

Enes Kišević, Snowball, and Avalanche

Svetlana Spaić

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What can be said about the poetry of Enes Kišević from the point of view of his faithful and life-long translator? For me, translating his poetry means having to immerse oneself in all that is said and even more in all that is left to hover unspoken between the verses, experiencing the beauty but also the torments of the creative process, while the poem takes shape in a foreign language like clay, and resists like marble. It remains untranslatable for a time until it suddenly starts glowing in an evocative form and rhythm equivalent to the original and can therefore be released into the open. It is then that the miraculous effects of Enes Kišević's poetry start to appear through the prism of the translator.

Thus, a few years ago in Brussels, soon after the terrorist attacks at an international artistic gathering that reflected the fascinating diversity of this city, I spontaneously recited my translation of Enes's poem "Belonging," written decades ago. In it the poet, behind the façade of "celebrating" the spirit of division, wittily and ironically calls upon the Sun to "finally declare itself" and make up its mind which nation it belongs to. The poem touched the hearts of all present and was immediately accepted as a symbol of the still tenacious international spirit of Brussels, perhaps even more unshakeable after the blow inflicted upon it, which many outsiders had taken for a coup de grâce.

That was the first snowball of Enes's poetry in Brussels that has been rolling and growing ever since, "threatening" to turn into an avalanche. Touched by the poet's words, the co-organizer of the renowned festival "Balkan Trafik," which is held every year in the leading Belgian cultural institution Bozar, approached me with a proposal to prepare a poetry evening with Enes Kišević, as part of the off-program events of the festival.

A few months later the event took place in the premises of the organizer's "Creative District" next to Bozar, where Enes Kišević had the opportunity to address a large international audience, both directly in his mother tongue and through my translations into English and French. Accompanied by the wonderful Kurdish guitarist Stalin Belak, Enes's charisma won the hearts of all present even before they could understand the meaning of his poems through translation. It was a magical evening. The audience was made up of painters, sculptors, writers, professors, translators, interpreters, actors, and musicians as well as curious passers-by who entered and stayed. I was struck by the extent to which people of so many different professions and nationalities were touched,

Interpreter, Serbia

Corresponding Author: Svetlana Spaić, Interpreter, Serbia, e-mail: svetlanaspaić@hotmail.com

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all in the same way, by the words and truthfulness of a poet who was completely unknown in Belgium. For days after the event I received reactions from people who had discovered the poetry of Enes Kišević on that day and felt the need to share the way in which they felt enriched by it.

Here are excerpts from just a few of them:

"I expect the poet to feed the water, the song of rivers, the carefree whirling reflections under the shining eye of the sun.

I expect the poet to raise my gaze and the strength of my love.

I know that such purveyors of words are rare and precious.

That day, on April 22nd, I descend stairs that plunge into a gallery shielded by bright glass squares. Downstairs it is crowded!

A voice speaks the verses, a woman translates them with passion, a guitar joins them from time to time. All of a sudden, I join in myself.

One moment, one text and thousands of affinities connect me with the grey-haired poet.

Enes and I share a common homeland which is neither Croatia nor Wallonia, but a land that lovingly carries the suffering soil in its arms. In that sense, the two of us are brothers and I leave enriched."

Bernard Tirtiaux, a well-known Belgian writer, actor, and sculptor, who decided after the performance to engrave one of Enes's verses in stone at the farm-art colony where he lives: "Light, too, is inaudible. Yet it shines."

"A beautiful evening of wonderful poetry by the Bosnian poet Enes Kišević, translated into English and/or French by the beautiful and talented Svetlana Spaić! Arabic-Spanish music on the guitar of the Kurd Stalin added an additional dimension to the atmosphere. Enes Kišević's poetry moved me so much that I decided to start translating it into Finnish myself."

Sirpa Lehonten, Finnish conference interpreter.

"The poetry of Enes Kišević, that I listened to in translation and in the original which sounded so beautiful and melodic, gave me the desire to learn the poet's language."

Ton de Wit, Dutch actor and playwright.

"In the poetic performance of Enes Kišević, I really liked the presence of the author in front of the audience, despite the language barrier. Without pathos and with a light touch, in his own voice and that of Svetlana Spaić, he said things that were touching and spoke fundamental truths. I also liked the special place that the 'Stalinist' guitarist (Stalin Belak) occupied on stage, like an udu player."

Christophe Canon, Belgian ICT engineer.

"I'm not surprised that a man with such a beautiful face should create such wonderful things. I will always remember the sentence, 'It is better to be at peace than to be right.'"

Bibi Den's, Congolese singer and composer, who decided to make musical arrangements of some of Enes's poems translated into French.

In the meantime Enes, busy with his work as a poetry missionary elsewhere, could not accept the invitation to open the first celebration of the United Nation's International Day of Peace in Brussels, but left it to me to present his poetry to the international audience of the European capital, where it was once again received with radiant faces and warm hearts. The snowball was definitely growing.

These presentations gained further momentum when a group of artists from different parts of the world, residing mostly in Belgium, decided to launch a poetic-musical movement, the "Peace Performance Train," as an artistic call, indeed a lyrical cry, for peace, reason, and tolerance against the backdrop of a world increasingly torn apart by division and exclusion. They asked Enes to join them as a founding member and once again one of his verses—"Ours, my love, is only what we have given others"—was chosen as the slogan summing up the spirit of solidarity of the movement, which has since grown to over 60 artists from almost as many countries. Enes's call to the Sun in his poem "Belonging" spontaneously became the unofficial anthem of the movement and this poem is now regularly performed in various languages at performances of the group.

Representing Enes in this artistic movement, I—a conference interpreter and literary translator used to a life in the shadows—have now found myself in the spotlight and am slowly gaining enough confidence to no longer keep the program to a bare minimum, aware that the poetry may bring light to someone in the audience. Our performances are becoming increasingly frequent and ambitious and we plan to have Enes more often with us in person, especially as one of the main ideas of the movement is to show how much we understand each other, including in languages we do not know, when words, and particularly poetry are spoken from the heart. The snowball is slowly turning into an avalanche; we can only hope that in its crystal purity it will envelop many more people in this part of the world as well. Or perhaps, following the example of the apple from one of Enes's well-known poems of the same name, it will escape all earthly efforts to be captured and brought down and instead end up falling up into the sky, because the "man of the rain"

Kišević (kiša means rain in Croatian) remains nonetheless a poet of light and sun, faithful to the paradox that permeates all poetry.

But these are only external manifestations of the intimate act of writing, translating, and even reading poetry. When I ask myself why Enes's poetry provokes such a strong reaction of identification and recognition in people of very different cultures, religions, and convictions, I come to the conclusion that apart from its literary refinement and quality, its strength lies in the poet's deep sincerity and his contagious faith in the supremacy of good over evil.

Few people have as much respect for words as Enes does, guided in his life and actions by the aspiration to be worthy of what he writes. That is why his words have the power of truth and life. That is how the poet restores to the words their magical power and to poetry the ancient role of the sorcerer. And that is why, in my opinion, they often have a transformative effect on readers and listeners and why they sound so true. When the poet talks about water, stone, or fire, we have the impression that these elements confide in us directly; when he speaks for example about Nikola Tesla in the "Sonnet Wreath" dedicated to him, the genius himself seems to come alive before our eyes and we admire only Tesla and forget the author, which is all the more to the poet's credit. That is why, when I recited my translations of Enes's verses in Paris, Brussels, and Amsterdam in front of people who had never heard of him, they were always received with the same reaction—one of recognition and transformation, accompanied as a rule by a request to receive more of his poems, to share them on their websites and use them in films they were making, or for teaching purposes etc.

But the magic does not only work on Northern European intellectuals. Wherever his poetry has been translated, irrespective of the culture or people, Enes is recognized as one of their own. In Japan, Iran, Africa, among Christians, non-Christians, and atheists, Enes is seen as part of them, as someone who builds upon their own traditions and expresses their own deepest beliefs. It is difficult to explain, but I personally think that the reason for this is that like a mine worker, Enes plunges deeper and deeper into the secret of himself and of the universe until he touches its very beginning and with it, a core that we all have in common and which then easily reaches everyone, regardless of cultural, geographical, and even temporal distance.

However, the magic does not only happen when I present Enes's poetry at literary gatherings where, in a way, it is only natural for a great poet to be recognized. As much as by intellectuals and artists, Enes seems to be liked by ordinary people who have kept a pure heart and to whom Enes feels particularly close. This is clear from the many testimonies of the unique impact Enes's poetry has had on people's lives—e.g., a father who raised his two daughters on Enes's poetry, an old man who claimed that Enes's poetry kept him alive by "turning him into the living word", or a gravedigger

who overcame his own fear of death with this verse by Enes: “creep entirely inside me/outside winter is on its way/it is Death that came looking for us/and realizes that we are away,” as well as numerous stories of people who always carry their favorite Kišević poem with them.

Some time ago I worked as interpreter at the Nuclear Training Center in France with a large group of welders, locksmiths, and pipe fitters from Croatia and the surrounding region. They were being trained to work in nuclear power plants and it was tough and demanding. During the break, out of curiosity, the workers asked me what I do when, as a freelance, I have no work. I replied that I liked to translate poetry, mostly that of Enes Kišević. Some of them had heard of him and some had not. I told them how every day in his youth Enes used to travel with the workers to their factories and recite poetry to them along the way—which is why I call him a poetry missionary. It did not take much encouragement for me to start reciting Enes’s poems, which I knew by heart. And once again, an incredible thing happened. The group of those who were listening grew larger; modestly and tentatively they began to discuss the meaning of what was being said, pointing to the essence of the verses no less authentically than experts and connoisseurs and coming up with suggestions—e.g., that some of Enes’s poems should be shared in churches and places of worship. Titles of poems and books were written down and shared. The nuclear safety training breaks were no longer the same afterward and mastering the material, difficult both for the participants and for me, somehow became easier as a result of those fulfilling conversations and their meditative effect.

There is also the example, which as a conference interpreter I witnessed personally, of an individual indicted before the War Crimes Tribunal in The Hague, who recited Enes’s poem “Time Steps Back” when testifying as a character defense witness in favor of another defendant, who incidentally belonged to the opposing side. The poem starts with the following words: “From time to time, There comes a time, When envy walks in, All malice accumulates. Neighbors no longer greet neighbors, No one wants to be with anyone, Everyone lives for themselves.” And while colleagues in the English interpretation booth were complaining about the impossible task of simultaneously interpreting poetry, I in the French booth was aware how fortunate I was to know Enes’s poetry by heart. The defendant, who was a lover of Enes’s poetry, was subsequently acquitted of all charges, an outcome which had little to do with his affinity with Enes’s work—though perhaps in some ways it did. As for Enes, moved by what had happened in that courtroom in The Hague, he sent the former defendant a collection of his poems as a gift.

Perhaps the skeptics who say that literature cannot change the world are right. But it can change a person, which is at least a start. And who knows? Maybe like the snowball I spoke of earlier, one day the power of literature will turn into an avalanche.

In conclusion I return to the act of translating itself. Translation is first and foremost a craft and for years I was bothered by the fact that one of my favorite poems by Enes, “MRŽNJ,” (mržnja means ‘hatred’ in Croatian) is actually untranslatable. When I shared my grievances with the author, he suggested that I leave the title untranslated but briefly explain it and the pun the poem is based on in a footnote. I did so and “MRŽNJ” is now also regularly presented at our performances in Belgium and, encouraged by the reactions I have described in this text, about to be published as part of my translation of a collection of Enes Kišević’s poems. To conclude, I enclose it in the original and its English and French translations:

MRŽNJ

Oni su toliko množili mržnju;
da se ne okuži, bježaše zrak.
Sjedeći u društvu
suglasnih suglasnika MRŽNJ,
prvi put očitjeh kako je
u tom neartikuliranom skupu
teško, ali viteško biti
nezavisni samoglasnik A.

I otkud taj sram na mojem licu?

Što ne mogu mrziti?

Ne znam ni sam.

Ili što se sasvim prirodno

u tom puku

ponašam kao nepostojeće A.

M R Z N J*

They multiplied hatred so very much -

To avoid contamination

Air itself flew away.

While seated in the company

Of consonants full of consonation

M R Z N J

For the first time I could see

How difficult yet how noble it was to be

The independent vowel A.

And why is there this shame on my face?

Why can I not hate -

Who am I to blame?

Or why am I so proud

In this inarticulate crowd

To behave like

The silent A?

*Translator’s note: Mržnja means hatred in Croatian, while the silent A refers to a grammatical rule according to which the letter A sometimes disappears.

M-R-Z-N-J*

Ils dissipaient tellement la haine -

Pour ne pas s’empester

L’air s’enfuyait.

Assis en compagnie

Des consonnes consonnanteuses

M-R-Z-N-J,

Soudain,
Dans cette assemblée
Toute inarticulée,
J'ai éprouvé
La difficulté
Et la noblesse de quand on est
La voyelle A,
Indépendante et éloignée.
Et d'où vient cette honte sur mon visage?

Pourquoi ne puis-je haïr?
Je ne le sais pas.
Ou pourquoi dans un tel cas
Je deviens tout naturellement
L'inexistant A.
*Note de la traductrice:
Mržnja signifie la haine en croate, et l'inexistant A fait
référence à une règle de grammaire selon laquelle la
lettre A disparaît parfois.