on the side of the grave.  
These are your grandmother's bones, he says,  
and these are your father's.  
First time I see my father after twenty years,  
a bag of bones. I shouldn't faint, it's him, and yet,  
all I can see poking through the bag  
is this delicately curved white collarbone. (62)

And the poet then recalls, 'Priests and doctors. / The first poke at your soul, my father used to say, / the second at your body' (62). Again, I point to these lines to draw attention to the poet remembering conversations in her first language – with the priest, in recent memory, and, from much earlier, from childhood perhaps, with her father. Here the relationship with language infers an association not with violence, as in the earlier poems, but with familial attachment and love, and with mourning and loss.

Between these opening and closing poems is 'pickled tongue', the one poem in this collection that speaks explicitly of language in a migrant nation such as Australia:

language an olive on my pickled tongue,  
the jar suspended on the shelf of (in)difference.  
cry in a language, laugh in another, add pepper and chilli. (17)

The absence of upper case in both the title and the beginning of the first line sets this poem apart, an indication perhaps of its non-conformity. Its acknowledgement that one may live, cry and laugh in multiple languages is one that reflects the experiences of many thousands of Australians. However, its recognition of the '(in)difference' with which language diversity is often received by the dominant monolingual culture is also an accurate comment.

*Persuading Plato* is not only about language in a migrant nation. A group of its poems cluster around professional concerns: some are devoted to the writing and editing processes, while another evokes the experience of delivering a lecture and the need to 'find a friendly face in the audience'

(49). A number of the poems highlight the everyday, the comfort of mundane tasks such as doing the dishes, the tidiness and regularity contrasted with 'the transitory intersective moment' (58). Yet, even in these poems of the quotidian, language difference intrudes. In 'Amateur in the leafy suburbs', the poet explains that, as she becomes more established in the neighbourhood, 'the owner of the corner Deli / and the hairdresser suddenly understand my accent' (20). Amusingly, though, their comprehension lapses 'when they learn that I am renting' (20), indicating that language is not the only potential barrier to be overcome. Like the poet's conversation with the miner, it is the intersection of 'other people's unparallel lives' (58), perspectives and languages (even when they are mostly conveyed in English) that make Petrescu's work especially relevant to contemporary Australian culture.

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