

Damjana Mraović-O'Hare

Interview with David Albahari*

David Albahari (b. 1949) is a Serbian writer who has lived more than 10 years in exile in Canada. He went into exile because the former Yugoslavia was torn apart by ethnic war. Albahari left the country in 1994, at the peak of the conflict, and from 1995 to 1997, he wrote three books which are known as his "Canadian Circle novels": *Snow Man*, 1995; *Bait*, 1996; *Darkness*, 1997. Displaced and far away from his country, Albahari examined in his new novels how place and history impacted personal identity. Moreover, he argued against the negative—though prevalent—discourse about the Balkans, seeing instead in his war-torn homeland a universal historical and cultural conflict.

Albahari's books, prior to his exile, were almost exclusively concerned with the inability to communicate in a postmodern society. His early prose style was experimental and anti-realistic, fragmented and often autopoetical—closer to that of the lyric than to that of the epic narrative. Influenced by the social changes and ethnic clashes in the former Yugoslavia, he transformed his prose, recapitulating reality within the epic form. Metafiction, dominant in his earlier works, gave way to postmodern realism. Albahari, too, transformed his own identity as an author, abandoning the indeterminate subject position common in experimental fiction and embracing a self that is grounded firmly in a historical moment, however incoherent and violent it may be.

Although he spends most of the time in Canada, Albahari is still regarded in his homeland as one of the most accomplished and beloved contemporary writers. In October 2006, he was elected to the Serbian Academy of Sciences and Arts, the most eminent institution in the country. And though at this point Albahari is introduced as a Canadian author, he remains in many ways undeniably Serbian in his sensibility. To date, he has published ten novels, ten collections of stories, and two books of essays. In Serbia and the former Yugoslavia, he is a critically acclaimed bestselling author. His prose is translated into 14 languages, among which are English, French, German, Italian and Spanish.

This interview was conducted in 2005 and 2006, while Albahari was in Belgrade and Calgary—his two homes.

Q: You have been living in Canada for more than a decade. The protagonists in all of your books written in Canada are very uncomfortable in the environment to which they immigrated. How do you feel after more than a decade?

A: I feel entirely differently from my protagonists. On the one hand, North American culture had been very familiar to me even before coming to Canada,

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which means that I didn't experience any cultural shock. My protagonists are mostly going through different phases of cultural shock when they find themselves on this continent, and to a great degree they aren't based on me, but on my view of that experience among other people. On the other hand, coming to Canada made my dream of dedicating all of my free time only to writing, translating and other writing activities come true. (For fulfillment of that dream I'm also thankful to my wife who has a steady job and who's willing to put up with a husband who "doesn't work at anything but writes.") In other words, I feel very good in my new environment, and after ten years in a country of immigrants such as Canada—and spent in the same place!—you start feeling like an experienced native.

Q: Almost all of your novels are written in the first person, and those from the 1990s are focused on exile and the war in the former Yugoslavia. However, only *Bait*, the novel about the narrator's mother and turbulent history of the former Yugoslavia, was recognized as a novel truly based on an autobiographical experience, even though you claimed that you had never had the recording tapes mentioned in the book and that the mother in the book is just "based upon" your mother. How do you explain that?

A: Not only the books I wrote after my arrival to Canada but also a great part of other things that I've written are based on my experience. For example, the collections of stories *Porodično vreme* [*Family Time*, 1973] and *Opis smrti* [*The Description of Death*, 1982] have perhaps more autobiographical references than *Bait*. I suppose that, thanks to the NIN Award [the most prestigious Serbian award] *Bait* simply drew more attention and the autobiographical details were more precisely noticed. As you say, the tapes on which the narrative is based don't exist at all, and yet a certain acquaintance of my mother's told me that she remembered when my mother and I had recorded those tapes. Another possible explanation occurs to me: there are [in *Bait*] a great number of clear historical, geographical and other details that made it easier to identify the novel with my real life. That, for example, doesn't exist in *Snow Man*, a novel that is also autobiographical, but in which all of the references are conveyed in ciphers.

Q: Starting with your first novel, *Sudija Dimitrijević* (*The Judge Dimitrijević*, 1978), all of your protagonists are male, and although very contemplative, they are silent (or at least, silenced). In your most recent novels, *Snow Man*, *Bait*, and *Leeches* (2005), the narrative is, in fact, the narrator's personal story, which also becomes the narrator's own text. However, these later characters still do not communicate well; they are able to write profoundly and yet they are not able to *pronounce* words. They usually emphasize that they do not want to answer, or they do not know what to say. Could you explain that dichotomy between written and spoken words in the Canada novels?

A: There are many elements that could be included in an answer to your question, but I'll dwell only on a few. All of the questions regarding language [in my novels] originate from a postmodern disbelief in the possibility of transmitting a real and accurate experience. Speech is only a cause of misunderstanding, instead of being a source of understanding. Therefore, for my characters, silence seems to be a much more reliable means of conveying sense, which is, of course, paradoxical because silence is also prone to different interpretations. But if they need to explain, my characters decide to write because, when you write, you have better control over language and over what you want to say. There is a certain place in all this for the frustration associated with Wittgenstein's claim that the borders of our language are also borders of our world. The world should be definite, because [we think that] language is definite too, but the world, in fact, is not definite and it spreads outside of our language as well. We see that language can't follow [the world]; that feeling of frustration brings in certain nervousness in what my protagonists write. Language betrays us all the time, because it must stay practical and limited, and we would like to have more precise words, for example, for different feelings, psychedelic experiences, dreams, epiphanies (Satori). Writing, as I said, at least leaves a possibility to come back and correct a mistake. [Spoken] words are suds, bubbles: once they burst nothing can restore them.

Q: On the other hand, you are very concerned about spoken language, as a form of identity. In *Bait*, your narrator claims that, when he first listens to his mother's voice and her Serbian words, they "frightened me at first. It was two years already I hadn't heard my own language,... and when it echoed,... I simply drooped." You have published an essay in a Serbian newspaper in which you are concerned with Serbian immigrants' tendency to neglect their native language, once they are in Canada. It seems to me that there is an ambiguity here: there is a genuine mistrust in language and, yet, language is a (national) identity symbol. Could you explain this?

A: My distrust of language is purely literary, based on different theoretical concepts. In everyday life I use language as everybody else does. In the situation you mention, my concern about language is rooted in my insight about the speed by which a language is being forgotten and leads to identity changes. Language, however, is not the only basis for identity (especially if a language is not given to us at birth, and we need to attain it by learning), but it is a means by which an identity can be preserved and strengthened. Therefore I think that it is important to encourage learning of a mother tongue, because it will contribute to forming a more solid identity, even if that identity is actually a new identity.

Q: You live in Canada, and you are considered an exiled author, but all of your books are first published in Serbia. You have a very interesting position: you are physically dislocated from your native language and the country, but you have

never stopped being a part of Serbian literature. Also, when one thinks about your work, it is never within the terms of diaspora or immigrant literature. How would you explain your position?

A: In a few of my texts I wrote how I do not consider myself an exile. Why would somebody who left on his own be considered an émigré? I'm now in the position of many other writers—you write in your own language, but you are not in your country, and you live somewhere else simply because you want to live in that place. (A good example is, let's say, Canadian writer Mavis Gallant who has lived in Paris since the early 1950s but writes in English). Life circumstances brought me to Calgary, but my writing was not endangered by the act of leaving the country. In other words, I didn't find myself in the situation that I cannot publish in Serbia, which might force me to try to write in the English language. Hence I still write for those who will read [my books] in the original form, that is, in the Serbian language. From a technical point of view, I could write in the English language, but I don't see the point of such a move, and practically speaking, I would just limit myself.

Q: However, it is very interesting that in 2005 you were introduced at the book fairs in Germany and France, as well as in Belgrade in 2006, as a Canadian even though you emphasize that you are a Serbian writer and that you are only “at the margin” in Canada. In Belgrade, the press welcomed the fact that your book, although published by a Serbian publishing house and in Serbian, is a part of the Canadian cultural endorsement, suggesting that you are an author who successfully crosses borders and switches languages. Does language allow you to adopt different identities? Or is your decision more practical and personal?

A: I don't change languages; I write stories and novels only in Serbian, and most often other translators translate them into English (and other languages). In other words, my writing identity is not changed. The language in which I write defines me as a Serbian writer, but the fact that I live in Canada, in a multicultural country that accepts the possibility of creating in all languages, makes me a Canadian writer. I accept that duality because it's a reflection of my reality, as well as my readiness to accept an occasional feeling of confusion about [my] identity. For a writer, that position is very suitable because it opens an array of themes that can be written about, simultaneously looking at two different cultures, two histories, and two worlds.

Q: You are also an excellent translator (e.g. of Sherman Alexie, Vladimir Nabokov, Isaac Bashevis Singer, John Updike, Thomas Pynchon, Raymond Carver). It is assumed that one needs to like a novel in order to translate it into another language, but what are your criteria (style, cultural/literature importance, your own literary taste)? And what are your concerns when you are translating?

A: I believe there're two sorts of translators. One group is made of translators who strive to inform their own culture about current literature in other languages and in other cultures. As a translator, I see myself in that group. Thus, the aim of my translations is to draw our [Serbian] readers' attention to a new literary name or a new literary phenomenon in those literatures in which I have an interest. For example, I thought that our readers should learn about Sherman Alexie's prose, for he is one of the most interesting literary figures who recently appeared in American literature. For the same reason, in the 1970s I was translating so-called "metafiction" stories, such as those by Donald Bartheleme, Robert Coover and John Barth. In short, as a translator, I'm primarily interested in literary information, but not at the expense of [literary] quality. There is also another category of translators: those are translators who are skilled experts in their languages and who translate so-called "classic works," from Shakespeare to Joyce, Musil and Proust. They are also important for a culture because they are in a literally sense "blacksmiths of language." Translating is central to the openness and importance of certain cultures, and it is a great pity that there isn't much translating in Canada and the U.S. A culture, which isn't in constant communication with other cultures, is doomed to closing itself within the narrow constraints of its own complacency, which means that sooner or later [that culture] will become uninteresting for other cultures.

Q: In *Bait*, there are little differences in translation, local nuances which would, otherwise, need footnotes (e.g. Albanians/Shiptars). For example, "Shiptar" in Serbian has a pejorative implication, while in the English translation it was transformed into the more general "Albanian." Consequently, a specific cultural meaning was lost. How do you feel about that?

A: I don't intervene with translators' work; in other words, I think that translators alone should find and chose the best solutions. If they want to consult with me, I will always be obliging, but the translators make the final decision. A translation is always an adaptation, and the skill of translating is often a skill of trying to find the best way to rephrase something in such a way that readers in that language don't lose a point. Footnotes, by the way, are the worst thing that could happen in a fiction translation (although they are sometimes necessary, I admit) and the less there are—the better.

Q: It is very interesting that you, as a writer who is deeply concerned with the inability to communicate, keep writing. *Leeches*, published in 2005, is your ninth novel. You have also published ten collections of stories and two collections of essays. It is a fascinating phenomenon; could you talk about it?

A: The answer is simple—I believe in writing, but I don't believe in the possibility of accomplishing any perfect [literary] work by writing. Therefore every time I try

again. You can find a similar poetics—or at least traces of that poetics—in Beckett's or Faulkner's [works]. Furthermore, writing is a completely personal act for me. In other words, I write to reach some answers that I consider relevant for me. When a story is already written, then it can also be published, but a reader most probably won't recognize what urged me to write that story. In the end, a reader won't read a story that I wrote, but he'll read a story he wants to read. That is another ambiguity we need to think about when we talk about language and communication; to be precise, a writer and a reader seemingly read the same story, but each puts the story in the context of his own self, which means that, naturally, a reader can't read what I wrote. I already know in advance that what I try to say reaches the reader in the form in which he wants to hear it. Not even I can read my story twice in the same way. Literature is like a river, and one can't step twice into the same river, as a philosopher once said.

Q: When we were talking about this interview and the language we would use, you told me that I could use English but that you would prefer to answer in Serbian. This strikes me as fascinating, especially when one has in mind your concerns about language. Could you explain this stand of yours?

A: I've chosen a language in which I feel safer, in fact, in which I can without any effort express my thoughts. Although occasionally I write a text in the English language, as a writer I abide to Serbian. I grew up in that language and started to write in it, and there isn't a need to change it now. I could have answered, of course, your questions in English, but then I would have needed to pay attention to the things we shouldn't be thinking about while writing: did I use a correct grammatical tense; did I find the exact phrase; is the article (ah, those articles!) where it should be...

Q: Your exile experience introduced a change into your poetics. Critics agree that in your earlier works language was the central *organizer* of total human experience, in a Lacanian and Wittgensteinian sense, but that when the 1990s brought the war and ethnic clashes in the former Yugoslavia, the historical context almost demanded to be introduced into your novels. The metafictional concerns with language as a concept collapsed because they were not able to grasp all of the historical turbulences (*Why do people get killed? What is the purpose of the war?*). However, it seems that your interest in language has never withered, it was just "overshadowed" by the epic themes.

A: You are completely right: some new themes have appeared in my prose, but all of them are still seen within the dilemma about the power or impotence of language to actually register our experience. Hence my new books must be looked at in relationship to my earlier collections of stories and novels. For example, *Bait* should be read and analyzed in conjunction with my novel *Tsing* [1997], written after the

death of my father. The novel *Bait*, for instance, I didn't write because I wanted to argue with history, but because it was interesting for me to write a book that actually doesn't exist—*Bait* is not a book about my mother who is mentioned all the time; a book about a mother hasn't been written, and if it has, it is unknown to the reader. *Götz and Meyer* is a novel about the Holocaust, but it is essentially about the inability of language to express the horror of history and memory. But my interest in the linguistic limitations of narration is more visible in the short stories, where my narrative poetics in all these years has hardly changed. I still experiment with the short story form; many of them are still about linguistic dilemmas; the character of "my wife" is still a dominant character who, as some inner voice, mocks my attempts to finally achieve an ideal form and an ideal story.

Q: You have said that you started to write novels when you came to Canada, when you had more time for writing, but that you still considered yourself a short story writer. However, it appears that there is a more profound reason for that change from short story to novel.

A: The reason lies, though, in the abundant time I've gained by coming to Canada. Getting that time was a gift: I would feel stupid if I didn't write. Of course, I had more than enough time for writing short stories, and then I was able to dedicate myself to novels. If I had stayed in Belgrade, I would probably have written a novel (and surely different from the novels I wrote here) but certainly I wouldn't have written six novels and three collections of stories. Then, once I started to think about novels, everything else was easy. I'm a disciplined writer: I write every day and it's enough if I tell myself that on such-and-such day I'm starting to write a new novel. In Belgrade (I'm talking about the early 1990s, and then, about the beginning of the war, chaos, dreadful inflation, the struggle for survival) to devote that much time to writing was a luxury. For that reason I talk about time as an act of liberation—the novels' themes then just came about.

Q: The novels written in the 1990s and later introduce not only a very specific historical moment but also the trope of Jewishness into your prose. In *Bait*, for the first time you talk about your own Jewish background; in *Leeches*, although not a Jew, the protagonist is exposed and you talk in detail about Ashkenazi and Sephardim history in Belgrade; *Götz and Meyer* is a masterpiece about two German soldiers who drive a gas-truck in Belgrade. Was this change initiated by the historical moment, the war in the former Yugoslavia, or was there a personal reason, or something else?

A: I need to correct you here: actually my first book, the collection of stories *Family time* (1973), openly talks about my family and my background. Many details from those stories appear and are developed in *Bait*. To a lesser extent, the

Jewish theme is also present in my other collections of stories and, of course, in the already mentioned novel *Tsing*. In the more recent novels that theme received more room, although the novel *Götz and Meyer* [2003] is not based on autobiographical details, while the novel *Leeches* is completely out of the family context in which my fiction is immersed from the earliest stories until today. And I need to emphasize that I didn't, as critics sometimes see [it], write the novel *Götz and Meyer* as a reaction to what happened in Srebrenica or to the stories about new concentration camps in Bosnia, but I wrote it because I wanted to write about suffering of Serbian Jews in World War II. The Holocaust is a unique historical event that must stand alone, as any other historical horror must stand alone, and not serve as some measure of another horror. Yes, maybe the mechanisms of the crimes are the same, but circumstances are always different, and I was, in fact my narrator was, interested in an attempt to explore what could have forced Götz and Meyer, who are real and not fictional characters, to become cold-blooded murderers. Everybody, of course, can interpret the book as he wants, but for me there is only a story about a mobile gas chamber and the [Belgrade] Sajmište camp.

Q: In these novels from the 1990s, you seem to be incorporating stereotypes about the Balkans, Europe, and the West and forming your narratives around them. Your protagonists try to understand those stereotypes but, eventually, misunderstanding between two worlds, Eastern and Western, is inevitable. To a certain extent, your novels become essays about that problem. Are you reacting to Kaplan's *Balkan Ghosts*—a travel book that describes the Balkan peoples as barbarians predisposed to wars— or were you allegedly influenced President Clinton not to send the troops to Bosnia, or are you reacting to a personal experience, or a historical context?

A: I play a little bit with all those different interpretations and prejudices, but I must emphasize that I don't do that with any specific intention. The stories I narrate are mostly based on my personal experience and not on a wish to settle accounts with certain ideas and stereotypes at a theoretical level. Of course, they [stereotypes] play a great role in personal experience, because the majority of people accept stereotypes delivered by media, politicians, and celebrities. That's why the conversation between the narrator and Donald (in *Bait*), and, between the narrator and Daniel Atijas (in *Globetrotter*), is filled with stereotypes and prejudices, from which—it must be stressed—nobody is immune. The question is open whether misunderstanding, as you say, is inevitable. My feeling is that Europe and North America are more and more drifting apart, and that in fact understanding is diminishing, but now we are closer to political terrain, and I'm not interested in that.

Q: The problem you return to in all of your "Canadian novels" is a question of responsibility, individual and collective. In *Snow Man* a Canadian professor of political science, a very obnoxious character, claims that the Serbian people are

responsible for the war and Milošević's reign, while *Svetski putnik (Globetrotter)* is actually an essay about that problem. Could you comment on that?

A: I don't know if that's visible enough in my fiction, but I don't accept condemnation of entire peoples for decisions and actions that were acts of governments and command systems. It's true that people easily come under the influence of propaganda—which is visible in all social systems, not only in totalitarian ones—but never is the entire population under that influence. To say that in Serbia, for instance, all people favoured ideas about a so-called “Great Serbia” or about an alleged Muslim genocide is, to put it kindly, a stupidity that can be said only by somebody who was “brainwashed,” that is, by people who unquestioningly accept what a state system imposes on them (as, for example, that poor professor of political science in *Snow Man*). For instance, during World War II, Canadian authorities put into camps people with Japanese background—I am sure that for that I would not now condemn the entire Canadian population, but that I would find the offender, if I were looking for him, in the government structures of that period. My parents, although they lost their dearest in the horrors of the Second World War, never accused the German people for that, but they talked about Hitler, his big bosses and Nazis, of those who masterminded “the final solution of the Jewish question” and those who directly participated in its realization.

Q: What do you think about the statement that the former Yugoslavia was “a failed experiment”?

A: For me, Yugoslavia has never been “a failed experiment.” That issue is put *ad acta*, and now all over the territory of the former Yugoslavia there are new generations for whom the idea of Yugoslavia doesn't mean anything at all. Sooner or later, that will be just an episode in history textbooks, and when it was disintegrating, it seemed like the end of the world... Now people from our [former Yugoslav] regions talk about how horrible it was to live in Yugoslavia, but those are all fallacious testimonies, made for different uses. I was happy in that country, and if that country had remained, I would have certainly lived happily in it.

Q: There are many maps in your recent books. The protagonists are obsessed by them. In *Snow Man*, the narrator says, “A story doesn't live on paper, among pages of a book, I thought, just as a border doesn't live on a map or in an atlas.” It seems that you, or at least your characters, are concerned about the inter-connection between territories (countries) and identities, or am I reading your prose incorrectly?

A: The protagonist of *Snow Man* reflects what the main concern was just before the beginning of clashes in the former Yugoslavia—definition of territories. (The

absurdity of that whole story is that, although nobody was satisfied with the existing borders, those borders between the former republics and today's states are there to this very day, after the meaningless war and unnecessary victims and devastation.) From day to day, we were bombarded by new versions of borders, new maps, and new interpretations of historical heritage and the importance of forming borders. Maps were flashing on TV screens long into the night. Therefore it was normal that my narrator is confronted with that world of maps, with the fact that, in spite of his beliefs, there are still unsolved problems regarding borders and definitions of certain territories. And it is certain that between territories and identities there are contiguous points. The collapse of Yugoslavia also shook up the identities of the people who live there—those who thought about themselves as Yugoslavs all of a sudden lost a state, to be precise, they found themselves in a situation that changed their identities out of the blue. However, that relationship between a territory and identity is visible here too. For example, our immigrants don't think about themselves as Canadians, and they call Canadians those people (most often white) who are born here. Legally, our immigrants are Canadians because they acquired Canadian citizenship, but they will talk about themselves as, for instance, Serbs or former Yugoslavs.

Q: In the novels from the 1990s and later, you use, if I might call them this, "leitmotif sentences." In *Bait*, the sentence is a variation of "If I was a writer, I could write"; in *Snow Man*, "If there wasn't orange juice." These refrains turn a narrative into some sort of a lament. Why do you use them so intensely? What do they mean to you (besides provoking rhythmical and cohesive effects)?

A: You've noticed correctly that their purpose is primarily rhythmical and cohesive, which is actually very important for the whole text. I see those sentences as special kernel sentences. They are the core of the story that constitutes the novel. Repeating them, I remind myself, and of course, readers, of the whole story. Besides, they're also a unique refrain; to be exact, my novels are written in one paragraph, which is extremely boring as a form (although a very tempting and inspiring form) and those sentences that emerge as refrains emerge in a long (and in a formal sense equally boring) epic poem written in a decasyllabic or blank verse.

Q: When one reads your novels, it is almost easy to conclude that your literary influences were Borges and high modernists, and that you were influenced by poststructuralist theories, especially that of Roland Barthes. However, it seems there is another influence that has not been mentioned by critics: Samuel Beckett (you have translated Beckett into Serbian). For instance, your *Bait* recalls "Krapp's Last Tape"; the instability of language is one of Beckett's obsessive themes. Would you agree with this?

A: Borges is certainly one of the writers I've read, but he didn't influence me. The reason can be found in the fact that Borges' influence is easily recognized; in other words, a Borgesian story might be written in only one way, as a Singerian story might be written only in a way Singer used to write it. American metafictional writers (or postmodernists) had a much bigger influence on me, especially R. Coover and D. Barthelme, although John Updike and Raymond Carver have also left their mark in my fiction. Beckett has influenced me undoubtedly, especially by his attitude toward language (and certainly by his attitude toward memory, which is as unstable in his fiction as language), but much more it was an influence of two Austrian writers, Thomas Bernhard and Peter Handke. Bernhard made me like the form of a novel-paragraph, and Handke persuaded me that the meaning of writing is mostly in questioning the exact meaning of writing. All of the mentioned writers, however, learned from Beckett and in that sense he is actually perhaps the biggest influence of twentieth-century literature.

Q: It seems to me that your inspiration always came from foreign literatures instead of Serbian and that you feel closer to the "world" than the domestic literary tradition. In the context of the 1970s, when you published your first books, that was both visionary and radical in a soft-communist country.

A: It's true that I was more interested in what was going on in world literature at that moment, because what was going on in Yugoslav contemporary fiction at that time was rather uninteresting. However, we shouldn't think that our [Yugoslav] literature was cut off from the rest of the world—on the contrary, there were many translations even then; translations of Beckett, Bernhard, and Handke were available but they did not leave any visible effect on our fiction. A few writers from my generation, and then younger authors, readily accepted new influences and started to write differently, more playfully than the previous generations [of writers]. I think that the older writers looked at what we were doing then quite scornfully, but that didn't stop us. To a certain extent, the conflict in which Danilo Kiš found himself later was the final clash between different approaches to literature. By the way, that conflict is still present in Serbian literature and in some unpredictable intervals it blazes up anew.

Q: Your latest novel "for adults," *Leeches*, is somewhat atypical for you. It is almost 300 pages long, while your novels are closer to novellas, and structurally it is a crime-novel written in the first person. Is that another change in your poetics? Are you going to an even further remove from the short form that was typical for you?

A: When I started the novel *Leeches*, I imagined it as a much shorter book, but then a lot of material was collected, the story expanded, and in the end I needed to cut it

(the first version was 50 pages longer). Maybe this was natural for me, because every new novel was longer than the previous one, and therefore *Globetrotter*, published in 2001, was my longest novel until *Leeches* was published. However, not for a single moment have I neglected the short form, namely short stories, and essentially I feel as a writer best when I write short stories and just now I am working on a manuscript of a new book which will appear in October 2006 at the Book Fair in Belgrade. By the way, you are right when you say that *Leeches* is different from the rest of my books, but a novel into which anti-Semitism, Kabbalah, history of the Zemun Jewish community, and current political issues are crammed must be baroque, even when it is written in one paragraph.

Q: In Serbia, there is a general “consensus” that when Serbia and its culture started to be “interesting” for the West, after Slobodan Milosević lost the elections in 2000 and the country was “liberated,” the war in Afghanistan started and the Western focus was suddenly shifted to that country. Although you are probably the only Serbian contemporary writer whose work is simultaneously translated into German, French and English (both in the UK and the U.S.), and whose name is recognized in the West, could you comment on that?

A: My impression is that the situation is not that black-and-white—as it might seem from your question. It is true that political events always have an impact—unfortunately!—on interest about a culture, but it is not entirely true that there isn’t any interest in Serbian literature. For instance, plays by Biljana Srbljanović, who is considered one of the most prominent contemporary playwrights, are staged all over the world. It is true that in the States our writers publish little, but in the States translations of any kind are rarely published. But in France every year a significant number of Serbian writers is published, including Svetislav Basara, Radoslav Petković, Vladimir Tasić, and other authors. The remnants of political evaluations and relationships toward Serbian politics certainly still influence publishers in different countries, but it can’t be said that they close their eyes when they run across good works. One should also keep in mind that in recent years some of the most interesting Serbian writers immersed themselves so much into language that they write books that are very hard or even impossible to translate (Goran Petrović, Radovan Beli Marković, Miro Vuksanović). In short, my impression is that there isn’t any organized, planned resistance toward Serbian literature, and that a great part of quality works will sooner or later reach the wider world audience.

Q: What do you think about the binary “major/minor literature”? In the U.S., Slavic programs are very worried about marginalization of “minor” literatures and the purpose of their departments in the world where everything is being translated, where there is not a need for studying a foreign language, not to mention a Slavic language.

A: I don't believe in divisions such as major/minor literature, because they are simply not true. Countries can be divided into big and small by different criteria, but those criteria don't refer to literature and art in general. Many small countries have produced some extremely important writers, which is something one can't say about all big countries. Of course, when one looks at literature from the perspective of Slavic departments, your question takes on other importance, because it warns of a possible disconnection between what used to be the main channels of spreading other cultures and translating literary works. I am not sure about Slavic departments in Europe, but American cultural disinterest in translation and representation of other literatures is certainly a reason to be worried. I guess, above all, [these are problems] that must be solved within [departments], but the help of states is also essential, that is to say, [the help] of cultures that consider the existence of such departments important.

Q: Do you believe that being a novelist today has a social function? In Serbia, especially in the 1990s, your novels were perceived as "a voice of reason," a statement against current politics.

A: I do not believe that a writer has any predetermined role in society. A writer can, if he wants, be engaged in different social aspects, but without any special rights. That, of course, doesn't mean that a writer can prevent his being seen as somebody's voice, in other words, of speaking in somebody's name. I think that a writer is really a writer only at the moment when he creates, specifically when he writes. In all of the other moments a writer can only play the role of a writer whose name he carries, that is to say, [he must] be a human being like anybody else, not to invoke his literary status. Why should a writer have a privileged position in society? One must be utterly cautious about those premises, especially when they are seen against all of the bad things that ensue from words and actions of some writers in different historical moments.

Q: Are you working on a new novel or a new translation now?

A: I mentioned that I'm working on a new collection of stories, and I am putting in order the stories that will be included in that collection. I'm also working on a short novel that I envisioned as a "novel for young adults," a novel in which the protagonists are high-school students. Of course, older readers will be able to read the novel, considering the fact that the novel will play with some elements of a crime novel, as did the novels *Bait* and *Leeches*.

Q: Since the last time we talked, the collection was published in Serbia in October 2006, under the title *Senke (Shadows)* and it was immediately welcomed critically. Whose or what kind of shadows are you concerned with? Is the book also, to a

certain extent, a shadow of your previous poetics, because you include—again—politics? There is even “The Last Story About my Wife,” about the character who was often present in your stories and it seems that you are saying “good-bye” to her.

A: The title of this collection refers to people who, to a certain extent, become the shadows of their previous lives. Most of the stories in the book are about the moments of breaking and fracturing, when the protagonists of those stories definitely become losers, left without the fullness of their former selves and start to exist as shadows. Yes, the title of the collection can also be interpreted as a shadow of my poetics, although my poetics have not changed. “The Last Story about my Wife” is not a farewell to my poetics, but it is a consequence of the feeling that *that* character, the character of “my wife,” exhausted all her possibilities and if I continue to use it, it will be just repetitive. Therefore I needed to make a sad decision—after all, that character has been present in my stories for the last twenty years—to write the last story about “my wife.” Now I am thinking about having—in the same manner as John Updike once collected his stories about the Maples in one book—a collection of stories in which (in a few slightly different incarnations) the character of “my wife” appears. And that book, naturally, will be called *My Wife*.

Q: People often talk about you as the “most translated” Serbian author. *Leeches* is already translated in France and Germany, only a year after its publication in Serbian. Are there any plans about publishing the collection in Europe or the U.S., or about translating the novel into English?

A: My American publisher will soon decide whether *Leeches* will be published; even if they decide to do that, they’ll trouble me, because publishing that book will show if there are enough readers of my fiction in the US. On the other hand, nobody will publish the collection *Shadows*, simply because publishers think that collections of short stories are not selling well enough, and eventually they will choose to publish a shorter or bigger compilation [of my stories]. I already have one rather good compilation of stories [published] in English (*Words are Something Else*), but there are no stories written in the last ten years or so. Maybe the time has come to do a “complete works”?

Q: Just a few days after the publication of *Shadows*, you became a member of the Serbian Academy of Arts and Sciences. To be selected is a great honour and is an “official” recognition of your work—despite the Academy’s focus on the progress of arts and sciences and somewhat traditional politics. To what extent will you be engaged in its work and will you be tempted to contribute to the modernization of the institution?

A: The election to the national academy is a great honor, even when that institution has some problematic moments—nicely put—in its recent past. Considering the fact that I don't live in Serbia, I am elected as an “outside member,” which means that, in fact, I don't participate in the decision process of the Academy. My potential engagement might occur when—and if—I come back to the homeland. If I can have some influence, of course I'll try to contribute to modernization of the institution; in other words, to [contribute to] the party which considers that openness toward Europe and the world is a prerequisite for further development of sciences and arts in Serbia.

Q: What are you reading now? Are there any young writers that you find engaging?

A: At the moment I'm not reading any fiction, but [am reading] an interesting book by Canadian historian Daniel Francis, *The Imaginary Indian*, about the reception of Indians in Canadian culture. When we talk about younger authors, there are those who are good and inspiring. “Younger authors” is a flexible term, but in the last years I've found interesting authors such as American writers Sherman Alexie and David Foster Wallace, and Canadian writer Kenneth J. Harvey, and I've found Sheila Heti exceptional. Unfortunately, I don't have a good enough insight into works by younger Serbian writers, although I believe there are many interesting authors.

Q: Do you ever think about moving back to Belgrade, or is your decision about living in Canada irrevocable?

A: In the last few years, I live as often in Belgrade, meaning Zemun [a Belgrade neighbourhood on the Danube], as in Calgary, considering the fact that every year I spend at least 2–3 months in Belgrade. For now, that's how I see my life: as travelling between two houses (yes, this is also my house now), and when in a few years when the kids grow up and graduate from college, I might make a different decision. You know, I don't have a feeling that I've left, so I don't have a feeling that I need to come back. How could I come back, if I have never left?

Q: But when you come to Belgrade, do you see anything changed? My friends often tell me how Japanese and American tourists, along with visitors from the Balkan countries, are the most obvious sign that Belgrade is different, that it is again becoming a European city. They compare it with the Belgrade of the 1980s, when the cultural scene was at its peak, and refer to articles in the travel section of the *New York Times* as the ultimate recognition of that difference.

A: Tourists will for sure be the first to redefine Belgrade and they are already doing that to a certain extent. However, Belgrade and Serbia must first solve the political

problems and dilemmas; [they must] pull themselves out of the dark hole in which they've fallen and only then will it be possible to move on and become something more than a place that is visited by curious tourists. Belgrade is as attractive as always; it's a lively metropolis in which [people] well eat, drink, and have fun, but Belgrade isn't the entire Serbia. Belgrade will always have something to show and offer to tourists; there is no a doubt about that. However, I'd like to see the same feeling of freedom and joy govern the whole of Serbia (in which there are still oasis of deep political darkness). Then tourists and I will be truly happy.