

Interview with Josip Novakovich

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Writer Josip Novakovich was born in 1956 in Daruvar, Croatia. His grandparents had moved from Croatia, by then part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, to Cleveland, Ohio. His grandfather then returned to what had become Yugoslavia in the aftermath of the First World War. At the age of 16, while he was recovering from an injury, Novakovich read his brother's books in simplified English, enthralled by his new-found capacity of decoding words in a language he had not thought much of before, and perceived a transformation within his personality. Four years later, when his application to study at Vassar College, New York, was accepted, he left his country in order to pursue a career in writing, despite the fact that, at the time, he was studying medicine at the University of Novi Sad in Serbia.

Novakovich has, since then, taught at Nebraska Indian Community College, Bard College, Moorhead State University, Antioch University in Los Angeles, the University of Cincinnati and Pennsylvania State University. He is currently in Montreal, Quebec, teaching at Concordia University. He is the recipient of the Whiting Writer's Award, a Guggenheim fellowship, two fellowships from the National Endowment of the Arts, an award from the Ingram Merrill Foundation, and an American Book Award from the Before Columbus Foundation. He was anthologized in *Best American Poetry*, *Pushcart Prize*, and *O. Henry Prize Stories*. He has published a novel (*April Fool's Day*), three short story collections, two collections of narrative essays (*Apricots from Chernobyl*, *Plum Brandy: Croatian Journey*) and a textbook (*Fiction Writer's Workshop*).

My interview to Josip Novakovich was conducted face-to-face in Lovran, Croatia, on May 16th, 2016. The interview focused on the subjects of writing in a second language, and present and future contexts for writers using English in the light of the recent rapid spread of English as the world's lingua franca. We began by discussing the editing of the anthology *Stories in the Stepmother Tongue* (White Pine Press, 2000), a remarkable collection of short stories from authors who write in English as a second language, with each story introduced by a personal statement from the respective writer explaining the reasons behind the choice of writing in English. *Stories in the Stepmother Tongue* originated from a feature in the journal *Mãnoa: a Pacific Journal of International Writing* (1993), which

was subsequently expanded with professional editor Robert Shapard, and collected short stories in English written by non-native authors.

Sara Moschin: How was *Stories in the Stepmother Tongue* initially conceived?

Josip Novakovich: The idea behind the whole project came from me. For the *Mānoa* journal special, Robert Shapard and I combined stories published for the first time and others. He's been an influential editor (at the time, he had coined the term 'flash fiction' with James Thomas and started the whole phenomenon). We put a call on *Poets & Writers* for stories written by non-native English speakers: we got more than 300 and we ended up publishing 10 of them. Then, to fall up we made additional research and so the anthology was a fusion of what we had collected before the addition on *Poets & Writers* and what we were sent afterwards. In the meantime, we realized that there were so many other writers showing up on the scene, and that is how *Stories in the Stepmother Tongue* saw the light. By then, we did have enough stories, so we thought about publishing a series of anthologies, which unfortunately did not happen mostly due to issues relating to publishing houses. However, I must admit that I do not see myself as an editor. In fact, I'm afraid I've forgotten my role as an editor during this interview. It's because I actually prefer writing in a second language, and discussing.

S.M.: Is the profession of teacher and writer clashing with the role of editor?

J.N.: You know, in editing you have a finished product on which you can basically make some adjustments. Essentially, I think teaching compared to editing is in a way more aggressive and provocative. When you teach and you're going into the process of writing, often you have something to do with stories starting from scratch. You can suggest this possibility, or that possibility, you can start from the middle, or maybe the introduction.

S.M.: The stories collected in *Stories in the Stepmother Tongue* were selected with editor Robert Shapard. How would you describe the editing process? Did the collaboration with a native speaker originate any debate, especially as regards language-related issues?

J.N.: Yes, our main disagreement was over grammar (word order, articles, etc). He worked as a professional editor in addition to being an English professor, and he was tempted to edit the stories according to the Chicago Manual of Style. I insisted that even skipping articles, as for example the Russians speaking in English do, added something to the flavour, and that each person evolved his or her own dialect

fusing the native language with English. I think that this is the most delightful thing, the intonation, the accents - which you can't see but can feel on the page through diction, word order, etc. He had a steady address and reputation, so it was good to have him advertise to solicit the manuscripts etc. First, we did a special edition of Mānoa Magazine and then expanded it into the anthology. We combined stories published for the first time and others. In the magazine, we published the first story by Edwige Danticat, for example, and by Samrat Upadhyay.

S.M.: In the anthology there are writers who came to the States during their childhood, others as teenagers, others (including you, if I may) in their twenties. You stated that the stories were chosen out of their 'quality'. Any additional reason?

J.N.: Well, of course, we looked for diversity as well. For example, stories by Indian authors are very debatable because for many people from there English is the strongest language. Hindi is in most cases spoken at home, until the age of school when English has a more prominent role. However, [English] does come early enough and it becomes the superior language. It was my idea that there writers had to be represented in the anthology. And then there are pure immigrants such as Mikhail Iossel. For those Americans who do not understand my connection with the guilt complex, I usually say, "listen, I come from a country which got rid of serfdom in 1848 (most of the area that eventually became Yugoslavia, at least) and was colonized from North, West, East and South". I have more in common with black people than with white people in that sense. Croatians don't want to talk about it out of pride, still I am not hiding it. In a way, it gives me a certain critical distance from the colonialist guilt.

S.M.: The stories that were chosen for this anthology are connected through themes and two tendencies are easily noticeable. One is oriented to a linguistic form of seeking, or a quest if you like, for something to belong to, a context to fit within. The other gives the priority to escaping from a place, with English as the most suitable alternative to the native language. Are the two tendencies in complete opposition, or maybe could one of them be consequential, or even intertwined, to the other? And does this dualism influence the quality of writing on purpose?

J.N.: First of all, I tend to think that politics-oriented intents, which means writing with a political mission, usually make the quality of the writing worse. One tends to lose the sense of irony. But if there is a genuine interest towards the language itself, the outcome is more subtle, more playful, and generally better as a consequence. Many people chose English before going to the United States as a way to

free themselves; then, after going to the States, they look for a community to which they can belong, also on a linguistic level. There is, for instance, the case of Hispanic communities who still opt for Spanish, other choose to write in English, and also writers end up including the Barrio language in an American English period.

S.M.: Speaking of subjectivity, an aspect which is in common for most of the entries in *Stories in the Stepmother Tongue* is the strong presence of family members. Even though their influence on the main character takes various forms and attitudes, their relevancy to the plot is undeniable. Why?

J.N.: If you come from an older, more established culture, and then you go to the New World where families conventionally have two or three members, you tend to stay close to your relatives, also in virtue of the fact that economy is not flexible. That's part of why some immigrants do have a blueprint of their families and tend to tell family tales. Everybody in this field kind of looks back to some forms of tribal customs. And you learn stories from your family. As for folklore and storytellers in general, when you look back to your culture, you would look for some kind of original strength, since you cannot really compete with, or rely on, an American experience of childhood – you did not have one. So when I began to write, I remember thinking “wait a minute. I come from the oral tradition of the Balkans” and I went to Yugoslavia to find some storytellers and use their techniques. Up until I realized it's not really about the technique, it's about themes – in my case, war. I needed a war. And then in the 1990's a war came. When you think about it, war is deeply rooted even into Greek classics – the *Iliad*, to name one. The mythology is strong. I got to this storyteller in Belgrade and he told me the following story: “look at that barn, it's where my father and grandfather were shot by the Germans. When I was seven, the Germans came, I remember trembling and shivering in bed. I hid under the blanket. A German came in my room, put a hand on my forehead, went away and came back with a glass of water and two white pills. I remember it was extremely bitter, and thought I would die. And then they went away” he was shocked. Later he reconstructed the whole episode: he was probably ill and got treated with aspirin by a military doctor. The episode itself is extraordinary and complete. There's the element of surprise, the villain who turns out to be the good healer. I thought, “well, only war can give you a story like that”. Back to family traditions, I'm also thinking of *The Woman Warrior* by Maxine Hong Kingston. She's a good example of writing in English as a second language; even though she grew up in the States, she was raised in a Chinese-speaking family and wrote about her grandparents who worked on building railways. She really found

sources of storytelling within her relatives. Perhaps even more than people who do not belong to immigrant families. This phenomenon, the representation of immigrants, now is strong in Canada and the States. Some use it to their advantage, not always in a positive light.

S.M.: Considering globalization, English as the lingua franca and the Expanding Circle constantly gaining new members, could you picture the act of writing literature in English obtaining international recognition even in the case of a writer who never leaves his or her country of birth?

J.N.: I think that if you never experience life in an English speaking country you end up having way too many handicaps. You need the life, the speed of a living language which would inevitably be missing. I mean, theoretically it's possible, but vibrant pieces of writing are unlikely to be put together under such circumstances. I did [write in English] in medical school, when I was already into moving to an English speaking country. With the subjects I did not find challenging, I would take notes in English. Then, when I moved to the United States, for a while I considered writing in Croatian, but the language back in Croatia was already changing due to political reasons and I did not find it interesting; and besides that, my typewriter did not have all the letters from Gaj's Latin Alphabet. In English it's all more automatic, I do not need to look at the keyboard while typing. Speaking of the editions of my books on the Croatian scene, the current situation is a little frustrating for me, too. I can follow the translations of my books and they seem so different to me from what I write, they never sound good, that is not my rhythm. Maybe out of the fact that I've been away for so long and the language changed in the meantime. Anyway there are many Englishes, you know. You have the Hindi English, the Russian English which the tendency of omitting articles. Each country has its own peculiarities coming into English, but even more than that, there are as many Englishes as there are *people*. With immigrants you immediately assume that, out of the fact that they are immigrants, but you know, even in Croatian I had my own way.

S.M.: Should we never attempt to consider categories then, and just consider writers individually?

J.N.: In a way, sure, but beyond that, authors writing in English as a non-native language can still be grouped.

S.M.: Writer Shirley Geok-lin Lim mentions the influence that British literary classics had on her formation. Since the writers whose stories are featured in the anthology are mostly active in the United States,

could reading British literature be seen as an additional obstacle for a foreigner writing in American English?

J.N.: I sense an ambivalence in being critical of the Colonialist Empire and that aspect of the language, and at the same time embracing its influence enthusiastically. That may co-exist. Well, in my case I read most classics in translation. I read Tolstoj, Balzac and Flaubert in English, which is perhaps the reason why my stories sometimes sound as translations. And then Beckett, and... It might be shocking in Europe, but British literature in the States it's just a fragment in the education system, considering the impact that writers such as Hemingway had on American English. There's just so much American literature. And in any case, I think American English has been especially invigorated by languages spoken by immigrants. British English was less opened to import words from immigrants who were ghettoised, or despised, and had to ascend to a level of 'proper English'. In the States, Polish, Spanish, even Yiddish came in. In general, I guess every writer is affected in a different way and it is not always easy to determine what they read just from their books. Coming from Croatian, I couldn't help but notice that recently there was a revision of my native language through American and French minimalism, especially in efficiency and clarity. Many people write short sentences, and that's something new, which is maybe a consequence of cultural inferiority complex. Once I was in the States, for me it was a conversion experience. I really had to express myself simply and give up long, convoluted sentences with lots of dependent clauses. Like, "What do you mean with what you write?" "I have no idea, I am figuring out what I mean" "And who has the patience for that?". Anyway, you could still write long sentences in English, too. I'm thinking of Dickens now: as long as one does it well, it's clear. It's enjoyable to read Dickens because of his acrobatic approach.

S.M.: More than fifteen years have passed since *Stories in the Stepmother Tongue* was published. In your opinion, has anything changed in the perception the worldwide literary community has of non-native writers who adopt English for their profession?

J.N.: Oh, I am afraid, more than 20 years have passed now, considering that the anthology is in a way a consequence to the *Mānoa* feature which was published in 1993. In the meanwhile, a lot has changed. Ha Jin for example has since then won several awards in the U.S. There have been many anthologies of non-native speakers. Sandra Cisneros and other hispanic writers have become superstars, at least in the academic world. And moreover, this immigrant style of literature in the adopted tongue has become a worldwide phenomenon even for other languages – so for example, in Germany, now there's a prize for

the best novel of the year written in German as a second language. And Germans, who used to be almost a hermetic literary culture, where it was unimaginable that a non-native would dare to use the soulful language, well, even they now adore writers who have immigrated, and enjoy the flavours of different tongues in German, just as they enjoy the flavours of different ethnic cuisines in their otherwise horribly bland cuisine. Nearly every language of a major country right now is being injected with the vigour of foreign tongues.

S.M.: Considering the increasing influence of English-ruled social networks and, perhaps more importantly, the rise of educational systems teaching in English to students from an early stage of their lives in countries belonging to the Expanding Circle, would it be possible to foresee a growing number of non-native English writers in the next decade?

J.N.: At the moment, about 14 percent of American population is foreign born, and 21 percent of Canadian population is foreign born. More and more foreigners choose to keep writing in their native tongues especially if they come from the major ones, such as Spanish and Arabic, but many choose to write in the language in which they live, and if they live in English, they write in English. In Quebec, some write in French, and I think the French there enjoys a certain vitality of the influx of foreign voices. In the Middle-Ages, the lingua franca was Latin, and theologians, hardly any of whom grew up with Latin, all wrote in Latin as the second tongue. I do foresee that more and more people will write in English. So much communication takes place in English that people who don't live in anglophone societies naturally gravitate towards English.

Josip Novakovich's textbook *Fiction Writer's Workshop* is available in Italian: *Esercizi di Scrittura Narrativa*. Transl. by *Stefania Rossi*. Roma: Dino Audino Editore, 2008.

