

The Poetry of Aco Šopov:

An Interview with Christina Kramer and Rawley Grau

Interview conducted by Sibelan Forrester

Christina Kramer and Rawley Grau are the translators of a selection of poetry by the Macedonian poet Aco Šopov, *The Long Coming of the Fire*, to be published this year by Deep Vellum Press (Dallas). Some of their translations have appeared in the online journal *Asymptote*; others were discussed at a conference celebrating 100 years since Šopov's birth, supported by UNESCO and held in Paris in March of 2023, which both translators attended. This interview was conducted via email and then by means of a Google doc.



Christina E. Kramer in front of a portrait of Aco Šopov by Kole Manev.
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Aco Šopov (1923-1982) was a member of the Yugoslav Partisan movement and the first poet after WWII to have a book of his work published in the Macedonian language, which had been suppressed previously but has since flowered thanks to the work of authors like Šopov. He was an accomplished translator himself and formed many international friendships with poets in an era of widespread translation and broad interest in the international literary and poetic scene. He later served as Yugoslavia's ambassador to Senegal, where he made contact with many African poets and writers while helping to advance the Third World cause with political leaders. In particular, he had the opportunity to translate the poetry of Léopold Sédar Senghor. The hundredth anniversary of Šopov's birth is being celebrated this year with the conference in Paris, a conference at Goce Delčev University in his hometown of Štip, North Macedonia, a special commemoration at the Struga Poetry Evenings, and a December conference at MANU, the Macedonian Academy of Sciences and Arts. His poetry is richly presented, in the original and translated into many languages, on the website acosopov.com.

Christina E. Kramer is a professor emerita at the University of Toronto. Her translations of novels by Luan Starova and Lidija Dimkovska were supported by NEA grants and her translation of Dimkovska's *A Spare Life* (Two Lines) was longlisted for best translation of the year, while her translation of Goce Smilevski's *Freud's Sister* (Penguin) won a Lois Roth Honorable Mention. Next year her translation of Petar Andonovski's novel *The Summer Without You* (Parthian) will be published with support from English PEN. She was part of the translation team for Aleko Konstantinov's Bulgarian classic, *Bai Ganyo* (Univ. of Wisconsin Press). Excerpts from novels as well as other short works she translated from Macedonian have appeared in numerous journals. More information about the authors Professor Kramer has worked with, as well as a sampling of their short fiction and excerpts of her translations, can be found on [her website](#). She can be reached at ce.kramer@utoronto.ca



Rawley Grau speaking at the UNESCO conference on Šopov in Paris ©Cyril Bailleul. Published with permission.



Sibelan Forrester
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Rawley Grau is best known as a translator from Russian and Slovenian. His translation of the Russian poet Yevgeny Baratynsky (*A Science Not for the Earth*, Ugly Duckling, 2015) received the AATSEEL Prize for Best Scholarly Translation and was listed by *Three Percent* as one of the ten best poetry translations of the year; his translations from Slovenian of two novels by Dušan Šarotar (*Panorama*, Peter Owen and Istros, 2017, and *Billiards at the Hotel Dobray*, Istros, 2019) were shortlisted for the Oxford-Weidenfeld Prize. In 2021, he was awarded the Lavrin Diploma for excellence in translation by the Slovenian Association of Literary Translators. He met Christina E. Kramer in the 1980s, when he was a graduate student at the University of Toronto; he began learning Macedonian in 2020, after she invited him to collaborate with her on translating Aco Šopov's poems. Originally from Baltimore, he has lived in Ljubljana since the early 2000s. He can be reached at roligrau@gmail.com

Sibelan Forrester has published translations of fiction, poetry, and scholarly prose from Croatian, Russian, Serbian, and Ukrainian. She teaches Russian language and literature at Swarthmore College, Pennsylvania, USA. She delivered the SLD's Susana Greiss Lecture for 2018: "A Translator's Path to Eastern Europe." She can be reached at sforres1@swarthmore.edu

How did each of you become involved in this project? Were you already familiar with Šopov's poetry?

Kramer: His daughter, Jasmina Šopova, wrote to me in August of 2020 asking me to consider translating Šopov's poems. I had numerous books of Šopov's poetry but did not really know his work. I first heard of Šopov during my Fulbright year in Skopje. I arrived at the Institute for the Macedonian language and was told that no one would be there that day. Aco Šopov had died. When Jasmina and I spoke over Zoom I told her I was not able to translate poetry, despite my interest in it. I suggested she contact Rawley Grau, whose translations of Baratynsky I knew well. While Rawley didn't know Macedonian, he did know Russian and Slovenian, and, most importantly, he knew poetry.

I knew I could translate Macedonian, and that Rawley could translate poetry. But it was Jasmina who pushed us to attempt a collaboration.

Grau: When Christina wrote to me asking if I would be interested in translating this Macedonian poet I had never heard of, I was flattered of course but reminded her that I did not know Macedonian. I told her that maybe I could produce something poetry-like

from a good prose translation, but she should really contact somebody who knew the language. When a week later she wrote that Jasmina wanted me because she saw a connection between my work on Baratynsky and the kind of poetry her father wrote, and that she had suggested that Christina and I work together, the idea was too intriguing to turn down. So, we started with a short, fairly easy poem, "Koga ti e najteško" ("When Times Are Hardest"), and I was pleased enough with the result to want to continue. Jasmina, in one of those first emails, described the process as one of taking our first hesitant steps "in a kind of fog that is both frightening and exciting." That about sums it up.

What has each of you brought to the collaboration, with your different backgrounds (professional and linguistic, previous translation experience, etc.)?

Kramer: My responsibility was to bring my decades-long experience of studying and translating Macedonian as well as my deep knowledge of Macedonian language, literature, history, and culture. Perhaps also my long-standing interest in reading and memorizing poetry, though not translating it.

Grau: First, I should stress that Christina brought to our project not only her deep knowledge of the Macedonian language and Macedonian culture; she is an excellent and wide reader of poetry, and the importance of this should not be underestimated. My experience translating Baratynsky in particular but also other Russian and Slovenian poets has helped me understand how to deal with translating rhyme, rhythm, and stanzaic form into English—all important in Šopov's work. And, essentially if obviously, a lifelong love of English-language poetry, from the Protestant hymns and King James Version of the Bible, which I grew up with, all the way to the modernists and more recent contemporary poets, has provided me with good resources for understanding what an English line of poetry feels like, in all its variety. Prosody has fascinated me for as long as I can remember.

How did you decide which poems to translate? And did you translate them in any particular order? Did later translations send you back to revise some you had done earlier?

Kramer: We began with very tentative steps. In September 2020 we agreed to experiment in our collaboration with a few of Šopov's better-known poems. Jasmina first sent a list of poems that had not been previously translated into English, and this is where we began. Our translations of "When Times are Hardest," "To the Seagull Circling Over My Head" ("Кон галебот што кружи над мојата глава"), and "The White Sorrow of the Spring," and the process we developed for translating them, showed us that we had a viable working relationship—an exciting collaborative exchange of ideas developed that was one of the richest things I experienced during the long months of Covid lockdowns.

Grau: With that first group of poems, we were translating in the dark. The first three were earlier poems from the 1950s, but then we were suddenly doing poems from the 1960s, which are very different, less personal, less conversational, with almost surrealist elements. Then Jasmina sent us a list of all the

poems she wanted us to translate arranged in more logical groups, which we proceeded to do in order (such as the Prayer Cycle). This gave us a better sense of Šopov's work as a whole, his cycles, etc. And as we saw how he developed his images, repeated phrases and gestures, not just within a group of poems or a book but over decades, we went back to translations we had done earlier to try to bring some of this out. Šopov, over the course of his poetic life, developed a strong conceptual system, a poetic universe, which we needed to be aware of. So there was a lot of revision of our earlier translations.

What sort of process did you develop to translate the poems? Did it change over time?

Kramer: As Rawley noted, the very first poem we translated was "When Times are Hardest." On 9 September I sent Rawley the poem with a translation, with stresses marked in the Macedonian and interlinear grammatical explanations. As our process developed, I would provide Rawley with a close interlinear translation that included details about morphology, register, syntax, etc., as well as a first, more or less literal, translation of the poem. From this material, Rawley would create a draft translation seeking to capture in English the poetry of Šopov's original without in any way compromising its meaning. This draft bounced between us as we revisited decisions, often with input from native speakers, before settling on a near-final version, which in many instances we later revised. Jasmina Šopova then commented on each near-final and final translation. We had originally thought of recording the poems, but recordings of many of the poems were available on Jasmina's website, and Rawley began learning Macedonian so quickly that we no longer felt this was necessary. I shared these first translations with Macedonian colleagues, who responded enthusiastically to our work.

Grau: In the more "poetic" version that I sent back to Christina, there were usually a good number of comments, or rather questions, about specific words, or speculating whether the poet could possibly mean

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but the spaces inside them too.

something other than the primary meaning of a certain word, or noting correspondences with other poems, etc. Christina would respond with her comments, sometimes pointing out that I had deviated too far from the original and suggesting new solutions. It was always a very engaging dialogue, one I looked forward to. And, crucially, this helped me articulate my understanding of the poem as a whole, or even of the group of poems. You can't translate something well if you don't understand it. And when you are dealing with poetry, where there is rarely only one meaning, you have to be open—and try to make your translation open—to the various possible understandings. Šopov's poems are, to borrow one of his images, nets of meaning with golden fish dreaming inside them, and as translators we had to try to capture not just the meanings that form the cords of the net, but the spaces inside them too.

Are there any specific linguistic challenges you'd like to mention, such as syntax, morphology, register? Ways that the Macedonian language has changed in the past 100 years?

Kramer: Great question! In translation there are always challenges in everything, but in translating poetry these challenges are magnified because you are working in a small space. In a prose work you might have several ways to resolve a dilemma, but in poetry the choices are narrowed by the constraints of the poetic line. Here I will mention just a few examples of our dilemmas. Both Macedonian and English have a category of definiteness, e.g., the opposition between *a* book and *the* book—*kniga* and *knigata*. Macedonian has developed an indefinite article from the number one, but it does not correspond exactly to the English *a*. It generally means something specific but not definite, i.e., a certain book. The poem “Dolu ima edna krv” contains this use of *edna*. At first we translated it with no article, because the mass noun “blood” would not normally be particularized: “Down there there is blood.” But we “trusted the author,” as Rawley likes to say, because it is also odd in Macedonian. Our final version, “Down Below There Is a Blood,” captures the strangeness and strength of the Macedonian original.

Grau: A problem that often arose—which is distinctive of the lack of cases in Macedonian—was how to understand the preposition *na*, which may be used to indicate possession, location, and even the indirect object. There were a number of times when we debated whether *na* should be “of” or “at,” possession or location, and several times we asked native speakers how they understood the line. Similar problems

sometimes occurred with the preposition *so*, which can mean both “with” (in a locational sense) or “by means of” (in the instrumental sense)—but this did not throw me as much because it happens in Slovenian too. It is always important to work these problems out in the context of the poem. I always ask myself: What is the image here? What do I see in my mind? For example, the image about the nets that I mentioned earlier comes from the poem “August.” The line is “Ribarite na tvojoj pogled pletat nevidlivi mreži,” literally “The fishermen in your gaze [or view]/of your gaze [or view] weave invisible nets.” Christina initially interpreted *na tvojoj pogled* as “in your view/sight,” suggesting that the fishermen are seen by the speaker (who is speaking to himself here). But I wondered if the fishermen could somehow belong to the gaze: “the fishermen of your gaze,” as if the fishermen were inside the gaze weaving their nets. Our final line, in a way, allows for both ideas: “The fishermen in your eyes weave nets unseen.” Similarly, in the first lines of that same poem, Šopov writes about lying under the tree of night: “Ležam [...] vo avgust što umira i pee / so cvet od pepel na zgasnata groza,” literally, “I lie [...] in August that is dying and singing / with a flower/blossom from ash of [an] extinguished horror.” I thought: what if we understand *so* (with) instrumentally? That is, the speaker is not lying with a flower of ash but the flower of ash is the means, the instrument, by which August is singing. So in our final version we actually use different prepositions altogether from what might seem like the obvious choices: “in August, which is dying and singing / in a flower of ash from the burned-out horror”—“in ... of ... from” instead of “with ... from ... of/on.” Prepositions are often the hardest words to translate, at least for me.

I'm impressed by your respect for Šopov's poetic line—it makes the translations stronger in English! Were there any particular challenges from Šopov's poetic style? Anything that was “untranslatable”?

Kramer: One example that comes to mind and is illustrative of how even the simple can be complex is the title of the poem “Bela taga na izvorot.” Four words. White Sorrow at Source (definite—the source). Then we began thinking of each word with possible translations and those meanings in English. The title then starts suggesting numerous possibilities:

White sorrow/sadness/longing/saudade/ache of/at the source/spring/font/wellspring

We discussed these few words for months! Rawley's first proposal had been “White Ache of the Source.”

But could it be “at the source,” “at the spring”? This is an example where the translation of the preposition *na* was not clear. After many, many exchanges, Rawley proposed that we go back to the source—the poem—and see how “spring” would work. Using “spring” in the title, but “wellspring” in line 3, allowed for the disambiguation of the word. I was also having second thoughts about “ache.” He had chosen it because of its cousinhood with the Russian word *toska*. But as he came across other instances of the Macedonian *taga* where it seemed to mean your basic sadness and sorrow, not necessarily that profound existential sense of yearning, he proposed “The White Sorrow of the Spring.” It all clicked into place, even for Jasmina, who wrote: “I think that the changes you made are excellent and it shows already in the title itself: sorrow and spring make them for me more nostalgic and less a romantic atmosphere of the song than ache and source.”

You can imagine how detailed and extensive our conversations were as we translated 74 poems...

Grau: Well, much is “untranslatable” when it comes to the sound of a line: you do your best and hope that something comes through, and always thank English for the unexpected gifts she brings, and try not to curse her for things like the multiple meanings of “spring” or “temple” (in “Birth of the Word”/“Раѓање на зборот”). Šopov also coined a few words that gave us trouble, most notably, *nebidnina*, which would seem simple enough to turn into English: it’s a nominalization of the verb *bide*, to be, with the negative prefix *ne*—so “nonbeing,” right? But that’s a standard word in English, and Šopov’s word is a coinage, which he himself, although he said a lot about it in interviews and elsewhere, seemed to have trouble defining. You have to understand the word in the context of the poetry, especially in the poem titled “Nebidnina” and another one, “Pesnata i godinite” (“The Song and the Years”). I had initially proposed the word “unbeing” (I came across it in a poem by Craig Powell), but then, when we were working on “The Song and the Years,” I developed the idea of this *nebidnina* as a kind of separate realm from which things—souls, songs, poems—emerge into being, and not just as the antithesis of being. So I thought that perhaps the most open term, one that could hold various meanings of nonexistence, nonbeing, and unbeing and yet be something new, was “not-being.” So that’s what we went with.

Along the same lines, how did you handle his use of meter and rhyme? Where do your translations fit into contemporary anglophone poetic practices? I ask this after seeing the musicality of the translations, and I wonder how much of

that is intentional and how much is sort of instinctive.

Grau: Certainly, contemporary anglophone practices and indeed the resurgence of rhyme in American poetry of the last 20 years or so (although the British never gave it up), as well as its extraordinary playfulness in rap music, influenced my sense of what is acceptable as rhyme, or assonance, that could parallel Šopov’s use of what is almost always very close, if not exact, rhyme. And not just contemporary practices. As I said earlier, my sense of rhyme was shaped by the Protestant hymns I grew up with, where “blessing” rhymes with “ceasing,” “grace” with “days,” and “love” with “move.” I take this even further and am happy if I can suggest the idea of a rhyme or at least some phonetic or visual correspondence that tells the reader these words are pairs. As for meter, I still haven’t figured out Šopov’s meter. It’s usually not the standard meter I know from English or Russian poetry. It may have its roots in Macedonia’s rich folk-song tradition, but I’m not sure. Macedonian normally puts word stress on the antepenultimate (third from the end) syllable. But with two-syllable words (which are many) the stress falls on the first syllable. So the line tends to be irregular with two-beat and three-beat measures in various combinations. But Šopov’s rhythm (as opposed to meter) is usually clear and strong, so I tried to follow that. The best compliment Jasmina Šopova ever gave me was to say that the translation sounded like her father’s poetry. And that is what I was aiming for.

Most of your readers won’t be very familiar with Macedonian culture or history. How did you deal with any specific cultural references in the poetry? How specifically Macedonian is Šopov’s poetry, or does it vary from one poem to another?

Kramer: Šopov’s poetry can be read without deep knowledge of Macedonian culture and history. Some reference points are, of course, critical. Šopov fought as a Partisan, and his poem “Oči” (“Your Eyes”) was written for the fallen Partisan Vera Jocikj. Many of the poems in the book *Reader of the Ashes* need to be read in the context of the Skopje earthquake. The specificity of references to a lake, a monastery, and other images are enriched if you know the locations, but they are equally readable as products of imagination that can be conjured by any reader. Some other cultural allusions, such as the particular fish that live in Lake Ohrid or a reference to Blaže Koneski’s poem “The Embroideress” (“Везилка”) again enrich the work for those who know the references, but the poems stand on their own.

Grau: Our book will have a notes section at the end that will bring out some of these local references and allusions. That's a poor substitute for the kind of knowledge Šopov's original readers would have had, or that Macedonians today have, but in my own experience as a reader, I find that such notes can be very helpful.

How did you handle any disagreements between you about the best way to translate something?

Kramer: I think our disagreements were some of the most satisfying parts of our exchanges. Because we were working in parallel, disagreements constantly forced us back to the original, to explain our understanding of words, of poetic images, of complicated syntax. We would keep commenting on each other's changes until we could resolve the differences. No poem reached the near-final stage until we, and Jasmina, were satisfied. It took a while sometimes, but the resolution of those disagreements was immensely gratifying.

Grau: I agree. The "disagreements"—which were more discussions than opposing viewpoints—only deepened our understanding of the poems. This is one of the benefits of collaboration in such a project.

How did you know when your translation of a poem was finished? How much feedback did you get from your editor or from other trusted readers?

Kramer: Is any translation ever finished? We were done when we both were satisfied with each other's work and after Jasmina gave her approval—which often entailed interesting discussions as we explained our different understandings of the meaning of a poem, a word, or a line. We had other native-speaker input through the translation process. Aco Šopov is hard to untangle, even for native speakers, so the questions were complex and the answers not always transparent.

Grau: I expect we will still be making changes (minor ones, hopefully) until the book goes to press. We do occasionally share our translations with other trusted readers, and so far the feedback has been very positive. My favorite comment came from my nephew, who is an artist and musician (among other things). When I read him "Birth of the Word," his immediate response was: "That's really hard core." I think that's an apt description of Šopov's work.

Бела тага на изворот

By Aco Šopov

Си отидов песно стара, песно невина,
си отидов без жалење.
За белата тага на изворот си отидов,
за непостојаната љубов на реките,
за грутка небо — од јаглен синевина,
за недостижните, за најдалеките.
Си отидов песно стара, песно невина,
си отидов без жалење.
А сега склупчена до прагот на утрината
една тешка неизвесност седи
и исто прашање без прекин повторува:
Зар вреди она што мислиш дека вреди?

Зашто знам —
сè ќе притивне кога дојде есента,
и реките ќе најдат љубов што смирува
кога ќе се сретнат со своите мориња,
и небото ќе узрее оплодено од песната
на житата, на лозјата, на маслините,
само белата тага на изворот
ќе остане иста, неизменета
како вечен копнеж за далечините.

The White Sorrow of the Spring

Translated by Rawley Grau and Christina Kramer

I left you, song of old, song of innocence,
left without regret.
For the white sorrow of the wellspring I left,
for the inconstant love of the rivers,
for a lump of sky the blueness of coal,
for the unreachable things, the most distant things.
I left you, song of old, song of innocence,
left without regret.
And now a weight of uncertainty sits
hunched on the doorstep of the morning,
repeating the same question over and over:
Is it really worth what you think it is worth?

Because I know:
everything will fall silent when autumn comes,
and when they join with the seas that are theirs,
the rivers will find a love that brings them peace,
and the sky will grow ripe, made fruitful by the song
of the grain and the vines and the olives.
Only the white sorrow of the spring will remain
the same as it was, unchanged—
like the eternal yearning for distances.