

Spirit of Bosnia / Duh Bosne

An International, Interdisciplinary, Bilingual, Online Journal
Me?unarodni, interdisciplinarni, dvojezi?ni, online ?asopis

Interview with Muharem Bazdulj

John K. Cox

Muharem Bazdulj, born in 1977, is one of the leading writers of the younger generation to appear in the countries of the former Yugoslavia. He writes in a wide variety of genres, including novels, short stories, poetry, and essays; he is also active as a journalist and a translator.

One of his short story collections has appeared in English (The Second Book, Northwestern University Press, 2005). Bazdulj is the author of nine books in all, including his most recent set of stories, Magic. He currently lives in Travnik and Sarajevo. John K. Cox is currently translating some of Bazdulj's works.

John K. Cox: You write journalism and essays as well as a unique type of fiction, with strong historical, philosophical, and documentary elements. What are your main themes and concerns in your non-fiction?

Muharem Bazdulj: My non-fiction can be divided in two parts. I write about books, movies, popular music, even about sports. But I also write about politics, op-ed pieces, so to speak. For a long time, I avoided writing about political issues, but in contemporary Bosnia sooner or later one discovers that, even if you are not interested in politics, politics for sure is interested in you.

JKC: You've translated some English-language poetry into Bosnian, from authors such as Joseph Brodsky, W. B. Yeats, and Philip Larkin. What other poets do you wish to translate, and, more importantly, how do you know when a poem needs or deserves to be translated?

MB: When I like a poem very much, so much that I want to see how it would sound in my language, then I know that poem needs and deserves to be translated. Over the last few months I have translated some poetry by Richard Wilbur. This translation (a selection of about two dozen poems) is soon to be published in a literary review based in Zagreb.

JKC: I take it that you do not believe the old adage that poetry cannot be authentically translated. Do you perhaps hew to a more moderate line that only a poet can translate poetry?

MB: In a way, yes. I do not mean that a good translator of poetry must be a poet, with one or more poetry books of his own, but he must have real poetic talent.

JKC: If you could recommend three books to the Anglophone world for people who want to sample the beauty and complexity of Balkan culture and history, what would they be?

MB: The Iliad by Homer, Days of the Consuls in English by Ivo Andrić, and Imagining the Balkans by Maria Todorova. One epic, one novel, and one non-fiction book – all available to people from the Anglophone world and all really worthy of their attention.

JKC: Your most recent publication is the novel Transit, Comet, Eclipse. Since it has not been in circulation very long, can you tell us something about it?

MB: It is a novel in three parts. The theme of the first part is Ruggiero Boscovich's travel from Istanbul to St. Petersburg in the 18th century. Boscovich was a famous scientist, born in Dubrovnik, but raised in Italy, and he was one of the first westerners to travel through Bulgaria, Romania and Moldova. The second part takes place at the end of the 20th and the beginning of the 21st century in Moldova, with a young girl as the main protagonist. The third part is about a writer in contemporary Bosnia, and this part connects the previous two.

JKC: You've published in every genre except drama. You have brought out books of short stories, novels, essays, and poems, as well as many articles in newspapers and magazines. What are you working on currently?

MB: Just a few days ago I published a new book of short stories, Magic. It consists of thirteen short stories, most of them published before in literary magazines and journals in Bosnia, Croatia, Serbia, Slovenia, and France.

JKC: Do you find the word "Balkan" derogatory? As a historian, I personally do not, although I realize the word is freighted with all sorts of connotations.

MB: I do not find it derogatory, although, as you put it, I realize the word is freighted with all sorts of connotations. I published an essay last year in which I tried to explain why I think the word "Balkan" can also carry a strongly positive meaning.

JKC: How did you discover that you wanted to write for a living, or that you had a calling you could not resist?

MB: A long time ago, in some short history of philosophy, I read a sentence I still remember. I paraphrase: before Socrates, philosophers were concerned with metaphysical questions, but Socrates was the first who was primarily interested in human life and the questions around it. In my life, the war played the role Socrates had played in the history of philosophy. As a kid, before the war, I was much more interested in math or physics (not to mention soccer or basketball) than in literature. But, after the war broke out, I discovered that literature asks more important questions in general than any of the social or hard sciences.

JKC: When did you realize that you wrote or spoke in Bosnian and not in Serbo-Croatian?

MB: It was less my realization and more the realization of other people. Jean-Paul Sartre wrote that a Jew is a person other people see as Jew. That is similar to language in the Balkans. The languages spoken in Bosnia, Croatia, Montenegro and Serbia are essentially the one and the same, but their "difference" is – let me put it proverbially – in the eye of the beholder.

JKC: A welter of international perspectives and cultural phenomena, especially of a philosophical nature or of recent, pop-cultural origin, feature in your work. How do you archive so many perspectives and images in your head or your notebooks?

MB: I guess I am curious and I have a good memory. I enjoyed reading since I can remember, reading anything. By the way, I really like *A History of Reading* by Alberto Manguel. But I read like a hedonist, it is almost never a conscious hunt for something that might be useful to me in my writing. I just read and things and ideas come to my mind by themselves. It is similar with traveling, although I do not travel that much. Bosnians need visas to enter almost every country in the world and the process of issuing visas is usually very humiliating. That is politics, I guess; like I said before: in contemporary Bosnia sooner or later one discovers that even if you are not interested in politics, politics for sure is interested in you.

JKC: Tell me about you and the band U2. Your *One Like a Song* is a remarkable book. I see it as a grand postmodern experiment, a bricolage of over a hundred years of history keyed to recent events in the lives of people in the Balkans. How did U2 come to serve as the register or index for this experiment?

MB: It was my first book and for some reason I wanted it to be different from the great majority of prose debuts; I wanted it to be as far from anything autobiographical as possible. In that book, the music of U2 is some sort of my own private “soundtrack.” The autobiography is absent from the contents, but it is present in the form, so to speak. The titles of U2 albums and songs are connecting the history with our times. For example, when you look at the map of Bosnia, it reminds you of a heart and I used the title “Heartland” from the U2 song as a kind of metaphor.

JKC: Sometimes I like to make outrageous claims and judgments to stimulate discussion; perhaps this is a professional peril for academics. For instance, I think the most beautiful poem of all time, in any language, is “Sommer” by Ernst Stadler. I consider *The Emperor’s Tomb* by Joseph Roth to be the greatest European novel. The book that “changed me the most” is without doubt *The Grapes of Wrath* by John Steinbeck, for some teenagerish reasons I’ll spare you. My point is this: what are some outrageous claims you’d like to make?

MB: I like this question very much. Well, let me first use your own categories. The most beautiful poem of all time, in any language, is “September 1, 1939” by W. H. Auden. Maybe the greatest European novel is *The Year of the Death of Ricardo Reis* by Jose Saramago. The book that “changed me most” is *Love in the Western World* by Denis de Rougemont. The best film of the ’90s is *Unbreakable* by M. Night Shyamalan. The best record of all time is, of course, “One” by U2. The most beautiful woman nowadays is Maria Sharapova.

JKC: What is your personal favorite among the many works you have written, and why?

MB: It is really hard to say and it also changes from time to time. It seems to me that the most recent book is always the one closest to my heart at the moment. So it would be *Magic*, then, but also *Transit* and *The Second Book*.

JKC: Do your friends or readers ever tell you that they see you in your books? In which of your works do you find the most Muharem Bazdulj?

MB: Vladimir Nabokov wrote somewhere (I think it is in his epilogue to *Lolita*) that there are some little details in every book that contain the essence of the writer. In *Lolita*, for example, he said, and I paraphrase, the most Nabokov-like portion is in the list of pupils from Dolores Haze’s class. The most Muharem Bazdulj in *The Second Book*, for example, is in the eponymous story “The Second Book”; in the last paragraph of “A Red Flower”; and in some of the poems from the

story “The Poet.” Some of my friends see the most of me in the third part of *Transit*, and some of them in different short stories.

JKC: There is a strong emphasis in *The Second Book* on syncretism or at least parallel cultural practices across national, religious, or chronological barriers. One might view these as a patrimony or repository of beliefs or practices that link people of Muslim, Orthodox Christian, Roman Catholic Christian, Jewish, and other groups, even including Chinese and Egyptians from millennia past. Does the jumbled cultural pedigree of every society on our planet ultimately give you hope, or should we find our hope elsewhere?

MB: There is something in people which is “older” and more important than their religion. The “syncretism” you mention here sheds a light on that human quality. The people of different cultural and religious traditions have more in common than it seems at the first sight. We are all first humans, and only later Muslims, Christians, Jews or whatever ... Like in the lyrics of the song “Russians” written and performed by Sting: “We share the same biology/ regardless of ideology.”

JKC: In your novel *Zulejha and the Infidel* and the story “The Other Letter from 1920,” you are working with a Bosnia viewed from the outside, by powerful visitors from the West. In the former work, it is Lord Byron; in the latter, it is UNPROFOR. This would seem to be important because of the orientalist dilemma – the West misunderstands the East but yet has tremendous power over it, and the use of that power is somehow conditioned by the very misunderstandings. Are there other such visits you wish to explore? Rebecca West? Basil Davidson? D’Annunzio, to be provocative? Maybe some of them got it right about parts of ex-Yugoslavia?

MB: In one letter Ivo Andric wrote that he was always interested in the contacts of East and West, either in the form of conflict or in the form of collaboration. Understandings and misunderstandings between East and West constitute one of those rare topics which is always at the same time old and new. Some of the visits you mention would be interesting to explore in the form of an essay.

JKC: In “The Story of Two Brothers,” you refer to essential narrative “facts that impeccably, like some unknown star, situate [people’s] destiny in the eternal constellation ...” To me this seems to be one of the hallmarks of your writing in general – a kind of relentless push to link individual portrayals of character, emotion, or psychology to bigger philosophical ideas or to biographies of well-known figures from outside Bosnia-Herzegovina. Is this a useful way to look at your work? Do you do it because you wish to situate Bosnia in the wider world? Or because plugging individual stories into the flow and context of the bigger human tableau offers solace or guidance?

MB: Well, I do not know. Perhaps you are right saying that I “wish to situate Bosnia in the wider world.” Bosnia is a really small country, but during my adolescence it was, unfortunately, I must say, in the center of global attention. I reckon that in my writing I sometimes want to make it the “navel of the world” in some other sense. But I also think that “plugging individual stories into the flow and context of the bigger human tableau” is generally one of the essential qualities of great (post)modern fiction. One can use the same phrase in describing works by Paul Auster, Roberto Bolaño or Salman Rushdie.

JKC: In *The Second Book*, Nietzsche, Augustine, William James, and other philosophical figures are important. Where did you develop such a strong interest in philosophy? Was this part of your university education?

MB: Not really. I had philosophy classes at the university, but my interest was older than that. I started reading philosophy seriously during the war, when I was 15 or 16. It seemed to me at that time that Schopenhauer, for example, understood the world much more truly than any religion and ideology. I still think the same.

JKC: “Fiat Iustitia” is, I believe, one of your most intricately constructed tales, and also one with an impressive and very modern scope of subject matter. It also contains my favorite line (so far) from your work: “And so a relative or a friend of the victim kills the killer. And although he is only paying back a debt, the blood remains on him as it does on the tray of a scales for weighing meat.” This reminds me a great deal of Aeschylus and of the treatment of his ideas in the works of the Albanian novelist Ismail Kadare. Have you explored Aeschylus, and do you read Kadare?

MB: Ismail Kadare is one of my favorite writers. And I started exploring Aeschylus while still in high school. The story about Aeschylus’s death is also a very symbolic one. A sort of eagle from the Balkans is known for hunting turtles and breaking their shells by throwing them down on the rocks from a great height; the story has it that one such eagle mistook bald Aeschylus’s head for a stone, and he shattered it with a turtle. It always reminded me of Zeno’s paradox about Achilles and the Tortoise. In my novel *Zulejha and the Infidel* I wrote about similarities between the elegant and noble mathematical paradox and the cruel story: they both merge names from books of the antique and a large, harmless, long-lived animal.

JKC: Danilo Kiš believed, and I paraphrase, that fiction is the mother of the lie. How do you draw a line between fiction and non-fiction, or how do you choose to blur it?

MB: Well, I think Danilo Kiš used that phrase in his “Advice to a Young Writer.” In my opinion, he wanted to say that in our times a writer must base his fiction either on his experience or on documents. However, I do not think that Kiš underestimated the role of writer’s power of invention. The line between fiction and non-fiction in literature was never perfectly clear, especially in modern times. It is hard to say whether Sebald’s prose, for example, is fiction or non-fiction. I am not drawing a line between fiction and non-fiction. I basically accept the “traditional” view: the stories and novels are fiction, the essays and journalism are non-fiction.

JKC: “A Red Flower for Tomislav Podgora?” is a remarkable story. Perhaps I am also drawn to the story because of its extensive historicity or because I taught at a Jesuit university in the U.S. for 13 years. We hear a lot about Franciscans in Bosnia- Herzegovina, but not so much about Jesuits. Have you known any members of the Society of Jesus? More broadly, is this a story you might recommend that people read first, a kind of calling card or résumé of your methodological and thematic concerns?

MB: I am glad that you asked me this question. In the end of the 19th century, the Society of Jesus established a high school in Travnik (my hometown). It was, at the same time, a seminary and a secular high school. A century later, I attended the same high school, and I tried, in the story you mentioned, to involve my early biography in “the adventure of the 20th century” which is, in a way, the real topic of the story. “A Red Flower ...” can be, as you put it, a “résumé of my methodological and thematic concerns.”

JKC: The 20th century might well have spelled doom for many of Europe’s traditional regions. I am thinking here of regions as multi-ethnic or multi-confessional spaces, as well as specific places with mindsets and traditions. Will the richness once available in Czeslaw Milosz’s Lithuania, in

Kafka's Prague or Bohemia, or in Bosnia or Istria be replaced with something else, or simply missed?

MB: Great question! It is hard to answer it without ambivalence. Sometimes it seems to me that big cities of contemporary Europe (London, Berlin, Paris, etc.) have the richness of the regions you mentioned. But sometimes it also seems to me that these cities can never have that sort of original mixture of mindsets and traditions which synergistically existed in Lithuania, Bohemia, Bosnia or Istria in illo tempore.

JKC: Who are some writers, in any language you can think of, who deserve a wider global audience? Why?

MB: The Norwegian novelist and short story writer Frode Grytten, Guillermo Martinez from Argentina, Miljenko Jergovi?, Goce Smilevski, Vladimir Tasi?, Srdjan Valjarevi? from ex-Yugoslavia. They all have written more than one admirable book and they all have an international audience, but they all deserve a wider one.

Note: The editors thank John K. Cox and Transitions Online for permission to publish and translate this interview.

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