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Picking the Wrong Witch

By Richard Byrne

Dubravka Ugrešić Creates Exquisite Art from the Pain of War and Exile

Once upon a time there was a magical empire of letters called Central Europe. Its borders were fuzzy but recognizable. Vienna was its capital. The receding Ottoman Empire provided more of its territory. It was a place that existed largely in cafés and castles, train stations and brothels. The empire's writers found inspiration in the uneasy play of imperialism, capitalism, and burgeoning nationalism in its borders. Psychoanalysis and Marxism and Zionism overlapped and clashed and conspired, depending on whom you asked. Austria's defeat in the First World War did not end that empire— far from it. The new states formed after Versailles solidified and expanded its reach. The sustained and vicious assault of Nazism could not eradicate it, either. Many of its leading lights survived even that horror, through Holocaust and exile, to find themselves at the front lines of the Cold War, their fame fanned by the exigencies of dissidence and samizdat.

Dubravka Ugrešić, daughter of a Croatian father and a Bulgarian mother, was

born into that Central Europe in 1949. It was a literary empire built by the likes of Franz Kafka, Jaroslav Hašek, Robert Musil, and Karl Kraus, and its expansion had writers from Yugoslavia—Miroslav Krleža, Ivo Andrić, and Meša Selimović—busy discovering new vistas.

But that Central Europe, which survived two wars, did not survive a third—the Cold War that ended with the fall of the Berlin Wall. Ironically, the greatest writers of the empire when it finally disappeared—Václav Havel and Danilo Kiš—were outsized figures in events that led to its vanishing. Central Europe’s end, though sad, was largely peaceful—the empire itself dissolving fizzily in the great political and economic scramble westward to the European Union and NATO. The difference that was dissidence was erased. Central Europe’s writers found themselves the wards of small nations competing in the larger European marketplace. But in the former Yugoslavia, Ugrešić’s neighborhood, the empire collapsed in a spasm of blood and fire. Many of her fellow writers sought protection by dividing themselves into competing camps. But Ugrešić did not join a pack. She stood aloof at first, and then ran off to the woods, shouting aloud about the perfidy and terror of it all. By doing so, she became so strange and powerful that those whom she would not join branded her a witch. Ugrešić and four other women writers were attacked in a prominent Croatian newspaper as “unpatriotic” and as “witches,” and the novelist found herself ostracized and isolated in a newly independent country that she never wanted to live in—cast into exile.

These attacks on Ugrešić made her more powerful still. She is now the most prominent living writer from the Balkans, and she has created an astonishing body of work over more than two decades. Her writing attacks the savage

stupidities of war, punctures the macho heroism that surrounds it, and plumbs the depths of the pain and pathos of exile.

Many American readers were introduced to Ugrešić's work when in 2003 Dalkey Archive Press published *Thank You for Not Reading*, her collection of sharp and persistently Eeyoreish essays on literary culture. Ugrešić's other feuilletons and essays written for newspapers—collected in *Have a Nice Day* (2002) and *Nobody's Home* (2008)—were the seeds of key elements of her two unblinking novels of exile, *The Museum of Unconditional Surrender* (1996) and *The Ministry of Pain* (2005). Ugrešić's work is particularly sharp in tracing the cultural currents—large and small, political and economic—that shrink the writer's influence and moral authority. In "Glossary," the coda to her searing collection of personal essays about the death of Yugoslavia, *The Culture of Lies* (1998), Ugrešić succinctly lays out her principles in bursts of short definitions of phrases such as "a nation's writer" and "witches":

My Croatian passport does not make me a Croatian writer. It is easiest and most profitable to be a national writer, particularly if the nation is small. I have chosen a less profitable way: I do not wish to belong to anyone, not to a people, nor a nation, nor a national literature. If I have to belong to someone, then it's to my readers. Wherever they may be. . . . A milieu which destroys books has no mercy toward their authors either. Several years ago, my (national) cultural milieu declared me a "witch" and burned me on a media pyre with undisguised glee. . . . Today, from the perspective of my nomadic-exile, I can only be grateful to my former cultural milieu. I invested my own money in the purchase of my broom. I fly alone.

In short, In short, Croatia picked the wrong witch—and the world of letters is much richer for it.

Although the wars of Yugoslavia are beginning to recede into the distance of history, Croatia's literary witch won't surrender up that identity just yet. Ugrešić's new novel, *Baba Yaga Laid an Egg*, is filled with witches and folk tales, and it is set in Central European landscapes of spas and cafés and Ostalgia. Yet *Baba Yaga Laid an Egg* also returns to the concerns and motifs that dominated Ugrešić's work before she was called a witch and bought her broom. It boasts the lighter touch one finds in her earliest work, written before the blood and fire, and it possesses a renewed focus on anchoring the stories of women in the landscapes of life and letters.

The witch is flying backward, in a way, to find a new direction.

Dubravka Ugrešić's work is steeped in the literary traditions of that mythical Central European empire and its preferred forms—feuilletons, short stories, essays, and novels. She pastes together jagged bits of the found objects of the literary world—quotations, newspaper clippings, anecdotes, and observations—in ways that aggregate and illuminate the whole of whatever issue she touches on. She's a quick cutter, too. Her work tends to unfold cinematically. Brief scenes and sharp shifts of perspective dominate, pushing the narrative forward in jerks and leaps that also allow for avuncular asides (or materteral asides, since technically speaking only men can be avuncular).

Ugrešić's early books—her first novel, *Steffie Cvek In the Jaws of Life*, and stories

collected in English as *Lend Me Your Character* (2005), and a second novel, *Fording the Stream of Consciousness* (1988)—are brightly lit and cheerfully clever postmodernism, boasting a firm but often comic feminism. These works announce their intentions clearly and then fulfill them, creating a brisk, yet satisfying, experience for author and reader alike. Ugrešić quickly emerged as a rising star of Yugoslav literature by the early 1990s. *Steffie Cvek* was even made into a popular Yugoslav film released on video in the United States in 1987 as *In the Jaws of Life* (alas, no English-language DVD). Her second novel won a fistful of Yugoslav literary awards. And then came Yugoslavia's political destruction and its series of wars. To say it all came quickly would be false. Open fissures in the country did appear quickly after Josip Broz Tito's death in 1980, and they grew deeper and wider over the subsequent decade. And many intellectuals sympathetic to the Yugoslav project were in deep denial about those cracks. At the same time, nationalists of all stripes, some posing as intellectuals, busily made dark plans and armed to the teeth for a political and cultural renovation that would accompany Yugoslavia's eventual death.

Ugrešić articulated her sympathies for the multiethnicity and unity of Yugoslavia quickly and publicly as Croatia's conflict with Serbia intensified in 1991 and 1992. She picked up the baton carried (until his death in 1989) by Yugoslav writer Danilo Kiš, who notably attacked nationalism as "individual and collective paranoia," as "the ideology of banality," and as "kitsch" in his 1978 book *The Anatomy Lesson*. As she confronted a nationalist tide that would have been Kiš's worst nightmare (a nightmare he was spared only by his untimely death at age fifty-four), Ugrešić attacked it with the weapons of ridicule forged by Kiš and sharpened by her own savage wit. In an August 1992 essay, "The Realisation of a Metaphor," she links the cans of "Clean Croatian Air" being sold in Zagreb to both

the kitsch of nationalism and the paranoia and banality of ethnic cleansing and brutality:

And so, let us just add that it is August 1992, the sky over Zagreb is clean and blue, the air with each day ever cleaner and thinner. One breathes as in the Andes, almost with gills. On the other hand, the doctors assure us that just such air favours the creation of red blood cells. And red, as we know, is the colour of patriotism.

Reaction in Croatia was swift. Along with four other writers (including Slavenka Drakulić), Ugrešić was smeared in the statecontrolled Croatian press. The attacks galvanized her. Essays flowed from her pen. By the time they were collected together as *The Culture of Lies*, they had already acquired the status of a masterwork. The war transformed Ugrešić and her writing utterly, sharpening its language and increasing the stakes. Her essays insist that writers have a moral responsibility to intervene in broader intellectual and political currents when life, death, and human dignity are at stake.

The comic skewering of hapless literary types at an international conference in an early novel like *Fording the Stream of Consciousness* was transformed into something altogether more dangerous and coruscating in an essay like “Profession: Intellectual” (in *The Culture of Lies*), which circles back to the failure of many of Yugoslavia’s well intentioned intellectuals (including herself) to speak out soon enough and loud enough:

And so, when I am asked who is to blame for everything, I reply: I am! And I mean it quite seriously: I am to blame, because I did nothing to stop the war. Just as I did nothing when some ten or so years ago I watched television shots

of the police beating up Kosovo Albanians. . . . I did not react to the permanent production of lies; I let them wash over me like dirty water. I did not throw myself under the first tank as it set out for Slovenia. I did not pour petrol over myself in protest at the war and set myself alight in the city square. The list of my omissions is long. My actions are negligible, on the whole they had a written character. And I did not even manage to die of shame. The fact that others did not either is no excuse. Yes, I am to blame.

Being branded a witch in Croatia pushed Ugrešić into exile. It also compelled her to do the sort of writing that one often is compelled to undertake in exile: essays and occasional writing to put food on the table. *Have a Nice Day* is composed entirely of fûeillets that Ugrešić dashed off every week for a Dutch newspaper as she taught at an American university. There is a sense of shock in the book, an unwillingness to believe that this was anything but a bad dream. The war is there, but so are hairdressers and strange American customs and slang.

The war dragged on. So did the exile. In her novel *The Museum of Unconditional Surrender*, Ugrešić moved from pondering the oddities and quirks of her situation to cataloging what was lost. Set in a Berlin that one character describes as “the most attractive rubbish heap in the world[,] . . . the world capital of garbage,” the novel is a Baedeker to that lost Central European kingdom of letters—a provocative confluence of amorous misconceptions, thickets of quotations about exile, mysterious angels dropping feathers and art criticism. If *Have a Nice Day* views the trauma that created exile as a bad dream, *The Museum of Unconditional Surrender* is a living dreamscape that Ugrešić announces early in the book:

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.

In *The Museum of Unconditional Surrender*, many of those images are esoteric nods, homages, and literary in-jokes about exile. The sixth chapter of the book is a celebration-cum-parody of the Czech writer Milan Kundera and his philosophical comedy *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting*. But the novel's ultimate power comes from its extended meditations on the power of objects photographs, old diaries, the rubble of postwar Berlin, and the idiosyncrasies of the city's modern day asphalt—to contain and then unleash tidal waves of memory and loss. “The asphalt is only a thin crust covering human bones,” writes Ugrešić. “Yellow stars, black swastikas, red hammers and sickles crunch like cockroaches under the walker's feet.”

Ugrešić's other novel of exile, *The Ministry of Pain*, is at once her most formally conventional work and her most bitter in its tone. It is also her most powerful. Although they are often truculent and even spiteful, the essays of *The Culture of Lies* have a cleansing anger. They are powerful spells from the witch's wand to remove the cancer of nationalism or to rebalance the scales of justice. *The Ministry of Pain*, however, delves deeply—even fatally—into the dead end of exile. Its protagonist, Tanja, is an exile abandoned by her husband and left in a chilly Amsterdam to teach fellow exiles. The ministry of the title is the manufacturer of leather fetish wear that provides work for some of Tanja's students and a useful metaphor for Ugrešić's mining of what she sees as the

ultimate sadomasochism of the exile experience: pain caused by recalling pleasures past and their loss; the pleasure—or the tolerance, at least— of the pain exile causes. Setting the work in Amsterdam allows Ugrešić to weave in the region’s ongoing war crimes trials for her fellow exiles from the former Yugoslavia. Tanja and one of her students, Igor, make a day trip to the Hague tribunal, with expectations of quick justice. They are surprised to see slow grinding gears of court procedure instead and turn their ire (and fire) on each other:

“Those people are trying to help us, and we look on from the sidelines, grinning like morons! You and me—we didn’t even have the patience to sit it out a few hours.” “But it’s a tribunal, not a church.” “It wouldn’t do us any harm to think of it as a church. And sit through the service for humility’s sake.” “Well, I wasn’t the one who wanted to leave.” I blushed. He was right. I felt like belting him one.

The Ministry of Pain ends with Tanja quietly accepting the unpalatable anguish of her exilic condition, underscoring that submission with a litany of wild Balkan curses. Yet the novel’s key moment comes earlier on, when Igor reinterprets a Croatian fairy tale as his final paper in Tanja’s course and concludes that the tale’s moral is that “‘exile’ equals defeat”: “What if everything he said was true? What if return is in fact death—symbolic or real—and exile defeat, and the moment of departure the only true moment of freedom we are granted? And if it is true, what do we do with it?”

In one of the essays in *Thank You for Not Reading*, Ugrešić observes that “the true exile never returns, even when he can, even when the hurt called the ‘homeland’ has healed. Why repeat the same journey? Few have the strength for two exiles.”

Ugrešić’s most recent work is a return of sorts, however. Not to the Croatia that angered, inspired, and drove her into exile, but to the themes and forms of her earliest work. *Baba Yaga Laid an Egg* is full of deep ruminations on aging and illness and sharp gender and cultural criticism, but its tone is lighter and nimbler than anything Ugrešić has written since before the wars of Yugoslavia. And it returns to an aggressive postmodern style of storytelling. It was written for a series of books called “The Myths,” published in the United States by Grove Press, in which noted authors retell and reinterpret classic tales. (Margaret Atwood, for instance, tackled Homer’s *Odyssey* in the series’ first book, *The Penelopiad*, in 2005.) Ugrešić’s myth is that of the aging Slavic witch Baba Yaga—a tale that has variants in almost every culture in which Slavic languages are spoken. Her house is built on chicken legs, and then there’s the egg. She kidnaps small children, perhaps to eat them. She flies in a mortar, perhaps seeking pestles, and drops feathers behind her. Ugrešić reads the myth back into multiple narratives in *Baba Yaga Laid an Egg*: an account of a mother and daughter’s dizzying dance with aging and memory and illness, mediated by a strange folklore scholar named Aba Bagay; a deliciously comic novella in the novel set in a Czech spa; and a critical commentary on the use of the myth in the entire book, penned by the mysterious Dr. Bagay.

The book is full of sharp observations about aging and death (“Pupa often dreamed about how nice it would be if someone were to take her to Greenland

and forget about her, lose her the way one loses an umbrella or gloves”) and the persistence of folklore. It is also very much a woman’s book, in the best sense, foregrounding women’s perspectives in its narratives and the centrality of the feminine in our mythology. But what’s most striking about *Baba Yaga* is the near absence of war and exile in its pages, despite its very firm grounding in the formal play and cultural milieu of that Central European fairy tale. The war wound of one of its central characters is comic, priapic, and (most important) not permanent. There are nods here and there to exile and war, but they are asides.

Baba Yaga Laid an Egg signals that Ugrešić may have been wrong on one count. Return does not always equal death, and exile may be a defeat that is temporary, not permanent. If this new novel is what we can expect, the witch has found new magic in an old book of spells. Ageists and misogynists will have as much to fear from the blows of her broom as the war criminals and pseudointellectual nationalists of former Yugoslavia did. •

Books by Dubravka Ugrešić cited in this essay:

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