

ArtMargins

Martha Kuhlman, *The Culture of Lies, the Museum of Unconditional Surrender: Dubravka Ugresic's Recent Work*
30 December 1999

In 1993, a Danish critic reviewing Dubravka Ugresic's novel *Fording the Stream of Consciousness*, a clever satire of a literary conference, accused her of engaging in a crass form of literary escapism when she should have been writing about the "bloody war" raging at home in her native Yugoslavia. Since the novel was first published in 1988, this criticism was entirely misplaced. In fact, the war has been on her mind the entire time, as is evident from her two most recent books, *The Culture of Lies* (essays 1991-1998) and *The Museum of Unconditional Surrender* (1991-1996). Her reflections, which are profoundly disturbing, have met with popular and critical acclaim in Europe: she received the Charles Veillon European Essay Prize in 1996 for *The Culture of Lies*, and *The Museum of Unconditional Surrender* was a bestseller in Germany...

On the title page of *The Culture of Lies*, there is a short note from the translator, Celia Hawkesworth, explaining that the former Serbo-Croatian language "is now officially divided into three languages: Serbian, Croatian and Bosnian." For the purposes of this book, however, the author and translator decided to adopt the convention used by the Hague Tribunal, "which does not care much for the finer points of linguistic divorce; it is more interested in crimes against humanity," and refer to the language as Croatian-Bosnian-Serbian (CBS). What might seem like an innocent enough footnote in another context is suddenly charged with the pain of civil war, of language deployed as a political tool, and of national identity in a country that no longer exists. In the pages that follow, Ugresic pursues these themes in essays that are as insightful as they are wrenching.

As a professor of Russian literature and cultural critic, Ugresic is acutely conscious of language, how we learn it, and what assumptions are inscribed into its semantic depths. In "My First Primer," she dusts off her schoolbook from 1957, a relic from Tito's Yugoslavia filled with bright optimistic pictures that link letters to words, words to images "A for apple, B for brother, E for elephant, F for family, H for homeland..." With the verve and wit of a Roland Barthes, she deciphers its utopian (now naive) world view in which Serbian and Croatian names are intermingled as brothers: "And when brotherly hearts unite--nothing can oppose their might!" A train runs from Zagreb (capital of Croatia) to Belgrade (capital of Serbia); on the side one can read the initials of the Yugoslav State Railways in Latin (Croatian) and Cyrillic (Serbian) scripts.

In the new Croatian primer (1990), children learn letters of the alphabet using the names of villages, towns, mountains, and rivers within the clearly demarcated borders of the homeland. Through this simple and yet elegant exercise, Ugresic reveals the moment of linguistic and cultural instantiation when a child first recognizes her national identity--Lacan's "nom du pere," or Althusser's "Hey you." Her postscript, one of several, is a surreal combination of political catastrophe and symbolic breakdown: "Jovans are attacking Ivans, the Cyrillic alphabet is quarreling with the Latin script, Serbs with Croats, Djorde and Jafer are fighting...letters, figures, symbols from my innocent primer rushed to annihilate themselves."

What is the duty of an intellectual in a country that is self-destructing under the pressure of conflicting nationalisms? To speak out against injustice, and "live in truth"? To become a "spokesman for the people" in defense of the "homeland"? In the central essay, "The Culture of Lies," Ugresic explains with palpable outrage how "telling the truth about Croatia" in the Croatian media amounted to promoting a self-righteous image of victimhood at all costs. History was reevaluated according to new standards of truth, such that Croatian nationalists and "Ustasas"--"did admittedly commit crimes, but on a far smaller scale than was suggested for years by the 'Yugo-Bolshevik-Greater Serb propaganda.'" Anyone who dared to challenge these assumptions was considered "anti-Croatian," "pro-Serbian" or a "public enemy." Nonetheless, Ugresic opposed President Franjo Tudjman's distorted and exaggerated nationalist mythology that declared Croatia "European, Catholic, and cultured" unlike those "illiterate barbarians" (Serbs). She was denounced as a "witch" and a "whore" in her own country and her name appeared on both state and neofascist blacklists, eventually forcing her into exile in Holland and Germany. In

case you thought you might be able to read these essays from a comfortable distance, reconsider: "For foreign politicians and strategists the war is a living polygon for examining a potential future; for the media an exciting adventure; for foreign readers and audiences a fix for quickening the sluggish moral and emotional metabolism; for criminals the possibility of becoming heroes, for intellectuals of becoming...criminals!"

Her situation appears untenable: she cannot join Croatian nationalists who promote false and self-serving histories; if she criticizes her country she is considered a traitor, or (worse still?) risks appropriation by the Serbs. If she is anti-war and anti-nationalist, she will be accused of "Yugoslavism"--nostalgia for Communist Yugoslavia. She does not want to wallow in sentimental victimhood, nor participate in circular intellectual debates. Like a diabolically methodical chess player, Ugresic ruthlessly eliminates all of her options as an "intellectual" in one of her most scathing essays "Profession: Intellectual." One last play remains: renouncing ethnic and national identity altogether. In her own "primer," the Glossary included at the end of the book, this is, in effect, her solution: "Identity: [...] Being an ethnic 'bastard' or 'schizophrenic' is my natural choice, I even consider it a sign of mental and moral health."

The Museum of Unconditional Surrender concerns the same time period, but approaches the war from a much more personal angle using a combination of essays, diary entries, notes, and fiction. Rather than confronting the war at its epicenter, Ugresic travels along its ragged edges, offering a haunting and much more subjective view of the shock and disorientation of exile. For someone whose "only reality is a suitcase," everything seems surreal, as if in a dream or underwater:

The exile feels that the state of exile has the structure of a dream. All at once, as in a dream, faces appear which he had forgotten, or perhaps had never met, places which he is undoubtedly seeing for the first time, but that he feels he knows from somewhere. The dream is a magnetic field which attracts images from the past, present and future. The exile suddenly sees in reality faces, events and images, drawn by the magnetic field of the dream; suddenly it seems as though his biography was written long before it was to be fulfilled, that his exile is therefore not the result of external circumstances nor his choice, but a jumble of coordinates which fate had long ago sketched for him. Caught up in this seductive and terrifying thought, the exile begins to decipher the signs, crosses and knots and all at once it seems as though he were beginning to read in it all a secret harmony, a round logic of symbols.

The shock of exile is felt not only in the semi-autobiographical sections about her mother, her time in Berlin, and the dissolution her friendships during the war, but also in the fragmentary structure of the work. In the preface, we learn that Roland the Walrus died in the Berlin zoo in 1961, leaving behind the impressive contents of his stomach: "a pink cigarette lighter, four ice-lolly sticks (wooden), a metal brooch in the form of a poodle, a hair grip, a wooden pencil, a child's plastic water pistol, a plastic knife, sunglasses, a little chain, a spring (small)..." What is the mysterious link between these everyday objects, other than Roland's "whimsical appetite"? We readers are the visitors at Ugresic's museum of observations, fictional autobiographies, and postmodern fairy tales, left to fend for ourselves and establish connections wherever we can find them.

The book is a collection of collections, a tour of exhibits and tiny personal museums such as her mother's handbag from 1946, or a box of jumbled photographs: "We are the children of Bouvard and Pécuchet," comments a colleague. Each collection is a fragile system erected against an overwhelming feeling of disorientation and loss. Photographs--Susan Sontag's essay *On Photography* is one of many intertexts--are assembled, rearranged, ripped, or retouched; they are a concrete metaphor for the inconstancy of memory. Or its destruction: the narrator recalls a story about the war criminal Ratko Mladic, who called a friend of his as he was shelling Sarajevo in order give him five minutes him to collect his "albums" before blowing up his house. The narrator carries a yellowed photograph of three anonymous women bathing in the ocean without fully understanding why.

Small exhibits--a feather, letters, stones, a snow globe--are juxtaposed with larger, public ones. *The Museum of Unconditional Surrender* in Berlin is the site of the German capitulation, May 8-9, 1945. Formerly maintained by the Soviet Union, it languishes in its

peculiar anachronistic haze, displaying a dusty model of Berlin with Russian street names for anyone who still might be interested. The museum is a testament to a Germany that no longer exists, owned by a Russia that no longer exists. "I come from Atlantis," writes the narrator/Ugresic, who feels mysteriously drawn to these remnants of the Soviet past. At the Brandenburg Gate, she pauses to marvel at the Soviet souvenirs spread on blankets, sold not by Russian emigres, but Pakistanis. Somewhere between these separate episodes lurks the distressing suspicion that she, too, is an exhibit from a lost era. "We are all walking museum pieces," comments her friend Zoran.

One of the unifying motifs of the work is an angel that appears under various guises: a figure in a snow globe purchased at a German monastery, a beautiful young man who prophesies war, the angels in Wim Wender's "Wings of Desire." Another intertext (not overtly cited) is Walter Benjamin's angel of history. In the following passage, Benjamin describes Klee's painting, "Angelus Novus:"

His eyes are staring, his mouth is open, his wings spread...His face is turned towards the past. Where we perceive a chain of events, he sees one single catastrophe which keeps piling wreckage upon wreckage and hurls it in front of feet. The angel would like to stay, awaken the dead, and make whole what was smashed. But a storm is blowing from Paradise...

Ugresic steps through the wreckage of war, picking up objects, searching for metaphors, attempting to lend narrative coherence the chaos she experienced first hand. Her effort is brave and melancholy, a moving book for anyone who wants to glimpse the personal side of postmodern exile.