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TRANSLATION AND RECEPTION OF SERBIAN POETRY IN THE ANGLOPHONE WORLD: AN ANALYSIS OF SEVERAL SUCCESSFUL EXAMPLES

Abstract: Poetry can be scarcer than prose in translation: it is more challenging to translate, but it is also less often read as a source of sociological or historical insight into the culture of the original. At the same time, some readers consider poetry the highest literary genre, and linguists have argued that precisely poetry reveals and takes advantage of what each language can do that is most effective and impressive, indeed what might be unique to that language. These unique qualities require attention and inventiveness from translators working in languages that possess different resources. A number of Serbian poets have significant bodies of work translated into English. This paper looks at several recent poems in translation that prove to be effective as poems in English, comparing multiple versions where available, and identifying the challenges faced by translators as well as their successful solutions.

Keywords: translation, reception, Serbian poetry, the Anglophone world, Charles Simić.

Poetry seems to be less often translated than prose: translators who do not themselves write poetry may consider it harder to translate than literary or essayistic prose, which makes different demands. Poetry is also less often read for sociological or historical insight into the original culture, meaning that it is less likely to be sought and bought as a text for teaching, unless the teaching involves literature; this may discourage potential publishers when they are offered poetry in translation. At the same time, many eager readers of literature consider poetry the highest verbal genre, one that concentrates the action of a language. Linguists who study literary language have argued

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that poetry reveals and exploits what each language can do most effectively and impressively, indeed: what possibilities of expression might be unique to that language. These possibilities challenge translators working in languages that possess different resources. This study will concentrate on practical aspects of poetry translation,¹ offering examples from individual translations of Serbian poetry into English, and evaluate the translation's effectiveness with both a native speaker's reaction and attention to the challenges presented.

A number of Serbian poets have significant bodies of work translated into English: Desanka Maksimović, Vasko Popa, and Danilo Kiš are just a few examples; Serbian-American poet Charles Simic has been active as a translator and editor of translations, while his own anglophone poetry has been translated into Serbian by Marija Knežević,² among others. This paper will look at several (fairly) recent poems in translation that are effective as poems in English, pointing to the elements that distinguish the translations, making the poems successful. The poets include Vasko Popa, Miodrag Pavlović, Radmila Lazić, Vujica Rešin Tucić, Dragan Ristić, Katalin Ladik, Ljiljana Đurđić and Ana Ristović; the translators include Aleksandar Stefanovic [sic], Anne Pennington, Charles Simic, Biljana D. Obradović, Maya Teref, and Steven Teref. The quality of the poems mentioned here suggests that a reader may find numerous good translations of Serbian poetry into English, and that their quality may be increasing over time.

1. VASKO POPA

Eight poems by Vasko Popa in English translation were published in the very first issue of the journal *Modern Poetry in Translation*, 1965. That journal was founded by Ted Hughes and Daniel Weissbort (the latter mentioned in my first footnote), in what I would call a gesture towards the Thaw: the first issue's selection of international authors rejected Cold War binaries,

¹ Several collections of essays published in the United States foreground the practical aspects of poetic translation, among other kinds of literary translation: some examples are *Translating Poetry: The Double Labyrinth*, ed. Daniel Weissbort, Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 1989; *The Craft of Translation*, ed. Rainer Schulte and John Biguenet, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989; *In Translation: Translators on Their Work and What It Means*, ed. Esther Allen and Susan Bernofsky, New York: Columbia University Press, 2013.

² Čarls Simić, *Kasni sat*, izbor i prevod Marije Knežević, Beograd: Otkrovenje, 2000.

boundaries and priorities, seeing poetry as a realm above those concerns, no doubt impacted by politics but not at all limited to it. It is telling that Popa's poems in the first issue of *MPT* are immediately followed by a selection of poems by Andrei Voznesensky (well known as a Soviet poet from precisely that Thaw generation); poets all over Eastern Europe met with new interest in their work and new translations along with greater freedom of discourse and (for some) access to travel, international festivals and conferences, etc.

The first example in this study will compare different translations of the same work. This move, of course, requires that multiple translations be available, which is often the case for well-known Russian poets such as Anna Akhmatova, or Aleksandr Pushkin. It is more rarely possible with living or recent authors due to copyright protections—and at the same time it is also difficult with literatures that are less often translated, where the first translation might wind up remaining the only translation. Vasko Popa's relatively early emergence into the Anglosphere has meant more translations in print and online, with at least three versions of the poem below.

In the 1965 first issue of *MPT*, Popa's poem "Mala kutija" appeared in a translation by Aleksandar Stefanovic [sic]. If you search for that issue online today, though, what you will see alongside a *very* small facsimile of the original page is a later version of "Mala kutija," translated by Anne Pennington (and, the online version specifies, revised by Francis R. Jones).³ The same poem was published in a translation by Charles Simic in 1987.⁴ Having three versions to compare lets us zoom in on some of the different choices translators may make. An initial observation is that the lack of punctuation and of extended syntactic links must make this poem easier to translate than many poems in Slavic languages.

First stanza:	Stefanovic (MPT, 1965):
Maloj kutiji rastu prvi zubi	The small box gets its first teeth
I raste joj mala dužina	And its small length
Mala širina mala praznina	Its small width and small emptiness
I uopšte sve što ima ⁵	And all that it has got

³ <https://modernpoetryintranslation.com/poem/the-small-box>, accessed September 20, 2021.

⁴ Charles Simic, ed. and trans., *Homage to the Lame Wolf: Vasko Popa: Selected Poems*, Oberlin College Press: FIELD Translation Series 12, 1987, p. 66.

⁵ Vasko Popa, "Mala kutija," <https://www.scribd.com/doc/271378893/Vasko-Popa-Mala-Kutija>, accessed September 14, 2021.

Pennington (updated *MPT* issue 1):
The little box grows her first teeth
And her little length grows
Her little width her little emptiness
And everything she has

Simic (*Homage to the Lame Wolf*, 1987):
The little box gets her first teeth
And her little length
Little width little emptiness
And all the rest she has

Stefanovic's choice of "Small box" for the title and first line means two stressed syllables in a row (a spondee), harder to say for a native speaker of English than "little box" as both Pennington and Simic choose, with its alternation of stressed and unstressed syllables, though the strong syllables of a spondee can also work to slow down the pace of a reader or speaker. Stefanovic's "gets its first teeth" is more standard colloquial English than Pennington's "grows her first teeth," whereas Simic hits a balance with colloquial "gets her first teeth;" "gets" is less active than "grows" and so conveys a sense of the dative case in the original. Both Pennington and Simic choose the feminine possessive pronoun "her," which is not typical for an inanimate object in English but therefore animates and even personifies the little box. Pennington does not risk reproducing the bare nouns and adjectives of the original's third line, adding "her" twice, though she repeats the verb "grows," while Simic omits its second occurrence. Skipping ahead to the end:

Fourth stanza:
Mala kutija seća se svog detinjstva
I od prevelike čežnje
Postaje opet mala kutija

The small box remembers its childhood (Stefanovic)
And by overgreat longing
It becomes a small box again

The little box remembers her childhood (Pennington)
And by wishing really hard
Becomes a little box again

The little box remembers her childhood (Simic)
And by a great great longing
She becomes a little box again

Here Stefanovic continues to use “it” to refer to the “small” box; the effect may be less depersonifying here since the possessive pronoun modifies childhood, something only a person can have. It is always useful to note the points where multiple translations differ the most, and here it is the stanza’s second line. Stefanovic’s “overgreat” cleverly mimics the formation of “prevelika” but the rest of his translation has not prepared the reader for such inventiveness; it feels more striking than expressive, whereas the word in the original is strong but not unusual. Pennington offers a very colloquial third line, “And by wishing really hard,” perhaps domesticating the line more than is desirable with its comfortable expressiveness (just like something a child might say). Simic again strikes a balance between strangeness and comfort: “And by a great great longing” – it is striking yet feels like something a person might say, though probably a child would not, and omits the comma that would usually be present in such an utterance. This reader cannot say whether Simic consulted the earlier versions as he made his translation, but given the prestige of *MPT* and the impact of the publications there on Popa’s worldwide fame it seems likely that he did.

Comparing these versions, all fairly close to Popa’s original, does not provoke questions about how far a translation can or should depart from the original, splashing out into something unexpected. Simic’s version, the most recent, strikes the best balance between fidelity and imagination. One might ask whether the upswell of international poetic translation in the 1960s, begetting journals such as *MPT*, reflects the growing prominence of free verse at the time (at least, in English and in Serbian). Free verse presents fewer formal demands in translation than does metrical verse; the generally shorter lines in the English versions,⁶ due to generally shorter words in

⁶ Number of syllables in the first and fourth stanzas of “Mala kutija” and its translations. The differences here are not as striking as they would be in poems with longer lines.

FIRST STANZA:	Popa:	line 1	11	line 2	9	line 3	10	
		line 4	8					
Stef.	line 1	7	line 2	4	line 3	8	line 4	6
Penn.	line 1	8	line 2	6	line 3	10	line 4	6
Simic	line 1	8	line 2	5	line 3	8	line 4	6
FOURTH STANZA:	Popa:	line 1	12	line 2	8	line 3	10	
Stef.	line 1	9	line 2	7	line 3	8		

English colloquial vocabulary, do not spoil the effect. Because the formal demands are less rigorous, poetic translations may seem more acceptable than those of an earlier era.

2. SINGLE POEMS

The rest of the examples in this study are single translations, taken from four volumes; two of these volumes are selections of one individual's work (poetry by Vasko Popa and Ana Ristović), while the other two present selections of Serbian poetry more broadly. The two kinds of books work differently, presenting one important poet in depth versus offering fewer examples of work from each of a number of prominent contemporary Serbian poets (which implicitly or explicitly comes with a narrative about the development and current state of that poetic system), each poem must still be translated as an individual work within whatever larger matrix – the individual poet's other work, or the work of many poets. The principle of selection here is that the translations are especially effective and pleasing, persuasive for an Anglophone reader.

This poem by Miodrag Pavlović is from Charles Simic's 2010 selection of Serbian poets, *The Horse Has Six Legs*.⁷

QUESTIONNAIRE OF SLEEPLESSNESS

Who rattles in the keyhole?

Who builds belfries under my window?

Who weeps over the evil fate of the hero?

Who lets lambs out of the gates?

Who drives the dwarfs out to pasture?

Who threw the King's dolls into the coffin?

Who gave the alarm clock to the bat?

Answer!

Small night celebrates the great night.

Winter. At the inn everyone is hurrying.

The messenger in armor stumbled and fell.

Penn. line 1	10	line 2	7	line 3	8
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Simic line 1	10	line 2	7	line 3	9
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⁷ Charles Simic, ed. and trans., *The Horse Has Six Legs*, Minneapolis, MN: Greywolf Press, 2010, p. 79. The 2010 edition is updated from an earlier, 1992 edition with the same title but somewhat different composition.

Who will show me tomorrow the way?
Who will cook my lunch and hand me a letter?
Who rings now above my bed
and calls for the doctor?
Or does he summon the pilgrims to witness?
Who lights the big fence of kindlings?
The dawn already wiggles under my pillow.
Who has sent the urgent invitation to suffer?
And why has that invitation been directed to me?

Like Popa's "Mala kutija," this poem is relatively easier to translate because of its structure: it asks question after question without stronger links than the grammatical similarity of the questions, though it is varied by the unexpected content of the questions. A series of answers (or not?) follows, with further questions at the end, this time pertaining more directly to insomnia. Simic's choice of wording feels quite natural, shifting between more and less formal wording; the phonetic patterning (such as the near-rhyme of "keyhole" and "hero" in lines one and three) is subtle and might even slip by some readers, except for the resulting sense of rightness.

Simic's translation of a poem by Radmila Lazić similarly conveys the original's colloquial tone:⁸

KINDERGARTEN CURSE
I tell him, don't be mad at me,
you small and eccentric creature,
give me back my rags and Mediterranean moonlight
and my vasko popa,
we are so tired of this game
in which silk means nothing anymore
and I'm again afraid of sharks
while I dream again with you,
our bed had turned into something
I wouldn't even tell my best girlfriend about,
things are so bad, still
we could, or you could, exchange your marbles
for my plastic super girl, we could
ride in flying saucers
until my soul darkens so much
and I trip and hurt my knee,

⁸ Simic, *ibid.*, p. 261.

we ran and played hide-and-seek
during our honeymoon – much too slowly,
so I ask of you, give me back my worn-out gods
and my enameled idols,
the blue landscape we loved
has vanished, in my picture book
I find only something sad and horrible,
I'm speaking to you, do you hear,
– I'm asking you nicely...

I chose this example partly because it includes “vasko popa” (since the poem is almost entirely in the lower case, it is hard to say whether “vasko popa” here refers to that poet’s collected works or the poet, or some item or conversation that could be identified through its association with Vasko Popa – whose name definitely offers tempting phonetic possibilities), but also because it works very well as a poem: run-on sentences do not require particular grammatical cohesion, they can run on even more boldly given the paucity of grammatical case in English, and they set up a changing mood with both humor and pathos. Simic captures the shift from reported speech as the poem opens to direct speech at the end, with the *you* the poetic speaker is addressing (initially a third-person *him*) growing stronger and more pleasant. The one critique I would suggest is that the “plastic super girl” should be “supergirl,” since Supergirl from the universe of Superman has a name combined into a single unit. Simic is a fine Anglophone poet, and these translations feel well-considered and unforced.

The 2016 collection *Cat Painters*, edited by Biljana D. Obradović and Dubravka Đurić, is a catchy volume both for its impressive dimensions (71 poets; 450 pages!) and for its ability to straddle two approaches: informational, offering background and coverage in two substantial introductions (one written by each editor), and presentation of the translations as poetry per se. The emphasis on the specifically artistic and literary aspects of the work is visible largely in the blurbs from poets and scholars of poetry (Anglophone or even Russian) that open the volume, rather than from specialists in South Slavic literature and poetry.

Naturally, I cannot resist starting with this brief poem by Vujica Rešin Tucić, translated by Biljana Obradović (p. 51):

IN THE OFFICE OF THE POET VASKO POPA

I am sitting in the office of the poet Vasko Popa
eating a bitter cookie.

With absent eyes,

Vasko looks at me in a friendly manner.

I think he wants to poison me.

Besides the pleasure of Vasko Popa's name, again, and its resonance with the English word "poet," the translation offers the lovely oxymoron of a *bitter cookie* (for some reason the childish word "cookie," an Americanism inherited from the Dutch, is even better than the British "biscuit" would be); choice of the continuous present tense ("I am sitting" rather than the equally possible "I sit") lets the word chime with "bitter;" the words "friendly" and "poison" repeat the contrast of the earlier line. This small translation packs a punch.

In the same volume, Dragan Ristić translates his own haiku (p. 92):

morning bells –
the snow covers
last night's snow

This reader was made to write haiku as an exercise in elementary school, so of course the first thing to notice is that Ristić's translation does not offer the canonical 5-7-5 syllables, but rather a briefer 3-4-3. This may reflect the relatively shorter length of everyday English words compared to Slavic languages, already noted (and perhaps to Japanese words too). However, the poem is still satisfying because its second line is longer; more importantly, it has that ineffable deeper content essential for a haiku – which our elementary school teachers did not stress, remaining on the level of syllable count. Haiku is one form from abroad that has impacted poetry in the United States, if not the rest of the Anglophone world, which is remarkable given the relative insularity and intended or notional impermeability to foreign influences of many Anglophone societies. This general isolation helps to explain why lovers of poetry in the US may feel most comfortable with translations that fit into a generic free-verse mold, but also underlines why translations are doing important cultural work.

A poem by Katalin Ladik, translated from Hungarian by the author and Biljana Obradović (p. 65), offers rich phonetics as well as a thought-provoking question:

ONE

When he woke up, the world was still and deaf.
– Borges

This cracked wall is pregnant from a dream.
What wasp is that above me?
Which woman is she, who paints a wall in me?

If that's all that surrounds me is – a wall –
And if I am a wasp
And the insect in me – a man –
where do I end, where does the man begin?

Without knowing Hungarian, one cannot comment on the translation's relationship to the original, though including a poet who writes in this language speaks to the intentions of the volume. The very noticeable difference between a poem in Hungarian and a poem in Serbian vanishes in translation; a reader who skips the brief introduction to Ladik's work and career will not even be aware of that difference, possibly interpreting the specificity of Ladik's voice in translation as an individual trait, among the individual voices of every other poet in the collection. This translation has a lovely rhythm, tending toward iambic, and even a bit of slant rhyme (in/man/end/begin) and punctuation marks that convey a sense of fragmentariness, with a poetic and thought-provoking result.

This poem by Ljiljana Đurđić (p. 68) was translated by Obradović; the reference to American poet Sylvia Plath raises associations at once of an international body of women's poetry and of a closer relationship with Anglophone literature, identified as a pre-text to this poem:

PUZZLE

after Sylvia Plath

I took you apart again
How many times really
How many times have I covered you in foil
Rewrapped passed through the machine
For reformatting, for printing

Again peeling till the raw skin
Became simply unbearable
Epidermis dissolving
Cracking at the seams

And the classic image of your eternal half-life
(Always an odd number on the dice)
Getting back on its feet again
Nodding, teetering
Its tiny bird claws scratched on my forearm

This is no longer a process
On which one can rely
Resuscitation and the mouth-to-mouth
Will end up blowing away the ashes
Then who will put you back together again
Bone by tiny bone

Here as elsewhere, the almost complete lack of punctuation makes the poem simpler to translate: there is already ambiguity about how each line feeds into the next one. It is wonderfully unclear who is *you*, who is *it*, though at the end they appear to merge into the wonderful line “bone by tiny bone” – gripping phonetics atop a frightening reference to death and perhaps cremation. The longer words in the poem work well: *reformatting*, *unbearable*, and *resuscitation* set up the punch of that final line: five syllables in four words. Longer, “intellectual” words can feel awkward in English-language poetry, where what poet and professor Robert Pinsky calls “the forbidden language” was associated with Victorian poetry, dreadfully old-fashioned by the time the boom in international translation began with the flood of free verse. Rhyme and meter, however, are strongly present in Anglophone spoken-word poetry, related to the genres of rap and hip-hop, where knowing impressive words and rhyming them elegantly is prized.

Last but not least, here are a few examples from a selection of poetry by Ana Ristović: *Directions for Use*, translated by Steven Teref and Maya Teref (Zephyr Press, 2017). This is the first book of poetry from Serbian published by Zephyr. Zephyr Press produces beautiful bilingual books, with the original text and the translation on facing pages (original on the left, of course, which to a reader of English makes clear its priority). Obviously, this makes it very easy to compare the two, though it is hard to say whether the immediate presence of the original would free the translator to explore new and different ways of expressing the ideas, or else encourage sticking close to the original in meaning and phrasing, since it will be right there for comparison. If Simić’s translations tend to follow the originals more closely than (for instance) Pennington’s, the Terefs’ translation of Ristović tends

to be briefer than the original, paring out words and even whole lines, or folding multiple words into one or two.

Here is one stanza from “Directions for Use,” the volume’s title poem (pp. 10–13):

Одвех је одмерен тај покрет, прецизан,
сигуран у себе да би шта могао дотаћи;
та рука која посеже за поједностављеним ваздухом
одвише јасних намера да би нешто боје
могло склизнути у длан, пуст, свакако.

The unfailing movement, precise,
free to feel:
the hand reaches for fresh air
the obvious plan for a slight flush
to slip into the palm, empty, without doubt.

The effect of the very short line second line in this excerpt, “free to feel,” is striking with its strong f’s and ee’s, though also strikingly different from the fourteen syllables of the same line in the original, whose lines are of a more even length.

Here is another example excerpted from the poem “PEEK,” which recites the contents of a woman’s purse (pp. 26–27):

[...] и пар фотографија ради сигурности
да оних који су на њима, заиста има,
и огледалце ради сигурности
да су неком другом одбројани дани.

[...]
и понека бомбона
и понекад бомба.

a few photos, just in case,
to prove those in them did indeed exist,
a compact mirror
to fend off a curse.

[...]
a bonbon,
and the occasional bomb.

The compact mirror (precisely what we call the small round mirror on a “compact” of makeup or powder) is a nice added detail, describing the item with more precision. “[T]o fend off a curse” abbreviates the original hugely, but does convey the meaning in a way and definitely grabs the reader’s attention. The translators were fortuitously lucky that the words *bonbon* and *bomb* (for *bombona* and *bomba*) are so similar to each other in English: the poem’s marvelous ending comes across almost entirely. This sort of good fortune might inspire a translator of one poem to undertake the project of an entire book.

In conclusion, these examples (chosen mainly because of convenience of access) show that there some excellent recent translations of Serbian poetry into English are available – suitable for teaching the poets translated individually or as part of a larger survey, or for reading out of individual interest in the poetic culture, and their esthetic quality makes them suitable for pleasure reading.

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PREVOĐENJE I RECEPCIJA SRPSKE POEZIJE U ANGLOFONOM SVETU: ANALIZA NEKOLIKO USPEŠNIH PRIMERA

Rezime: Poezija se prevodi ređe nego proza jer prevodiocu predstavlja veći izazov, ali se poezija i ređe čita kao sociološki ili istorijski uvid u kulturu izvornog jezika. Istovremeno, mnogi čitaoci poeziju smatraju najuzvišenijim književnim žanrom, a lingvisti su predočili da baš poezija otkriva i koristi ono što je u svakom jeziku najefikasnije i najupečatljivije, ono što je jedinstveno za taj jezik. Ti jedinstveni kvaliteti zahtevaju usredsređenost i umešnost prevodilaca koji barataju različitim jezicima. Neki srpski pesnici su već u značajnom obimu prevedeni na engleski jezik. Ovaj rad razmatra nekoliko pesama u skorijim prevodima koje su

pesnički efikasne i na engleskom, razmatra i nekoliko verzija prevoda tamo gde postoje, ističe poteškoće s kojima se susreću prevodioci, kao i uspešna prevodilačka rešenja.

Ključne reči: prevođenje, recepcija, poezija na srpskom, anglofoni svet, Čarls Simić.