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This side of paradise

Reviewed by James Hopkin

The Ministry of Pain

by Dubravka Ugresic translated by Michael Heim

IN HER BOOK of essays, *The Culture of Lies*, Dubravka Ugresic pilloried the traditional “Yugoslav identity” as racist, homophobic, intolerant and nationalist. Around the same time, she left her native Croatia when the president, Franjo Tudjman, declared the country “paradise on earth”.

When civil war and Nato intervention followed, Ugresic’s self-imposed exile gave her the distance to explore the human cost of Yugoslavia’s disappearance. Her work is unflinching and provocative, forever forging a balance between her cynicism of the West and her despair of, and obvious love for, the Balkans. In this novel, exile and estrangement are again the focus. Having fled Yugoslavia during the break-up, Tanja Lucic now teaches

literature at the University of Amsterdam. She lives on the edge of the red-light district, and many of her students, on refugee or university visas, work at the “Ministry”, a factory producing fetish rubber-wear. It is an analogy Ugresic works to some effect; the bondage between victim and victimiser, between nation and nationalism, between a place and an émigré, all of which leave their scars.

Tanja narrates the novel, creating a tense atmosphere as she asks her class of mixed Croatian, Serbian and Bosnian students to tell their stories. Indeed, Ugresic’s style is to merge image and anecdote; to mix reportage with novelistic set-pieces.

Quotations abound, from Serbian and Croatian greats to Polish and Dutch writers. One chapter is an essay on the film version of *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*. Such a fusion of genres, some tending towards the documentary, can make you wonder if this is a novel at all, especially as Ugresic often lacks the poetic vision to raise the material beyond its sources.

As in her novel, *The Museum of Unconditional Surrender*, Ugresic works with fragments, showing us not only the fragmentary nature of identity and language, but also the pieces that people choose to keep hold of, whether in terms of a way of speaking, or kitsch souvenirs. In one class, Tanja asks the students to indulge in “Yugonostalgia”. With one student speaking first in a southern Serbian dialect and then with a Bosnian drawl, they come up with Serbian kolo dances, Bosnian loves songs, sausages from Srem, Macedonian ajvar (roasted paprika), ethnic jokes at each other’s expense, “each a curator of their own museum”. By preserving their right to remember, they go some way towards restoring their own identity, and recovering a sense of nationhood, without nationalism or vilification of others — until Selim, a Croat, recalls the place where his father had his throat cut by a Serb.

The brutal reality of what happened in Yugoslavia haunts the text: a student kills himself when his father is indicted for war crimes. Tanja sits in on a session of the war crimes tribunal at The Hague.

Ugresic shows us how her characters cope, or don't cope, with the differences in language and landscape and culture, how they carry their hurt, their uncertainty, in a mythical time "after the war", in limbo between longing and belonging. It is an angry narrative, and a dystopic one, suggesting that it is inhumanity, and not goodwill, that binds us. Ugresic does not so much champion difference as detail its disintegration. She bemoans the next generation of Eastern Europeans for being educated in the West so as to return home with "no qualms about living off the misfortunes of the people they help".

Despite the bleak prognosis, and occasional awkwardness of the narrative as fiction, this is a disturbing read that should have you in its thrall.