



## Cat painters: an anthology of contemporary Serbian poetry

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## BOOK REVIEW

**Cat painters: an anthology of contemporary Serbian poetry**, edited by Biljana D. Obradović and Dubravka Djurić, New Orleans, LA, Diálogos Press, 2016, xliii pp., 49-450, \$29.95, ISBN 9781944884086

This anthology is dedicated to post-WWII poetry written both within Serbia proper and in the Serbian diaspora. Both editors are poets (their poetry is also included in the volume), academics and literary critics living and working in the US (Dr Biljana D. Obradović) and in Serbia (Dr Dubravka Djurić), respectively. What is particularly important about their approach in this collection is that 'Serbian' is not used in an ethno-nationalist sense. They include poetry written by ethnic Serbs (born in Serbia as well as those who migrated to Serbia from other parts of former Yugoslavia as a consequence of the Yugoslav wars in the 1990s), ethnic minorities (i.e. Hungarian, Roma, Jewish), immigrants and marginalized voices such as those coming from the LGBTQ community. Thanks to this approach and to the fact that thirty-one out of a total of seventy-one poets represented are women, many of whom are openly feminist, this anthology presents a lesser known face of contemporary Serbian culture to the English-speaking reader. The poets are listed according to the chronology of their year of birth. All were born after 1940, some still during WWII (the oldest ones in 1941) and the youngest in 1981, thus encompassing three generations, two that lived mostly under Tito's Yugoslavia and a few from the younger generation who came of age after the breakup of the country. This explains why well-known Serbian American poet, Charles Simic (b. 1938) is not featured in the volume. The poems included, however, are mostly from the post-1970s period.

The editors' own poetic styles have likely contributed to the fact that the poetry represented in this impressive and important volume comes from less conventional literary movements and styles such as Voivodina Textualism, the 'Poetry of a Broken Language' or the 'Poetry of a New Sensitivity' (p. xxix). Legacies of (Italian) Futurism, (Russian) Cubo-Futurism, (Yugoslav) Zenitism and (American) L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E poetry appear mostly in the work of younger women poets. The language reflects the political upheavals experienced by the country as some poets use Bosnian, Croatian, Montenegrin etc. varieties of the Serbo-Croat language that during Yugoslavia was defined as one language (and linguistically speaking, it *is* one language with local variations) but one that political separation lines have tried to split up into several languages since the Yugoslav wars.


The poems cover a wide range of themes. Although the English-language reader may expect the Yugoslav wars to be present more, Dubravka Djurić in her part of the introduction gives some possible reasons why it is only after 2000 that most poets from Serbia started to write about the war. Djurić sees in the poets' lack of willingness to make references to the war before that date an implicit resistance and opposition to the Milošević regime and Serbian nationalist politics as 'the entire Serbian mainstream culture [was] complicit with the prominent patriarchal-heroic culture of the time' (xxxviii). Instead, urban modernist poets turned to experimental forms.

The two parts of the introduction give relevant information on both the genesis of the book and the cultural-historical context of Serbia and Serbian poetry. In the first part, Obradović offers the reader a glimpse into the fascinating and complex evolution of the anthology between two continents while also paying tribute to the excellent work of the translators. The second part of the introduction, written by Djurić, gives a concise yet for the less informed

reader necessary overview of important moments from Serbian history and she also explains the evolution of the Serbian and Serbo-Croat language and of Serbian poetry.

Last but not least, the title of the volume, *Cat Painters* merits special attention. It was inspired by the cover painting, *Cat Painter* by prominent Serbian artist Mileta Prodanović. Prodanović's work was inspired, on the one hand, by the iconic painting *Self-Portrait* of Milena Pavlović-Barilli, a Serbian born cosmopolitan modernist artist who carried and expanded her intercultural (Serbian and Italian) heritage to other cultural centres in Europe and overseas; and by the 1982 film *Cat People*, on the other. As explained by Obradović, women in the movie are transformed into beautiful but also fierce man-eating beasts (p. xvii). Obradović sees the poets represented in the book along the same lines: as beautiful yet fierce cat painters who are dangerous beasts (dangerous in the sense that Plato spoke of poets) but who also offer a different beauty, an alternative way of looking at Serbian culture beyond stereotypes, hatred and division lines, and who show a cosmopolitan and outward-looking face of Serbian culture to the world.

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