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## EDITING AND TRANSLATING THE SERBIAN ISSUE OF *ATLANTA REVIEW*

**Abstract:** The co-editor/ translator of the special issue on contemporary Serbian poetry, Summer 2021 of *Atlanta Review*, Biljana D. Obradović, discusses her own background as well as that of her co-editor Dubavka Đurić's background, her own history of translation of poetry, and their work together and how the project of translating poems for this special issue on contemporary Serbian poetry came to be. She also highlights other recent publications of Serbian poetry in the US.

**Keywords:** Editor, Critic, Poet, Translator.

The daughter of a Serbian customs officer working on the border with Greece and Yugoslavia, I was born in Bitola, now in N. Macedonia. My father, Dragoslav (the middle D. in my name), then joined the Foreign Affairs Office, so that we began living abroad. First we lived in Thessaloniki, Greece from 1970-1975 and I attended an American school called Pinewood, and was immersed in the English language from the age of nine. Then I lived in Bombay, India and attended a prestigious Indian school, Cathedral & John Connon School, whose instruction was in English, the same one that Indian novelists, Salman Rushdie<sup>1</sup> had attended before me and that Amit Chaudhuri<sup>2</sup> attended with me. Then in 1980, I left India to return to Belgrade, Yugoslavia,

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<sup>1</sup> Rushdie writes about our school, Cathedral, in his *Midnight's Children* (among other books).

<sup>2</sup> Chaudhuri mentions my name in relation to Cathedral, in a poem his book, *Real Time: Stories and Reminiscences*. Picador, 2003.

where in 1987 I received a B.A. in English Language and Literature from the Philology Faculty of Belgrade University in Belgrade.

I, now a Serbian American poet, first came to the US in 1988, to pursue an M.F.A. in Creative Writing, Poetry at Virginia Commonwealth University. The now late, Dr. Tihomir Vučković, from the Philology Faculty, told me about the existence of the field of Creative Writing and advised me to pursue it after seeing some of my poems written in English. (I am trying to explain how I came to writing poetry in English, as well as translating poetry into English from Serbian.) In Belgrade, I had met an American performance poet, Max Schwartz, in the late 80s before I left for the US, then saw him again in NY. He connected me with the renowned Serbian poet, Desanka Maksimović (my childhood idol). When I met her in 1989 in Belgrade, she didn't quite understand what Creative Writing was and why I needed to study writing poetry. But she gave me the rights to translate her as part of my Masters thesis which primarily included my original poetry.

After graduating with my M.F.A. in 1991 at Virginia Commonwealth University (VCU) in Richmond, VA, where I studied with the poets, Dave Smith, Margaret Gibson and Gregory Donovan, Dave Smith suggested to me to pursue a Ph.D. afterwards and so I did. I published some of my translations of D. Maksimović in the US before graduating from my M.F.A. program in 1991. I earned a Ph.D. in Creative Writing from the University of Nebraska, Lincoln in 1995. (There were only eleven Ph.D. programs in Creative Writing at the time in the US.) There, I studied with Marcia Southwick (the poet, Larry Levis' ex-wife). I had met the US poets, Larry Levis and Philip Dacey, in the summer of 1988 before going to the US. They were Fulbright scholars in Belgrade that summer. Levis later came to teach at VCU after I had already left, and then sadly died there a bit later. Dacey, a Neoformalist poet, continued to be a great friend. Before he died in 2016, he left me his essays on poetry to edit and publish which I did last summer (Dacey 2020).<sup>3</sup> In Nebraska I also studied with the poet Hilda Raz who was then the editor of one of the oldest US literary magazines, *Prairie Schooner*, housed at the University of Nebraska. I also worked with poets Marcia Southwick, Greg Kuzma and the ex-US Poet Laureate, Ted Kooser at Nebraska.

My first collection of poems, my dissertation, *Frozen Embraces*, winner of the Rastko Petrović award from the Center of Emigrants from Serbia,

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<sup>3</sup> Dacey, Philip. *Heavenly Muse: Essays on Poetry*. Biljana D. Obradović, Ed. New Orleans: Lavender Ink, 2020.

was published bilingually in 1997 (Obradović 1997). That was followed *Le Riche Monde* (my MFA thesis) (Obradović 1999). My first collection of translations was published the same year, of poems by my then partner, now husband, the poet John Gery (Gery 1999). I translated several other poets into Serbian, Stanley Kunitz (Kunitz 2007), Ezra Pound's granddaughter, Patrizia de Rachewiltz (de Rachewiltz 2012), Bruce Weigl, who has roots in Serbia and Slovenia among others, (Weigl 2013), and Nigerian American poet, Niyi Osundare (Osundare 2015). I also translated collections from Serbian into English by Bratislav Milanović (Milanović 2014), and Zvonko Karanović (Karanović 2020). My first anthology of poetry in translation was called *Fives* (Obradović 2002) and the second, *Cat Painters* (Obradović & Đurić 2016), which won the Mihajlo "Miša" Đorđević Book Prize, from the North American Serbian Society, in November 2019. I also published two more collections of poems, *Little Disruptions* (Obradović 2012), which will be coming out in the US in 2022 from WordTech Communications (previously only published in Serbia), and *Incognito* (Obradović 2017).

So, I've lived in the US since 1988, now 33 years. I've been a Professor of English and Creative Writing at an HBU, Xavier University of Louisiana, in New Orleans since 1997, now in my 25th year. A poet, translator and critic of Serbian poetry, I write narrative poetry in English, having lived abroad from age nine, including in Greece and India.

I met Dubravka Đurić twenty years ago this year, through a mutual friend, the poet, Charles Bernstein, after he and I were together on a panel about poetry after 9/11 at the Modern Language Association (MLA), the biggest conference in North America on languages and literatures, held in New Orleans in December 2001. Đurić, likewise, graduated with a B.A. in General Literature with Theory of Literature from the Philology Faculty of Belgrade University. She received her Ph.D. from the University of Novi Sad, in Serbia. She has been a leading feminist critic, Language poet, and Editor of *ProFemina*, a leading feminist journal in Serbia. She teaches at the Faculty of Media and Communication, Belgrade, Serbia. In association with the women's initiative she started the AWIN School of Poetry and Theory. Once we were introduced, we began cooperating in publishing reviews of Serbian poetry collections in the US and writing papers about them for conferences in the US and Europe. She has worked on translations of contemporary American Language poets in Serbia from the 80s. In 2012 Dubravka Đurić and I began work on a four-year project of compiling an anthology of contemporary Serbian poetry, *Cat Painters: Contemporary*

*Serbian Poetry*, gathering the work of 71 poets born after World War II and completed it four years later, in 2016. Charles Bernstein wrote the Preface.

In addition, we have been eager to continue promoting and working on translations of individual collections of poetry, such as the one I translated and published, Zvonko Karanović's, collection of prose poems, and before that I also translated a collection of Bratislav Milanović's poems, and am currently working on translating a collection by Dubravka Đurić, as well. I edit and review book reviews for *Serbian Studies* and review books for *World Literature Today* and *Xavier Review*.

But we are not the only ones who have been hard at work on translating Serbian poetry and publishing it in the US. Credit must go to ex-US Poet Laureate, Serbian born, Charles Simic, who translated individual collections by several contemporary Serbian poets in the past: Ivan V. Lalić, Vasko Popa, Aleksandar Ristović, Novica Tadić, and Radmila Lazić. The anthology that preceded ours, called, *The Horse Has Six Legs: An Anthology of Contemporary Serbian Poetry* (Simić 2010), got first published in 1992 and had two editions, but was not as comprehensive as ours. Nina Živančević translated individual poets and published her own poems in the US, most recently *Roller Skating Notes*, through Coolgrove Press. Besides these two, there was the now late, Vasa D. Mihajlović, of Chapel Hill, a poet himself to whom I was introduced by Desanka Maksimović, who did regular reviews of Serbian writing including poetry in *World Literature Today*. He did some translations as well. He translated the Serbian epic poems among others. Recently Ana Ristović's collection, *Directions for Use*, published by Zephyr Press in 2017 has been translated by the married couple (Steven and Maja Teref), who also translated Novica Tadić, a collection called, *Assembly*, published by Host in 2009. Sybelan Forrester translated Marija Knežević's *Breathing Technique*, a Zephyr Press, a 2020 publication. The poet, Snežana Žabić, who also has an MFA in Creative Writing, now living in Chicago, has done some translations of poems and published her work in English as well. So there really have not been that many collections of translations of contemporary Serbian poetry published in the US recently, and I invite you to do so, if you translate. It's not easy to translate into your second language, however I have been going to school and working in English for fifty years. It's important to be familiar with the American dialect, spelling and punctuation that need to be used if you do so and plan to publish in the US.

This particular project began in Spring of 2019, at the Associate Writing Programs Conference (AWP) in Portland, Oregon. This is the biggest writers'

conference in Northern America, which I've attended for the past thirty years on a regular basis. Past Poet Laureate of Louisiana, Julie Kane (the state where I reside, who was once a student of Charles Simic), and the poet, Grace Bauer, a Professor from the University of Nebraska (where both Karen Head and I received our degrees), who were the editors of the *Nasty Women's Poetry Anthology* (Bauer & Kane 2017), featuring among others, Obradović's and Karen Head's poems, invited me to dinner in Portland before the conference. Besides other people, among the guests was Karen Head, now editor of *Atlanta Review*, who sat next to me and to my surprise invited me to guest edit *Atlanta Review* featuring Serbian poetry. I presumed that she must have seen Dubravka's and my anthology, *Cat Painters*. I was familiar with and aware of the prestige of the special international issues of *Atlanta Review*.

To be frank, at first I was both excited and not excited about the project. Of course, I was honored for the invitation, but at the same time, it came only two and a half years since we had completed *Cat Painters* which took us four and a half years to do, and I was tired of translating and wanted to devote some time to my own poetry. I had had a sabbatical for the anthology, at first, but then continued working on it after it had ended while teaching a full load. I didn't have one this time around....However, I wasn't going to pass this opportunity by, and besides it was a shorter project. We were asked to select one-two poems by thirty or so poets and add an introduction and bios. So, thanks to Karen for this opportunity, we began. Right after I found out about this project, I communicated with Dubravka Djurić, who co-edited *Cat Painters* with me, and who lives in Belgrade, and she immediately accepted the project with enthusiasm, and wrote to the poets during the spring and summer 2019, inviting them to submit their poems.<sup>4</sup>

For this journal, we selected additional poems by some of the same poets from, *Cat Painters: Contemporary Serbian Poetry*, but also other younger Serbian poets, with almost all poems not previously published in the US. This selection of contemporary Serbian poetry, focuses on the generation of poets born between 1960s and 1980s. Our selection shows how Serbian poetry is rapidly changing under the influence of contemporary transnational tendencies and becoming globalized. We want to show a wide range of poems, from those that are narrative to those who

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<sup>4</sup> Parts of the next six paragraphs were taken from the Introduction to *Atlanta Review's* special issue on Serbian Poetry co-written with Dubravka Đurić.

insist on the fragmentary. In selecting and translating these poems we have noticed a prevalence of three-four directions poets seem to be taking in this generation: readers will find some poets dwell on individual experience outside of politics, while others use satiric devices to respond to dramatic political conditions or changes in the last two decades in Serbia, a third group cultivates experimental art and an interest in the avant-garde, while a few write in the surreal voice about individual experience in imaginative ways. Some are preoccupied with domestic life, the imaginative, some are concerned with politics or avant-garde language play.

Readers should immediately note that all the selected poets write in free verse. It is important to know that historically free verse in the Serbia (which had been overshadowed by the predominant practice of formal verse) represents a contemporary impulse to break from tradition into being modern, in both the style and content. In this selection we can single out a few characteristic thematic tendencies articulated in various ways. For obvious reasons, a large number of poets remains preoccupied by the hardships of the Yugoslavian wars (1991-1999). They write not only about the actual war, and the mass murders, condemning them, but also about the experiences as refugees, in the search for that which was lost or for new identities (Tanja Stupar Trifunović, Dragoslav Dedović, Biljana D. Obradović, Nenad Milošević, Tatjana Bijelić, Dubravka Đurić, Natalija Marković, Bojan Savić Ostojić, Petar Matović, Siniša Tucić, Ana Marija Grbić).

In addition, this selection gives the impression that on the scene there are more women, than men. During the 1990s, the Anglo-Saxon feminist theories arrived in Serbia, and since then poets have turned to questions of gender and gender identity, especially in women's and less frequently in lesbian (Jelena Kerkez) poets. They rarely declare themselves as feminists, but feminist themes proliferate in the majority of their writings. In this selection, the women poets, dealing with the female identity, in the most direct way include Jelena Angelovska, Danica Vukićević, Jasmina Topić, Ana Seferović, and Vitomirka Trebovac. Other women poets, such as Maja Solar, Ivana Maksić and Snežana Žabić, deal with the consequences of the brutal neoliberal exploitation of the human work. In short, contemporary poets have become very politicized, so that many poems offer critiques of the constitutionalizing of national countries and the imperial aspirations which has been achieved through brutal wars around the world during the 20th and 21st centuries (Ana Ristović).

Other poets broaden their scope to engage more diverse cultural circles: Central Europe (Alen Bešić and Oto Horvat) and the Mediterranean (Nadija Rebronja). They call on the classic European heritage (Enes Halilović) and indicate the experience of life and literature in North America (Alen Bešić). Another important element is how poets weave popular culture into their work as part of global experience, as in the poems of Zvonko Karanović and Marija Midžović. Poets are dealing with everyday life, gender roles, national and sexual stereotypes, the relation of local and global (Vladimir Kopicl, Marija Knežević, Dragan Jovanović Danilov, Nenad Jovanović).

Stylistically, poets oscillate between writing the short and concise lyrical poems (Danica Pavlović, Bojan Vasić), and those who use longer lines, especially in the case of narrative poetry. The narrative impulse, present in the majority of the poems, is important as it challenges the strong demarcation lines drawn between poetry and prose. Slobodan Tišma in fragments from *Blues Diary*, a hybrid book, mixes genres of diary, essay, poetry and prose. This selection shows the appearance of the prose poem (Bratislav Milanović, Nenad Milošević) which has seldomly been seen before in the Serbian poetry. Most importantly, however, is that we believe this selection demonstrates forms of poetry seldom seen before in Serbia and possibly the direction it is headed in, in the future. Most poets here are of an Eastern Orthodox background, but there are those who are Moslem or Catholic or atheist with a critical stance toward any religion (remember that Yugoslavia used to be communist). Some of them are of mixed national heritage. Most of them live in Serbia, some of them in Serbian part of Bosnia and Hercegovina, others in the diaspora: Germany, Italy, USA or France.

Even though I am not the only translator of the poems in this issue, she is the primary one. Some poets, like me, write poems in English or translate them themselves, like Ana Nina Živančević (who lived in the US, but now lives in Paris, France) and Snežana Žabić (who lives in Chicago). Some poets co-translated the poem with me like Anđelovska and Nenad Jovanović (who lives in Dayton, Ohio), and a co-translation with another translator as in the case of Tamara Božić from Montenegro who translated Vitomirka Trebovac. Nina Živančević translated Vladimir Kopicl, Sibelan Forrester translated Marija Knežević and Novica Petrović translated Dragan Jovanović Danilov. The rest I did myself, working with the poets themselves. We ordered the poems in alphabetical order by last name instead of by year of birth as we did in *Cat Painters*. So, out of 147 pages of the journal we had our section from 39–137, and then some of the short bios at the end of the journal, so altogether with the introduction 102 pages of Serbian poetry.

Besides Karen Head, we'd also like to thank the poets, the translators, and our spouses, for their support, Miško Šuvaković, and John Gery who helped edit most of the translations.

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Biljana D. Obradović

O UREĐIVANJU I PREVOĐENJU SRPSKOG IZDANJA ČASOPISA  
*ATLANTA REVIEW*

**Rezime:** Kao ko-urednica i prevodilac specijalnog izdanja časopisa *Atlanta Review* o savremenoj srpskoj poeziji (leto 2021), Biljana D. Obradović razmatra svoju istoriju prevođenja poezije, zatim zajednički rad sa kourednicom Dubravkom Đurić, kao i okolnosti nastanka i osmišljavanja ovog prevodilačkog poduhvata za specijalno izdanje o savremenoj srpskoj poeziji, ističući druge skorašnje publikacije srpske poezije u Americi.

**Ključne reči:** urednik, kritičar, pesnik, prevodilac.