

INTRODUCTION |

The value of knowing one of the smaller languages of the world and loving literature lies in the discoveries one is likely to make of writers and poets who, despite being astonishingly good, are completely unknown outside of their countries. I can imagine even those who never dreamed of translating a literary work being tempted to do so after reading an extraordinary book or a poem. This is certainly how I started as a translator. Forty-five years ago, I came across a poem by the Serbian poet Vasko Popa in the New York Public Library's Slavic Division, fell in love with it, and had an instant, overwhelming desire to turn it into English and show it to my poet friends. Since one was prohibited from borrowing books from that division of the library, and copy machines were still not widely in use, I wrote the poem in long hand in my notebook and hurried home to see what I could do with it. Of course, the moment I began, I experienced the joy of translation, the excitement of making available in English a work that in one's opinion deserves wider attention, and the aggravation of being unable to find the right word, the right phrase and the right tone for what seems so exquisite, so effortless and so clear in the original poem.

Whatever its merits were as translation, and most likely it was a poor job, I showed that poem to my friends and they liked very much what they saw, which made me return to the library and continue to fill my notebook with contemporary Yugoslav poetry. Being an American poet of Serbian background made this entire endeavor much more than a literary exercise. I found myself between two cultural identities, two ways of looking at the world, and having to negotiate between them. To translate is to be aware not just of the differences between two languages and literary traditions, but equally of the way in which so much of what the native reader understands and appreciates in a poem is not to be found in the words on the page, but remains unspoken.

This is what drew me to it: the knowledge that what I was about to do might not be possible to accomplish. Many times over the years I had to give up on a poem because an image or a few lines could not be properly translated into English. In that respect, the predicament of the translator is no different from that of the poet, who often feels that he has not been able to find the exact word for a particular mood or experience, and had to settle for a rough equivalent. What the two of them have in common is an obsession with getting each bit of language right, and the belief that once in a while they can defy the gods, do the impossible and reach perfection.

Together with Novica Tadic, Radmila Lazic, Dusko Novakovic, Nina Zivancevic and one or two others, Milan Djordjević belongs to one of most remarkably talented generations of Serbian poets. He was born in 1954 in Belgrade in what was then Yugoslavia. His mother, who came from a wealthy family, became a communist before World War II out of a desire to abolish poverty and make society more just. This was a scandalous step for someone of her class and made her a black sheep in the family. After the German occupation and the end of a civil war in which she fought on the winning side, she became one of the directors of a prestigious publishing house. Nevertheless, in 1947 she was expelled from the Communist Party and eventually lost her job for supposedly allowing people in her office to criticize the leadership. His father was an architect and an anticommunist who worked in his youth in the British embassy, whose cultural attaché at that time was the novelist Lawrence Durrell, with whom he was friends. Milan Djordjević was thus a child of what the communist authorities in Yugoslavia at that time regarded as two enemies of the people. He grew up in Belgrade in a house his father built in the yard of the house belonging to his great-grandfather. Like all Balkan children, he learned about communism and anticommunism and what the great powers did to the small nations, listening to his parents talk.

As a young man, Djordjević wanted to go to art school and become a painter, but ended up studying world literature, since he loved books

and had already begun writing poetry in high school after coming across some poems of Georg Trakl, the dark and visionary Austrian poet. His father often took him along on business trips both throughout Yugoslavia and abroad. Consequently, he lived for long stretches of time in Ljubljana, where he learned the language, began translating Slovenian poetry and prose into Serbian, and came under the influence of two leading postwar Slovenian poets, Dane Zajc and Tomaz Salamun. It was a milieu in which avant-garde arts and literature flourished within a small circle of men and women under the watchful and wary eye of the local Communist Party. Salamun, whose poetry incorporates such diverse influences as that of Walt Whitman, Velimir Khlebnikov and Frank O'Hara, was then the most innovative poet in Yugoslavia. Djordjević's first book of poems, *On Both Sides of the Skin*, which came out in 1979, is in no way as experimental and skilled as Salamun's poetry, but its occasional touches of surrealism and black humor recall the adventurous spirit of the older poet.

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Djordjević's second book, *Fly and Other Poems*, which appeared in 1986, is a far more confident and successful collection. If the task of a young poet is to search for and discover an authentic voice and an original way of looking at things, these poems do that. They are short, often erotic, and startling in their imagery.

The Rain Wants to Kill Itself

With its fingers the rain stains your window and mumbles.
 It wants to come in and kill itself.
 I see you are in bed and couldn't care less.
 In the dark. Naked. Couldn't care less.
 Your hair loose. Your thighs spread open.
 And there, in plain sight, black moss!
 Your left middle finger busy, busy!
 Villain, searching for the red crest.
 While golden honey already oozes.
 You call me from your delirium tremens.

Me already changed into a crow.
 I fly down into your lap and peck, peck.
 And then in my beak carry the caught fish away,
 to go play cards and drink.
 While the rain with its fingers
 makes stains over your windowpanes and mumbles,
 counts its beads,
 wants to come in and kill itself.

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In this and the other poems in the book a distinct persona begins to emerge, an obsessive, introspective and intense young man who, irrespective of whether he looks at an apple he is about to peel, or the dishes he's washing, encounters some surprising and troubling aspect of himself. "I speak of myself as of another, and of others as of myself," Djordjević has said. There's something else, too, present in these poems. Marxism is in disrepute nowadays, but its idea that political reality determines consciousness may have some relevance here. A dark cloud hangs over Djordjević's poems. He never spells out whether it is his own fate that worries him, or the world he lives in. Most likely, it is the combination of the two. Like his older contemporary, Novica Tadic, whom he most resembles in these early poems, Djordjević has a premonition of tragedy. Certainly, these "dark visions" of his are also a literary strategy, an attempt to disrupt the reader's expectations, strive for surprise, something never seen before, never heard before, as much as they are premonitions about the future. Still, reading these poems today, one can't help but recall the horrors that were soon to take place in Yugoslavia.

In books that followed, *Mummy*, *Amber and Garden* (both 1990) and *The Desert* (1995), Djordjević's poetry gradually begins to change. He's no longer interested in creating some new reality, but in examining the one that's already there. From a poet of surreal visions and wild imaginings, he becomes a poet of his own experience. Perhaps this new directness is to be attributed to the war taking place all around him and

the prose he was writing in those years. In the 1990s, Djordjević was politically active as an opponent of the regime of Slobodan Milosevic, the rise of virulent nationalism, ethnic intolerance and violence. He wrote articles for opposition papers and participated in various dissident organizations and political parties. During this time he also wrote three collections of stories and one of essays. One cannot tell much about Djordjević's life from the earlier poems. Now, his life becomes his principal subject matter, and the voice we hear from poem to poem we begin to recognize as the voice of the man who writes these poems. Still, many of the techniques found in the earlier poems—compression, fragmentation, free association—as well as his love for the surprising image and detail, are still to be found in the poems of this period.

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Orange

Like the cry of a seagull in the still air
above the empty beach where dark algae are drying,
The bluish blade cuts into her skin.

My fingers bare the nakedness of the orange lamp
so that with a scent of Crete it may light my room,
the way fresh water sprinkles a dry plant.

His next two books, *Clean Colors* (2002) and *Black Orange* (2004), distinguish themselves by their ambition and the high quality of the poems. Some, like "Aachen" and "Wilted City," are accounts of his wanderings around Europe. Their narrative flow is interrupted by many unanticipated transitions and asides, where past and present events alternate, and myth mingles freely with reality. The restless, solitary figure who is our guide in these poems is the poet himself, depicted as a kind of lost soul, a young man from another culture adrift in these forbidding and yet attractive foreign cities. As is true of many later poems of Djordjević, the recurring emotion is that of wonder. For him, as it had been for Chekhov, the simplest things are the most incredible ones.

What Emerson called “the common, the familiar, the near, the low, is worth spending one’s life puzzling over.”

Fire in the Garden (2007) and *Joy* (2008) received several important literary awards in Serbia, but that recognition of the high esteem with which his poetry was regarded was marred by personal tragedy. In January of 2007, Djordjević was hit by a car while crossing on the designated crosswalk one of the main streets in Belgrade. He was in a coma for several days and near death for weeks, but managed to pull through despite serious bodily injuries, and after months in the hospital, and an even longer period of rehabilitation to teach him to walk again, he came home an invalid. Since then he’s been pretty much confined to his house and garden. Fortunately, he has used that time well, writing a lot of poetry and prose. In this book, I’ve included eleven poems from this period which are again different from his previous work. Even more direct and plain in their diction, they range from the ones like “Mr. Accident” and “Solitude” that refer to the accident that changed his life, to others that either recall the past or, as in this poem, take as their point of departure something that had occurred or that he had observed that day looking out of the window.

Two Pigeons

I watch them sitting on the electric wire
 stretched black over our street.
 It’s a gloomy day, rainy, the sky is gray.
 I see them pressed to each other.
 The rain softly falls and wets their feathers.
 They barely move their heads,
 and never look at each other.
 Is it love or warmth that keeps them close?
 Are they shielding each other from cold raindrops?
 I’ve no idea, I only note
 the closeness of their bodies
 on that black, thick wire,

two gray feathery beings
joined into a single question.
When next I happen to look outside,
I see the wire is empty,
as if they both suddenly took off flapping their wings,
god knows where or why.

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I resisted placing Djordjević's poems in chronological order. It seemed to me that in a book of this length, it would not convey the unity of his work, the distinct sensibility that pervades all his poems, which I would call empathy, his need to place himself in the place of another, be it a drunken old Polish cook he bumps into while walking around London, or a spider spinning his web and catching flies on the wall of his room in Belgrade. Undoubtedly, his recent encounter with death has made what was always present in his poetry even more acute. The poet's mission is not to save the world, but to save some human experience from oblivion, these poems are saying. Not history or metaphysics, but mortality, not just his own, but that of every other creature, no matter how marginal, is the theme of many of these later poems. "The voice of poetry is the voice of one solitude addressing another solitude," Djordjević has written. The strange experience of watching a moment in time come and go, the compassion for all whose time may be up—hasn't that been one of the primary emotions in lyric poetry? Although his poems are written in free verse, they have a feel for form and economy of expression that recalls that tradition. They say what they have to say briefly, very simply, and very powerfully. I hope that these translations of mine convey some of their originality and their beauty.

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