

Dubravka Ugresic

Ministry of Pain (Ecco/Harper Collins, Feb. 2006, 272 pages, \$22.95)

Twenty years ago, the countries of Eastern Europe were self-contained and cut off, like leather pouches tied on a peasant's belt: no one could get in and no one could get out. While life inside these pouches was dark and claustrophobic, it offered the comfort of deep familiarity and social homogeneity. In 1993, the long knives slashed open the pouch called Yugoslavia, and the people in it were flung to the ground like millions of tiny marbles: many died, most lay where they fell, but some went rolling away to every corner of the earth. Dubravka Ugresic's *Ministry of Pain*, beautifully translated by Michael Henry Heim, tells the story of a handful of marbles that landed in the Netherlands. It has to be one of the best descriptions of the dislocations of exile ever written.

Tanja Lucic, the central consciousness of *Ministry of Pain*, begins as a teacher of Slavic languages in Zagreb, Croatia; when the war comes and her husband, Goran, a professor of mathematics, loses his job because he is ethnically a Serb, they move to Germany. Then Goran decides to move to Japan, and Tanja, who does not want to go with him, gets a one year offer to teach Serbo-Croatian in Amsterdam. Now here she is, in this clean little city built on circular canals like "a snail, a shell, a spider's web, a piece of fine lace, a novel with an unusually circular plot and hence no end," (28) in self-exile from a country that no longer exists, teaching a language without a name—the politicians have declared there is no such thing as Serbo-Croatian, only three separate and distinct languages, Serbian, Croatian, and Bosnian, so she and her students are reduced to calling their subject, "our language."

(I suppose it is no more shocking to declare a language non-existent than to dismember a country, but Serbian, Croatian, and Bosnian are in fact dialects, not languages, about as different as the dialects of people from Alabama, New York, and Wisconsin.)

Tanja's first semester goes well enough; there is no set curriculum and almost all the students are also exiles from the "Former Yuga," enrolled to obtain student visas. She attempts to solace both them and herself by making the class into a loving museum of Yugo-nostalgia where the students write down their memories of little homely things: kids' books, candy bar wrappers, a certain kind of plastic shopping bag. They bond enthusiastically and have coffee together after every class, and Tanja's life would seem to be getting on the right track except that she is often overwhelmed by a vague anxiety, a numbness and lack of feeling, a sense of absence. But her students are in the same state:

The breakup of the country, the war, the repression of memory, the "phantom limb syndrome," the general schizophrenia, and then exile—these, I was certain, were the reasons for my students' emotional and linguistic problems. We were all in chaos. None of us was sure who or what we were, to say nothing of who or what we wanted to be. At home my students resented being typecast as Yugonostalgics, that is, dinosaurs, but they felt little affinity with the prepacked retrofuture of the newly minted states. And here in Holland they were stigmatized as 'the beneficiaries of political asylum,' 'refugees,' or 'foreigners,' as 'children of post-Communism,' 'the fallout of Balkanization,' or 'savages.'"(52)

Realizing that her memory games with her students are as much a manipulation as the obliteration of history practiced by the new states, Tanja fears that, by evoking endearing images

of a benign past, she may be obscuring the bloody images of the recent war. Such questions persist throughout the book. There are no answers; nobody here is above the fray: everyone is an exile, struggling with the same issues. Igor, a student who falls in love with Tanja and tries to break through her numbness, is as crazy as the rest of them.

Between semesters, Tanja returns to Zagreb to see her mother, but when she tries to get her Croatian ID renewed, can't find the office, though she has been there many times before. Overwhelmed by anxiety, she bursts into tears in the street. "The refugee trauma, the equivalent of the sudden disappearance of the mother from a child's field of vision, had surfaced where I'd least expected: 'at home.'"(117) Back in Amsterdam, there is worse news: Uros, one of her students, has killed himself. He left no note, but the other students think his motive was shame, because his father is on trial in the Hague as a Serbian war criminal. Tanja and Igor go to the Hague to see the proceedings for themselves, but the international court is a hall of mirrors, with everything seen through screens and mediated by translators. None of it seems real, thinks Tanja, the only thing real is pain, and imagines what would happen if all that pain came together in the mind of an Oskar Matzerath (the unforgettable dwarf-artist-hero of Gunter Grass's *Tin Drum*, who can shatter glass with his screams): "I pictured that piercing, earsplitting voice shooting the gray potato head of Uros's father into the air, sending all the heads of all the blood-drenched murderers flying through the air..." But it doesn't happen, and when Igor tentatively reaches out to her, Tanja turns away.

Then comes betrayal, and self-betrayal, as the book build to its climax: The head of her department says a student has complained that Tanja is not really teaching them anything. "We didn't invite you here to give group therapy sessions," he says, and dangles the prospect of a permanent job if she will straighten up. Furious with her students, desperate for a real job, Tanja

turns into a hateful, self-hating martinet who gives 200 pages of reading a class and would not dream of having coffee with her students. Half of them drop out.

Then come exams. Igor gives a brilliant oral, in which he draws the moral that, for them, return is death, exile is defeat, and the moment of departure is the only true moment of freedom they will get. Though Tanja agrees, she is locked into her own fury and paranoia: convinced Igor is the one who ratted on her, she gives him an F, all the while feeling so trapped she is like a human fish, a primitive cave creature “that had got stuck in the process of metamorphosis...gills breathing, blood flowing through the thinnest of veins, a miniscule heart beating all but inaudibly. Help me, beat the heart. Touch me and I shall turn into a beautiful maiden, leave me and I shall be prisoner of my darkness forever.” (183)

I shall withhold the details of the shocking, violent climax and resolution of *The Ministry of Pain*. Suffice it to say that this wonderful novel is not only about the pain and confusion of exile, and the push and pull between teachers and students, men and women. Without using a single word of therapeutic jargon, it shows the slow movement of a few survivors of traumatic events from numbness to feeling, from fish to human, from dissociation to Oskar Matzerath’s scream. Numbness may be necessary to survival, for a while, but survival is not healing, and the natural response to pain is a scream. It is a first step on the way to art.

Dubravka Ugresic has always been a fine writer. Her early books, *In the Jaws of Life* (1981) and *Fording the Stream of Consciousness* (1988), postmodern works of comic genius, established her reputation as the best prose writer in her language—that language which no longer exists. She was a tenured professor at the University of Zagreb until 1993. Then came the war. Ugresic, who calls nationalism “the ideology of the stupid,” (*Culture of Lies*, 1995) wrote essays making fun of the surging tide of Croatian nationalism when it was at its full flood;

for this sin, she was denounced in the gutter press as a witch—literally, along with four other Croatian women writers; she received multiple anonymous threats; and everyone in her department stopped speaking to her. I got to know Ugresic during this period, and admired her modesty and stoicism as she was driven into self-exile, but had no idea what the experience would do to her as a writer. I have dealt with many writers in exile: some write for émigré ghettos, some stop writing altogether, and some become stronger writers as citizens of the world than they ever were as citizens of one country.

Ugresic is that kind. War and exile made her political—or as she would put it, anti-political—and she has written a number of important books since she left Croatia, including *Culture of Lies*, and the novel *The Museum of Unconditional Surrender*. But *Ministry of Pain* is a whole other thing, a breakthrough book that gets beyond her trademark postmodern ironies and displacement devices and literary references—though all are here—and speaks in the true voice of feeling, not describing but enacting, in the most sensitive prose, the progression from numbness to a scream, from survival to life.

Meredith Tax is a writer and the President of Women's WORLD (www.wworld.org), a global free speech network of feminist writers. She is currently working on a political memoir.