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For Ana-Karina

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For Ana-Karina

One of my earlier meetings with Ana-Karina was at the 'Infinite Londons' conference at 'Lucian Blaga' in Sibiu, in 2001, which she organised with her great friends Adriana-Cecilia and Cristina Şandru, with Sean Matthews when his main post was with the British Council. The opening preliminaries at that conference were elaborate, taking up around two hours as I recall with welcomes from a wide range of civic, university, and faculty officials. After all that we had coffee, and being the opening plenary at 11.15, I was feeling quite nervous by then. Ana-Karina chatted briefly with me, and made a strong impression, though much of the chat was on routine business – she would shortly introduce me, she said, to the sound-tech person who would take me to the lecture theatre and check that the mikes and recording equipment were all working properly. But she was also quietly reassuring, not just about doing the session but also on the matter of the text I had decided to use. The poem was John Milton's Sonnet 23, though I am not a Milton scholar. It concerns a troubling dream about the poet's deceased second wife, and its first line is 'Methought I saw my late espoused saint.' Actually, he never had seen her, as he was already blind when they married. Hence 'Methought.' I had practised reading the poem aloud many times, but the only rule for reading out a poem in a lecture is to read it slow – the more familiar the text the slower the reading should be – at least twice as slow as you imagine would be about right. The effect of a reading on the audience can only be guessed at, but the effect on the lecturer of speaking a great poet's words cannot be anticipated. Sometimes, in the act of reading the poem out, the words seem to come unexpectedly to new life and begin to stir with new meanings. You might even imagine that you in some way become the poet whose voice you borrow, as I did that day. When Milton tells us that 'sweetness, goodness, in her person shined,' those words today seem to express the effect Ana-Karina had on so many of us. And after that brief

encounter with her, I felt that I didn't need to be anxious, neither about the armies of commentators who had gone before me, nor about stepping out of line in what I might want to add.

Of course, commentators today are often keen to critique Milton from a feminist, psychoanalytic or historicist viewpoint, and Ana-Karina always wanted to help hone and shape contributions to ABC along such lines, especially from the younger generation of critics and theorists. When she asked readers for an assessment of one of these pieces, she always tried to reduce our work to a manageable level, telling us not to bother with typos, spelling mistakes, faulty grammar or even command of English idiom. It's hard for an academic to leave a typo uncorrected and foregoing the self-congratulatory thrill of marking it up. But it is salutary to do so and nice to trust other people to spot it too. Instead, Ana-Karina emphasised that what she needed from us was clear and supportive advice on the strengths and weaknesses of the argument, as judged by the strictest international standards, and suggestions for eliminating any obvious gaps in the writer's command of the relevant scholarship.

When Milton wakes from his dream, he experiences a renewed sense of his loss – he is re-bereaved, so to speak, because as a dreamer he has forgotten that Katharine has died. In the same way, readers, and writers, of a piece like this, briefly suspend the sense of Ana-Karina's loss when they reminisce with friends about the vivid sense we all had of her unfailingly supportive presence, or her characteristic ways of doing and saying things, and of getting things done and said. But the effects of her presence, and the benefits of all her energies and abilities will stay with us. She was able to enthuse other people, and get them to write for her, and read articles and contribute to conferences like 'Infinite Londons.' And nothing is better in academic life than building a sustained relationship between university departments, like the one between Aberystwyth in Wales and 'Lucian Blaga' in Sibiu, and its diaspora in other parts of Romania.

I want to quote, too, from a more recent poem, which is W. B. Yeats's compendium-elegy 'The Municipal Gallery Revisited' of 1937. The lines are these, which are the last three in Stanza IV (of VII).¹

*And I am in despair that time may bring
Approved patterns of women or of men
But not that self-same excellence again.*

For me, this is the poem's real ending, because, after this point, Yeats really just goes on to praise himself for having such terrific friends and being such a popular and fortunate chap – 'My glory was I had such friends,' and all that. I have used these lines before on a similar sad occasion, and I do so again here because I don't know any others which express what they say so well. They say, firstly, something which is necessary and comforting – that in the future we will all once again have excellent friends and excellent colleagues in our academic lives, including some who are still at this sad time unknown to us. That is because time has the power to do that (that is the force of the 'may' in the first line quoted). And we must take comfort from this, and we can be sure that that is what Ana-Karina herself would want for us in our futures without her. When the second line mentions 'approved patterns of women or of men' it means that they will be the kind of people that appeal to people like us. We must take note of that and look forward gratefully to their arrival. But the sting is in the tail of the third line quoted, which explains the 'despair' mentioned in the first of them, concerning what time can never bring back. And it is that which has been in my mind all weekend while writing this. There will indeed be fine people in our lives and in the future, just as the poet says, but 'not that self-same excellence again.' For each of us, the force of the compound 'self-same' will be different – a different moment, or look or remark, or forbearance, or confidence, or joke – but we can join as one community as we cherish such moments together, both formally and privately.

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Note:

¹ <https://thepoetryhour.com/poems/the-municipal-gallery-re-visited>