

In Conversation with Croatian Poet Iva Ticic

by Janna Brancolini



The word “passion” in English conjures different things for different readers. It can describe a feeling, a conviction, a state of inspiration. It can refer to love and affection, an emotion distinguished from reason, or even devotion to work, a game, or life more generally.

In Croatian, “passion” has the same literal meaning, but the connotation is different, explained Iva Ticic, an award-winning Croatian poet and teacher who writes in her non-native language, English.

“It kind of has this connotation of being physical and slightly animalistic, and very much about love and sex and lovers,” she explained. “I always think it’s curious it [exists] in such a way, and then I look at Croatian society and think, ‘ah okay.’ [Language] is always related to the culture, like how many words they have for snow in Icelandic.”

These are the kinds of linguistic and cultural insights that Ticic brings to every word of every poem. Currently living in Guangzhou, China, by way of Zagreb, Croatia, and New York City, where she earned an MFA in poetry from Sarah Lawrence College, Ticic represents the type of multi-lingual poet whose linguistic fish-out-of-water qualities add even more depth and meaning to her work in a second language.

She writes about relationships of all kinds — family, friends, and love — and about places: the relationship between distance and place, how you perceive a place when you’re in it versus away from it, and the longing and receiving inherent in these themes.

Her poems are unintentionally political thanks to the historic events she experienced firsthand — namely the Croatian War of Independence and dissolution of Yugoslavia — and the cultural differences that have marked her five years as an expat in various cities.

Choosing English

Although her earliest poems were composed in her native Croatian, Ticic has been writing in English since high school.

“I think there’s something about your native language that feels like it’s been in your mouth for as long as you’ve been around,” Ticic said. “You can write in standard, as neutrally as possible, but that’s not very conducive to creative writing because you don’t want to be neutral.”

Ticic’s talent for the English language asserted itself early and with force. When she was 10 years old, she began studying privately in an after-school English program in Zagreb that met for a couple of hours each week — “nothing intense,” she explained. The next year, though, she changed schools, and her new school offered an experimental program for learning English where the students worked with native speakers, watched videos and

cartoons, debated, and told stories — all in English.

The experiment was going so well that the students had been featured in educational programming on Croatian TV before Ticic joined. When she arrived, their teacher didn't want her in the class because she was behind her peers. She surprised the teacher by "just kind of catching up right away."

"She put me in — said, 'Let's see how she does' — then she became my biggest fan," Ticic said. "That's when I kind of fell in love with it. From then on I was always in the top for whatever contest they were trying to put together. I just knew this became my thing, but I don't know exactly how that happened. I think it's sort of a talent or a gift. That's the background, then you have to do the work to get good at it."



Iva Ticic teaching in China. (c) Iva Ticic

In the meantime, Ticic had also begun writing poems in Croatian, starting at eight years old. Like most Croatians she was raised Catholic, and her first poems were mostly about nature and God. When she was in her second year of high school, she had started

to become more interested in love and relationships, and was listening to a lot of singer-songwriters in English. Artists such as the British singer Dido served as early inspiration.

"I was reading the lyrics and I thought, 'This is beautiful; I could write something like that and it would sound better than Croatian,'" Ticic said. "There's something so cool about English. It's softer than a Slavic language — more like a song."

Changing languages also allowed her to write about more intimate topics.

"I wrote this thing [in English] and it was still a poem, but it felt not as intrusive," she explained. "This way I was a little removed from myself. I could write some things and make them not so intimidating."

The summer Ticic turned 15, she honed her English skills abroad for the first time. Her aunt and uncle were moving to Bloomington, Indiana, with their two young daughters, and they brought Ticic along to help with the trip. She spent the summer in Bloomington and visited Indianapolis, Chicago, and Cincinnati with the family. (Full disclosure: On that trip Ticic also befriended the author of this piece.)

Back in Zagreb, she finished high school and earned an MA in American Literature and Public Speaking from the University of Zagreb. She spent two summers traveling in California when she was 21 and 22, and then visited New York briefly in 2009. That trip would unexpectedly change her life; she made a few friends and became determined to make a life there. At age 26, she moved to New York to work as an au pair, and began applying to

MFA programs in poetry.

At that point Ticic was still in what she calls her second writing phase. Her poems were more personal but still very young, adhering to strict rhyming schemes and shorter line breaks. Still, Marie Howe, the former Poet Laureate of New York State, read her application for Sarah Lawrence College, recognized her potential, and ensured she received a coveted spot in their MFA program.

It's worth noting that Ticic doesn't consider her English perfect. She learned English spelling as an adult, when she was working as an au pair, and she still makes small mistakes such as "lend" versus "borrow" (they're the same word in Croatian). She admits that being in graduate school for writing and making these errors was "incredibly embarrassing."

Still, at Sarah Lawrence, Ticic's writing became more mature, and for the first time she embraced her status as a non-native English speaker.

"I was always trying to get away from the fact that I was not a native speaker, but then my teachers would tell me, 'Don't do that. It's the thing you have that other people don't.' It's an added layer to what you're trying to say."

Now she uses it to her advantage, incorporating direct translations that might constitute mistakes if taken literally in prose but that work well poetically. Croatians who read her work in English will catch on to the subtle nods to their own language.

"They will almost be moved at different points by different things than by reading the same exact poem to a group of English speakers," she said. "The more you think that way and the more you know other languages, the richer it becomes."

Different language, different poem

Sometimes Ticic misses writing in Croatian and feels an urge to rekindle the type of writing she did when she was young. In those moments, the international literary culture — which mostly takes place in English — tends to pull her back to her second language.

The last time she wrote creatively in Croatian was in 2015, when her poetry collection *Alice in Greenpoint* was published in English by Finishing Line Press. Marie Howe described the poems as "witty and joyous, brimming with expectancy and hunger," while poet Spencer Reece wrote that Ticic's words "lovingly keep vigil over a divided world."

In addition to her book's New York debut, Ticic wanted to host a launch party in Zagreb to celebrate with her friends and family back home. She translated the poems into Croatian so she could present them side by side with the English versions.

“That worked better than I expected, and some poems I even liked better in Croatian,” she said. “But I would have never written them in Croatian like that. It almost made a different kind of sense in the different language. Things appeared in the translation that weren’t there in the original. It’s not the same poem.”

She found that she enjoyed translating herself more than translating other people. With her work, she could follow the sound and see where it would take her — instead of worrying about staying truthful to another author’s original meaning.

“I like to make a point with sound,” she explained. “A little miracle sometimes happens when you translate, and it makes a sound you weren’t expecting and you let go of meaning. I never know where to draw that line between sound and meaning.”

Ticic moved to China in 2016 after a two-year teaching stint at College of Agora in Zagreb. She now teaches English literature and public speaking to high school students who want to continue their studies in the United States.

Ticic says that thanks to her time in Guangzhou she can feel her poetry moving into a fourth phase. Her first year there the culture shock was so intense it rendered her artistically silent, but now she is infusing her environment into her work. She has begun to incorporate individual Chinese words in her poetry when they strike her, and has even started a writing group and won a local poetry contest.

She has also found a calling with the adolescents she teaches. Her ultimate goal is to move back to New York City to teach and write — in English, as always.

“I have an English voice that I’ve used almost exclusively in all these ways that excite me,” she explained. “I use it when I travel, when I write creatively, when I teach. Every other moment of my life when I’m at home I’m using Croatian. When someone asks me to do the dishes, it’s in Croatian. I like this idea of having a choice and being able to choose something less familiar. I know it’s a privilege, and I’m taking it and trying to use it for all it’s worth.”