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AN INTERVIEW WITH JOHN K. COX

You have published literary translations in at least five languages, and you are fluent in even more. When did your love of languages start, and how did you learn so many foreign languages?

These days I think frequently about why I ended up in a career with an international orientation. To put that in a more interesting way, I wonder a lot about the internationalization of my mind, and tastes, in my youth. I first traveled abroad in 1975. I was 11, and my family made a big trip to Europe to visit my sister, who was living and working in West Germany at the time. I've always told my children, and my students, that learning another language is like growing another brain! Or, more caustically:

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America is not enough for our brains...At any rate, I enjoyed Germany and Austria and Switzerland a great deal on that family trip, and when my junior high school participated in some pilot program (did they receive a grant, or the actual teacher? I've always wondered how Frau Fritsch got to Raleigh.) for German, I jumped on board. Then in high school, I had a fantastic German teacher all three years---we actually read, painfully but gloriously, part one of Goethe's *Faust*. My vocabulary was such that when I spent my first solo time in Germany, in the summer of 1982, with a family in Nordrhein-Wesfalen, I spoke a beautiful „Goethe-deutsch,” they all said, but I didn't know how to order a meal or buy a train ticket. It was a beautiful dilemma.

Anyway, I guess I was at the right place at the right time, because in college (university), while I was double-majoring in German and Political Science, I was able to take two years of Russian. Again, this was a pilot program, and I jumped on board. We were still in the Cold War, and I had already visited East Germany, Hungary, and Czechoslovakia as a tourist, and also become active in anti-Reagan, anti-nuclear student organizations, so I was very curious about Russian and, for the first time, the Slavic world.

A year in Hungary, courtesy of the Rotary Foundation, and then the outstanding offerings in modern languages at Indiana University in Bloomington, where I did my Masters and PhD in history, opened the door to other languages for me. French I was able, after a fashion, to acquire on my own, for use in research, mostly on Ismail Kadare, and for trips to Quebec in my 20s and 30s.

Yes, I love languages. But I've never felt the need to work with them as a linguist. Literature seems to be a more natural fit for me, but there, too, I am in fact a bit of an outsider. The biggest point I want to make here is that I've always thought that I moved into history because I wanted to understand other societies and cultures, to understand the life of the people in the places that languages were allowing me to explore and enjoy. Most of my favorite reading when I was a kid had some kind of international twist; I always smile when I think back to the enduring lure of volumes of *The Hardy Boys* or *The Happy Hollisters* that were set in the Caribbean or France or Mexico or Canada. There were so many pen pals, then drinking buddies, travel partners, some romance, and a wave of social media-enabled friendships. Then too, when you start to travel and get positive feedback for trying to speak the language, even at an early point as a young person, as a spoiled or dumb (or insular) American, the desire to exist, even temporarily, in another cognitive and affective environment swells and fuels itself.

How and when did you become interested in East and Southeast Europe and the region's languages and literature? Where does your fascination with this region come from?

The first time I went behind the „Iron Curtain' was with my West German host family after high school. They had relatives in West Berlin, and we drove there from Bonn. I don't remember much about the hours on the East German autobahn going and coming, but I certainly remember the day trip we took through Checkpoint Charlie. The experiences in Eastern Europe started piling up, long before I realized I wanted a career connected with this region or set of regions. I studied for a semester in Munich as a university student, and I pretty much traveled only eastward in the breaks: Budapest, Prague, Weimar, Dresden, Leipzig, East Berlin again--and then it was off to the races.

When I fell in love with Europe as a teenager, I felt like it was the un-America. Then when I discovered the countries of the Eastern (or Central and Southeastern, however we choose to call it) half of the continent, I felt like that was the un-un-America. One worthy step further towards understanding the world. A step to be taken on its own terms. This was not the un-Europe, but Europe-plus. It was stimulating at first to feel like I was seeing the real contours of the Cold War world, but through people and food and languages, I simply came to find time in Hungary or Yugoslavia or East Germany very satisfying and rewarding. My stays there fed my curiosity; they did not satisfy it. They sparked it, more and more, and eventually it extended to literature. There were no judgments to be made. Everything felt *sui generis*, even if it was hidden by circumstance.

As a professor of history, you have the luxury of being able to choose what you would like to translate. Could you tell me about how you choose translation projects?

You are quite right that it is a luxury to be able to pick books to translate in a setting free from most commercial considerations. Commercial considerations for me, that is--the publishers still have them. And it is not just my university position that undergirds this relative privilege; I have been fortunate to find publishers--although I am unagented and do not have access to the traditional publishing titans--willing to take risks on „unusual" authors (by that I mean writers working in lesser known languages or, believe it or not, deceased writers who cannot do signings and podcasts). And let us not forget the rights-holders. Usually living authors have the rights to their work in this part of the world, at least for international publication, so I have not had to work with many agencies. But in the case of authors who are no longer with us, I've benefitted tremendously from the supportiveness, knowledge, and enthusiasm of their rights-

holders. And there's another element underpinning this luxury: the support I've received from grants through the Serbian, Montenegrin, and Slovene government ministries or writers' organizations. These awards, not huge in and of themselves but cumulatively potent, have been crucial in fueling my summer work and my autumn conference presentations and networking in this region.

So there is a great deal of good fortune behind my current activities. I try to pay it back by diligence and scrupulousness in my work and I try to pay it forward by reading and meeting and listening to lots of „younger writers” and doing what I can for them in terms of an interactive, honest reading of whatever they'd like to share with me; I also translate and try to place some of their work, usually a story, in a kind of digital acquaintance or literary friendship that usually quickly becomes symbiotic. This is also a way of exploring new ideas, staying fresh as a translator and an observer trying to understand the 20th- and 21st-century Balkans, and, happily, meeting a lot of interesting people.

About choosing books to translate, or engagements to sustain, I would say that I wait for something to jump out at me from the historical record. There is luck, or chance; there are the recommendations of friends and acquaintances; there is a lot of reading, mostly of books by the writer in question but also about him or her. Every engagement has its own kind of beginning. But I am usually looking for books that shed light on a historical period in which I am interested, books that are innovative or serious in their intent and effect, and, well, books that I love. Books that I want to share with other readers of English, including my students and my family and my friends. This strange decision-making process of mine seems, when I lay it out like this, both intensely personal and intensely pluri-causal. I hope that it is also considered professional.

How did you start translating literature?

I did a few random historical translations in the 1990s, including some material by the great Slovene poet Edvard Kocbek about the meaning of the concept of Central Europe (and, wow, would I love to find a copy of that translation; I don't know where it ended up, either in manuscript or in publication). But I made a conscious decision to begin translating literature about 20 years ago. Maybe it was a bit before that.

A lot of factors were in play. One of them was that I could not shake the idea that I was not using the languages I had learned to their fullest extent. That was a big deal, because I had spent years and years studying German, Hungarian, Serbo-Croatian, and Slovene. And my parents had made sacrifices to keep me in those classrooms. These were beautiful subjects to study, and of course they came with a lot of perks, like

study-abroad opportunities in Munich, Bonn, Vienna, Szeged, etc. But I was at some level trying to find a modality of work that would allow these acquired languages to do something permanent, and something other people could enjoy or refer to---I wanted to take them beyond just me. Since I was looking for more primary sources, books and other texts in print, I mean, connected to the courses I was teaching, it seemed like a good time to translate. At first I had in mind two things, concretely: I wanted to find good fiction from European writers about the Ottoman Empire, and I made plans for an anthology of East European historical sources. That wouldn't have been a literary project, obviously, but one built on translated primary sources from the societies of Central Europe and the Balkans, dating from the Napoleonic period forward. My negotiations with a big publisher for that collection fell through, but I still have the outlines and materials for it. The emphasis was going to be on social and intellectual issues and not just national(ist) ones.

Then there were the opportunities. The journal *Slovene Studies* was publishing some translations at that time, and I had found a story by Mate Dolenc that I loved. The title was „The Role of My Boots in the Angolan Revolution,” and it not only contained a nod to Bora Čosić's novel but also was a bit transgressive or corrosive in terms of the Slovene literary canon, at least as those traditions have appeared in English translations. I hoped to shake things up, in a minor way, and maybe do more in that vein later. It's a solid story, and I still like it, even though some people called it merely „episodic” or „journalistic.” I've been a member of the Society for Slovene Studies for decades, and a member of the North American Society for Serbian Studies for many years, too, and I think it's very important for journals like theirs to offer the place for occasional literary or historical translations. They have readerships that care about those works, many of which are not contemporary or commercial, and they have the power to spark interdisciplinary research among their membership. Another path into this arena of literary translation led through the fantastic web site Words Without Borders. I know one of the editors there, and she included me in an early call for submissions after the terrorist attacks in the US in 2001, at a time when Americans needed to be reminded that there were ways to interact with the rest of the world that involved words and emotion and even beauty, and not just bombs and labels and divisions.

Which is your favorite translation so far?

Everything I translated by Danilo Kiš felt like a gift, like I had been granted a special visa to some storied landscape inhabited by people who were at once real, and realistic, at the granular level, and also larger than life; this was a place at once within history and outside of it, and the train I rode into this landscape was Kiš's language, so

singularly clear and rich that I wished my visit could go on forever. I felt that way about every novel, poem, and story of his that I ever took up. What I mean to say is that translating Kiš was an honor and an adventure, in the most bracing and positive and enduring sense of that word. I will always be grateful to the people who made it possible for me to publish those translations. Very grateful. I mean Mirjana Miočnović and Pascale Delpech above all, but also a set of 10-15 editors, publishers, and friends who helped make my translations both better and, if you will, permanent.

I guess I cannot answer your delightful question head-on, however. Favorite...favorite...I mean, there are works that have delighted a few readers enough for them to contact me, such as a short story by Ivan Ivanji I did for *Words Without Borders* many years ago. That is a rare treat. Then there are the sketches and short stories by Miklós Radnoti that I translated, laboriously but intoxicated (with my morning coffee and fascination with the Hungarian lexicon and also under the influence of a muse or two), and of which I remain very proud. But above all I suppose I think of my translations, or the lion's share of them, as components of a series of engagements. First came Ismail Kadare (of whom I only translated one short story, and from the French, but about whom I published a small set of articles), then Kiš, and now Biljana Jovanović—these are engagements because I write about these authors' ideas and the impact of their writings from the perspective of intellectual history, while and after I am translating them. So I have a hard time separating how I feel about a completed translation from the headiness or admiration I feel about the author's ideas and life work. I hope this is making some sense...

At any rate, one way of responding to the adjective „favorite” would be for me to say that I think the single most important book I have translated is *Psi i ostali* (Dogs and Others) by Biljana Jovanović. In my judgment, its importance is two-fold: the effectiveness of Jovanović's innovations, in pairing form and style with a subversive message, on the one hand, and the potential for confronting readers, not just in the West but also at home in Yugoslavia or Serbia, with very uncomfortable verities about urban life and, especially, the treatment of women in late Titoist society. I wish everybody I know would read that book, in whatever language they want.

What have you found most difficult to translate?

The hardest thing I've ever translated was Biljana Jovanović's first novel, *Pada Avala* (Avala Is Falling). As recently as two years ago, I was telling myself (and plenty of other people) that I wouldn't translate it. And now here it is, already printed, several months ago, in fact. Oh, those good folks at CEU Press!

The language of *Avala is Falling* is extremely different; it has plenty of urban slang from the Belgrade of the 1970s, and the novel's interior monologues are joined by polyphony, flashbacks, doppelgaengers, a blurring of paragraph structure, bathos, (deliberately) obscure cultural references, omitted punctuation, and other tools for creating a kind of narrative or even epistemological „angst.” It is a challenging structure that, like the themes and plot of the story itself, makes great demands on the reader. And a translator is, first and foremost, a devoted reader, patient but insatiable. Translating it was exhausting, and my Serbian friends were generous with their help, especially on dated idioms, idiosyncratic nicknames, and the like. In the end it felt really good to recreate, in a form that I hope is both authentic and accessible, this second novel by Biljana Jovanović in English. The relationship, critically and intellectually, between *Avala is Falling* and *Dogs and Others* is fascinating and rich. Only two years apart, the novels have different emphases and represent complementary but distinct phases of Jovanović's development as a writer; nonetheless they form a kind of diptych, playing off of each other, and very different from her third novel and her plays.

Avala Is Falling was originally published in 1978, and *Dogs and Others* followed in 1980. I translated them in reverse order, because I felt like I needed to work up to the challenges of her first novel. It turns out I prefer, personally and as a historian, the ferocity and scope of *Dogs* to the high-modernist riddles of *Avala*, but I love both books. And they really do have a large number of themes and stylistic approaches in common.

What's your translation process? What do you most enjoy about it?

Read, read, read. That's where it all starts. No novel is fair game, or truly accessible, in my view, until we've read other works by that same author. How much other reading is required depends on the difficulty of the novel and, of course, on how much material is available. For instance, after I found a reference to Jovanović's work in Celia Hawkesworth's *Voices in the Shadows: Women and Verbal Art in Serbia and Bosnia* (CEU, 1999), I ordered all three of her novels via inter-library loan from my university (let's hear it for university librarians!), read them, thought about them, and asked colleagues digitally for their opinions and impressions of her work and legacy. I've started down this road of „orientation” with ten or fifteen writers in the past two decades. Right now I'd say I'm looking closely at four or five Serbian writers from the 20th century, considering their work, in and out of its context, and trying to discern where my next commitment, substantive but ultimately joyful for me, I hope, might come. It could be that I will have no more multi-book „engagements” with the same author; maybe from now on what will seem necessary to me as a translator and a

historian is a book here and there from a handful of writers, especially from the period 1945-1991.

So once I pick a book, or a story, I translate the first chapter or section. I don't necessarily work on the whole book in its strict printed sequence, but I work slowly on the first chapter to „crack the code,” so to speak. To take the measure of the project. To begin a conversation with the text, set initial expectations for myself, feel out the lexicon and syntax, and so forth. First chapters are often labored, I find. I usually translate in longhand. Big yellow legal pads are my favorite, but I have used student blue-books, my kids' recycled spiral notebooks from school, etc. The important thing is that when I type the hand-translated pages into my laptop, at regular intervals, I do the first revisions. I don't call the text, in its first digital manifestation, a „rough draft” (which it is) but rather „version 1.5”. I typically only do more systematic revisions when I've worked through the entire book; nonetheless I may work again and again on difficult passages. A typical book for me takes months, because of the other kinds of research and writing I keep up, at least at some level; because of my teaching obligations; and because of family commitments. After a final, mostly style-centered, reading and comparison of texts, it's off to the editors and then the familiar cycle of type-setting and page proofs begins. Generally I work on only one book at a time, though I might branch off into shorter projects now and then. A final piece of the puzzle that is important to me is keeping track of my observations on the writing, and developing ideas of how I want to try to explain and contextualize the work, for the translator's preface and for my historical introduction, foreword, or afterword. I jot notes down in a notebook, digital or otherwise, starting with scholarly references and bibliographic citations from my original phase of research on the book. Then after the translation is finished I write up the preface and essay. It is very important for me to include an essay with every book-length literary translation; it is simply part of what I bring to the table, this modest multi-disciplinary addition. It's the place to work out some initial thoughts on how the text might figure in my or other people's historical writings, and it's the place to orient the reader (including myself) and, perhaps, spark some discussion.

During the translation process translators are often faced with the dilemma of whom to leave undisturbed: the author or the reader? Whether to aim to bring the reader close to the source text or bring the source text closer to the reader? What is your approach to this?

This sounds like Schleiermacher, and it's a great question. I would definitely choose to disturb the reader. My translations are not devoid of smoothings, tactical ones, but ultimately fidelity to the author's intent is most important to me. What I do is

designed to bring the source text closer to the reader; maybe that's my historical training. But I will admit that I take it as a huge compliment when someone tells me that a translation reads like an original work in the target language and not a translation from another source.

Maybe this is a bit of a tangent, but there is a kind of related work I like to do that certainly does involve bringing the author closer to the reader. It's extra-textual, though. I have done a handful of interviews with authors whose works mean a lot to me. These have been published just in a couple of journals, such as *World Literature Today* and *Transitions Online*, for instance. Most recently I interviewed Jurij Koch in German and translated our conversation. He is a Sorbian writer from Cottbus. In 2019 I had the pleasure of spending a few days with him in Lusatia and I am currently translating, for the Digital Press at the University of North Dakota, his novella *The Cherry Tree*. I have also interviewed the Swiss writer Erwin Koch, as well as Muharem Bazdulj and Ajla Terzić. The give-and-take of these interviews yields important understandings for all of us readers.

Do you ever get worried about losing the essence or meaning of the words? What can you do to prevent it? What is your approach to language when it's untranslatable?

This is another excellent question. And a difficult one. Hugo Friedrich wrote about how the Romans translated Greek works—fearlessly, imperiously, and apparently impetuously. But there arose in French intellectual life, later, the idea of enriching one's own language by adopting idioms and nuances and images from other languages. I hope that something I do rises to that level someday. But I take comfort now in what Walter Benjamin said about languages not being strangers to one another. Still, some words are untranslatable—especially if we are looking for one-word equivalents. Adding a parenthetical phrase or, some would say, even a footnote to another author's text is off-limits, so I tend to use a set of words instead of a single equivalent, or keep the word in the original language in the translated text and discuss that usage in the preface or foreword. I have occasionally added a footnote, although some editors take a principled stand against that. If we consider not just arcane lexica but rather case of polysemy or ambiguity (and some theorists apply this notion to every part of every text, of course), I can only place my faith in reason, or reasonableness. A shared honest among author, text, translator, and reader, I mean. Context, patience, good intentions on the part of the translator, a conversation with the text, an acceptance of and trust in the right of the author to share meaning and experience as needed—all of these things play their part.

It's not a pretty truth, but there are sometimes little mysteries in a text that, in a regular edition, we cannot crack. I suppose in a scholarly edition, the rare product of years of work in the context of what is often a collaborative, multi-lateral undertaking, one would clear these up or at least reach a consensus on why they can't be resolved. Finally, dialects, puns, jokes, and poems, in that descending order of difficulty, often take considerable effort to work through. They can be very frustrating, actually.

Translation requires sensitive reading, but also superb writing skills. Do you also write fiction yourself?

Like many people, I have dabbled in poetry for decades. Almost none of my verse has been published, and I don't generally translate poetry, for a lot of reasons. I'd like to think it's because I understand poetic values and the poetic difference too well. But fiction—yes, I have been writing short stories since 2016. There were some bizarre, fitful prose texts before that, mostly from my grad school years, when I created a couple of issues of a fake absurdist magazine called „The B.U.R.P. File”. That stood for „the Bloomington underground's recondite press.” But back to 2016: the thing that happened to my country in November of that year released so much morbid, free-floating anxiety and impatience for the future and need for distraction in the present that I tried to channel that energy and sketched out, in short order, a cycle of ten stories to be completed by November 2020. The first story I finished, and the eponymous title for the collection, is „Chicken.” They are stories of obsession and acceptance. As for finishing the collection, I'm almost there. As for my country completing its four-year phantasmagoria, we're almost there.

Fiction demands such a different kind of writing that it always amazes me when I can slip into that mode, start „taking care of characters” at the same time I am visualizing and trimming words and descriptions. By „different” I mean that historical writing and translating are other, distinct forms of writing. All three are dear to me.

As a translator what do you think is the place of Southeast European literature in the English-speaking world?

One of the most frequent questions I am asked in Serbia has to do with the reception of my translations in the Anglosphere. Unfortunately I usually have little to say in response. One of my Jovanović texts was reviewed in *Slavic Review* and in a few newspapers and some online journals; the Kiš books got more attention in the „thick journals” of the literary world, but not a lot. For sales info, I would have to approach my

range of publishers in a systematic way. I know that the books make it into a fair number of university libraries, and that my friends enjoy them. I hope they will prove stimulating to a variety of readers over time. More important is the question of Jovanović's, or Kiš's, etc., reception in general, both in ex-Yugoslavia and abroad. That's a big topic, with a sizable but somewhat slippery source base for studying. I do hope to do some archival work in Serbia in the near future to try to establish the contours of Serbian reaction to Jovanović's work during her lifetime. It would be a simple matter then to compare and contrast that to her reception in the Anglosphere.

In general, I have no doubt that literature from Southeastern Europe still bears the double burden of trying to be both poetic (ie, artistic) and political in Western eyes. Kiš said this best: outsiders insist on seeing *homo politicus* instead of *homo poeticus*, and that does a great disservice to local writing. In the past thirty years, I think there has been a real shift towards meeting writing from Central and Southeastern Europe and the former USSR on its own terms. That said, I don't deny having a certain fondness for ethnographic elements in a novel. I don't consider this a predilection for „rootedness” (I am suspicious of all reductionist and normative prescriptions for healthy national „identity”) but rather for context. It's not exoticism I am drawn to, but rather historicity. Often. But not always. Perhaps it's obnoxious of me, but I grin when people talk about „historical novels.” I know what they usually mean: real-life historical figures, above all. To my mind, though, every novel is historical, regardless of its setting. All novels are cultural products that originate in and leave their tracks through history. In the rare event that the characters are not realistic humans, the writers certainly are, and that's historical enough for me.

To broach a related topic: I don't really accept, personally, the distinction so many people insist upon, between local concerns and universal values. If a book is written by a human being, it's meant for human beings. If a literary work demands more energy or knowledge from a reader, why is that a problem? Do great truths really need to be sweet and simple to swallow like sore throat lozenges? I hope that these are more than just pet peeves and digressions; I mean them as a defense of something that shouldn't need defending: the value of writing in languages that are less frequently studied and translated. I refuse to call them „small literatures.”

Serbian literature, which never ceases to amaze me with its breadth and complex achievements over the past 150 years, seems reasonably well represented currently, at least for the decades since World War II. But it nonetheless deserves a fuller profile, especially in terms of earlier periods and alternative movements, in North America, the UK, and beyond. This goal could be approached by translators and publishers working together to get novels by Judita Šalgo, Mirko Kovač, and Milovan Danojlić into circulation, along with *Kronika palanačkog groblja* by Isidora Sekulić,

and the last great Crnjanski awaiting translation, *Dnevnik o Čarnojeviću*. I've translated some excerpts from the latter. There are many other books that would comprise alternate routes to this goal, including some by contemporary writers, but these five loom large in my thinking these days. I think I want to translate Šalgo next, if I can establish contact with the rights-holders, but I am enthusiastically exploring a wide range of other works. Some of these other works are of quite recent vintage.

At the present time, I am lined up to translate *Atelanska igra* (The Atellan Farce) by Dragana Kršenković Brković, Jurij Koch, and Jovanović's third novel, *Duša, jedinica moja* (My Soul, My One and Only). I am also finishing up short prose works by the Croatian writers Tea Tulić, and Neva Lukić, for a special European issue of a Canadian journal. Their writing is invigorating and lyrical and keenly observed—and it is just the tip of the iceberg; I have worked little with Croatian literature, save the big musical novel of Vjenceslav Novak, *A Tale of Two Worlds*, but I would like to do more if opportunities present themselves. I am intrigued by Matoš, Pavličić, Dežulović, Ivo Brešan, and Slobodan Šnajder. Sometimes I feel like I should go back across the border to Hungary---at least in my mind, since I can't go there in person due to my country's failure to manage our COVID-19 crisis effectively---and spend a year on the great Erzsébet Galgóczi's underappreciated 1984 novel *Vidravas* (The Trap or The Steel Trap). We'll see. My ties to Belgrade are currently warm and expansive, and I truly enjoy traveling to Serbia. I'm able to get to Belgrade once a year or so, usually in the early autumn. If I detour, I doubt I'll stay gone for long.

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