

LOS ANGELES TIMES

West's sellout of standards

Merle Rubin, Special to The Times

There is no shortage of American writers and critics bemoaning the depredations wrought by the marketplace on the world of literature. But sometimes, seeing the same problem from a slightly different perspective can heighten our understanding of what is at stake.

Prize-winning fiction writer and essayist Dubravka Ugresic is a Croat who was born in 1949 in the former Yugoslavia. She left the strife-torn, newly independent nation of Croatia in 1993 for political reasons. Clearly, this is someone who did not view favorably the breakup of Yugoslavia, an entity she had thought of as her country.

Suddenly finding herself a native of the new nation of Croatia, she saw around her a cadre of self-consciously ethnic-identified writers concocting an assertively nationalist literature. Yet in her new home, the free and open multicultural West, Ugresic saw writers forced to serve another god: Mammon.

Making a living has long been a concern for most writers: No man but a fool ever wrote except for money, as Samuel Johnson famously growled. But what has truly shocked this exile from Eastern Europe is the extent to which the Western publishing industry promotes all that is trivial, empty, stupid and downright bad at the expense of that which is thoughtful, original, profound and excellent.

We may take it for granted that someone such as Jackie Collins makes more than John Updike does. Ugresic doesn't -- and the freshness of her outrage, peppered with her acerbic wit, is the salient virtue of "Thank You for Not Reading."

Having recognized how difficult it is for a writer to compete for attention in this overstocked, free-for-all market, Ugresic aims to be "sparkling" -- and succeeds. Her writing coruscates with bitter irony, trenchant wit and scathing indignation: "The Croatian cultural scene is dynamic and flexible ..." she explains in her list of "The Top Ten Reasons to Be a Croatian Writer." "For instance, I know an editor who became chief of police and a professor of aesthetics who became a paid state military adviser. I also know of ... writers who became war criminals and war criminals who became writers."

Rather more staid in tone, her essay "The Writer in Exile" describes what it

is like to leave a politically repressive environment only to end up under the constraints of an unconstrained marketplace. Good writers, she suggests, feel banished wherever they are and only bad writers feel everywhere at home.

In the West, she is dismayed to see the distinction between high and low culture being effaced: The practitioners of the former (professors, artists and intellectuals) "study" the latter and package themselves in simplified form for popular consumption, while practitioners of low culture sprinkle their products with allusions to high culture. Ugresic sees a world of broadcasters with no listeners, with everyone trying to sell himself.

Indeed, as Charles Newman pointed out nearly two decades ago, if a writer can't find a publisher because publishers believe her book won't sell the requisite number of copies, she has been censored as effectively, if not as deliberately, as any dissident in the bad old days of Communism.

But the whims of the marketplace are not all that concerns Ugresic. She is equally horrified by the sheer proliferation of garbage and the sad decline of literary standards. It's not merely that Ivana Trump makes more money from her books than Joseph Brodsky: It's that the review of her book in the New York Times Book Review strikes Ugresic as more indulgent and favorable than the one given to Brodsky. The untrammelled marketplace, she fears, is creating a world where cultural arbiters will have no role. There will be only one standard: what sells and what doesn't.

And increasingly, she notes, what sells -- whether in literature, music or the art world -- is trash. "Americans love junk," she cites George Santayana as saying. "It's not the junk that bothers me, it's the love." In the Eastern Europe of her youth, she recalls, art was distinguished from trash. The socialist ideal (like our own traditional democratic ideal) was to enable the ordinary citizen, not just the wealthy elite, to savor the highest and best productions of the culture.

But nowadays, as she points out, we kid ourselves that the public is best served by "giving the people what they want," no matter that those "wants" are created by a vicious circle in which the media and other institutions outdo themselves in underestimating the public's intelligence, and the public, proud of its right to choose badly, flocks to the circuses and sideshows provided.

Ugresic derides the upbeat supposition that all will be for the best in our brave new world: "Former communists, modern capitalists, nationalists, religious fanatics, they have all become optimists." The "culture-optimist" is happy to heed the fashion police and trade in his humble Eastern Bloc wardrobe for Versace, but when it comes to literature, he resents any

cultural arbiter who might inform him that Dante is better than Danielle Steel.

Proudly aligning herself with the unpopular culture-pessimists, those notorious defenders of "dead white males," Ugresic would have us ask why we are so intent on waging a cultural war against a mere "corpse." It's one of many timely questions posed in these provocative and wryly entertaining essays.

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