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## MILICA MIĆIĆ DIMOVSKA AND THE CHALLENGES OF SUBTLETY<sup>1</sup>

**Abstract:** The author considers the importance of translation in conveying the ideas and artistic production of less well-known authors, in this case Serbian author Milica Mićić Dimovska (1947-2013). Concentrating on two of her novels, *Poslednji zanos* (1996) and *Mrena* (2002), the article discusses potential political interpretations of Mićić Dimovska's writing, with some attention to its critical reception in Serbia, and speculates on how each of the novels might translate into English.

**Keywords:** Milica Mićić Dimovska, Milica Stojadinović Srpkinja, women writers, Serbian literature, prose, politics, criticism.

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<sup>1</sup> This paper was originally presented at the conference "Translating Eastern Europe" at The Ohio State University (Columbus, Ohio, USA), September 30-October 2, 2005. Some relevant later literature has been added to the notes and the bibliography. I thank Dr. Svetlana Tomić, who encouraged me to return to this paper.

I realized as I began to write my paper that the difficulties of this kind of presentation resemble the issues that arise in the process of translation: reading, choosing what to translate, working through various stages of the translation, and then seeking an audience. Who in the United States has heard of Milica Mičić Dimovska, besides specialists or émigrés who can read her in the original? What do people in North America know about Serbian literature, the matrix in which Dimovska worked even though she often referred to North American or Western European authors? How can I convey enough information about the books I want to discuss without bogging down in plot summary? There is a questionable “plus” in Serbia’s notoriety after media coverage in the 1990s and early 2000s, which might lend translations of writing from there a more dubious attraction as historical or social-science documents; many regions in Eastern Europe have likewise become more infamous, if not better known, since the fall of the Iron Curtain. A dual scholarly and translational focus presents an additional challenge: so much of what is interesting in a translator’s work experience lies in the practical, local, delicious details, which cannot always be abstracted into an explanatory whole other than the whole of the work that has been translated.

Serbian author Milica Mičić Dimovska was born in 1947 in Novi Sad, the capital city of the northern province of Vojvodina, where she lived until her death in 2013. Mičić Dimovska was a prominent voice in Serbian literature, the recipient of a number of literary prizes. Without listing all her awards, I note that the major prizes offer evidence of support among Serbian writers and publishers for the kind of writing she did, and also of broad interest in, if not general agreement with, the political import of her writing.<sup>2</sup> One that seems especially indicative is the 1999 Borisav Stanković prize, which she won for her novel *Poslednji zanosi MSS*. The award provided for publication of her two-part travelogue *Иџмонучу* in the old-fashioned looking style of Stanković’s own books (as if to signify that she had become a 19th-century classic after the fact, or as if to write her into the founding history of Serbian literature).<sup>3</sup> For the

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<sup>2</sup> Of course harsh criticism or even an attack is much more painful than the prize or praise that it might appear to counterbalance; consider the experience of Danilo Kiš, who nearly had a nervous breakdown after his 1976 novel *Grobnica za Borisa Davidoviča* was attacked in Belgrade for supposed plagiarism, despite winning a big prize in Zagreb at the same time.

<sup>3</sup> I can only speculate on the effect of this binding style on a customer in a bookstore: would the unassuming cover and small, old-fashioned format get lost amid the brighter covers, or would it stand out and arouse curiosity precisely because of this difference?

foreign translator, literary awards in the original country confirm that the author is significant, not just good but also representative—an important part of the local literary process—and that we translators are not, or are not only, reading for confirmation of our own political or other preferences.

As critic and scholar Jasmina Lukić has pointed out, the tone of Mićić Dimovska's writing fits with the general pessimism and naturalism of most significant post-WWII Serbian prose: it is far from Socialist Realism (Lukić, 1996, 225-26). I would also stress the plane of the visual, a source of beauty and sometimes epiphanies that can compensate for the frequent darkness of the narration—her characters intensely experience the surface of a river's water or the sun shining on a painted wall or dusty street, and these passages offer the chance to linger over her prose as if in front of a painting. Mićić Dimovska's fiction in the last twenty or so years of her life came to convey unusually complex messages, often though not exclusively focusing on writers as exemplars of human creativity and moral choice. Hence, my title refers to "the challenges of subtlety"—the challenges she presents to the translator and also to the Milošević regime, which was widely disliked in Vojvodina (even if not as widely as people might now wish to remember), but even more to the people, especially the writers and scholars, who compromise with the powers-that-be in any historical era. The pressure to accommodate in order to survive and to reach an audience is a recurrent factor in Eastern European literary production. Mićić Dimovska examines and depicts this phenomenon in Serbia, where recent history has offered some particularly appalling examples. Taking advantage of my position as her translator, I have evidence of the importance of political readings for Dimovska: she sent me photocopies and newspaper clippings, making sure that I knew about attacks on her work and the political responses of readers and critics in Serbia, as if to ensure that I would keep those in mind as I translated and introduced her work or presented it to Anglophone readers as a critic or scholar.

Mićić Dimovska portrays her society and its distant or recent past in a subtly critical but deeply engaged manner. The same is true of each character in her work. Her novels, short stories and travelogues set realistic events and personalities within a rich context of memory, family relationship, and ethnic, religious and national identities. She has an ear for clever or expressive language and seems particularly fond of writing about poets, the people who are most deeply involved with language even if some of them use their creative powers in the service of vanity and self-deception. In one passage that nicely summarizes her translator's dilemma, she mentions a term her father used, 'caplav,' which she herself had to ask him about (it means that the back of a person's head is squashed flat). She told me she regretted that she was unable to use her father's very precise and expressive "localisms," drawn from the village where he grew

up; no one else would know the meanings, and explaining in a footnote would spoil the effect: "The picture must be like lightning, and an explanation in a footnote is not a picture but accompanying text."<sup>4</sup> For a translator of her work, this is a significant issue. The difficulty her language presents is partly in finding equivalents for its local specificity, the Vojvodinian flavor conveyed by regional language or terms that originated in German or Hungarian, and her use of local toponyms. Even when she uses more standard language, it often includes wordplay reflecting the mental life of her characters. If you're lucky, the words will play in another language, as when one aging poet with a love for Latin anagrams the vocative form of the name of a colleague he does not care for, Theodore, into the Latin for "I detest you"—"te odero." In the same book, an avant-garde poet, who would seem to share nothing with the older man except their vocation, mentally juggles the letters that symbolize blood types, A, B and O, into the word BAOBAB. The story "Odmrzavanje" [Defrosting] offers a lovely contrast of the stiff and cliché-ridden speech of the retired Party official, Radmila Jovanović, with the tabloid-inflected style of the narrator's officious and less well-educated mother. The heroine of the novel *Poslednji zanosi MSS* speaks in an anachronistic, heroico-poetic lexicon that resounds absurdly in conversations with anyone else, but especially her lower-class companion, Teodora.

As these examples suggest, Dimovska was sharply aware of the sociology of language and values, the specificity of each character's tone, and the various beliefs or habits of thought that both create and reflect that linguistic fingerprint (I will return to this aspect below). The difficulty of conveying this individuality was eased by Dimovska's willingness to discuss her word choices—she was a living writer who was a treat to work with. Many of the loaded locally-marked terms simply cannot be rendered by equivalent means. This verbal texture, with its various political and cultural associations, is present in her stories and travelogues as well as in her longer prose, but I will focus here on its significance in two novels: *Poslednji zanosi MSS* and *Mrena*.

Mićić Dimovska's 1996 novel *Poslednji zanosi MSS* [The Final Ecstasies of MSS], whose third edition came out in 2003 and fourth in 2015, is a very provocative treatment of a somewhat sacred cow, the nineteenth-century poetess (and I use the term advisedly) Milica Stojadinović Srpkinja (1830-1878). The importance of Stojadinović Srpkinja is suggested by the number of subsequent scholarly and critical works that

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<sup>4</sup> This source was previously found at [http://host.sezampro.yu/jezikdana/5-98/5-98\\_8.htm/](http://host.sezampro.yu/jezikdana/5-98/5-98_8.htm/) but is unfortunately no longer accessible.

have addressed Dimovska's novel.<sup>5</sup> In an interview with the late Judita Šalgo, Mičić Dimovska succinctly points out the coincidences that drew her attention to Stojadinović Srpkinja—though the novel's title elides it by using initials, they share a first name (Šalgo, 1995, 169-170). "Milica" means 'dear,' suggesting that the woman who bears it was a welcome and beloved child. It might be translated into English roughly as "Amy," with the additional weight of the medieval Serbian queens who bore it. The authors' other names also make for a revealing comparison. Mičić and Stojadinović are ordinary surnames, though markedly Serbian, but Milica Stojadinović's self-assigned pseudonym, "Srpkinja" [meaning 'Serbian woman'] trumpets her nationality, while Milica Mičić Dimovska's second last name, from her Macedonian husband, implicates her in ethnic mixing. Choosing to use her husband's surname alongside her own in her literary signature (and using the feminine form of the last name as Macedonian does, rather than the masculine form) argues implicitly for the productive complexity of intermarriage and *against* the more unitary message of 'Srpkinja'. A second coincidence is that both Stojadinović Srpkinja and Mičić Dimovska came from Vojvodina, once part of the Austro-Hungarian empire, and an early place where Serbian women rose to recognition as artists or scholars—Dimovska mentioned proudly in her letters the example of mathematician Mileva Marić Einstein, and she always stressed Vojvodina's cosmopolitanism, its mixture of languages and ethnicities.<sup>6</sup> Finally, the two are both writers, meaning that Milica Stojadinović is necessarily a part of Milica Dimovska's artistic family tree, before either of them had a chance to choose. Dimovska's many years of work at Matica srpska gave her access to Stojadinović's letters and diaries and other archival materials, and she quotes them copiously. In a 2002 article, Nina Ivanović compares this novel to Peter Ackroyd's *Last Testament of Oscar Wilde*, as they both incorporate known history and extensive citation from the writings of their main characters, and create a kind of parallel reality, recognizably both familiar and different, incorporating a good dose of fiction. The combination of historical accuracy, which springs from respect and research, with invention, which suggests a more critical perspective, embodies the author's critical position vis-à-vis a hero who was once alive

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<sup>5</sup> See for example Popov 1997, Forester 1998, Pavković 1999, Hawkesworth 2000, Ribnikar 2012, and among journalistic reviews Mirković 1996, Kragujević 1997, Vladušić 1997, and others.

<sup>6</sup> Even more than in her stories, in her insistence (as president of one of the Vojvodina writers' organizations) that the sign in Serbian only at the writers' union be replaced by the multi-lingual one that had been there until the early 1990s.

and active as a significant cultural creator. The interweaving of "real" and "invented" elements allows Dimovska to engage in a dialogue with her predecessor. This, like the coincidences of name and origin, adds nuances to Dimovska's obvious differences from Stojadinović: both are deeply concerned with Serbian literature and culture, and the fate of the Serbian people, though the kinds of concern and the ways they express it are distinct.

Mićić Dimovska's harshly naturalistic presentation of Stojadinović's fall from prosperity and respectability and the earlier poet's responsibility for her own fall offended some readers. This was similar to, though perhaps less intense than, the reaction of Vladimir Nabokov's publisher to the depiction of Nikolai Chernyshevsky in his novel *Dar* [The Gift]: the fourth chapter, which gave a less than flattering biography of Chernyshevsky as written by the novel's hero Fyodor Godunov-Cherdyntsev, was not included in the 1938 publication, and the full Russian text was not published until 1952. Stojadinović Srpkinja is remembered for a few very good, stirring patriotic verses. Her official image seems to be frozen in her early youth, in her 1848 appearance wearing the colors of the Serbian flag, as if to suggest that she herself embodied the feminine abstraction of the nation, beautiful and demanding. Dimovska looks at Stojadinović later in life rather than in her pretty and promising youth: in the novel the poet is nearing fifty, an old maid, lonely and impoverished. Her brother, heir to all the family's property, has gradually forced her out of her home. The disconnect between a past of youth, beauty and fame and her misfortunes in age also shows up in repetition of the word "rodoljupka." At first reading, it is just the feminine form of the Slavonic form "rodoljub," a lover of the *rodina* not Latinized in the alternative form "patriot." As the word recurs, the reader may begin to notice a new connotation in the word's second half, "ljupka," which is identical to the feminine adjective meaning "cute," "darling," maybe even "kissy." "Ljupka" is a word well suited to an 18-year-old poetess whose pose of fiery patriotism is both attractive and influential, but not to an old maid whose behavior should by now have evolved into something more adult and effective.<sup>7</sup> Milica Stojadinović remains trapped in the youthful, girlish mode of being that first brought her success, resting on her laurels; in that single word, Milica Dimovska summarizes a great deal about literary politics and the shape of women's lives. How could a signal like

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<sup>7</sup> Another form of this word, "rodoljubica," is also used in the novel. I would argue that there is a similar significance to the second part of this word, "ljubica," which means the flower violet, similarly feminine and diminutive, as well as a common female first name.

the emergence of the word "ljupka" from "rodoljupka" be conveyed in translation? Only by weaving the meaning more widely into the text, since there is no corresponding morphology for feminine nouns in English, never mind one that happens to combine patriotism with cutesy diminutive femininity. Elsewhere, Dimovska shows Stojadinović Srpkinja's sensitivity to language in the pain the poetess feels when her favorite literary and historical character, Jeanne d'Arc, is belittled by urban wags in the coinage "žandarka" [female gendarme]. Once she has heard this term scornfully applied to (horrors!) a German woman who is visiting Belgrade after taking part in fighting in Hercegovina, Stojadinović Srpkinja abandons her dream of writing a great poem in Serbian about Joan of Arc, whom she had intended to "translate" into "Jovanka Srbijanka." This was the one and only writing project the aging poetess still dreamed of, and giving it up means the end of her hopes and future as a writer; it had symbolized her aliveness as a creative artist even as it (again) underlined the overblown and unproductive ideals she held of womanhood and of the possibilities available for her own actions as a woman poet.

Dimovska's thoughtful and in many ways generous approach to Stojadinović takes the earlier writer seriously, depicting the injustice she faced as an unmarried woman whose brother inherited the family home and property to leave her without resources, but the novel ultimately shows her responsibility for many errors much more harshly than would a reading that celebrated her patriotism and fame and rejoiced merely that there *had* been a woman writing poetry in that time and place. Stojadinović's unhappy life is most conclusively ruined by her own worldview and behavior in a process that Dimovska documents in excruciating detail. This closeness to the heroine and critical attitude towards her works and deeds is deeply feminist; it works to reclaim a problematic ancestress and bring her persuasively to life, in order to bury her mistakes more securely. Dimovska's serious and invested approach to a second-rank predecessor is more striking if we compare it to the very different tone of Russian émigré poet Vladislav Khodasevič writing about Russian poetess Evdokija Rostopčina (1811-1858),<sup>8</sup> or Serbian Modernist tastemaker Jovan Skerlić writing about Milica Stojadinović Srpkinja herself.<sup>9</sup> A second, and I would say equally important, project is to offer a critique, though with such subtlety that many of Dimovska's readers seem to have missed it, of the literary and political failures of her own contemporaries, resulting

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<sup>8</sup> Vladislav Khodasevič, «Графиня Е. П. Ростопчина, Ее жизнь и творчество», 1908.

<sup>9</sup> Jovan Skerlić, "Milica Stojadinović Srpkinja. Književna slika", in his *Pisci i knjige* (Belgrade, 1907).

from their primitively patriotic attitudes towards writing and culture. The flagging artistic production and foundering reputation of the ultra-patriotic authoress MSS can be extrapolated to scourge both the political misprisions and the artistic limitations of many more recent authors.<sup>10</sup> This theme comes out in much more detail in her next novel, *Mrena* (2002; second edition 2003, third edition 2015).

You can see why a novel about Stojadinović Srpkinja might be interesting reading for people who study women writers, nineteenth-century poetry, or Eastern European culture in general—but I fear that the features I have pointed out would go right over the head of a North American reader, who would surely never have heard of Milica Stojadinović (or even of the more famous friends of her youth, Vuk Karadžić and Petar Petrović Njegoš), or of Vojvodina, and who would have no idea about the events or currents of thought in which Milica Stojadinović moved, or the history of the relationship between Vojvodina and Belgrade, the capital of "narrower" Serbia, to which Stojadinović eventually moved, though Dimovska did not. Milica Stojadinović Srpkinja's writings and career show that many Vojvodinians have held an image of the province and its meaning quite unlike Milica Mičić Dimovska's more ecumenical one.<sup>11</sup> How could the shock of the novel's polemical edge be conveyed? Perhaps by placing it in a series devoted to 19th century women writers; by appending a scholarly introduction and lots of footnotes, which could prepare a sufficiently patient reader for a more informed and picturesque second reading; by putting it on the internet with lots of explanatory live links? The specificity that lets the novel hit home at home dresses the more universal parts of its message in local color that would need to be interpreted for foreign readers.

Mičić Dimovska's more recent novel, *Mrena* [The Cataract], is much more complex in structure than *Poslednji zanosi MSS*, involving a large cast and wide variety of characters—so many that it takes some time to settle into the book on first reading. It is set in Novi Sad over several months in 1998-1999, from shortly before until shortly after the NATO bombardment of what was then "rump" Yugoslavia. The narrative consciousness and center of attention shift from one character to another, in the third person, with several featuring in the sections of

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<sup>10</sup> See Forrester (1998) for more on that aspect of the novel.

<sup>11</sup> A similar reading is given in Tomić, 2018, pp. 232-42, which suggests among other things that a feminist approach to literature can produce consistent interpretive results when applied in different times and places.

each chapter. We see the various personages from one another's perspectives—all self-centered, and many also full of self-righteousness and self-justification. Each speaks and thinks with a distinct language and tone, though they are connected or divided by family, not-quite-outgrown friendship, and intellectual and institutional bonds. The shift from one center of consciousness to another establishes a number of contrasting worldviews in quick succession, and especially political positions and opinions, all given as internally persuasive discourse. The novel is a feast for Bakhtinian analysis, as Dimovska distributes her own known biographical or psychological traits among the characters, or in a few cases must have imagined what a person would have to be like in order to think or speak in a certain way. She is fascinated by the ways people perceive events, other people, and themselves.

The novel's topics include political debate and the evolution of political loyalties. The images that some characters hold of others, their memories of past words and beliefs or shared passions, both deepen their depictions and show how some of them now edit or even falsify their pasts, claiming they were persecuted in socialist Yugoslavia for their Serbian orientation or that their transformation from former cog in the system to ranting reactionary was the result of religious conversion. The cultural spectrum is as wide as the political, ranging from an avant-garde performance artist and a lively group of pro-reform student journalists through aging poets or scholars of high status, whether truly creative artists or epigones. The major characters range in age from seventeen to over 80, spanning several generations, and some of the variation in their concerns reflects the differences in age: the youngest are pursuing sex or romantic relationships, while the middle-aged fret about such things and the oldest recollect them. Grandmother and aging former partisan Miroslava Prodanović refuses to go for an operation on her titular cataract, because as she declares she no longer cares to see the world, but the sections that include her reminiscences are especially coherent, vivid and moving, even if they never coalesce into what you would call a plot. She ponders and recreates events of her own life, paying attention to the lives of her parents as well, the historical and political streams that shaped their opportunities and choices, and the production and fate of secrets that lose their taboo quality as the bearers age and die. Some secrets, like the classic Serbian poet Đorđe Omorac's Catholic Croatian maternal ancestry, only emerge after death, when his will specifies that he wishes to be buried in a local Catholic graveyard. We actually witness Omorac's death both from within his own narrative consciousness and from the point of view of the other Serbian forum members sitting around him at a meeting, though the novel leaves many other plot lines as unresolved loose ends.

The shifts from one character to another bring corresponding changes in language register, from Miroslava Prodanović's flexible everyday vocabulary, peppered with socialist-era acronyms that her own grandchildren might not understand, to the stiffly formal or even Slavono-Serbian syntax of some of the aging literary functionaries,<sup>12</sup> who write and even speak in a locally-marked old-fashioned language that recalls Vojvodina's historical claim as a center of Serbian cultural activity (and that resembles Milica Stojadinović Srpkinja's speech register). Some of the most prehistoric of these old writers are interesting and likable and clearly merit the author's sympathy, though they too direct the novel's world only while they are the narrative center. The members of the middle generation, stymied in their career ambitions or family lives by the sanctions on the local economy or else freed by the system's breakdown to pursue illegal or semi-legal activities, speak and think with an educated informality that may bear whole rafts of clichés, adopted wholesale from the media or from the political and cultural debates around them. Quotations from Milošević, the Bible, or modernist author Isidora Sekulić, another significant woman from Vojvodina, reveal potentially new meanings when harnessed to the trains of thought of the various characters. The young adults speak and think a hip lingo full of slang and popular song lyrics or band names in English (intentionally or not, including a few grammatical mistakes in the English), leavened with quotations from school readings in Nietzsche or Ralph Waldo Emerson. Compared to *Poslednji zanos* MSS with its single central heroine, *Mrena* has a striking multitude of actors. It could also be argued, though, that the book takes Novi Sad itself as its main character, enriching its recognizable streets, buildings, cultural references and recent events with characters who elaborate on recognizable types with their individual worldviews and experiences. We watch every one of these characters making compromises—the big difference between the more and less positive is that the more positive (for example, Stevan Prodanović, son of Miroslava) see themselves choosing to compromise their principles and feel disgust or regret, rather than pretending that things are as they should be.

The novel's depiction of the cultural and personal polemics of Novi Sad led to a media polemic in 2003: the respected journal *Letopis Matice srpske* published a highly negative review of the novel, signed by the secretary of Matica

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<sup>12</sup> Slavono-Serbian was the written language that emerged in Vojvodina in the 18th and early 19th centuries, with syntax and vocabulary largely drawn from Russian, the native language of many of the orthodox priests there.

srpska, Dragan Stanić, who now in 2020 is the president of Matica srpska.<sup>13</sup> Milica Mićić Dimovska worked at Matica srpska for many years, until early 2003, when she retired in anticipation of the birth of her first grandchild. She was also a member of the editorial board of *Letopis* when the review appeared, but was ill at home and was not informed that it had been published. Translating this review would offer its own pleasures and challenges, and I regret that the limits of space do not permit me to cite some of its more Soviet-sounding passages, worthy of commentary by Nina Seergeevna, the heroine of Lidija Chukovskaia's novel *Going Under*. In her letter of resignation from the board of *Letopis*, Mićić Dimovska referred to its tone as “‘Informbureau’-ovski,” objecting not to its negative evaluation of her novel but to its attitude and tactics. Among other things, the review's author reproached her for having the book published in the Latin alphabet rather than Cyrillic, hinting darkly that this would make its supposedly anti-Serbian message more accessible to “others” who might rejoice at her criticism or pessimism. Stanić apparently did not read past the first 20 pages or so of this 336-page novel and never reached the critical depictions of its more “Europeanist” characters, but his harsh reaction, evidently approved by a sufficient number of other members of the editorial board of *Letopis*, shows that despite the many awards Dimovska's writing could present an unwelcome challenge to literary and political powers-that-be. Matica srpska is a much more treasured and defended institution than some woman writer from the nineteenth century.

Aside from this critical reception, which I shall not elaborate on further here, I found the novel *Mrena* much more translatable than *Poslednji zanosi MSS*, even with the difficulties introduced by its complexities and local references. The constant shifts between characters offer the chance to have fun, flex translatorial stylistic muscle, and leap from one stylistic register to another. The overt political message is ambiguous but very particular, expressed in the behavior and theories of well-recognized types,—one reviewer comments that the book would not be comprehensible to people from outside, but is only too comprehensible to anyone

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<sup>13</sup> Stanić actually signed the review with his literary pseudonym, Ivan Negrišorac, so that the reader here did not have the chance to see someone named Dragan [‘dear one’] snipe at someone named Milica. Note too that “Ivan” is the Croatian (or Bulgarian, or Russian) form of the widespread name Ioannis/John, versus Jovan, the Serbian form—thus Stanić's choice of pseudonym does not seem to harmonize with his critical orientation.

from the Balkans so the book best rewards a reading informed by knowledge of local history and political movements.<sup>14</sup> For example, some characters who were born and raised in Novi Sad refer to others as "dodoši" (newcomers) or (more neutrally) "kolonisti," and some of those "colonists" still feel like outsiders decades after moving to the city and carry a chip on their shoulders; this makes more sense if the reader knows that numerous Serbs were brought from Hercegovina and elsewhere to replace the ethnic Germans or *Volksdeutsch* and others who fled Yugoslavia or were massacred at the end of the Second World War. Like Miroslava Prodanović's recollections of her father's suicide or her husband's arrest by UDBA, the secret police, these details show how history continues to trickle down into the present. (The honesty about personal testimonies to historical fact may also threaten to undermine some of the ways local history has been presented since the end of Yugoslavia.) On the other hand, while some of the older characters scoff at American popular culture, their children and grandchildren are completely conversant with it. References to music groups such as R.E.M., and one character's very vocal obsession with the Monica Lewinsky scandal, as well as the easily retrievable information about the NATO bombardments, which lead to the death of one of the book's main characters—these give Western readers too a kind of insiders' perspective. Many elements of the book involve universal, familiar-feeling collisions between types, sexes, generations, and worldviews. The general pessimism of the situation, as the economy suffers and politicians only make it worse, is balanced by the difficult consequences of even joyful decisions (as when the teenager Marina's new love relationship leads to sexual contact, pregnancy, abortion, and replacement of the relationship's exciting, carefree early phase with an anxious new dependency).

Mićić Dimovska is continually attentive to language in *Mrena*, describing Marina's satisfaction at thinking up a name for her mother's second-hand shop, "Butik Pepeljuga." (I would call "Pepeljuga" a much more adequate translation of the insulting intentions of the fairytale nickname "Cendrillon" than the rather pretty English counterpart, "Cinderella," which brings to mind J. R. R. Tolkien's comment about the phonetic beauty of the words "cellar door.") *These* things are harder to convey than the political fine points, or maybe I am just more willing to fudge the political fine points, to let them be approximated by rhetorical equivalents from the

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<sup>14</sup> Unfortunately, the text is no longer accessible.

current political scene in the United States, which can cast a pall of pessimism equal to anything in Dimovska's writing.

In conclusion: of course my translating practice is marked by the North American intellectual or artistic tendencies I bring as a reader—in particular, a feminist perspective and a certain set of opinions about recent history in the Balkans which finds Mičić Dimovska's political opinions, expressed more overtly in some of her recent interviews than in her novels, quite congenial. Although more than twenty-five years ago she told an interviewer that she tends to write more about women only because she knows women better, her own introduction to a 2002 collection of stories by contemporary Russian women, *Mrvice sreće*, demonstrates a strong knowledge of and interest in women writers.<sup>15</sup> But her treatment of political opinion works less simply in her creative fiction. At one point in the late evening, rereading *Mrena* to prepare for this study, I suddenly felt warm and comfortable agreement with the internal monologue of one character—Emilija Radovanović, a university professor appalled by the oppression of the Kosovar Albanians and with a generally leftist and European orientation. It may well be that Mičić Dimovska shared some of the fictional Dr. Radovanović's beliefs, but the author does not hesitate to make the professor look silly or immature, and the young policeman who interrogates her after her arrest offers the unsolicited opinion that she is drawn to encourage her students' political activism because she is unmarried and has no children of her own. So, thanks to Mičić Dimovska, my pleasure at finding a character who "speaks my language" suddenly forces me to wonder what personal or psychological reasons I too might have for sharing these opinions, what complexes of experience or compensation might accompany these opinions and rhetorical bundles in my own life and society.

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<sup>15</sup> Dimovska was surely invited to write this introduction due to her literary prominence—though her involvement is not advertised on the book's cover or even on the title page!—but it also reflects her interest in authors from other traditions, from Liudmila Petrushevskaja to Margaret Atwood. Her introduction emphasizes the darkness of the Russian women's portrayals of their society and protagonists, one very close to her own artistic method—and stresses that these stories, in translation, will sound very familiar to Serbian readers, as if to underline the common Slavic heritage. For this reason, or perhaps some other, the collection is printed in Cyrillic.

So what are the consequences of this political and stylistic attraction? Of course, first that I have chosen to translate her and advance her reputation (slightly!) in the US by taking this opportunity to write about her writing. But also in order to pay attention to conveying these issues, which appear much more clearly and in much greater complexity in a novel -- which I did eventually translate despite its length, after sticking for years to her stories and one of her travelogues. Thus, after talking ABOUT her novels, I can now also speak THROUGH them.

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## Sibelan Forester

### MILICA MIČIĆ DIMOVSKA I IZAZOVI PROFINJENOSTI

**Apstrakt:** Autorka razmatra značaj prevođenja prilikom prenošenja ideja i umetničkog stvaralaštva manje poznatih pisaca, u ovom slučaju srpske književnice Milice Mičić Dimovske (1947-2013). U središtu analize su njena dva romana, *Poslednji zanosi MSS* (1996) i *Mrena* (2002) i diskusija o mogućnostima njihovog političkog tumačenja. Pažnja je usmerena i na kritičku recepciju ovih dela u Srbiji, a istražuju se i mogućnosti njihovog prevoda na engleski.

**Ključne reči:** Milica Mičić Dimovska, Milica Stojadinović Srpkinja, književnice, srpska književnost, proza, politika, kritika.

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