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Review Of "The Horse Has Six Legs: An Anthology Of Serbian Poetry" Translated By C. Simic

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The Horse Has Six Legs: An Anthology of Serbian Poetry

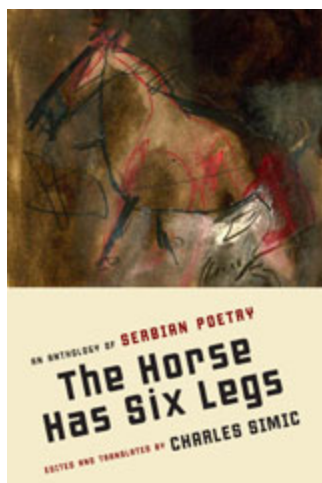
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Book Reviews

from the [March 2010 issue](#)

Reviewed by [Sibelan Forrester](#)



Translated from the Serbian by Charles Simic
Graywolf Press, 2010

Translation of poetry should always motivate two kinds of fidelity

Translation of poetry should always motivate two kinds of fidelity: adequate representation of the content and form of the original, and viability of the new version as a work of poetry. (My students sometimes refer to these as “Professor Stuff” and “Art Stuff.”) The two concerns may be addressed by teams of translators: a native speaker who knows the original language and culture, along with the poem’s place and weight within those, and a poet who is capable of creating a genuine poem in the new language. Charles Simic plays both roles in his translations of Serbian poetry, and the updated and expanded edition of his anthology, *The Horse Has Six Legs: An Anthology of Serbian Poetry*, gives happy cause to mention his gifts as a translator: professor and poet, one man with all the right stuff.

I started to note the poets I wanted to cite in this review, but the list quickly grew too long. Not that I like them all equally—but a reader might not like them equally in Serbian either. Each poet has a distinct voice, different emotional shadings, and a clearly individual relationship with the translator’s sympathetic magic. Simic chooses poets who have moved and inspired him, rather than everyone who “should” be represented in an anthology of Serbian poetry, and thus gives an idiosyncratic and necessarily incomplete view of the tradition. Hence perhaps his un-academic title, which evokes monstrosity, or super powers, or a creature injected with alien genes (from seraphim?). At the same time, such a collection is more likely to inspire reading and study than more inclusive but less rewarding volumes. Simic does not force a narrative of development over time; the unit of value is the individual voice and *oeuvre*, from anonymous folk songs (written down in the early 19th century) through mostly 20th-century and a few 21st-century works by twenty-four poets. The youngest poet included was born in 1961 (so, pushing fifty as I write); a project like this requires long acquaintance and return visits, which tend to privilege older, proven authors.

Almost every poet is represented by several works, ranging in length from one line to eight pages. Some names are fairly familiar in the West: Desanka Maksimović, Vasko Popa, and Milorad Pavić (best known for his success in prose, *Dictionary of the Khazars*). I applaud Simic for including several women, and for engaging deeply with their work rather than including (or excluding) them mechanically on the basis of gender (“we have women poets too!”).

Since at least the late 19th century, Serbian poetry has more or less kept pace with the general development of poetry in Europe, and much of the 20th-century work is experimental rather than traditional in form. Simic does not strive for formal regularity in the earlier poets, binding the lines together with loose rhythm and to some extent muting differences among the poets. However, his English is confident and effective, accurate overall without being hobbled by details. In the last of an extended sequence from Vasko Popa’s humorous “Mala kutija” (“The Little Box”), the final lines read, “*Ni jedna od malih kutija/ U maloj kutiji zaljubljenoj u sebe/ Nije poslednja/ Nađite sada svet.*” Simic offers:

But not one of the little boxes

Inside the little box in love with herself
Is the last one

Let’s see you find the world now

Just a few more examples of Simic’s results: “earring of hearing” (Pavić, p. 90), or “light lithe dragonfly”—“lithe” buzzing like those wings (Gadjanski, p. 172 ff.). There are a few topical poems: Matija Bećković’s sizzling indictment of Yevgeny Yevtushenko’s silence upon the invasion of Czechoslovakia in 1968 (pp. 181-2) should interest any fan of Russian poetry.

The original, 1992 introduction, included here, makes no mention of events current in 1992. The new 2010 introduction does comment on the wars of the 1990s; Simic notes, "Everyone knew the names of Serbian war criminals, but almost no one knew the names of its writers and poets." Here a reader might quibble that one of the best-known war criminals, Radovan Karadžić, actually had more than one published collection of poetry, though we might not grant him the title of writer or poet. Simic may never have read Karadžić, of course, but it demonstrates the importance of poets in Serbian culture that even the war criminals wanted to be one.

Sibelan Forrester

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