Like Waltzing Instead of Walking

Interview with Sibelan Forrester, conducted by Biljana Dojčinović

On the photos: Sibelan Forrester

Collage by Jovana Mitrović

Sibelan Forrester is the Susan W. Lippincott Professor of Modern and Classical Languages and Russian at Swarthmore College in Swarthmore, Pennsylvania. Her teaching focus is on the Russian Language and Literature, primarily on the 20th Century Russian Poetry and Russian Women Writers, and also on the Croatian and the Serbian Literature and literary translation, both in theory and practice. Forrester has translated ten books and a great number of poems and stories. Among these are Milica Mićić Dimovska's novel *The Cataract*,[1] and a fragment of the novel *Apeiron* by Miroljub Todorović.[2] Most recently, Forrester translated a substantial selection of Marija Knežević's poetry entitled *Breathing Technique* (bilingual publication).

You have recently taken part in the International Literary Gathering in Krupara, and in a number of literary events in Belgrade. What keeps you attracted to and in touch with Serbia, its language and culture?

The invitation to attend the Literary Gathering inspired me to travel for the first time since the pandemic began, and to add time in Novi Sad and Belgrade, where I last visited in

2018. I have wonderful friends in Serbia—smart, interesting, and kind—and there are always interesting new books, and interesting new writers, or at least new to me.

Your most recent translation from Serbian is a large selection of poems by Marija Knežević, entitled Breathing Technique, *published by the prominent Zephyr Press in 2020. What brought you close to Marija Knežević's poetry?*

In 2017 I was invited by the editor at Zephyr to find a Serbian poet I liked (they had just published a book of translations by Steven Teref and Maja Teref of Ana Ristović's poetry), so I went around the bookstores and then asked my friend and colleague Svetlana Tomić for suggestions. Marija Knežević was at the top of her list. Then Svetlana and I went out for burek, and as we were walking, who should appear, coming in the other direction, but Marija Knežević herself! So I met her, we spoke briefly, and she agreed in principle to let me make some translations.

Once I started reading in depth, I was struck by the seriousness and complexity of her poetry, but also delighted by the humor and by her absolute mastery of the language—both its sounds and its etymological richness. It's much easier to translate someone if you like what they do; if they do what you wish *you* could do with words. She studied in the U.S., and her English is so good that she could quickly catch any misunderstandings in my first drafts, meaning that the practical aspects of the project went easily too.

How would you describe the process of translation? How do you describe it to your students, for instance?

Sometimes you hear a sentence or a few words and the translation just pops into your mind. That must be how simultaneous interpreters do it (I don't have that skill). Usually, even if I love a text and feel that I will be able to do it justice, I have to break it down into pieces, include all the synonyms in my rough draft. That stage moves very slowly; when I was first drafting *Mrena* (*The Cataract*) I couldn't do more than 10 or 12 pages a day. When I've asked my sources to help with things the dictionaries and the internet didn't supply, I go back and move much more quickly, making choices among the options partly for the rhythm of the language. That stage can require several passes, especially for poetry.

I know that some translators work by making each line or each sentence perfect and then moving on to the next one! But I encourage my students to start their work by "bulldozing", as I do, and then working with the interlinear text that we would describe as "lost in translation." When I compare the rough first draft with subsequent stages, I can grade a student who's working with a language I don't know—Arabic, Chinese, Korean, Malay. Starting that way helps them develop their own practice. I encourage them not only to seek out people who know the language and culture they are working from, which can be their own older relatives, but also to show their advanced drafts to friends who don't know that original language, who can tell them whether the translation works for a reader.

Why did you choose to translate Milica Mićić Dimovska's novel The Cataract *and not* The Last Fascinations of MSS, *which you wrote about with admiration?*

Ah, when I read *The Last Fascinations* (a hard book for me: I was not familiar with that period, its vocabulary and its issues), of course I wanted to translate it so I could share it with other people who only know English. I think it's a brilliant work; I spoke about it at a conference and sent the paper to Milica so she could see that I had really engaged with the novel. She must have liked my interpretation, because she arranged to have it translated into Serbian, by the very impressive Draginja Ramadanski, and published in *Letopis Matice srpske*. Nevertheless, I was sure that an American reader would not understand the novel and wouldn't have the patience to make it through its unfamiliar elements.

The Cataract, on the other hand, offers a reader many "ways in" to its action. The issue of generational differences is familiar in any society, and the youngest characters in the novel frequently refer to American (and British) culture—popular music, literature, and also simply useful catch phrases in English. I didn't know, when I started work on the novel shortly after it was published, that it would attract so much negative and partisan criticism. My students have enjoyed reading it and have found a lot in it to discuss.

In an interview available on the internet you said you began learning Russian just for fun in your first year of college. How did it happen that you started to learn Croatian and Serbian?

When I got to graduate school (at Indiana University in Bloomington), we were told that we had to study a "second Slavic language." The word "second" is quite telling, assuming

that these languages would always be secondary to Russian. At that point the university offered Czech, Polish, and what they then called Serbo-Croatian. Graduate students could also choose to present non-Slavic East European languages – Estonian, Hungarian, Latvian, Lithuanian – or, I think, Central Asian languages – I knew one woman who took Uzbek, though I don't think she went on to use it professionally.

I don't know why I chose Serbo-Croatian, perhaps because I had never heard the name, but I was very lucky: the teacher that year was a Fulbright scholar, Rada Borić, who has gone on to do amazing things in the wider world. She is full of energy and brilliant intelligence, a fabulous language teacher, and we all loved her.

After learning Russian, I sensed the different stress in familiar words (usually it's one syllable earlier than in Russian) and the greater openness of the vowel sounds as a musical transformation, like waltzing instead of walking. So it's not just that Rada Borić and then our professor Henry Cooper were compelling as teachers. I was enchanted with the beauty of the language and wanted to keep it alive for me alongside Russian (which is also beautiful, of course, but somehow greyer, or maybe pearly in color).

Are students in America interested in Russian language and culture?

Students are indeed interested in Russian language and culture, though many shy away from studying the Russian language because it has the reputation of being "hard." (I tell them, "Yes, and when your future boss sees Russian listed on your résumé they'll know that you aren't afraid to work hard.") We are finding that in Russian, as in many other academic disciplines, we need to present the culture and the literature in ways that make the broader relevance obvious: connections with history, or presentation of environmental issues. Students of political science obviously realize that they need to know about Russia. And certain authors – especially Dostoevsky – are well enough known to attract students of philosophy, psychology or religion along with the fans of literature. A lot of our students encounter a bit of Dostoevsky in high school, so they're ready to read him in more depth in college.

Which Russian women writers do you teach about?

Different writers in different courses. In a course about love and sex (!), we read memoirs by Nadezhda Durova-Alexandrov, poetry by Karolina Pavlova, Evdokiia Rostopchina, Sofya Parnok and Marina Tsvetaeva, and prose by Yulia Voznesenskaya and

Liudmila Ulitskaya. In a course about the environment, nature and industry, we read Voznesenskaya, again, and Svetlana Alexievich. In Russian Fairy Tales – Marina Tsvetaeva, Nina Sadur and Tatiana Tolstaya; in Russian and East European Science Fiction – Olga Larionova and Daliya Truskinovskaya.

Have you had any students of Serbian or Croatian in the past five years? What would you say about the future of "small" languages in the US academia?

I don't get to offer the language regularly (though I was asked to do so once as a "directed reading"), but when I teach a first-year seminar on East European prose I can lean hard on my knowledge of South Slavic writers. Depending on what's in print (alas!), we've been able to read Ivo Andrić, Meša Selimović, Irena Vrkljan, Danilo Kiš, Dubravka Ugrešić and Milica Mićić Dimovska.

About the future of "small" languages – it's hard to say. I do believe that any country needs specialists in almost *every* possible field, and our educational institutions can offer the first step toward knowledge with those requirements for "second" Slavic languages and the like. I notice, though, that almost all the younger specialists in South Slavic at the big universities that have significant Slavic departments are from former Yugoslavia, or emigrated from there as young people.

In the socialist period, there was much more translation going on among the languages of Eastern Europe. Now, oddly, it seems as if English or German are more likely to mediate between the various languages, even if there are excellent translators who can work directly from Serbian to Polish, say, like Jovanka Dorota Ćirlić.

As long as there are wonderful writers, musicians, filmmakers, and so on, even a tiny language can play a role on the world stage. I hope that the governments concerned are providing funding for translations and supporting the arts and the artists at home!

A literary evening devoted to your poetry, held in August in Belgrade, was a kind of revelation for many attendees, judging by reactions on the internet. In what measure has your teaching and research on Russian poetry of the 20th century influenced your poetry?

The first thing Russian poetry did for me (especially the great modernists –Tsvetaeva and Mandelstam) was prove to me that I wasn't sufficiently serious to be that kind of poet, so I turned to graduate school and academic life, thinking I would write in my spare time. (Ha! –

says every university professor!) I think my involvement with Russian poetry, and Croatian and Serbian as well, has made me more sensitive to etymology in language, through the riches of Slavic word formation, and also to the sound and rhythm of poetry. Every time I'm working on poetry translations, I get a jolt to my own creative energy, and reading scholarly texts can be inspiring as well.

In the poetry collection Second Hand Fate*, from 2016, you are playing with the meanings of everyday life derived from "second hand" – from clothes to love. The title poem also tackles social injustices. Do you agree that, when writing from a "small" starting point we can nevertheless touch upon everything important in this world? Or should a poet start from a "bigger issue" if she or he wants to talk about political, social, historical problems?*

In my own efforts to write about serious social issues I see that it works better if I start from small things, and perhaps that is related to women's writing in general: so often we're the ones at the sewing machine, or washing the dishes, or breading the smallest (cheapest) fish from the market to fry them for the family – a moment Tsvetaeva describes in a letter to a friend. I've tried to write poems about big issues – Lord, what big issues the U.S. has to write about! – but I usually don't have much success if I do so on purpose.

You have published your own poetry and translations on the internet. The year 2020 brought us the challenge of online teaching. We are going digital, more and more. What is good and what is not so good about it, seen from your perspectives of both professor, on one side, and poet and translator, on the other?

I made my first website in 1995 or 1996, which was pretty early for a professor outside of computer science, because it was exciting to make connections across great distances. It's such a treat to find a site like *Književnstvo*, with all the great information and valuable scholarly writing right there on the internet! I've had conversations by e-mail that were profoundly meaningful to me, and sometimes the pleasure of connecting people who should know each other, should know about each other's work, but haven't yet discovered each other. Any new way of making human and intellectual connections is precious. There are brilliant online poetry journals, journals of literature in translation, scholarly and cultural journals, just a tremendous wealth of texts that have jumped over the heads of the usual gatekeepers without demanding huge financial investments – just investments of time and love.

My first few published translations were of Croatian prose and poetry, and what first drew me into Serbian culture, where I had visited but never stayed, was an e-mail message from Draginja Ramadanski, who found me on the internet because she was looking for a specialist on Tsvetaeva to write a foreword to her translation. The messages led to a visit in person and to wonderful conversations. Working on projects together and keeping in touch as human beings via digital communication are such good things, even if some of the results are more ephemeral than letters written with paper and ink.

Of course, I'm not at all the first person to feel the limits of online communication – the possibility for misunderstanding a hurried e-mail or text message, and of course the likelihood that a younger interlocutor doesn't even check e-mail regularly. Skype or Zoom depend on the quality of the technical connection, though visual confirmation makes them better, less anxiety-provoking for a non-native speaker, than a long-distance telephone conversation. Teaching online is pretty depressing: there's not just the loss of spontaneity (students don't want to chat before class starts, because everyone will hear them – unless they're doing it in a private chat on the side, which only works well if you already know the person you're chatting with), but there's also the horrible sitting and sitting. I never realized how much I stroll around while I'm teaching, or hop up to write on the board, until I was stuck in a chair with my laptop in my lap.

What are your plans for the next year or two? Is there any surprise for the Serbian culture in it? A revealing correspondence or a new translation?

A wonderful question, and a good idea to end our conversation by looking into the future! I've started translating a fascinating Russian poet, Elena Mihailik, who teaches in Australia – underlining how digital communication eases work with someone on the other side of the globe. On this visit to Belgrade, I've picked up a nice stack of books of poetry, which I will read with interest and pleasure, and which will surely be full of inspiration. And who knows what wonderful message will arrive tomorrow, with a great suggestion or a provocative question?

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[1] Published by CreateSpace Independent Publishing Platform in 2016.

[2] Miroljub Todorović, Excerpt from the verbal-visual novel, *Apeiron*, from Serbian (Moscow: Mycelium samizdat publishers, 2013) https://www.scribd.com/document/124376884/Miroljub-Todorović-Apeiron (link from November 2, 2021)