

A Survey of Bosnian, Croatian, and Serbian Poetry in English Translation in the U.S. and Canada

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**Snezana Zabic and Paula Kamenish,**  
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**Abstract:** In their paper "A Survey of Bosnian, Croatian, and Serbian Poetry in English Translation in the U.S. and Canada," Snezana Zabic and Paula Kamenish present a survey of book-length collections and anthologies of Bosnian, Croatian, and Serbian poetry in English translation published in the U.S. and in Canada. Zabic and Kamenish argue that it is necessary to determine which factors are advantageous for the survival of poetry originating in "minor" languages and transmitted to the United States and Canada. Zabic and Kamenish propose three elements that have ensured a marginal but persistent presence of South Slavic poetry in English in the United States and Canada since the 1970s: émigré(e) writers who also serve as translators, scholars who study and teach minor literatures of the world, and a publishing industry open to offering poetry in translation. Zabic and Kamenish argue that if North American English-language culture chooses to ignore poetic practices in foreign languages, vital international influences on literature would be interrupted or lost.

**Snezana ZABIC and Paula KAMENISH****A Survey of Bosnian, Croatian, and Serbian Poetry in English Translation in the U.S. and Canada**

Mysterious vertical tombstones known as *stecci* can still be found scattered throughout Bulgaria and Bosnia-Herzegovina (see at <<http://www.angelfire.com/hi5/profesorhk/StecciRadimlja1.jpg>>). These crumbling medieval steles are beautifully engraved with scenes whose meanings are forever lost to us. Their alleged creators, the Bogomils, practiced a dualist religion deemed heretical by the dominant Orthodox, Catholic, and Muslim faiths. These powerful religious groups prosecuted and finally assimilated the Bogomils in the late Middle Ages, and *stecci* stand as reminders of how easy it is for an entire culture to fade away, leaving behind only indecipherable artifacts. Nowadays, it is not necessarily the aggression of a dominant civilization that jeopardizes the survival of a less powerful one: indifference and a lack of curiosity on the part of majority cultures about their lesser known counterparts also render the latter invisible. One of most obvious examples today is found in the marginalization of South Slavic and other lesser-known literatures in North America (the U.S. and Canada). The appreciation of world literatures is affected routinely by questions of accessibility. Literature not written in English remains beyond the reach of many North American speakers of English, especially if that literature is in a lesser-known or "minor" language. In consequence, the availability of translation is key to the transmission of such literatures (on this, see, e.g, Dickens <<http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol4/iss1/1/>>). A case in point is the presence of Bosnian, Serbian, and Croatian poetries in English: how evident is this presence, and what might it predict about future trends in publishing the works literature written in those languages? What does the status of Bosnian, Croatian, and Serbian poetries in translation reveal about North American English-language appreciation of and respect for non-dominant literatures?

Our focus is book-length collections of contemporary poetry written in Bosnian, Croatian, and Serbian, translated into English and published or distributed in the U.S. and Canada in the period from 1970 to 2004. A few chapbook-length collections are considered as well. In order to determine the present state of the transmission of recent poetry from three Balkan countries to the United States and Canada, we include here established poets who wrote and published poetry in the former Yugoslavia after World War II, as well as current poets active in separate Balkan countries or in the U.S. and Canada (émigré[e] poets). Our research elucidates how and in what context the poetry of a "minor" language survives and might continue to thrive. Before we go into the matter any further, let us clarify that we view Bosnian, Croatian, and Serbian as three variants of the language formerly known as Serbo-Croatian, spoken by approximately twenty million people. As particular ethnic groups in the former Yugoslavia constituted themselves as separate nations in the 1990s, Serbo-Croatian became an historical term, and the language split into three standardized linguistic units with each ethnicity naming its language after itself. Although there are, arguably, tendencies for those variants to keep developing away from one another, they are currently mutually intelligible to the degree that they appear indiscernible to a non-native or untrained ear. Consequently, any translator who acquires competence in one of these languages or language variants is competent to translate from another language/variant. Therefore, the translator will be free to choose from poets writing Bosnian, Croatian, and Serbian poetry, guided by his or her tastes and interests. It is equally important to stress that there have always been distinctions between literatures and poetries we call Bosnian, Croatian, and Serbian. Poets writing in these language variants have mostly been centered and published in the capitals of Bosnia-Herzegovina, Croatia, and Serbia -- Sarajevo, Zagreb, and Belgrade, respectively. Throughout the existence of Yugoslavia, these were the three main literary and cultural centers for authors writing in Serbo-Croatian, nurturing diverse regional traditions. Poets in other cultural centers of Bosnia-Herzegovina, Croatia, Serbia, and Montenegro gravitated, and arguably continue to do so, toward one of the said urban centers. Focusing on poetry written in what was once known as Serbo-Croatian and translated into English, we surveyed anthologies, individual collections, and chap-

books currently available from U.S. and Canadian publishers/distributors, as well as out-of-print books that were published in the previous decades. Those books published in Great Britain, but available in the U.S. and/or Canada, are also included in the survey. Although research devoted to the translated poetry that appeared in journals would give further insight into the reception of Bosnian, Croatian and Serbian poets in the U.S. and Canada, we decided to focus primarily on book-length and secondarily on chapbook-length selections. Book-length selections usually reach a broader audience than a literary journal does, they are likely to come to the critics' and reviewers' attention and they stay in circulation longer, thus marking a continuing presence of a translated literature in the U.S. and Canada.

We found that book-length translations of Bosnian, Croatian, and Serbian poetry began appearing only in 1970. Since then, roughly one to two such books are published every year. This low rate, albeit steady, reveals the marginal position allotted by U.S. and Canadian presses to poetry translated from a "minor" language. However, compared with the decades before 1970, when books of poetry translated from Bosnian, Croatian, and Serbian were rare and usually dedicated solely to folk poetry, it becomes clear that the work of a handful of translators and editors has resulted in a small but constant presence of these poetries in North American English-language countries. According to Vasa D. Mihailovich's *A Comprehensive Bibliography of Yugoslav Literature in English, 1593-1980*, the very first English translation of a South Slavic poet appeared in 1593. As Mihailovich explains, it was in fact a translation from Italian, the language in which the Montenegrin poet Ludovik Paskvalic wrote his sonnets. Needless to say, the translation of a South Slavic poet was almost an accident, seldom repeated in the coming centuries. A somewhat more visible presence began in the nineteenth century, when South Slavic folk poetry triggered some interest in the Western world, first in Austria and Germany and then in England. The beginning of the twentieth century saw the first attempts of English authors to translate modern poetry and fiction directly from the Balkans. By the mid-twentieth century, the world began to acknowledge modern South Slavic literatures and, for example, the novelist Ivo Andric -- who, similar to many other South Slavic novelists, began as a poet -- won the Nobel Prize for literature in 1961; in the same decade, Bernard Johnson, Vasa D. Mihailovich, and Charles Simic started publishing their translations of contemporary poets from Yugoslavia in literary journals in Great Britain (see Johnson) and in the U.S. (see Mihailovich; Simic). To date, these three scholars/translators have published approximately twenty books of translations from Bosnian, Croatian, and Serbian poets. Bernard Johnson (1933-2003), a British scholar who served as the director of the Language Centre at the London School of Economics, edited the first book-length collection of modern Yugoslav literature in 1970, and he translated several individual poets' collections (see Johnson <<http://www.lse.ac.uk/Depts/language/pdf/TributetoDrBernardJohnson.pdf>>. Serbian American Vasa D. Mihailovich is both an assiduous scholar (currently professor emeritus at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill) and an émigré poet who composes his poetry in Serbian. In his effort to introduce English-speaking audiences to a wide spectrum of Slavic literatures, Mihailovich preferred to edit anthologies rather than publish translations of individual poets. In addition, he is a highly accomplished bibliographer. He has compiled four volumes of bibliography of Yugoslav literature in English translation, covering the entire twentieth century in all English-speaking countries, all the English-language publications that came out in Yugoslavia, as well as all the existing translations and treatises that were published in English in the preceding centuries.

Thanks to the efforts of these and other poets and scholars, translated Bosnian, Croatian, and Serbian poetry has been available continuously to English-speaking audiences, except during the war years of the early to mid-1990s. In 1970 Penguin published the anthology *New Writing in Yugoslavia*, which included a rich selection of poets and fiction writers, and most poets in the anthology were translated by the editor Bernard Johnson. That year also puts Charles Simic, by then already an established Serbian American poet, on the map as a dedicated literary translator, as he is responsible for three books of Serbian poetry published in the United States in 1970

<<http://www.poets.org/poet.php/prmPID/27>>. One is a chapbook, *Four Yugoslav Poets: Ivan V. Lalic, Branko Miljkovic, Milorad Pavic, Ljubomir Simovic*, and the other two are individual collections of Lalic's (see Lalic, *Fire Gardens: Selected Poems, 1956-1969*, translated by Simic and

Truesdale) and Vasko Popa's poems (see Popa, *The Little Box*, translated by Simic). In the following ten years, two more anthologies were published, both in the U.S. and both thanks to Vasa D. Mihailovich: *Introduction to Yugoslav Literature: An Anthology of Fiction and Poetry* was edited by Branko Mikasinovich (also an émigré Serbian American poet), together with Mihailovich and Dragan Milivojevic, while Mihailovich alone is responsible for *Contemporary Yugoslav Poetry*. As far as individual poets are concerned, a total of nine book-length and chapbook-length collections were translated and published. After the two books of his early translations of Lalic and Popa in 1970, Simic translated Djordje Nikolic's *Key to Dreams According to Djordje* in 1978, and Vasko Popa's *Homage to the Lame Wolf* in 1979. Popa appeared in Anne Pentington's translation of *Earth Erect* in 1973 as well (International Writing Program, University of Iowa), and the British author published her translations of Popa's poetry in the United States once again in 1978 when Popa's *Collected Poems: 1943-1976* appeared from Persea Books. Miodrag Pavlovic's *The Conqueror in Constantinople* came out as a chapbook in Joachim Neugroschel's translation in 1976 and in the same year Desanka Maksimovic's *Poems/Pesme* were published in a bilingual edition. In 1975, Izet Sarajlic's poems were published in Marilyn Sjoberg's translation as *Poetry* and in 1980 Hamdija Demirovic appeared in Charles Causley's translation in a collected volume entitled *Twenty-Five Poems*.

Reviews regularly followed the publication of Popa's books in the U.S. and in England, but other poets were not recognized equally. Specialized journals, such as *World Literature Today* and *Modern Poetry in Translation*, as well as publications such as *The New York Review of Books*, *The Observer*, and *The Times Literary Supplement* devoted reviews to Popa's *Selected Poems* and *Collected Poems 1943-76*. No other Bosnian, Croatian, or Serbian poet received such attention in the period between 1970 and 1980. According to Mihailovich, other authors received one review (Nikolic, Sarajlic, Pavlovic), two reviews (Lalic), or no reviews in journals during this period (see Maksimovic). The period between 1981 and 1991 brought forth four more anthologies and more than a dozen chapbooks and books of translated Bosnian, Croatian, and Serbian poetry in English. The individual collections ranged from self-published chapbooks and limited editions, to publications by more well-known presses; consequently, some had more impact than others. The anthologies also differed in their goals and formats. The first volume, *The Anthology of Croat Verse 1450-1950*, tried to compress a rich, five-hundred-year-long history in a single volume. It was edited, translated, and published by Antun Bonifacic in 1981. Unfortunately, this one-man-endeavor could not achieve the ambitious goal of exposing a new audience to this little-known poetry. Still, as a noteworthy attempt, it serves as an incentive for anthologists to compile a new, more laudable collection for the English-speaking audience. The following year, the journal *Slavic & East European Arts*, published by the Slavic Cultural Center Press of the State University of New York at Stony Brook, devoted its entire first issue to Yugoslav poetry: the volume was entitled *The Meditative Generation: An Anthology of Younger Yugoslav Poets*, edited and translated by Mario Susko and E.J. Czerwinski. The other two anthologies, published by small but reputable U.S. presses, are the *Anthology of Serbian Poetry: The Golden Age* by Mihailo Dordevic (Philosophical Library) and *Serbian Poetry from the Beginnings to the Present* by Milne Holton and Vasa D. Mihailovich (Yale Center for International and Area Studies). The *Anthology of Serbian Poetry: The Golden Age* brings to light a selection of Serbian poetry written in the period between 1880 and 1914 (also known as the *moderna*), and all the translations were done by the editor Mihailo Dordevic. The translations are too literal, lacking the full impact a more imaginative rendering would have had. Luckily, the anthology is bilingual, allowing the bilingual reader easy access to the original poems, and it could be used as an excellent starting point for another translator. Holton and Mihailovich's anthology, *Serbian Poetry from the Beginnings to the Present*, is the most ambitious of all we have encountered, and very commendable. The hefty volume is divided into ten sections, each accompanied by a critical essay denoting both the major events in Serbian history and the main artistic developments in Serbian poetry. The sections are devoted to oral poetry, old Serbian poetry, Enlightenment, Romanticism, Realism, the *moderna*, poetry between the wars, and poetry during and after World War II. The anthology can serve as an excellent model for any editor wishing to present a less known culture's poetic tradition to English-speaking readers.

Among the fifteen individual collections that were published between 1980 and 1991, only four received formal reviews. The poets who gained acclaim in the previous period, Popa and Lalic in Simic's translations, fared well in this period too. The former's *Give Me Back My Rags* was reviewed in *Choice*, and the latter's *Roll Call of Mirrors* in the *Bloomsbury Review*, the *Library Journal* (see Hudzik), the *Yale Review*, *World Literature Today*, and in the *Times Literary Supplement*. Slavko Mihalic's poems, translated by Charles Simic and Peter Kastmiller and collected under the title *Atlantis*, were reviewed in *World Literature of Today*, the *Library Journal*, and *Publishers Weekly*. This supports the notion that the translator's reputation is a factor, along with the size and reputation of the press that publishes the book when it comes to the attention that a foreign poet receives. As Simic's place in US-American letters solidified, the poets he translated did not go unnoticed. On the other hand, Milivoj Slavicek is a poet who was not translated by Simic, but who still garnered reviewers' attention. *World Literature Today* published a review of his *Silent Doors: Selected Poems*, translated by Branko Gorjup and Jeannette Lynes and published by Exile Editions of Toronto, Canada. In this period, Exile Editions also published three titles by Miodrag Pavlovic (two translated by Barry Callaghan, one by Bernard Johnson), and New River Press of St. Paul and Angel Books of London jointly published another of Pavlovic's books, translated by Johnson. Exile Editions also published collections by Slavko Mihalic (Johnson's translation) and by Antun Soljan (with translations by Simic and others), thus completing a Yugoslav series in its catalogue. It seems that most of the poets published by the Canadian Exile Editions and other presses during the period between 1981 and 1992 did not receive reviews: such is the case for Miodrag Pavlovic, Vesna Parun, Aleksandar Ristic, Antun Soljan, and Miljenko Kovacic. Soljan and Ristic were even translated by Simic, but this fact apparently did not help draw the attention of reviewers. In this period, Mihailovich published his translation of Jovan Ducic, and, likewise, no reviews appeared. Jovan Ducic (1871-1943) was a poet active before World War I and between the two World Wars, so Mihailovich's choice was unique in this period: all the other individual collections of modern Serbian poetry were translations of contemporary poets in their prime.

In 1992, Simic published a collection of his translations of various Serbian poets entitled *The Horse Has Six Legs: an Anthology of Serbian Poetry* (see Pavic). That same year, he published an individual collection of his translations of Novica Tadic's poems, entitled *Night Mail: Selected Poems*. From 1993 until two years after the 1995 Dayton Peace Agreements, no books of Bosnian, Croatian, or Serbian poetry in translation were published in the U.S. or Canada. A noteworthy selection of translated Croatian, Serbian, as well as Slovene poetry was published in 1993 in the anthology *Shifting Borders: East European Poetries of the Eighties* (see Cummins), a book broader in its scope than the focus of this paper. Considering that books of translations were published yearly since 1970, a four-year hiatus is noticeable. The silence was broken in 1997 with another collection of Lalic's poetry, this time in Frances R. Jones's translation, published in London by Anvil Press Poetry and distributed in the U.S. by Dufour Editions. That same year, the University of Toronto Press published another poet famous in Serbia, Matija Beckovic, in Sofija Skoric's translation. From 1997 to 2004, six more individual collections have been published in the U.S. and Canada, two by Semezdin Mehmedinovic, and one each by Goran Simic, Ferida Durakovic, Aleksandar Ristic, and Radmila Lazic. In this same period, two more anthologies were published: the 1998 *Scar on the Stone: Contemporary Poetry from Bosnia* and the 1999 *At this Terrible Moment: An Anthology of Croatian War Poetry, 1991-1994*. Out of the three anthologies published in the 1990s, two had significant success and are still in circulation: *The Horse Has Six Legs* and *Scar on the Stone*. There are several ways these two anthologies differ from the third one: *The Horse Has Six Legs*, covering several decades of twentieth-century poetry, along with a few examples of traditional oral poetry, is the collection of translations by the highly acclaimed poet Charles Simic. *Scar on the Stone*, edited by Chris Agee, was also conceived by an established writer (Agee is a published US-American poet residing in the United Kingdom). Established poets, especially of Charles Simic's stature, attract the attention of readers and critics who may not normally be interested in poetry coming from the former Yugoslav states. By contrast, *At this Terrible Moment* was edited by Ivo Sanader, a literary scholar who was then a representative in the Croatian Parliament and is now -- 2006 -- the Prime Minister of Croatia. His co-editor, Ante Stamac, is an important poet in Croatia,

but not well known outside the region. Their anthology included only poems dealing with the Serbian aggression in Croatia, known as the Homeland War. Poets represented in the anthology were thus chosen based on their subject matter, and the quality is subsequently inconsistent. The poems range from patriotic verse of dubious aesthetic merit to passionate protest poetry with an enduring value.

Both *The Horse Has Six Legs* and *Scar on the Stone* feature works spanning the last several decades. Additionally, they carry not only the poets otherwise unknown and unavailable to the English-speaking audience, but also the works of poets whose individual books in translation were already available in the United Kingdom, the U.S., and Canada. *The Horse Has Six Legs* contains selections from poets whose individual collections had been available prior to or after the publication of the anthology: Ivan V. Lalic, Vasko Popa, Aleksandar Ristic, Djordje Nikolic, and Novica Tadic. Similarly, *Scar on the Stone* was soon followed by the publications of several Bosnian poets' individual collections: one by Ferida Durakovic, two by Semezdin Mehmedinovic, while Mario Susko had by then begun his productive writing of books of poetry in English. *Scar on the Stone* and *The Horse Has Six Legs* have both received favorable reviews in *World Literature Today* (see Jastremski) and in *Publishers Weekly* (see Anonymous). Additionally, Agee's anthology was reviewed in *Publishers Weekly* and *The Times Literary Supplement* (see Montefiori), and Simic's anthology in the *New Republic*, in a double review that also dealt with Novica Tadic's book *Night Mail: Selected Poems* (see Baranczak). *Night Mail* was also reviewed in *World Literature Today*. In 2002, Palgrave published a scholarly study of Mak Dizdar written by Amila Buturovic: *Stone Speaker: Medieval Tombs, Landscape, and Bosnian Identity in the Poetry of Mak Dizdar*. The text includes a selection of Dizdar's poetry in the original language along with English translations, and introduced in an essay by Dizdar's translator, Frances R. Jones. Dizdar's work is celebrated in his native Bosnia and Herzegovina, as well as in Croatia where he also lived, but it was virtually unknown in English-speaking countries before the anthology *Scar on the Stone* and before Buturovic's book came out. The interest of Palgrave, a major publisher/distributor, in Buturovic's book probably lies in the scholar's interdisciplinary approach. Buturovic pays tribute to the poet, but also successfully uses his poetry to examine Bosnian national and cultural identity, extending her work beyond the analysis of poetry and into the fields of history and cultural studies. From 1997 to 2004, eight individual books by Bosnian and Serbian poets were translated and published by reputable presses in the United States and Canada, including the new émigré poets, Goran Simic and Semezdin Mehmedinovic. Both books by Mehmedinovic were translated by Ammiel Alcalay and published by City Lights Books. Other than the example of Mehmedinovic, translated poets shift from press to press. Even the collections translated by Simic share that fate: Tadic's *Night Mail: Selected Poems* was published by Oberlin College in 1992, and the two more recent publications of Simic's translations, selections of poetry by Aleksandar Ristic and Radmila Lazic, were published by Faber and Faber and Graywolf, respectively. We have found that most of these poets received reviews and that all were favorable. Mehmedinovic has had the most success so far, and his *Sarajevo Blues* was reviewed in *World Literature Today*, the *Library Journal* (see Roncevic), *The New York Times Book Review* (see Neskow), and *The Atlantic Monthly* (see Adams), while the book *Nine Alexandrias* was reviewed in *Publishers Weekly* (see Gold) and the *American Book Review* (see Gioseffi). Although we have not yet found a review devoted to Goran Simic's new book *Immigrant Blues*, published in Canada in 2003, *World Literature Today* brought out a positive review of his book published by Oxford University Press, *Sprinting from the Graveyard*. Reviews of Radmila Lazic's *A Wake for the Living* appeared in *Booklist* (see Monaghan), the *Library Journal* (see Taylor), and *The Antioch Review* (see Wright).

The thirty-four-year history of book-length selections of contemporary Bosnian, Croatian, and Serbian poetries published in the U.S. and Canada shows us that no single press tends to monopolize the publishing of such texts. What we found is that a wide range of presses -- major (Penguin, Palgrave), independent (Faber and Faber, White Pines), and larger and smaller university presses occasionally include such books in their catalogues. From 1970 to 2004, more than thirty presses have published books of Bosnian, Croatian, and Serbian poetry. A small number of these presses feature specific series devoted to East European literature, while the rest make an ef-

fort to foster a global outlook and include examples of contemporary world literature in their catalogues. White Pine Press's "Terra Incognita" series, dedicated to East European literatures, is edited by the Slovene poet Ales Debeljak, and almost all of the titles published in the series so far actually have to do with South Slavic writers and/or themes. In 1998, the series published a collection of Ferida Durakovic's poems. Twayne Publishers, responsible for Branko Mikasinovich's *Introduction to Yugoslav Literature*, was founded in 1949 specifically to promote links between East and West literatures. While presses of Palgrave's status might, in the future, be interested in other serious and ground-breaking interdisciplinary work similar to Buturovic's *Stone Speaker*, we expect independent and university presses to remain the primary publishers of poetry discussed here. Still, the answer to the question of which types of U.S. and Canadian presses are likely to publish poetry originating from a less-known literature remains a broad one: we can say that any press of any size and history might publish such works, as long as it tends to feature titles from world literature. In other words, it seems that the potential is limitless; all it takes is a critical number of translators, scholars, and editors, willing and qualified to prepare quality manuscripts of translated poetry. As we have seen, even a handful of dedicated experts can still secure at least a marginal presence of a smaller literature on this continent. Charles Simic, Vasa D. Mihailovich, and Bernard Johnson were responsible for more than half of the books of Bosnian, Croatian, and Serbian poetries published in the last three decades of the twentieth century. While Simic and Mihailovich continue their efforts in the twenty-first century as well, other translators and editors might take the place left open with the departure of Bernard Johnson: Frances R. Jones, Ammiel Alcalay, or others. The arrival of recent émigré(e) poets in the United States and Canada, such as Susko, Mehmedinovic, G. Simic, and probably numerous others as yet unpublished, might prove to be a catalyst that will increase and improve the transmission of Bosnian, Croatian, and Serbian poetries to the English-language audience of North America.

In conclusion, our survey suggests that the future of literary translation dealing with a "minor" language depends on the presence and activity of three groups: 1) immigrant writers with a significant reputation in the host country (the U.S. and Canada in this case) who are willing to act as translators; 2) scholars in comparative or world literatures who are interested in linguistically marginalized contemporary poetry; and 3) a publishing industry, comprised of a large number of commercial, independent, and university presses who welcome this type of poetry in translation. We believe that any dynamic literature can find publishers for the North American English-language audience as long as translators are active and connected to the contemporary literary scenes in the U.S. and Canada, scholars continue to study less dominant world literatures, and presses remain open and willing to publish in these areas. The collaboration of these three elements is necessary if we want to ensure that the poetries of the world will not become the Bogumil stecci of the twenty-first century: mysterious and indecipherable. Without that collaboration, we certainly risk losing the influence of diverse cultures and literatures on the English-language landscape of literature and culture in North America.

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