

READING IN TRANSLATION

“SCATTERED WORDS (AND SCATTERED WORLDS)”: DUBRAVKA UGREŠIĆ’S “AMERICAN FICTIONARY,” TRANSLATED FROM CROATIAN BY CELIA HAWKESWORTH AND ELLEN ELIAS-BURSAĆ

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“This is an indecent book,” Dubravka Ugrešić’s *American Fictionary* proclaims in a new co-translation by Celia Hawkesworth and Ellen Elias-Bursać, and then continues:

I have always believed (and still do) that a writer with any self-respect should avoid three things: a) autobiography; b) writing about other countries; c) diaries. (7)

This proclamation remains unchanged from the early pages of the essay collection’s first appearance in English, a 1994 translation by Celia Hawkesworth with the title *Have A Nice Day: From the Balkan War to the American Dream*. The removal of the first English translation’s subtitle, with its binary-imposing unidirectional motion (from → to), is an exemplary change in the new translation. The omission of “the Balkan War” and “the American Dream,” terms which have themselves become overburdened with definitions, mirrors the omission of “Have A Nice Day.” In the postscript to the new translation, Ugrešić indicates the newfound changes to this latter phrase, the following among them: “That exaggerated yodel at the tail end of the phrase, which had always ended on an upward flip, now has dropped, crestfallen. The phrase is uttered today more evenly, more directly, with far less feigned enthusiasm than before” (188). Rather than being “between” languages, as the work of multilingual refugee and migrant writers is often marked, *American Fictionary* foregrounds the simultaneous determinateness yet limitlessness of language itself. That a definite article no longer accompanies “American” in the new title allows its referents to float and emphasizes its nondescript pervasiveness. The pun on “dictionary” holds our attention. Form takes center stage from the very start of the new translation.

American Fictionary returns continually to questions of form as each chapter distinctively elaborates on a single word in Ugrešić’s “American dictionary”—including entries such as “ID,” “Manual,” “Shrink,” “Couch Potato,” and “Harassment.” In this way, the text not only traverses genres, but resists simplification more generally. It is difficult to summarize this collection, for this is a text characterized by multiplicity: of genres, places, times, languages, words, identities, and directions. The directions in which Ugrešić herself traveled resist simplification as well. At the dawn of Yugoslavia’s fall, she lived in Zagreb as a scholar and writer, working at the University of Zagreb from which she graduated with degrees in Comparative Literature and

Russian. As the newfound independent nations of the former Yugoslavia succumbed to increasingly choking nationalisms which Ugrešić publically criticized, she was forced into exile in Amsterdam. As she details in *American Fictionary*, a temporary teaching position at Wesleyan University took her to the U.S. shortly thereafter, from where she routinely visited New York. Thus Zagreb, Amsterdam, Middletown, and New York exist intimately together in this “American fictionary,” as do war, multi-racial coalitions, economic crises, nationalisms, community, languages, television, and countless others.

In the very first chapter Ugrešić explains her reluctance to submit to a single genre. To exemplify the changes introduced in the new translation, I include the 2018 English translation, the 1994 English translation, and the original Croatian, respectively:

I have always felt that writing about oneself was a kind of self-improvement exercise, indecently tedious for everyone else. Writing about other countries, too, is a kind of cloaked indecency; it not only implies a foolish belief that one’s personal view of things is unique, but reduces the irreducible to little dead sheets of scribbled paper. As for the diary genre, I used to believe it was just the forgivable sin of a cultural coming of age. The sad literary practice in my country demonstrates that the diary is, in fact, the genre of war.

So, this book has been written against my personal literary convictions. (*American Fictionary* 7)

I have always felt that writing about oneself was a kind of self-improvement exercise, a service of the cult of self, indecently tedious for everyone else. Writing about other countries is also a kind of disguised indecency; it not only implies a foolish belief that one’s personal view of things is unique, but reduces the irreducible to little dead sheets of paper with writing on it. As for the diary genre, I used to believe it was just a forgivable sin of cultural growing-up. Sorrowful literary practice in my country demonstrates that the diary is, in fact, a war genre.

So, this book has been written against my personal and literary convictions. (*Have A Nice Day* 12)

Pisati o samome sebi činilo mi se oduvijek vrstom autogenog treninga i nepristojnom gnjavažom drugih. Pisati o drugim zemljama vrsta je prikrivene nepristojnosti; koja ne samo da podrazumijeva priglupu uvjerenost da je osobni pogled na stvari nenadoknadiv nego i nesvodive stvari svodi na mrtve plahtice ispisanog papira. Žanr dnevnčkih zapisa, smatrala sam, tek je oprostivi književno-dobni grijeh. Tužna književna praksa u mojoj zemlji pokazuje da je dnevnik, zapravo, ratni žanr.

Knjiga je napisana protiv mojih osobnih književnih stavova. (*Američki Fikcionar* 11)

Ugrešić reinforces her challenge to broad conceptualizations, including her own, of genres like the autobiography and the diary. The passage describes her project as one written against the grain of her own “personal literary convictions”: its contours embody both the autobiography and the diary. Form can eclipse conviction. The subtle yet discernible changes in the new translation give the words crispness and clarity aided by flow. The new translation revives the representative energy with which Ugrešić untangles her work from any particularly

sensationalizing or one-dimensional categories. In place of the genres listed, she grounds the project as a dictionary, stretching it to envelop the essay. The dictionary allows her to “put my scattered words (and scattered worlds) into some sort of order” (*American Fictionary* 5).

Yet, neither is the text simply a “dictionary”; it is, as the title indicates, a “fictionary.” It originates from a typing error, a slip from “d” to “f” (*American Fictionary* 11). This slip serves as one among many pluralizations. First, the slip makes sense only in English (the Croatian word for dictionary is *rječnik*). The text’s layers unfold with the recognition that Ugrešić is a) writing in Croatian about her experience of English, Russian, Dutch, and Croatian languages; b) traveling to and from the United States, the Netherlands, the Soviet Union, and the Former Yugoslavia; and c) is then being translated into English. The text exists in many languages and places simultaneously. That the first English translation appeared in 1994, following quickly the publication of the original in 1993, highlights this simultaneity. The text is thus foundationally what Rebecca Walkowitz calls “born translated,” wherein “translation functions as a thematic, structural, conceptual, and sometimes even typographical device” (4). These texts can be “written for translation,” “written as translations,” or “written from translations” (4). Ugrešić’s text is radically “born translated” from a frequently sidelined language not under the purview of Walkowitz’s research.

The word “fictionary” also stretches the bounds of Yugoslav literary categories, which did not historically have a way to demarcate a text’s genre as “fiction.” The category did not exist. Yet fiction, in Ugrešić’s ode to words, is the star of this text, its theme and variations. The fictionalizing of order, the fictionalizing necessary in the process of finding words, the fictionalizing of facts in our day—fiction functions on every level of the text. And while the first English translation begs readers to ask what a “fictionary” is, the new translation places the titular “American” into question as well, especially following the 2016 U.S. presidential election. The two translations are end posts to “a dialog between two moments that are a quarter century apart” (*American Fictionary* 187). In the postscript appended to the new translation, Ugrešić asks, “[B]etween which two—or more—moments? Was it between my stay in Holland and the time I spent in America? Between the Croatian time and the American time? Between the time I spent traveling and the time I spent in America? Between my American time back then and subsequent American stays?” (*American Fictionary* 187-188). The only concise answer the text offers is, as before: a bit of all of the above.

True to the dictionary form, the essays in *American Fictionary* can be read individually, out of order, but in each combination they lend themselves to a different whole. Read alongside the first English translation, Hawkesworth and Elias-Bursać’s new co-translation makes transparent how endless the process of translation can be if given the opportunity and reflects—on a formal level, on the level of content, on the level of language—the multiplicity of Ugrešić’s words and worlds.

Ugrešić, Dubravka. *American Fictionary*. Translated from Croatian by Celia Hawkesworth and Ellen Elias-Bursać. Open Letter Books, 2018.