

Bread is Bread:

A Serbian Translation of Dragutin Tadijanović's "Na stolu kruh"

By Michael Despotović

Never has the act of breaking bread been as complicated as between the nations of Croatia and Serbia. A common item found in every Balkan household, bread is a foundational symbol of the Yugoslavian, or rather, Southern Slavic people; a symbol which needs no clarification or further explanation to Serbians or Croatians alike. However, in Dragutin Tadijanović's "Na stolu kruh" ("Bread on the table"), the symbol of bread is altered with the disintegration of the former Yugoslavia, and consequently, the death of a unified Serbo-Croatian language. As a consequence, in a post-war reading of this Croatian poem, Jakobson's notion of "intralingual translation" must reword "Na stolu kruh" into the Serbian equivalent, "на столу хлеб/Na stolu hleb," as means of retaining the original symbolism of bread (Bassnet 22). This emphasis on bread as a symbol is deconstructed and constructed in David Damrosch's account of Milorad Pavić's *The Dictionary of the Khazars*, as well as an example by Steven Galloway. Moreover, while Peter Ramadanović points to the linguistic independence of Serbian and Croatian, it is Arne Koch who demonstrates the need for "Intracultural Translations" in his essay on "sameness" and "difference" in language and nation (73). Thus, even though civil war and political animosity have separated Croatia and Serbia into two separate nations, the single Serbo-Croatian culture continues to exist in the final words of Tadijanović's poem, "And let there be bread on the table for all!" (49).

As a pivotal building block of the Serbo-Croatian culture, bread is the inspiration for a common people to bond together and draw understanding from. Originally, it can be attributed to the genesis of thought and understanding, as described by Predrag Matvejević,

It will remain a secret, perhaps forever, wherever and whenever grew the first grain. Its presence attracted a fresh look and awaked curiosity. Arranged grains – their order in the row - provided a model of harmony, measure, and perhaps, equality. Types and quality of grain, instead, gave difference, virtue, and probably, hierarchy.¹ (Kruh i tjelo, 1)

Subsequently, Matvejević deconstructs bread to its basic element, wheat, and offers a parallel between the naturally complex structure of grain to the larger, cultural understanding of abstract notions of "equality" and "hierarchy" (1). His depiction portrays a deeper, philosophical discovery, or perhaps, construction of modern understanding, in which grain is likened to a near-image of the Tree of Knowledge. Therefore, with the harvesting of grain, and the eventual

production of bread, the first people learned “measure,” “virtue,” but most notably, “difference” (1). However, understanding “difference” in a unified nation seems counterintuitive, if not harmful to the common bonds tying together the former Yugoslavia.

In Tadijanović’s poem, the reader is given many symbolic words to frame the meaning of bread but a critical reading of the text will portray an ironic sense of tone;

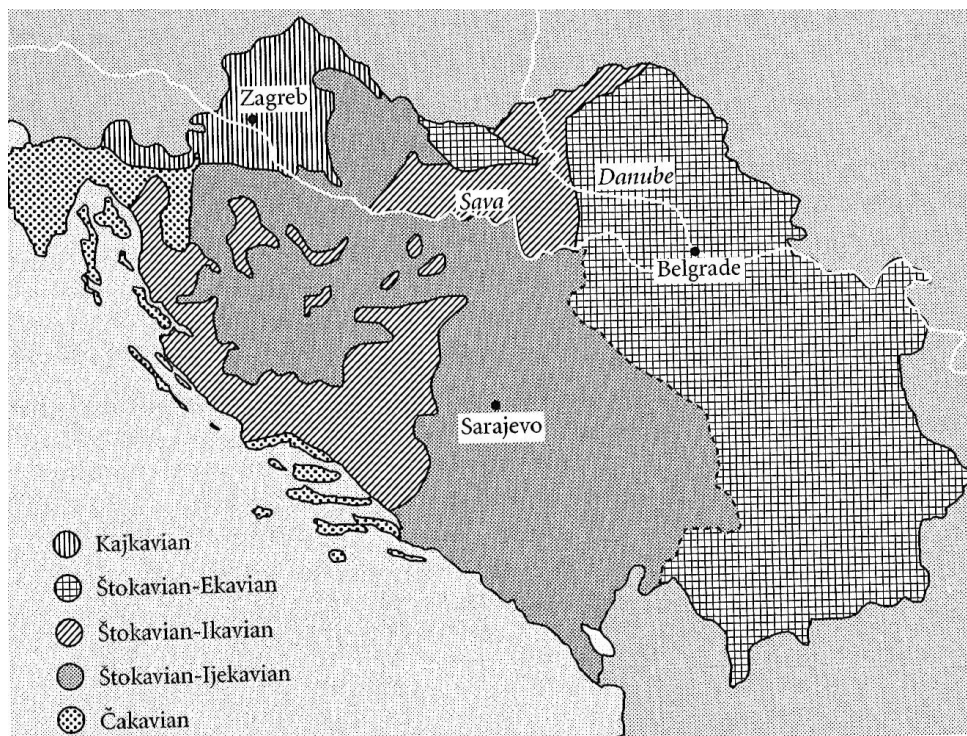
In all the languages of the World
 And for millions of people on Earth
 There is a weapon to destroy them –
 But you want your cry to be heard as well:
 Peace to the World! Freedom to the World!
 And let there be bread on the table for all!
 (trans. Dennis Ward, *Bread on the Table* 49)

Clearly, Tadijanović crafts each word in his poem to bring out enigmatic references to history, without the labelling of one specific event or instance. For example, one reading may present this poem as a critique of the post-WII envision of widespread communism in Eastern Europe. Through this lens, Tadijanović’s play on the Bolshevik motto of “Peace, Land, and Bread” demonstrates a natural distrust towards communist ideology (Lugarić 109). Nevertheless, in the aftermath of WWII, the “...peoples of Yugoslavia were joined together under the banner of communism...” led by Josip Tito through what became the popular slogan, “the brotherhood and unity of the peoples of Yugoslavia (Wachtel 630). Therefore, where bread is a cornerstone in communist ideology in which the people of Yugoslavia have built their nation upon, Tadijanović’s poem mocks the cries of Tito. In other words, Tadijanović is criticizing the constant reuse of symbols of “peace,” “freedom,” and “bread,” as unification tactics for a culture which doesn’t wish to be united.

Nevertheless, this reading is complicated by the fact that “Na stolu kruh” was published in 1984, four years after Tito’s death. Even so, the influence of soviet ideology is nonetheless prevalent in Serbo-Croatian culture. In her search for the meaning of bread, Lugarić outlines the “narratives of the struggle for bread, more precisely, the struggle for the harvest, as a message about the struggle for the survival of socialism...” (104). Her essay deconstructs the multiple instances of exploiting the symbol of bread in Russian propaganda posters, ultimately striving to unify the Russian masses for a single cause. While bread was not directly used as a form of political manipulation, the Yugoslav wars of 1991-1995 would change how the Serbo-Croatian people would view bread. For instance, in *The Cellist of Sarajevo*, the author, Galloway,

remarks, “but the bread Dragan brings home makes him indispensable, and the roof [his family] put[s] over his head traps him there” (38). Within the context of the narrative, Dragan is at the mercy of Serbia’s mortar bombs during the Yugoslav war, in which his daily goal is not to bring home money, “which is more or less useless anyway,” but bread (Galloway 38). Within this work, the symbol of bread has shed a direct connection to political ideology, yet it still remains within the greater political context at work. Regardless, bread is at the centre (literally, in the case of Bosnia) of the disintegration of the Serbo-Croat culture.

Moreover, it is important to note that the military warfare between the nations of Croatia, Serbia, and others did not cause the fragmentation of the Serbo-Croatian language, however, “[t]he language situation in the former Yugoslavia was irrevocably transformed after the break-up...” (Greenberg 159). In fact, leading up to this period in history, the unified nations of Croatia and Serbia had continuously found ways to separate the two national languages (Croatian or Serbian) on terms of dialectic difference. As the following map from Robert Greenberg’s *Language and Identity in the Balkans* shows, the territorial boundaries of Serbia and Croatia were not complimentary to the boundaries of dialect of the citizens within the two nations;



However, in an effort to establish difference among nations, the Croatian government settled on a standardized Croatian language using the Štokavian-Ekavian dialect, while the Serbian government settled on a standardized Serbian language using the Štokavian-Ikavian dialect

(Greenberg 161). In short, the main differences between the two dialects revolve around the spelling, and consequently the pronunciation of certain words, such as “*milijun*” in Croatian, and “*milion*” in Serbian (Kovačić 199). On the other hand, there are more noticeable differences between the two dialects, such as the word for paper; “*papir*” in Croatian, and “*hartija*” in Serbian (Kovačić 199). According to Kovačić, these syntactical differences are a result of “loanwords” from other cultures, most frequently those that occupied Southern Slavic land at one point or another. In the case of the Serbian “*hartija*,” this word is of Greek origin, while the Croatian “*papir*” is a phonetic representation of the German “*papier*” (Kovačić 199). Yet, in regards to Tadijanović’s poem, the most significant difference between the two dialects, and thus the two languages, is in regard to the word for bread; “*kruh*” in Croatian and “*hleb*” in Serbian (Kovačić 199). Once again, the difference lies in the Serbia’s incorporation of “an old Germanic loanword,” which happens to equally appear in Russia, Bulgaria, Macedonia, and other surrounding countries. Despite this, Croatia’s use of “*kruh*” is derived from early, Illyrian vocabulary, specifically found in literature from Dubrovnik (Greenberg 128). Consequently, this phenomenon of having two distinct words represent the very same image gave rise to conflicted situations such as “requesting bread with the “Serbian” *hleb* rather than the Croatian *kruh* elicits scowls in Zagreb grocery stores,” (Dragojević 74). Ultimately, due to lexical distinction between the *kruh* and *hleb*, the symbol of bread in Serbo-Croatian culture has been divided to their east-west dialects, otherwise known as their national languages.

Among the splintered countries of the formerly unified country of Yugoslavia, Koch’s analysis of “intracultural translation” points to a key understanding of the symbolism of bread (76). In addition to this, Jakobson’s concept of “intralingual translation,” operates counter to “translation proper,” as a result of the dialectic origins of Croatian and Serbian as national languages (Bassnet 22). While politically speaking, Serbian and Croatian are recognized as distinct languages, for the purposes of understanding the symbolism of bread in Tadijanović’s poem the definition of “intralingual translation” better suits the task of identifying a shared culture among the Southern Slavs; “an interpretation of verbal signs by means of other signs within that same language” (Bassnet 22). Likewise, Koch’s words, “translation always exposes at once parameters of difference and sameness” point to the linguistic dichotomy of bread in Serbo-Croatian (73). As Matvejević explains how, “types and quality of grain ... gave difference,” (1) he likewise demonstrates how the symbol of bread is an anchor for the two

nationalities to meet at “*kruh/hleb*” and understand “difference” in their language, but “sameness” in their culture (Koch 73).

In opposition to this view, Milorad Pavić’s *The Dictionary of the Khazars* deconstructs not only the symbol of bread in Serbo-Croatian culture, but also the role of nation (and hence, language). Although not immediately revealed to have “nationalistic undercurrents” present, Damrosch argues that *The Dictionary* hides Pavić’s wish to see Serbia separated from the unified Yugoslavia and put in a position of Balkan supremacy (120). This argument stems from several passages from within the text, but none speak as loud as Pavić’s parallel between his view of Tito’s government and his depiction of the Khazar government;

Dyed bread is the sign of the Khazar’s position in the Khazar state. The Khazars produce it, ... The starving populace ... eats dyed bread, which is sold for next to nothing. Undyed bread, which is also made by the Khazars, is paid for in gold. The Khazars are allowed to buy only the expensive, undyed bread. Should any Khazar violate this rule ... it will show in their excrement. Special customs services periodically check Khazar latrines and punish violators of this law. (qtd. in Damrosch, 392)

In order to understand this parody, Damrosch points to Serbia’s population as the largest within the former Yugoslav Federation. As a result, the Khazars are a stand-in for the Serbian nation, therefore indicating Croatia, Bosnia, and other nations to be the “starving populace,” or otherwise, non-Khazars (Pavić qtd. in Damrosch, 392). By extending the metaphor to include the deconstruction of national language, Pavić’s dichotomy of bread (dyed and undyed) correlates specifically to the dichotomy of words used for bread (*hleb* and *kruh*). In relation to Tadijanović’s poem, the symbol of bread remains within its political imprisonment, to which Pavić’s comment is received: the Croatian bread (*kruh*) is different and inferior to the Serbian bread (*hleb*). Nonetheless, Pavić may be just a single Serbian nationalist, but his *Dictionary* was first published in 1984, within the same year of Tadijanović’s poem. Moreover, Pavić took advantage of the disintegration of the Yugoslav Federation as well as the splintering of national languages in order to republish his book in the nation’s official language, Serbian, and not the “ghost language” of before, Serbo-Croatian (Ramadanović 185). While purely a political self-statement, *The Dictionary* is now a work of Serbian literary art, while Tadijanović’s “Na stolu kruh” has defaulted to its original tongue, the Croatian language (Štokavian-Ekavian dialect). Therefore, as a Croatian poem read in a post-war Serbo-Croat culture, the readers of “Nah stolu kruh” are divided by their original language, and thus their nature. In order to remedy this

“difference,” I must step into the discourse of Serbo-Croatian literature and adapt Jakobsen’s “intralingual translation” to Tadijanović’s “Na stolu kruh” (Bassnet 22).

To the Croatian reader, there is no change to the symbol of bread in either the pre-war or the post-war poem as there has not been a change in original language. While interpretations are still open to the individual reader, the Croatian language and the Croatian reader will connect through the poem, and enable the reader to encounter Tadijanović’s criticism and his incorporation of bread with no linguistic challenges. However, a Serbian reader approaching this Croatian text is not likely to receive Tadijanović’s poem in the same regards as a Croatian reader due to the disconnect in linguistic choice. The Serbian reader, although familiar with common differences between the two languages, will instead perceive the poem as essentially nationalistic, and thus, antagonistic to his own nationality. In fact, the linguistic identity of the poem has shifted the Serbian’s perspective to read, “And let there be bread on the table for all [Croatians]!” in the last line of Tadijanović’s paper (48). Consequently, the Serbian reader is distanced from the more important, symbol of bread, and how Tadijanović draws upon its cultural relevancy as a means of critique. In order to save “Na stolu kruh” from losing its cultural symbolism by a barrier or prejudice, Tadijanović’s Croatian poem must be translated into Serbian. Fortunately, this is not a hard process in that only five words change within the poem. In order of appearance and from Croatian to Serbian they are, *bijelim* > *bijelom*, *papirom* > *hartijom*, *milijuni* > *milioni*, *pjesama* > *pesama*, *kruh* > *hleb* (Tadijanović, trans. Michael Despotović, 48). The final result of this process is the Serbian translation of “Na stolu kruh” to “Na stolu hleb.” Still, the translation lacks one last component that is afforded to the Serbian speaking population, the Cyrillic alphabet.

Aside from the differences in overall differences in national language, Serbia also has a national alphabet separate from the Latin script, known as Cyrillic. Initially exposed to the alphabet by St. Cyril, the Serbian clergy used Russian Cyrillic until 1868 when Vuk Karadžić created a Serbian sanctioned script it for national use. As Somdeep Sen writes, “[t]his set of alphabets is what is ... often seen as a reflection of the pure and traditional Serbian culture and nation (520). However, Damrosch recounts another side to the Cyrillic alphabet in his essay about Pavić, “Death in Translation.” He writes,

In order to fit the Slavonic language within the cage of their script, Cyril and his brother Methodius ‘broke it in pieces, drew it into their mouths through the bars of Cyril’s letters, and bonded the fragments with their saliva and the Greek

clay beneath the soles of their feet.’ (388)
 Pavić’s method of translation from the Latin alphabet to the Cyrillic alphabet is imperialistic in nature, breaking and eating the original text. Although Pavić’s method serves as a metaphor for the act of intralingual translation, in order to create an exact duplicate of the original, this practice of transliterating from Croatian Latin script into Serbian Cyrillic is necessary and resulting in an accepted representation of Serbian poetry:

на столу хлеб
 [...]

 На свим језицима света
 И за милионе људи на Земљи
 Спремљено је већ оружје да их уништи -
 А ти хоћеш да се чује И тој крик:
 Мир Свијету! Слобода Свијету!
 И свакоме на столу хлеб!

(trans. Michael Despotović, *Na stolu kruh*, 48)

Consequently, I have created “на столу хлеб/Na stolu hleb” as a means of stripping away any linguistic barriers to the symbolism of bread. In doing so, my intentions were free of nationalism for Serbia, but instead, it liberated the overarching culture belonging to all Southern Slavs, Pavić and Tadijanović included.

Arguably, my translation has enforced Koch’s argument that “[c]ultural difference shapes sameness and ... transforms it further into a possible expression of cultural hegemony” (Koch 74). With this in mind, national hegemony is not something that neither Croatia nor Serbia wishes to strive towards, as seen by their history. On the other hand, through the literary construction and deconstruction of the symbol of bread, like in Pavić’s *The Dictionary*, the greater Serbo-Croatian identity is located with each reference to *kruh* and *hleb*. Instead of a political or national flattening of the Southern Slavic people, my translation reveals a cultural hegemony amount like-minded people. Furthermore, Koch writes, “[w]hat appears most significant in the use of translation is the repeated manifestation of an inherent politicization and juxtaposition—implicit or not—of regional and national affiliations” (87). The symbol of bread is at the center of every political context within Croatian and Serbian literature, while Tadijanović’s “Na stolu kruh” as well as my Serbian translation, “на столу хлеб/Na stolu hleb”

depict both the “difference” and the “sameness” of these two conflicting identities (73). Moreover, the need to impose Jakobsen’s intralingual translation (or Koch’s intracultural translation) on Tadijanović’s poem is due to what Koch calls, “[t]he expression of regional difference ... [which] achieves such an offensive stance despite the effort of making this difference decipherable for everything through translation, thus aiming for linguistic regularity or sameness” (76). As evident by the judgments of the Serbian reader of “Na stolu kruh” or perhaps the judgment of the Croatian reader of “на столу хлеб/Na stolu hleb,” the underlying need to grasp for the symbol of bread is what holds the translation together. In the end, “[t]his tension is often but another device of articulating an individual’s strained position,” such as that of Tadijanović, “in-between national and other realms of belonging...” (Koch 87).

To conclude, within the very elements of bread began the start of the Southern Slavic culture. Yet, through the multiplicity of dialects, political disputes of nationalist leaders, and the disintegration of the Yugoslav Federation in 1991, the very symbol of bread that the Southern Slavs build themselves upon was dichotomized within the two main languages spoken, Croatian and Serbian. As a result, this combination of conflict complicated the pan-Slavic criticism within Tadijanović’s “Na stolu kruh,” thus urging for an intralingual translation of the Croatian text into the Serbian language. Moreover, Koch’s argument of “intracultural translation” identifies the “*kruh/hleb*” dichotomy as an indication of “difference” and “sameness” within the same culture (74). Therefore, throughout its history as a communist icon, object of non-Khazar oppression, and its other many connotations, bread is both a symbol of difference between the Serbian and Croatian people and a symbol of sameness between the collective identity of the Southern Slavs. It’s transcendence in Tadijanović’s poem is a form of expression that will reach far beyond future national conflicts.

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ⁱ "Ostat će tajnom, možda zauvijek, gdje i kad je izrastao prvi klas. Njegova je prisutnost privlačila pogled i budila znatiželju. Raspored zrnâ – njihov poredak u klasu – pružao je primjer sklada, mjere, možda i jednakosti. Vrste i kakvoće žita odavale su razliku, vrlinu, vjerojatno i hijerarhiju." With the exception of Dennis Ward's translation of "Na stolu kruh," Suzana Dujmić translated all originally Croatian texts.