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A priest, a sad song, and a literary sensation

In 1774, the 33-year-old Augustinian abbé, scientist and travel writer Alberto Fortis published Viaggio in Dalmazia (‘Travels in Dalmatia’), a two-volume travelogue with observations on natural history, geology, and ethnography.1

Dalmatia is a geographically and culturally distinct region fringing the Eastern Adriatic. Its long coast and islands clearly belong to the Mediterranean world: until well into the last century, for instance, many people spoke Italian as well as the local variety of Croatian (or Bosnian or Montenegrin or Serbian – the differences within this language spectrum, once known as Serbo-Croat, are slight). But behind the ridgeline of the Dinaric Alps that rises like a long wall a few kilometres inland, the Mediterranean culture and landscape merge with those of Central Europe and the Balkans. Dalmatia’s hybrid nature is a reflection of its history. Over the centuries, different states and empires have shared control of the region, their borders constantly shifting to form fresh patterns of interlaced territory. Historically, its 20th-century stay in one state, Yugoslavia, is a brief interlude and its splintered status since the 1990s – largely Croatian, but with parts belonging to Bosnia and to Montenegro – is a reversion to form. When Fortis travelled there in the 1770s, Dalmatia was shared largely between the city-states of Venice and Dubrovnik, and the Austrian empire – or, more precisely, the Hapsburg-ruled Kingdom of Croatia. Within living memory, much of this patchwork had also belonged to the Ottoman province of Bosnia. However, most of Ottoman Dalmatia was conquered by Christian forces in the 1710s. This left a long tongue of Croatian and Venetian territory between the coast and Bosnia proper, whose border now lay well behind the Dinaric ridge.

It was not only scientific research that inspired the Abbé and his companions to travel through these borderlands. The late 18th century was the age of Jean-Jacques Rousseau: of the belief that societies less corrupted by civilization had a natural nobility and vigour which so-called advanced cultures had lost. It was also the age of Ossian’s Celtic epics: of admiration for the uncorrupted, vigorous creativity output of the folk cultures that lay at Western Europe’s fringes. Fittingly, Fortis’s companion on one voyage – his patron Frederick Hervey, Bishop of Londonderry – hailed from these fringes. As intellectuals of this age, Fortis and his companions had an enthusiastic interest in the culture of the peoples they were travelling among – especially of the local Slavs, whom outsiders then called Morlacchi. Historian Noel Malcolm describes Fortis as going “in search of poetry and primitive virtue, […] noting that ‘A Morlacco travels along the desert mountains singing, especially in the night time, the actions of ancient Slavi Kings, and barons, or some tragic event’”2.

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2 Malcolm, p. 78.
In a section of his travelogue titled *On the Customs of the Morlacchi*, Fortis presented one of these songs, *Xalostna Pjesanza Plemenite Asan-Aghinize* – ‘Sad Song of the Noble Hasan-Aginica’. Its protagonist is the wife, or aginica, of the aga Hasan – an aga being a feudal lord and commander in the Turkish army. Hasan Aga lies wounded, perhaps from a border skirmish with Christian troops, in his tent high on the mountain. Hasan Aginica, however, out of a sense of decorum or shame, dares not visit him. As a result, he divorces her, forcing her to return without her children to her mother’s family; she is then married off by her brother to another man. All this she accepts, but one thing she cannot: the loss of her beloved children.

In his book, opposite the Slavic original, Fortis added a parallel Italian translation: *Canzone Dolente Della Nobile Sposa d’Asan Aga*. This immediately attracted the enthusiastic attention of a European reading public who, tired of the constraints of classicism, had recently taken the works of the Scottish bard Ossian to their hearts. For these readers, what soon became called the *Hasanaginica* was an authentic testament to popular culture and feeling – more authentic than the poems of Ossian, in fact, where many suspected that their “translator” James MacPherson had simply written them himself. The same European reading public had just been swept away by the aptly-named German blockbuster *Sorrows of Young Werther*. *Hasanaginica*, like *Werther*, was a tale of tragic love; but unlike *Werther*, it went against standard literary stereotypes, which may actually have added to its appeal.

The song quickly went viral, so to speak. Within four years, Fortis’s book had been translated into German, French and English. The *Hasanaginica* itself also was also translated and published separately. One of the first translations was by *Werther*’s young author himself – the fast-rising international literary star Johann Wolfgang von Goethe. Many more versions of the song followed, in many more languages, and some by other leading literary figures: Alexander Pushkin and Anna Akhmatova produced Russian translations, for instance, Prosper Mérimée and Gérard
de Nerval produced French translations, and Walter Scott an English version. At Hasanaginica’s bicentenary in 1974, literary scholar Alija Isaković listed translations in twenty-four languages, including Spanish and Esperanto, Dutch and Danish, Hebrew and Arabic, Malay and Persian. Within individual languages, the Hasanaginica has often been re-translated: by 1974 there were almost fifty separate versions in German alone, and this volume contains what is at least the 22nd published English translation³.

**The Hasanaginica as literature**

MacPherson’s Ossian is now consigned to the curiosity cabinet of literary history, and few except for German-literature students now read Goethe’s Werther. The Hasanaginica, however, still continues to be translated and published. This testifies to its lasting power over readers. This power reaches beyond the ebb and flow of literary fashion, and transcends the ever-increasing distance which separates its own time and cultural values from those of each new generation of readers. Indeed, the Hasanaginica is a true classic of world literature, in that this distance does not detract from its immediacy and universality. Instead, it actually adds to its appeal – giving readers the extra frisson of entering a world which, like the world of dream, is both strange and intimately familiar.

The strangeness is part cultural, but also part literary. Culturally, a world where a woman has no rights as a wife or mother is alien to modern European readers – a world where a woman can be divorced at her husband’s whim, where he then becomes unquestioned keeper of the children, and she reverts to being the property of her male blood-kin. But that a misunderstanding between man and wife can avalanche into tragedy, and that such tragedies are the stuff of ballads – this, surely, is universal.

In literary terms, key points of motivation are unexplained, and hence no less strange to modern readers. Why is Hasan Aga wounded? Fortis comments that this happened “in un combattimento” – but does not speculate with whom, why or where this combat had taken place. More importantly for the story, why does his wife the Aginica not visit him as he lies wounded? The song says “Glubovza od stida ne mogla”: “[his] Beloved from shame could not”. But why she should feel shame is alien even to Fortis. He describes it as “un pudore, che parrebbe strano fra noi”: “a modesty, which would seem strange in our view”. This implies that it made sense to the song’s listeners: perhaps because it would have been unseemly for her to travel there alone. This lack of explicit motivation, however, adds to the song’s sense of authenticity. With a folk song, probably a variant on a familiar tale which was in turn probably based on a real-life event, the external motivations would almost certainly be known to listeners. Hence they would be less interesting than the dynamics of what was done, said and felt within the song itself.

Yet, despite the strangeness of its cultural and literary assumptions, the Hasanaginica’s psychological world is deeply familiar to all its readers and listeners, and all too believable, testifying to the singer’s human understanding of her (or his) protagonists. How many of us have not witnessed, or even experienced, how a spiteful chasm can suddenly open up between a couple fallen out of love? And witnessed how, in such cases, one parent can use the other’s love for their children as

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³ In 1983, Vasa Mihailović listed twenty English translations and presented another of his own (“Dvadeset prevoda Hasanaginice na engleski [Twenty translations of the Hasanaginica into English]”, source unknown).
a weapon to hurt the other? Or witnessed how losing one’s children to the other parent can cut far deeper than losing his or her love? This human trueness is universal, reaching beyond the specifics of social systems, gender rights or husband-wife misunderstandings.

**The Hasanaginica’s origins**

The song’s exact origins are a mystery too. Clues in the song itself, however, suggest that Fortis’s version was composed or first sung by a folk singer or bard, who may well have been female, and that it almost certainly originated not from the coast, but from the Croatian- or Bosnian-ruled hinterland. The *Xalostna Pjesanza* of the Hasanaginica’s title can, like its modern equivalent *žalosna pjesma*, mean both ‘sad song’ and ‘sad poem’: there was traditionally not much difference between the two, since what we now call a folk poem would have been chanted to a tune anyway. Structurally, it does not use stanzas, but relies on unrhymed *narodni deseterac* (“folk ten-syllable”) lines. These typically have a trochaic rhythm, with a caesura dividing the line into two sections, one of four and one of six syllables, as in the song’s opening lines:

\[
\text{v . v . } | \text{ v . v . v .} \\
\text{Seto se {} bje_li } \text{ u } \text{ gor_je } \text{ ze_le_noj?} \\
\text{[What is whitening in the hills/forest green?]}
\]

\[
\text{v . v . } | \text{ v . v . v .} \\
\text{Al- su } \text{ snje_zi, al- su } \text{ La__bu_to_ve?} \\
\text{[Are they snows, are they Swans?]}
\]

This is typical of the South Slav bardic epic, an oral poetic form that was – and sometimes still is – improvised rather than recited from memory. In *The Singer of Tales*[^5], his classic analysis of the bardic epic, Albert B. Lord explained how improvising an oral poem in real time is a skill made possible by certain key features. In particular, bards often retell a familiar tale, with the fixed rhythm forming a framework into which four- or six-syllable units are slotted, many of these being conventional phrases (“u gorje zelenoj”, for example) or minor variants in order to reduce the mental load.

As for the gender of the Hasanaginica’s bard, a traditional division in South Slav folk song/poetry is between so-called “men’s songs” (*muške pjesme*) and “women’s songs” (*ženske pjesme*). The former tend to tell of battles, legendary heroes and suchlike – like the songs about Marko Kralević, a Muslim prince battling the Christians (or vice versa, depending on the bard and the audience) on his winged horse with supernatural help. *Ženske pjesme* tend to have a wider variety of forms and themes – though, whether tragic, romantic or humorous, they are often closer to real life rather than martial or supernatural. Though the division does not necessarily reflect the gender of the singer, many *ženske pjesme* do tell of women’s experience from a woman’s viewpoint, making it more likely that they would have been composed or sung by women. The Hasanaginica certainly does take this female viewpoint, suggesting a female singer: the Aginic herself is not only the centre of

[^4]: In the first version of this Afterword, I assumed that the Hasanaginica was recorded in Croatianruled, i.e. Christian or Christianized, territory. Nakaš (present volume), however, points out that it could well have originated across the border in Bosnia: I have integrated her comments into the present version of this Afterword.

the action, but she is a fully-rounded character, seen from the inside, as it were; Hasan Aga, however, is seen only from the outside, via his written and spoken words as read and heard by the Aginica.

Who actually sung the version of Hasanaginica presented by Fortis, however, or even who wrote it down, remains unknown. The Abbé does not tell us. We do not know, for example, whether the written text records the song roughly in its sung state, or as reworked by an educated intermediary. Though the Abbé knew some of the local Slavic language, he was probably not skilled enough to understand and transcribe a song he had heard “in the field”. It is more likely, therefore, that he was given the song via a friend or contact from the region – as elsewhere in Europe, intellectuals from the coastal cities of Split and Dubrovnik were collecting folk poems from their region, and literate poets in Dalmatia and Bosnia were polishing or reworking poems from the oral tradition. Such a person could have passed a written version to Fortis. Alternatively, he or she might have sung the Hasanaginica to Fortis and helped him write it out. One appealing theory is that the person who did so was Fortis’s housekeeper and steward Stana (her surname is unknown), who came from the inland Dalmatian town of Drniš. As Stana, however, was almost certainly not a folk bard, this implies that the original extemporized epic had now become a popular song with a fixed text and melody.

As for the region the song originated from, this was almost certainly the rocky hinterland. The song’s dialect is inland rather than coastal, and the inland town of Imotski is the only place-name mentioned in the song. Moreover, two characters in the song, Hasan-Aga Arapović and the Beg (‘Lord’) Pintorović, are known to have lived near Imotski in the late 17th century, when it was still under Bosnian-Turkish rule.

Imotski, however, passed to Venetian rule in 1717, two generations before Fortis travelled there: soon after the Venetian conquest, Imotski’s Muslim inhabitants were killed, expelled or forcibly baptised – as happened all too often before and since to the Muslims of the Balkans. These facts seems at odds with the song’s Muslim cultural and social framework, giving two possible origins for the song. One is that it came from the region of Imotski itself, thus testifying to the power of popular culture to outlive changes of statehood and even state religion. Indeed, Mahmutčehajić argues that the song bears witness not just to folk memories of the area’s Muslim past, but to the clandestine maintenance of Muslim cultural and sacral traditions by local citizens who had converted, or had been converted, to Christianity. The other possibility, advocated by Nakaš, is that the Hasanaginica was composed across the border in Bosnia, as a re-singing or re-writing of a popular story by a poet who was herself intimately familiar with the patriarchal social structure of Ottoman Bosnia.

**Translating the Hasanaginica**

Translating the Hasanaginica into English has been an unusual privilege, but also an unusual challenge. It is a privilege to work on what is not only an iconic work in the South Slav cultural heritage, but also a key text in modern European literary history. It is a privilege, too, to join the large virtual community of those who have translated the Hasanaginica down the centuries and across the globe. These two aspects,
however, lead to challenges different to those normally faced by a translator of Bosnian-Croatian-Serbian poetry, where most work is with living or recent poets who are being translated for the first time. The fact that the Hasanaginica is such a well-known and widely-admired work puts a great responsibility on the translator, but its status as an oral classic from a former age makes that responsibility hard to fulfil. On the one hand, translations of classics are usually scrutinised closely for their semantic correspondence (closeness of meaning) with the original – but that correspondence is sometimes unknowable. On the other hand, it means striving for high quality of poetic form and diction – but here the problem is not only to achieve high quality, but to decide what it might be. I explore these issues in the sections that follow.

**Translating words**

One barrier to semantic correspondence between source and target text (original and translation) is that of knowledge. We simply do not know the meaning of certain words in this poem, because they occur only in this poem. In particular, are Line 80’s *nozve pozlaćene*, which the Aginica gives to her two older boys, ‘gilded knives’ (*noževe pozlaćene*) or calf-long ‘thread-of-gold slippers’ (*nazuve pozlaćene*)? And when Hasan tells his sons that their mother is *serza argiaskoga*, is she ‘bad-hearted’ (*srca rđavoga*), ‘unkindly-hearted’ (*srca rdavskoga*), or ‘arrogant-hearted’ (*srca agr’atksoga*)? Or is her heart like that of Hagar (*hagarskoga*) – the servant-girl whom Abraham made pregnant with their son Ishmael, but who was cast out into the desert when she provoked the enmity of Sarah, Abraham’s first wife, by acting haughtily towards Sarah?

In the source text, these ambiguities can remain as they are. In a translation, non-ambiguous words must be chosen: in each case, one of the branching paths must be followed, and the other abandoned. This is partly a linguistic issue: English has no word, for instance, which means both *knives* and *slippers*. However, it is also a professional issue: one of how translators are conventionally expected to behave. The ambiguities listed above are almost certainly accidents of history rather than the intention of the original bard, but it is usually seen as the translator’s duty only to recreate the poet’s intention. Hence mimicking such accidents by translating *argiaskoga* with the made-up word *agarrant* (combining ‘arrogant’ with ‘arrant’ with ‘Hagar-like’), for instance, might be seen as a breach of that duty. In the end, in consultation with this volume’s editor Rusmir Mahmutčehajić, I chose *slippers* and *Hagar* respectively, as these best fitted the interpretation of the poem explored in his own Afterword.

Sometimes a source word’s meaning might be clear but its role in the text world might be unclear. This can form another barrier to correspondence. The reason is that a source-language word, like the Aginica’s fateful *stid*, often has not one exact target-language equivalent, but a set of near-equivalents which express subtly different aspects of the original – the more self-blaming *shame*, the more virtuous *modesty*, and the ‘younger’ *demureness*, for instance. Choosing one of these near-equivalents above the other again imposes an interpretation on what is ambiguous. Here, what determined my final choice was not (as with *nozve* and *argiaskoga*) a fit with texts about the poem, but a fit with the English poem’s internal structure. *Shame* was excluded because it was needed later to translate a different word, *sramota* (*shame* in the sense of *disgrace*):

I’m banished, brother, from my five young bairns.
For shame!
Of the other two possibilities, the adjective *demure* fitted the rhythm and sound-structure of the line – “But his dear wife is too demure to go” – whereas *modest* did not.

**Translating poetic form**

This brings us to the question of choosing an appropriate poetic form. With fixed poetic forms – in this case, the *narodni deseterac* – translators have three choices: to abandon form, mimic the source form, or find an analogous but different target-language form. For me, abandonment – that is, making the *Hasanaginica* a free-verse poem – was simply not an option. The rhythm is the poetic heartbeat of the poem: rip that out, and the poem dies. As for the argument that poems do not need rhyme or rhythm nowadays, I would reply that this is an 18th-century folk ballad, and folk ballads have rhythm: using free verse would make the *Hasanaginica* into an artefact of modern intellectual culture, which it is not.

Mimicking the original trochaic 10-syllable line is a possibility I considered. This is done fairly successfully by 19th-century English translators such as John Bowring (1827):

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What’s so white upon yon verdant forest?
Is it snow, or is it swans assembled?
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I found two problems with this approach, however. Firstly, whereas Bosnian-Croatian-Serbian falls readily into a trochaic rhythm, English is more naturally iambic (\( .v .v \)). Hence keeping up a trochaic rhythm for 92 lines is difficult without sounding forced: Bowring’s addition of “assembled”, for example, considerably weakens Line 2. Secondly, recreating a line’s form does not necessarily recreate that form’s cultural meaning. To Bosnian-Croatian-Serbian listeners, the *narodni deseterac* immediately signals “this is a traditional folk ballad”; but to English listeners, Bowring’s clone does not.

Finding an analogous English form is no less hard, however. The closest cultural equivalent is probably ballad metre, which alternates between unrhymed four-foot and rhymed three-foot iambic lines, as in this try-out:

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What shines so white in the green hills?
Say, are they swans, or snow?
Swans would have flown, and snowdrifts would
Have melted long ago.
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There are two problems here. Practically, it is hard to squeeze the ten-syllable source lines into alternating eight- and six-syllable lines, even given the fact that English words tend to have fewer syllables than Bosnian-Croatian-Serbian words. Ethically, this is such a radical adaptation to English-language norms, erasing all traces of the original form, that some might see it as a sort of cultural imperialism.

In the end, I chose an unrhymed iambic pentameter line (\( .v .v .v .v .v \)). This is one of the most common metres in English poetry, and has a tradition of being used in narrative verse. It also does not stray too far from the *narodni deseterac*, because its base form also has ten syllables. The disadvantage, however, is that unrhymed iambic pentameters are not an archetypal folk form in English. Their associations are

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8 Lawrence Venuti argues that this is the risk of “domesticating” a text to fit target-culture norms, especially when translating into globalized language like English (*The Translator’s Invisibility*, London: Routledge, 1995).
more high-culture – Milton’s *Paradise Lost* or Shakespeare’s plays, for instance. To strengthen the folk feel, I firstly increased the rhythmic drive by keeping to a strictly 10-syllable rhythm, avoiding the option of adding an extra unstressed syllable (as in *To be or not to be, that is the question*). I also worked an alliterative element into each line, attempting to create echoes of our own Anglo-Saxon bardic tradition:

What’s shining white up on the high green hill?
Say, are they drifts of snow, or are they swans?

Of course, Anglo-Saxon alliterative verse did not have a fixed syllable-count. But ultimately, any choice is a compromise: my only hope is that it works for the reader.

**Translating the Hasanaginica’s style**

The choice of English style is no less easy. To modern Bosnian-Croatian-Serbian readers, the poem’s language is markedly old-fashioned and regional. This is hardly surprising for a folk poem gathered almost a century before a standard language was established (though, interestingly, it was folk poetry, from the regions where Croatian, Bosnian and Serbian speech had most in common, which gave the basis for this standard). It would have been possible to signal this stylistic texture in English – by translating it into the language of the Scots-English border ballads, for instance, which were recorded at a similar time to the *Hasanaginica*. There are two problems here. The first is that the archaic Herzegovinan-Dalmatian dialect of the original is a literary version of the singer’s everyday speech, whereas my writing the Scots or Northumbrian English of the 18th-century border ballads would be a much bigger and more artificial departure from my own everyday speech – which, even though I live in the Scottish-English borders, is 21st-century, fairly standard English. The second is the rather arbitrary modern-day convention mentioned earlier: that translators should try to recreate the poet’s original intent, but not the accidental patina of geography and history that overlays it. Recreating regional style, no matter how important it may be in the modern source reader’s experience, is often felt to be a dubious venture for a translator. As for recreating its historical patina, this breaches what is perhaps the only remaining taboo in English poetry: the taboo which forbids the use of archaized language in poetry, as a reaction to its over-use by 19th-century poets.

In the end, I felt that the game of mimicking the full historical and geographic texture was not worth the candle of alienating my target readers. Hence I chose modern standard English for the poem’s narrative – albeit a somewhat stylized English with repeated leitmotifs (“high white hall”, for instance), in order to reflect the formulaic, improvised-song structure of the original. I added a Northumbrian tinge to the dialogue, though again more the Northumbrian of traditional song than of modern Newcastle speech. Here, I felt that the borderland associations of this dialect to most UK readers would signal the original’s own hybrid, borderland origins:

Because my wretched heart would rive in two
If I saw all my orphan bairns again!

This also alludes to what, for me, was an important motivation for retranslating the *Hasanaginica*. In the 1990s, many people of the former Yugoslav region paid a grievous price in life, health or wellbeing for political dogmas that imposed simplistic but absolute divisions between communities, and tried to reinforce these divisions with rigid, impermeable borders. The *Hasanaginica* itself is a Bosnian Muslim tale
either originally sung or swiftly adopted by Dalmatian Christians: whether Fortis’s version originated on the Croatian or Bosnian side of the border is unknown, but a ‘cover version’ of Fortis’s Hasanganica soon appeared in the coastal dialect of Split, for instance9. In either case, cultural memory ignores a border imposed by what we now call ethnic cleansing. In translating the Hasanganica, therefore, I am also translating an iconic work of two neighbouring and partially overlapping literary heritages: the Croatian and the Bosnian. In so doing, I feel honoured to be part of a growing movement to recognize and, once again, celebrate the cultural hybridities, interflows and inspirations which criss-cross the borders between the South Slav states – and which have helped make their literatures into such a powerful force in European and world culture.

9 There is no direct evidence that the coastal version was written after Fortis’s inland version (rather than vice versa), but the song’s Ottoman-Bosnian setting makes this view most likely.