

exiled ink! / Winter 2007-2008

A Conversation with Dubravka Ugresic

On the occasion of her newest collection of essays published in the UK Dubravka Ugresic: Nobody's Home, Telegram Books, London, October 2007.

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Q: I had been reading Joseph Roth's collection of essays 'Report from Parisian Paradise'. I mention this because I am struck by the similarities in your existences, perspectives, and themes - albeit separated by 3/4 of a century. Like yours now, Roth's themes, set between the two world wars, are his exile and his transient existence - which enabled him to dissect his social environment with a greater sense of objectivity. It would seem as if you are also able to see things from above in all their magnitude. Is it possible that exile is perhaps an ideal situation for a writer?

D.U.: The similarities you mention between mine and some of Joseph Roth's writings simply occur because exile itself is a cultural text. I'd say the oldest and richest of these began with Adam & Eve's banishment from Paradise, for biting into that famous apple from the tree of knowledge - that moment of the innocence lost and the stripping away of illusions. Into that big cultural text called exile, many texts have been built in, even those that at first sight do not seem to be thematically connected, such as 'The Wizard of Oz', about which Salman Rushdie has written an excellent analysis.

Exile itself was the subject of my study long before I myself became an exile. I have studied and written a great deal about Russian literature which, as you know, has been well marked by exile. A great number of writers found themselves abroad after the Revolution. One could start with cult figures such as the poetess Marina Cvetayeva (my novel 'Ministry of Pain' begins with Marina's poem about exile), or temporary exiles like Victor Shklovsky and other famous exiles such as Vladimir Nabokov, or later, Joseph Brodsky (I use quotes from all three in 'The Museum of Unconditional Surrender'). I had felt a direct taste of life in exile, even before I left my home, through Russian writers I'd known who emigrated to America (these encounters were the origin of some episodes about emigration in my novel 'Fording the Stream of Consciousness').

Whether exile itself is an ideal condition for a writer is perhaps a subject for a much longer discussion, and I would prefer not to give it a superficial answer here.

Q: You are now a European writer paradoxically exiled in Europe. You are travelling, lecturing, observing, and warning us, through your writing, about the dangers of rising nationalism, chauvinism and fascism - even though you write with a great deal of humour. Do such manifestations of evil bother you more in your native Croatia than elsewhere?

D.U.: When reading my essays every intelligent reader knows that Croatia is taken as a model and that when I use that country as an example I do not think that only Croatia has a licence for nationalism, fascism, chauvinism and the like. Of course I could respect the rules of political correctness and add to each fragment of writing where I use Croatia as an example that the same things happen in Serbia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Slovenia, Macedonia, Bulgaria, Romania, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania as well as in Western European countries like Holland, France, and the UK. However, there would still be a naïve reader somewhere eager to point out that I had left out Sweden, for instance. Interestingly enough, I think it is usually the readers who have not solved their own issues of nationalism or chauvinism who are the ones reacting to my Croatian examples. The Croats at home complain that I have only been looking at their country, while at the same time the readers outside it, but of the same mentality, congratulate themselves that such things only happen in Croatia. And with that same self-congratulatory satisfaction, those Croats read about bad things in Serbia refusing to see the same things at home. Therefore, I repeat that which I have always underlined in my essays: Croatia is a model which I am using simply because I know it best – but I do not write about Croatia. I write about the phenomena of ethnic hatred, the exclusion of the 'other', societal manipulation, collective paranoia, the use and abuse of history, and so on and so forth.

Q: You obviously see the demise of Yugoslavia as the end of an era. I repeat the analogy with Roth who, as an assimilated Jew, considered the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy his only fatherland. My impression is that the demise of Yugoslavia made you in one sense an orphan, while on the other hand you have become a perfect example of a 'European' writer. Would you agree?

D.U.: It all depends how we look at things, how we interpret them, from which personal mental mindset we see them. Yugoslavia was the country in which I was born, which I grew up in and which I carry as part of my personal baggage, and that's just a simple fact. However there is an interesting turn. If you read my work before the destruction of Yugoslavia, it is more than evident that as a background, Yugoslavia does not exist in my novels or stories. They are, in a way, 'cosmopolitan'. The action of my novel *'Fording the Stream of Consciousness'* could have been situated in London and not much would have changed. The same is the case with my short novel *'Steffie Speck in the Jaws of Life'* or with the collection of stories *'Life is a Fairy Tale'*. Yugoslavia and its destruction, nationalism, war and the creation of the new nation states became a visible background for my prose only when I found myself beyond the borders of that zone.

Q: Accordingly, would you agree that exile and the themes issuing from it have now become not only central to your writing, but to the writing of our time in general? If we follow the great literary cycles, for example the development of American literature, we quickly observe that the children or grandchildren of the first settlers were its main contributors. Could it happen that in a couple of decades we are enriched by a great wave of literature from the descendants of people currently emigrating to Europe from all over the globe?

D.U. Very interesting question, but I am afraid that it would require much more time than we have on our hands. I don't think one can say great literature is written only after the big events have taken place, and by the descendants of those who participated in those events. For example, in Russia after the Revolution, before the Kharkov congress of 1932 and the imposition of Socialist realism, the strongest criticism of the Soviet regime was built into the greatest literary works such as Bulgakov's *Master and Margerita*, the satirist duo Ilf and Petrov's *The Golden Calf*, or Juri Olesha's *Envy*, to list but a few examples. These novels were written in the era of early communism, before Stalin's ban on any criticism had been imposed. I just mean to say that it is difficult to predict cycles in literature. There is another thing we should also take into account, which is that the notion of 'great literature' presupposes the existence of a literary canon, which along with 'literary values', is a shaky notion at best.

Q: Many of your essays have been concerned with the current literary scene. Can you expand on the context of your expression 'a semantic traffic jam'?

D.U.: When the breakdown of great ideological systems happens, as it did in Central and Eastern Europe and then in the former Yugoslavia, people experience it as a kind of psychological earthquake. In order to survive, they have to adapt themselves to a new system very quickly - like finding yourself in a heap of debris, and having to build a new house from it. You have to reset yourself mentally, and develop strategies of hide and show, delete and restore. And everyone takes part in this restoration: the historians, the government, the state establishments, the media, the educational system - absolutely everybody, including ordinary citizens. Everybody is adapting to the new regime. So when these things have not quite yet settled, when the struggle for the domination of one version of truth is still piping hot, it is then that this semantic blockage occurs.

Q: In your new book you express concerns about the danger represented by the unquestionable, widely spread popularity of religion today. What role does religion play in modern concepts of 'identity', and how does this conflict with the notion of the great European Enlightenment?

D.U.: I am an atheist, but even more than this, I am profoundly anti-religious. To start with, I believe every religion basically has a fascist strategy at its core. Secondly, every religion shows horrible disrespect towards the strivings of human reason. In its essence religion is a totalitarian and exclusive ideology, even though the clerics supposedly offer us the freedom of choosing whether to believe or not. In today's Croatia for instance, the priests go around the schools blessing the school satchels. What is the message here? The message is that school does not count, nor the teachers, nor the student's efforts, but what counts is God because He is what will help you. In Croatia every hospital has a crucifix in the lobby, and in every patient's room. The crucifix tells you that science can't help you,

neither medicine, nor doctors, and that you must place your faith in God. The highest grade of cynicism is shown when priests start preaching against communism for having destroyed so many millions of people. But nobody has yet undertaken to make a list showing the total human toll of the world's religions, from the small sects to the big religious systems.

Let us not forget also that religion is a male invention, which directly neglects half of humanity - the women! And not only does it neglect them, it humiliates them, forces their submission to male canons, turns them into slaves or actually kills them outright.