

chronological survey of the events in Bosnia during the second half of 1995.¹

In the final section of the original, however, entitled "Acknowledgements," Silber and Little tell us that "to work in the former Yugoslavia is to enter a world of parallel truths" (390). And they conclude by stating, "Any errors of judgement this book contains . . . are, of course, our own" (311). The writer of this review is not a historian and would rather refrain from judging the historical accuracy of the book. Nonetheless, as a reader and observer, I find it both an exciting and terrifying excursion into the not-so-distant past. The chapter on Bosnia is both shocking and depressing as the reader realizes that the worst nightmares of history can and do repeat themselves. For a resident of the former Yugoslavia this well-written work is bound to recall very vividly perhaps suppressed but not forgotten memories. For a foreigner, it may be a shocking revelation.

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Aleš Debeljak, *Twilight of the Idols: Recollections of a Lost Yugoslavia*. Fredonia, NY: White Pine Press, 1994. Translated by Michael Biggins. Photographs by Elizabeth Rappaport. 85 pp., \$10 (paper).

----- *Somrak idolov*. Klagenfurt: Wieser, 1994. 45 pp. (paper).

Mercifully, in North America our deepest suffering during the break-up of Yugoslavia was listening to experts who knew too little. They still confuse the players because they do not have a program (and foreign names are too difficult), but they often have an agenda. The favorite cliché (at one forum Pierre Trudeau and Mikhail Gorbachev agreed on it) is the one about ancient hatreds as a result of which nothing can be done. Oh yes, and everybody is equally guilty. To these and others I recommend Aleš Debeljak's moving and intelligent account of what happened in Yugoslavia.

¹ Later editions by Laura Silber and Allan Little are: *The Death of Yugoslavia*, rev. ed. (London: Penguin; BBC Books, 1996). *Yugoslavia: Death of a Nation*, rev. and updated ed. (New York: Penguin, 1997).

What is most wonderful in *Twilight* is a love song to the Yugoslavia that was. To have loved it as much as Debeljak clearly did does not mean, of course, that one necessarily choose the wrong side during the break-up, as did, for instance, Peter Handke and Emir Kusturica. Debeljak knows the good guys from the bad guys and he names names. He is so angry about Serbian nationalism precisely because it destroyed Yugoslavia. Many Slovenes (and other South Slavs) share this feeling. They did not leave Yugoslavia; they are not the cliché separatists of simplistic Western analysis. Their Yugoslavia was stolen from them. They exited just in time from a perverted version of it. Witness Bosnia.

But how many of the people that need to understand what has happened in Bosnia are ever going to read a book like this one, published in a suburb of Buffalo, the laudatory review of the *Village Voice* notwithstanding? How many of the people in a position to do something for Bosnia are literate enough to understand it? Lewis MacKenzie, who dropped out of university after two years, says in *Peacekeeper* that he wishes Dr. Ejup Ganic's training had been in philosophy like his. A few dozen people in North America will read this book, and probably none of those who need to.

Twilight is better when loving than when angry, partly because love need not be explained as much as anger. The love shines through, the anger must be backed up, and so, no matter how accurate, it still sounds like propaganda. I might agree that, "just as obvious, however, is the fact that we will have to learn to live with new values and ideals in the coming century, for our century died in Sarajevo" (15), but the statement sounds too dramatic and intellectual and *mitteleuropäisch*. A cynical North American, I was surprised that even Mojca Drčar-Murko recently tried to get Zbigniew Brzezinski to say that Slovenia was strategically important in the new world order; I was not surprised to hear him respond that every Eastern European country he has ever been to thought that it was the most important. Pardon my cynicism, even about the importance of Sarajevo. Better that, I hope, than the hypocrisy, which Debeljak attacks throughout, of those who subscribe to all the correct values but did nothing to save Sarajevo.

I have no objection, however, to singing along with Debeljak's singing along with Johnny Štulić. How beautifully Debeljak presents

the scene of his "nesrečni rojak" (29) singing a song of old Yugoslavia in the Paris Metro: "neko me voli / sanja o meni / gleda me kradom / ali ne znam tko" (29-30). What is wonderful about the book is not only Debeljak's own writing but his impresario's work of having made an anthology of the Yugoslavia he loved—its places, poets, wines, little magazines, girls, the seaside. The song in the metro is a song he grew up with; I did not, and I am so grateful for his having given it to me.

The translation here, incidentally, though itself lovely, has not a chance because what is essential in the text, in the scene, is the relationship between Slovenian and Serbo-Croatian, or whatever the correct term for the language may be now. There is no way to render that relationship when in the translation both languages are now English. And such a relationship is what the book is about.

I read *Twilight of the Idols* in tandem with *Somrak idolov*, casting glances as much as reading. You know translators. Let me just put two representative swatches side by side so that you can see for yourself the general quality. Writes Debeljak:

Na razlike v nekdanji federalni državi sem bil pred obiskovalci iz Zahoda ponosen s tisto vrsto srečne samoumevnosti s kakršno je gozdar ponosen na prostranstva svojih smrekovih gozdov, čeprav se bohotno razraščajo zaradi ritma deževnih in suhih dni, ne pa zaradi njegove posebne skrbi (19).

Biggins translates:

When Westerners came to visit, I showed my pride in our federation's diversity with the kind of blissful matter-of-factness that a woodsman shows toward his pine forests, even though their luxuriance is the result of an even succession of dry and rainy days, not any special effort on his part (35).

It is a formidable job translating a poet writing prose. This is good translating.

I was reminded, reading the two versions side by side, how much translating from a language and a world like the Slovenian, or even the slightly larger Yugoslav world, must needs be translating-cum-explaining. Which necessity, alas, affects the style. Here is a simple

example. Says Debeljak: "Vendar za nas ni bil odločilnega pomena samo priznana vplivni Borges, ampak predvsem Danilo Kiš" (41). Since the reader in English would at this point ask, Who? the translator—or perhaps the translator, the writer, and the editor—gives the sentence as, "The truly decisive role in our formation as writers, however, wasn't Borges, as influential as he was, but the Serbian-Jewish writer Danilo Kiš" (68). I understand that this footnote-in-the-text had to be added, but what happens after a book-full of these addenda is that the tone of private meditation in front of an intelligent reader becomes more pedestrian or pedagogical. Perhaps better to make no allowances, demand that the reader follow, and stop apologizing for a small frame of reference! The reader who is not prepared to research is not worth having! One should find out who Kiš is. Had I been the editor, I would have noticed instead a glitch here: Neither Borges nor Kiš can *be* a role. (One cannot say that "the decisive role . . . was Kiš.") Debeljak is elegant and so, most of the time, is Biggins. But writers rarely get the editors they deserve.

Similarly, it is pointless to gloss helpfully but lamely as in the following change from, "kakor da bi stopili iz romana Meše Selimovića *Derviš in smrt*" (20) to, "as though they'd walked straight out of Meša Selimović's brilliant novel *Death and the Dervish*" (36). I know the idea is to convince us of Selimović's brilliance, but the adjective will not do it. What is needed, at least, is more economy. When Sorško polje (31) is done as the Sora River's flood plain (55), is not at least "River" redundant? When Alice Munro tells us about a nameless river flowing into the Saugeen, she does not have to say, "the Saugeen River," though the Saugeen is as unknown as the Sora. The running helpful glosses ruin the rhythm and thus detract from a book which you want to show to your friends or hurl at the next person spouting clichés about "the former Yugoslavia." Such a target would be Thomas Friedman of the *New York Times*, who did not "give two cents for Bosnia," he repeats, "not two cents." Because the people brought their troubles upon themselves!

What a business this translation! This reviewer has made his share of mistakes.¹ There are some oversights in the Biggins

¹ I once translated the *zmaje* in Kocbek's "Lipicanci" as "kites," and not because I did not know they were dragons (and not toys) but because the rhythmic values of "kites" seduced me at the same time I was

translation. How, for instance, did *repententi* (9) (what Debeljak calls the people who destroyed Yugoslavia and went to work on Bosnia) become "flunkies" (18)? I suspect there must have been a conference between writer and translator in which signals were crossed. For, of course, a *repentent* is someone who *flunks*, but people who flunk, who repeat a grade, are not *flunkies*, not in English. Biggins does not need to be told this, to be sure. And we, glad to have anybody at all publishing Slovenians cannot complain about editors. Where will we find a bilingual one?

In a discussion of *jugo-rock*, however, some real problems arise:

. . . Seveda, jugo-rock je izhajal iz univerzalne matrice, basa, kitare, bobnov, in vokala. Hkrati pa je pil pri izviru folklornih melodij, zaradi katerih so naši zahodni vrstniki vadili *Yellow Submarine* in *Rock'n'Roll Music*, začetniški kitaristi pa so po kleteh in garažah nekdanje Jugoslavije poskušali poleg Beatlesov in Chuck Berryja oponašati tudi sedem-osminski takt bosenskega bluesa . . . (28).

Biggins' translation is as follows, for some reason over two paragraphs:

. . . Of course, Yugo-rock was based on the universal configuration of bass, guitar, drums and voice, but it also drew on the living well-springs of Southern Slavic folk melodies.

The result: while our Western contemporaries were practicing standard numbers like "Yellow Submarine" and "Rock'n'Roll Music," novice guitarists in basements and garages all over Yugoslavia tried to imitate the seven-eighths rhythms of Bosnian blues . . . (50).

That is to say, the original says that the influence was dual, Berry *et al* plus the Bosnian sounds. The translation has only the Bosnian influence. This is not a quibble. The point of this book is that Debeljak and his people belonged to both worlds. The picture which appeared in the *New York Times* of the handsome woman in a very short skirt running past Sarajevo's Sniper Alley is important because it counters in

remembering some frightening post-murder kites in *Macbeth*, and so I put the two together and came up with a glaring error.

a wry way the Serbian nationalist version that theirs is a war against Muslim fundamentalism.

This is how the original passage continues:

. . . tudi sedem-osminski takt bosenskega bluesa, kakršnega je vrtoglavo popularni sarajevski bend *Bjelo Dugme* igral v nesmrtnih komadih *Selma*, *Ne spavaj moja mala* in *Sve je to od lošeg vina*, v katerih je moja za vedno minula mladost našla nepozabne himne, ki smo jih po šolskih hodnikih prve sarajevske, klasične zagrebske in ljubljanske šentviške gimnazije prepevali na enako amaterski način (28-29).

The translation reads:

. . . tried to imitate the seven-eighths rhythms of Bosnian blues immortalized immortal by the vertiginously popular Sarajevo band White Button in songs like "Selma," "Don't sleep my sweet" and "Blame it on the bad wine" which provided my schoolmates and me with unforgettable anthems to sing in the corridors of Sarajevo First High School, Zagreb Classical and Ljubljana-Šentvid High Schools in the equally amateurish way as we marked the passing of our youth (50).

The translation suggests that Debeljak and his friends were marking the passing of their youth while they were singing those songs. This makes little sense unless these kids were awfully maudlin. These were the songs of their youth, which they were not mourning while they were in it. They were happy then. This is a passage about the death of Yugoslavia. In the original, Debeljak mourns now those happy days which are gone, not only because time passes. It is because of the brutal death of Yugoslavia that his and his friends' youth is a "za vedno minula mladost."

I notice, however, that these misreadings happen in a paragraph that says the Bosnian rhythms were "immortalized immortal" and I just know that the problem here is the editor or something in the gears of translation. Did this have to be hurried for White Pine in order

that it be relevant? If it had not appeared quickly, the Bosnian war might have ended first.²

I understand that there are natural problems in translating a poet who is writing to make a point. It does seem to me, nonetheless, that Biggins too often forgets the poet. In a section of "grief for the South" (47), we read, for instance: "Ker ima srce svoje razloge za katere razum ne ve, tudi metafizika mojega razklanega, za neponovljivo izkustvo oropanega srca raste iz spomina na skupno preteklost" (32). The translation is: "Because the heart has its reasons of which reason has no understanding, the metaphysics of my divided heart still grow (sic) from the memory of a shared past that I cannot renounce" (56). I think "divided" is too mild an equivalent for *razklanega*, but that is debatable. However, what happened to the wonderfully rhythmic "za neponovljivo izkustvo oropanega srca"? Unfortunately it probably cannot be positioned in English where it is in Slovenian, but neither should it be omitted, even if the original is merely repeating itself. It is what poets do. *Razklano* is archaic or dramatic enough that I would have "sundered the heart." "The metaphysics of a sundered heart"? As for the word *oropanega*? "The metaphysics of a sundered heart, whose unrepeatability experiences were looted"? "The metaphysics of my sundered heart, its unrepeatability experiences looted, . . ."? "The metaphysics of my sundered heart, looted of its unrepeatability experiences"? *Izkustvo* is another matter altogether, and not an easy one, for one phrase does not make a translation. It is easy to say what should not be left out and that "metaphysics" is singular.

This is a moving and important book. It is the book of a poet and thus speaks volumes in its few pages. Yet its distribution over there may have been limited by objections to its yugonostalgia and over here by the opaqueness of many of the cultural references.

² I am reminded of the time UNESCO in Ljubljana printed my rough draft of a pamphlet translation instead of the final version, under my name. I blamed it on communist shoddiness. Here the problem is that Slovenian writers and thus their translators are not yet sufficiently prominent. Plus, a bit, I suspect, of that feeling of gratefulness that anyone is paying attention, which causes us to hurry.

Elizabeth Rappaport's photographs are glorious. There is a Muslim refugee holding her son on p. 39 who should be remembered as The Madonna of Srebrenica.

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Josip Vidmar, *Kulturni problem slovenstva; išlo ob stoletnici avtorjevga rojstva*. Spremnna beseda, Aleš Debeljak. Edited by Andrej Blatnik. Ljubljana: Cankarjeva založba, 1995. 93 pp. (paper).

The recent reprint of Josip Vidmar's *Kulturni problem slovenstva* (*The Cultural Problem of Slovendom*)¹ represents one of the most timely publications of a classical text on the existential problem of Slovenes in the new, independent Republic of Slovenia and neighboring, ethnolinguistically related Slovene minorities in today Italy, Austria and Hungary's frontier regions. The first edition of this essay appeared in 1932,² at the time of the earliest existential crisis of Slovene intellectuals in Yugoslavia;³ it was reprinted in 1963 by Vidmar himself;⁴ three decades later it has reappeared as a memorial to the 100th anniversary of Josip Vidmar's birth.

Josip Vidmar's interest in the Slovene national question underlying his essay, *Kulturni problem slovenstva*, is in a way simply a continuation of his mission during his student years in the

¹ Sloven-dom (*slovenstvo*), with a living suffix -dom [OE -d ōm, OHG -tuom, -dom, freely employed to form nonce-derivatives with the sense of state of fact of being, dignity, realm, jurisdiction as in king-dom, duke-dom, free-dom, Christen-dom, Anglo-Saxon-dom. For the Contemporary Standard Slovene *slovenstvo*, compare with German *Slovenen-tum*. Cf. -dom in *Webster's New Collegiate Dictionary* (Springfield, MA: Merriam, 1977) and in *The Compact Edition of the Oxford English Dictionary* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1971).

² Josip Vidmar (1895-1992); cf. Franc Zadavec, "Vidmar, Josip," *Slovenski biografski leksikon*, 4.13 (Ljubljana: Slovenska akademija znanosti in umetnosti, 1980-1992) 444-451.

³ Josip Vidmar, *Kulturni problem slovenstva*, *Slovenske poti*, 3, ed. Juš Kozak (Ljubljana: Tiskovna zadruga, 1932).

⁴ Josip Vidmar, *Srečanje z zgodovino* (1932; Maribor: Založba Obzorja, 1963) 23-84.