

Translator's Note

A little over a year ago, a friend came round for a cup of coffee to tell my wife, a poet, about an American who'd started a creative writing workshop in the city and was scouting for talent, and would my good lady wife perhaps be interested in participating? We'd never even heard of a writing workshop in this country, and we both raised an interested eyebrow. Excellent, my wife said, this can't not be good.

In the following months, I got to meet the workshop members and watch the group grow in numbers and ability. I witnessed their first public readings at a small local gallery and marvelled at the promise they showed. They slowly honed their skills and developed an unselfconscious DIY ethic without ever taking themselves too seriously. When they organised a big reading at a local theatre, I was completely stunned, together with the rest of the packed hall. To fill a theatre with people willing to pay a small fee to see a group of young anonymous poets in the city where Iggy Pop had sold nineteen tickets a few years earlier isn't anything if not thaumaturgy.

As a fan of the group, I was immensely excited when asked to translate a selection of their poems for H.O.W. Journal, but at the same time a bit reticent. I'd only ever dealt with one author at a time, and now I had to deal with eight different styles, poetics, levels of proficiency—and eight different personalities. Most authors I've translated didn't understand my target language, and my interaction with them rarely went beyond a few emails with questions, so their input was minimal, although much appreciated. An author conversant in your target language may, quite understandably, want to be involved in the translation process to some degree. Unless you lay down the law at the outset, chances are the author's legitimate sense of ownership of his or her text will extend to the translation, and you'll soon find yourself doing more explaining and arguing than translating, which is bound to make both sides unhappy. But then, how do you lay down the law to a group of eight artists who lay down their own laws and write by them?

It turns out you don't. What you do is try not to be rigid and set in your ways, strike up a rapport instead of keeping a distance, have a go at the poems together with the group, and have a laugh in the process. I'm glad I did precisely that. For the first time in fifteen years, translating was a social experience. After all, the poems themselves were partly fruits of collective labour, long friendly arguments, and endless revision and negotiation (and for all these years I thought writing a poem was the quintessential individual act!)—it made perfect sense to approach the translation in the same way. I actually served the author as well as the text, another career first, and under similar circumstances I'd probably do it again.

In the English-speaking world, just as in Slavdom, domesticated, idiomatic translations are often valued above those which exhibit peculiarities stemming from the source language. I subscribe to a different school of thought, and my impulse was to make the poems just as odd and foreign in English as they are in their original linguistic and cultural context. The very existence of this group is a disruption of sorts, and it seemed only fair for the translations of their works to disrupt the conventions and expectations found in the target culture. For instance, quite a few lines are broken at conjunctions and in other ways generally eschewed in the Anglophone poetic tradition. This collective mannerism struck me as an act of stylistic rebellion and a group trademark, and I felt it had to be preserved. The group members tend (sub)consciously to borrow words, turns of phrase and motifs from one another. For instance, *finger pads* appear in five of the poems. I've gone to some lengths to preserve this and make it obvious, hence "finger pads" in some places where "fingertips" might be expected.

Whereas I generally consider excessive domestication and translational transparency (the illusion that a translated text isn't actually a translation) damaging concepts which serve

the interests of publishers rather than the recipient cultures and the texts themselves, I felt it would be unfair and petty to subordinate a body of work by a group of young unpublished poets to my theoretical preferences. As much as I wanted the translations to be as idiosyncratic in English as they are in Bosnian/Croatian/Serbian, I also wanted them to be enjoyable and approachable, so I had to strike some sort of balance.

Thus, for instance, in Zerina Zahirović's poem "Noise," I've made the word "feetfirst" mean something the dictionary says it doesn't really mean. The repeated line "death takes feetfirst" is a rendering of a folk saying, not quite a proverb, which Zerina ironically adapted to her needs by replacing "illness" with "death." I felt it was essential to preserve the folksy, pseudo-proverbial tone, which required brevity, and I forced "feetfirst" to mean that death takes a person by taking hold of the feet and moving on to the rest of the body, while "feet first" would have suggested that the feet were the first part of the body to die. Also, I've kept the image of a head seeping, as if it were liquid, through louvre slats, against the advice of two of the workshop's editors. The image is somewhat bizarre in both languages (and therefore perfectly in tune with the general tone of the poem), but it's clear enough and doesn't offend. On the other hand, in that same poem, Biljana Jandrić—PR Officer of the local clinic, who phones national TV at least once a week to inform the citizenry that so-and-so has been admitted to hospital for treatment, is being monitored, and will be released once recovered—became CNN's Christiane Amanpour, who covered the conflict in Bosnia and Herzegovina.

Ilija Ladin, the legendary Sarajevan poet mentioned in Dijala Hasanbegović's "First Aid," however, proved impervious to such treatment: if there's ever been a poet quite like him in *l'Anglophonie*, I've not heard of that person. In this poem, I had to aim for functional equivalence more than in any other. Dijala's poems almost always feature complex rhythmic patterns, simple but effective rhymes, and a lot of repetition serving different formal purposes, and "First Aid" is a veritable showcase of her trademark techniques. A metaphrastic, literal translation would have stripped the poem of all its essential formal features, so I had to replace quite a few items from the first aid kit to keep the rhythm and rhymes and capture the poem's playful, slightly caustic and irked tone. I also had to do a bit of tumbling to replace the pun in the last line. I faced similar challenges with Selma Kulović's ambitious and brilliantly structured "Nondum" and solved them in much the same manner. On the other hand, in Dijala's "My All," I've kept the wording "[staring] *into* my nape," which means that the gaze somehow physically pierces the skin. In the source language, this meaning is merely suggested, but it's quite explicit here in English. I just couldn't bring myself to break the sequence of six consecutive *into*'s.

Matea Šimić's "A Dinner for Ghosts" opens with a line in a rural (at least it struck me as rural) Croatian dialect and features another line in dialect elsewhere in the poem. Rendering these in standard English was out of the question—yes, using dialect to translate dialect is tricky and problematic in myriads of ways, even when executed masterfully (which I don't claim to have accomplished here), but the benefits, in my opinion, far outweigh the drawbacks. Most importantly, Matea's use of dialect painted a very striking image in many ways essential for the overall experience of the poem; if there was a way to achieve that particular sort of impact in standard English, it was beyond my skill. Although I don't speak it, Broad Yorkshire is probably my favourite non-standard variety of English, and it was my first choice in rendering the two lines in question. However, an editor and the author herself brought the obvious to my attention: "Go on, eyt summat, look at tha, aw skin an' beane" was likely to be perceived as pirate-speak across the Atlantic. After some negotiation, we settled for generic non-standard English. Pity, perhaps, but it had to be done.

The rest of the batch was relatively straightforward, with few problems to solve. In Nermana Česko's "Black Days," I had to render the colloquial Turkish loan word "mahala,"

here used metonymically, as “neighbours”—probably a bit bland, since it loses the connotation of a community of dedicated gossips, but it was the best I could do. There are turns of phrase in Ivana Krstanović’s poems which don’t come across as stale in the original, but may be less than fresh in English; nevertheless, I rendered them faithfully, and Ivana was satisfied with that. Naida Muratović and Nedla Čemanović-Porča love their syntactic ambiguities and pronouns with unclear antecedents, which I was happy to reproduce.

No matter how you approach translation, it’s essential that drafts be stored in a cool dry place for a few weeks or even months before you start revising. In my opinion, this is even more important if you value idiosyncrasy above idiomaticity, and if you skip this step in the process, it can be difficult to gauge what is idiosyncratic and what merely comes across as Borat English. Stacy Mattingly’s formidable editing skills proved invaluable in trying to offset this lack of drawer time, and she enlisted the help of Marina Alagić-Bowder, a brilliant editor, who did the final round of proofreading and suggested some fine tuning. I couldn’t possibly thank them enough. They pushed for idiomaticity, I pushed for fidelity, and we ended up with a body of poems in English which are readable, yet representative of the original works. The uniqueness of the group, its members, and their work clearly shines through. And that’s plenty to be happy about.

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