

УНИВЕРЗИТЕТ У БАЊОЈ ЛУЦИ
ФИЛОЛОШКИ ФАКУЛТЕТ

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NEW RADIATION

Simić, Charles (2010), *The Horse Has Six Legs. An Anthology of Serbian Poetry (updated and expanded)*. Minneapolis: Greywolf Press.

A crucial point of any discussion on anthological selection is the fact that an anthology always reflects the spirit and taste of its time, the judgement of the editor and his generation, as well as various aesthetic and societal tendencies. In addition, there is no single principle to build anthologies around (even when the fundamental criterion is emphasized), hence looking at the key courses of historical development is especially important for such projects.

The second, extended edition of the anthology of Serbian poetry, *The Horse Has Six Legs*, edited by Charles Simic, is extraordinary for various reasons. The first aspect that catches readers' attention is the unusual concept of the criteria used for the selection of authors. Simic addresses this in the Foreword:

Let me say at the beginning that this is not, properly speaking, a true anthology of Serbian poetry. Many important poets, both past and present, do not appear in it. The book is, rather, a selection from my thirty years of translating that poetry, and I translated only what I liked and kept only what I felt I did justice to. Representing the entire range of Serbian poetry was beyond my ambition and my ability.

Put in this way, it is not surprising Simic omitted one of the fundamental criteria that more or less determines any anthology: *chronological continuity*. That is to say, there is unusual 'adjourning' and 'adjoining' of the timeline, when, after the introductory medieval and oral literature, the author 'leaps' right into the poetry of Momcilo Nastasijevic (an early twentieth-century poet). Nevertheless, what he

achieves by that decision is very interesting—distant texts are put 'shoulder to shoulder', but they bridge the 'chronological abyss' with their outstanding quality, as true great poetry, although not created *ex nihilo*, can exist and radiate its meanings independently of its predecessors or contemporaries. However, there is also truth in what T.S. Eliot's writes in 'Tradition and Individual Talent', that great art is 'chained', thus creating a new system, which changes fundamentally with the arrival of every new masterpiece. However, in the newly-revised *The Horse Has Six Legs*, both Eliot's and Simic's criteria are present; individually they both have their value and fulcrum, but when combined they offer a more compelling result.

Highly diverse Serbian poets caught Simic's attention so much that he decided to share his fascination with a wider audience, especially one that is not accustomed to such literature. That exactly is the main reason, or need of Charles Simic, to "stand up to" translation – when he would meet such an accomplishment which would agitate his poetic universe, he felt that he has to share his experience with all who believe in poetry. Accordingly, he talks about some interesting standpoints on translation, but it has to be said that it is uncommon that the arranger of an anthology would also be the translator thereof in its entirety, which not only doubles his engagement, but essentially justifies the fundamental criterion of choice by personal affinity.

Simic's experience of translation is that every truly great poem is essentially untranslatable, and that a poem he translates has to be as near as if it came from his

own stylus, as if he wrote it. If there is no such aesthetical identification, Simic says, the process of translation will not be successful. It is interesting to say that Milorad Pavic, one of the authors selected by Simic for his anthology, and who, besides being well known throughout the world for his prose, was an accomplished translator,¹ considered the process of translation similar to blood transfusion – such as, when you give your own blood for another man's body. The result is to revive someone else, but the one who gave the blood remains rather empty and exhausted (Pavic claimed that the process of translating foreign poets to his mother tongue was one of the most difficult activities that he embarked on as a young man, because he didn't quite know what he was delving into). On the other side, Simic claimed that, apart from the great effort, each translated poem rewarded him by enriching his creative universe and induced constant change of coordinates within his poetic system. "What I find marvelous about these poets is that they are such distinct individuals. – claims Charles Simic - Their poems are complex, unorthodox, and unique creations compounded of their own sensibility and of elements of their own native literary tradition".²

The introductory medieval poem chosen by Charles Simic, which opens the doors of this anthology, called *The Twelve Dreams of Emperor Shashkish*, is a section of the story that originated from Oriental literature, and talks about an emperor who had twelve dreams in one night and asked a wiseman and a writer called Mamer to decipher them. This story, in its integral version, is especially interesting for its con-

trast between fantastic images (which are often pleasant and bright), and their apocalyptic interpretations. Within the fragment used in the anthology, there is only the magical dream imagery, as a poetry in itself, but not the second part which talks about the interpretations of the dreams which interchange with each of these images. Therefore, one could argue about the creative involvement of the author who reorganized the text in such a way to transform it from prose to poetry, by rearranging and leaving out certain parts. We should also keep in mind that ancient literature did not know genres as we know today, so anyone who seeks poetry in medieval texts, is obliged to find metric patterns where there is no obvious prosody.

Such a way of taking finished passages from medieval biografies and "breaking" them into verses, even giving them separate titles, was marvelously done by Miodrag Pavlovic (one of the authors from Simic's anthology). Within his *Anthology of Serbian Poetry*³ he reorganizes sections of medieval texts from Sava Nemanjic (13th century) to Kiprijan Rakanin (late 17th century), thereby offering unique continuity of Serbian lyricism to the reader. When it comes to *The Horse Has Six Legs*, Charles Simic embarked on the adventure of creating continuity by his own affinity, and then breaking it intentionally in order to make an interesting symbiosis of the ancient and the modern, 20th and 21st century works. Also, accomplishments of oral literature, which in this case continue the medieval line, are often omitted from anthological selections of Serbian poetry, simply because they are considered to be the product of people's genius, although they came from mouths of gifted individuals whose names have not been remembered.

Simic's choice shows that he selected poems as well as poets. There are twenty

1 After almost half a century, Pavic's translations of Pushkin into the Serbian language are still unsurpassed.

2 Charles Simic: *Introduction to the Updated and Expanded Edition*, in: "The Horse Has Six Legs: An Anthology of Serbian Poetry", updated and expanded edition, Graywolf Press, Minneapolis, 2010, page XV-XVI.

3 Miodrag Pavlovic: *Anthology of Serbian Literature (13th - 20th century)*, SKZ, Belgrade, 1964, p. 101-201.

five representatives of various poetic lines, from Desanka Maksimovic, Drainac, Popa, Pavlovic, Lalic, Ristic, Miljkovic, to Dusko Novakovic, Radmila Lazic, Nina Zivancevic, Vojislav Karanovic, etc. He opens the literary doors of Serbian poetry of 20th century with Momcilo Nastasijevic, the main exponent of mystical folklore modernism, who, as a distinct neosymbolist, valericly delved into the music of language, and is therefore difficult to translate. Also hard to translate is Aleksandar Vuco, whose poem *Ćirilo i Metodije* is rich with innovative metaphors and unusual linguistic constructions and whose meaning is not always within reach, as well as Matija Beckovic, whose poetry, because of its profound local cultural context and language, can never express the richness and associativity of the original, when translated. Nevertheless, with these authors, Simic decided upon somewhat more communicative poems, which shows that he considered the receptory abilities of potential readers, but also his own abilities as a translator. In translation, as in creation, it is important to properly assess strength when „wrestling“ a text, in order not to allow the poem to overpower the translator, because it is at her own loss – to remain locked in the language it was written in – and therefore not reach new readers' shores.

If *quantity* is considered – which authors are presented in Simic's anthology with most poems, then one could find certain parallels, by the *criteria of affinity*, between poetics of the translator and the translated poets. Novica Tadić, Vasko Popa, Aleksandar Ristic and Branko Miljković had all been previously translated by Simic. Although very different, their poems chosen for this anthology do have certain similarities that make them stand out from other poets. As shown in linguistics – very simple words are chosen, which are not individually poetic. So where is the poetry? It is in the combination and orga-

nization of linguistic material into more meaningful wholes, which are in some cases arranged throughout the poem as peculiar checkpoints of meaning, while in others they don't seem to exist until the end of the poem is reached, where there is a „revolution of meaning“ and keys to decyphre the previous verses are found. Also, all of these authors carefully build their poems, gravitate towards a pregnant and immediate expression, and often use mythical and folklore substance to reach a modern end product. Inclination towards certain humor and the grotesque, as well as expression of awareness about the dark layers of collective coexistence, are also some of their common properties. Such a poetic world is usually dominated by an air of infestation and alienation, while the world is perceived as the main source of terror.

The other, extended edition of the anthology *The Horse Has Six Legs* brings about six new poets. Beside the aforementioned Novica Tadic, who passed away recently, there are also Milan Đorđević, Nina Živančević, Danica Vukićević, Dragan Jovanović Danilov and Vojislav Karanović. Simic's choice of their poems brings *the personal* back to the poetic scene. At times, there was a tendency to expel the lyrical „I“ from poetry, to prevent the poem from being a mere extension of its creator and his spiritual pursuance and roving. However, after a while, the expelled „I“ would return to its lyrical homeland, as a testimony of its own existence, although not present in first person singular, because good poetry, great poetry, as hermetic and apparently „outside bound“ as it may be, is always, in fact, personal. And that is the only way to „vast spaces of insomnia“, to universal truths, to the essential – through the back door of the lyrical subject.

In such anthological weaving, it is necessary to ask *the question of context*. Each poem that is found in an anthology is inevitably „ripped out“ from its original poetic, historic and social circumstances, and

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put into a brand new aesthetical context which is, among the rest, its „effort“ to glow cognizably in a sea of shiny lyrical medallions. Generally speaking, the fate of poems in anthological selections is not easy – they are ripped out of the warm, parental home of the book they were published in, and suddenly thrown into the arena of supreme quality to fight for survival.

Although it is not possible to create a complete and perfect anthology with dif-

fering criteria, it is considered successful if it gives a new viewpoint, if it builds a new poetic perspective, which is undoubtedly so in the case of Charles Simic's *The Horse Has Six Legs*. It offers the most precious thing a lyrical book can offer – seeing poetry through new cross-cuts which make it radiate a new, previously unseen, light.

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