

THE EXHAUSTION OF LITERATURE: AN INTERVIEW WITH DUBRAVKA UGREŠIĆ

VP Editors: *Can you start by telling me a little about your interest in literary activism, and what revelations sprang from the Kolkata conference you mentioned attending last year?*

DU: Literary activism, as I see it, should be a useful corrector of mainstream literary values, a reminder and promoter of unknown literary territories. Literary activism is supposed to usurp our comfortable and rigid mainstream opinions, to shake up our literary tastes and standards, to promote unknown writers and neglected literary territories, to bring fresh knowledge about literature. The role of literary activism is irreplaceable especially today, when one can't rely on national literary canons (they are predominantly male and operate with the old-fashioned, dusty concepts of national literature). We equally can't rely on the literary marketplace, because it operates like any other marketplace. When a book becomes a product, we are no longer talking literature, but about sales and trade.

Literary activists can do a lot. Wonderful literary magazines such as *Music & Literature* are the outcome of the literary enthusiasm of a group of young people and their wish to bring a bit of "evaluation justice" to literature and music. Young literary enthusiasts, such as Chad Post, the director of the small publishing house Open Letter Books and the Three Percent website; such as Benjamin Moser, who rediscovered Brazilian author Clarice Lispector and made of her a world literary star, really can do a lot. True, for such an achievement one has to possess genuine literary passion. It can't be faked. Many writers are literary activists themselves: I have been a literary activist my whole life. All I've done, including my own writing, naturally, I have done out of passion. Many famous writers become famous only thanks to the enthusiasm and efforts of literary activists. Such people are rarely mentioned, they usually stay in the shadows, and they are rarely credited for their work. Most of them were and are true literary activists. Let us not forget that there are false ones too. The history of culture confirms that there are quite a lot of Salieris, and just a few Mozarts.

How do you see your role as an academic in contributing to this shaking up of literary standards, and do you find students are receptive to challenging or 'difficult' books?

Thank you for bringing this up. The question of "literary standards" and "literary evaluation" is probably the most difficult all of the questions in our contemporary cultural world. Who establishes literary standards? National academies, critics, media, readers, ideologies (religious, political), national ministries of culture, even politicians (when they publicly announce their favorite writers), pop stars, cultural managers, lobbies of all kind, media, digital media (twitter, social networks, blogging, vlogging, etc.), publishers, booksellers, professors of literature, social groups, editors, agents, scouts, enthusiasts, literary activists, literary prizes, juries, fellow-writers, jurors, etc., etc. For a long time I thought, idealistically, that literary justice exists in our independent Republic of Letters. There is no justice from above: there is only a process of cultural negotiation and unstoppable cultural production where every participant has his/hers/its five minutes of fame (as Andy Warhol predicted). I would just say five seconds, that every participant can count on five seconds of his/hers

glory. It is very difficult to be an educator, or arbiter, or even a responsible participant in such a “democratic” educational system where “students” are replacing “teachers”, both not knowing that they have already been replaced by “readers” (take this as a metaphor, please).

How do you find your style or approach to writing fiction has evolved or shifted since your first novel, Steffie Cvek in the Jaws of Life, to your most recent, Baba Yaga Laid an Egg?

Although it’s a bit embarrassing to act as one’s own literary critic, I will bluntly skip the shame, and say: it hasn’t. My approach to writing fiction hasn’t changed through all these years, and exactly because of that fact, my “style” (narrative strategies and devices, themes and motives, etc.) changes from book to book. I wrote two short story collections before I wrote *Steffie Cvek in the Jaws of Life*. *Steffie Cvek* is a short novel, but it is a novel as much as *Closely Watched Trains* and *A Too Loud a Solitude* are novels. That doesn’t mean that I am comparing myself to Bohumil Hrabal in any way. His was a God-given talent, and God is not known for being overly generous in the literary department. Otherwise so many people would not be rushing to be writers.

The set of literary ideas, the theory that had the most formative impact on my writing, was Russian formalism, or the Russian formalists, such as Viktor Shklovsky and Yuri Tynyanov. A bit later came Yuri Lotman and his famous Tartu school, then other schools of literary theory joined, American and European. And I found myself in a rich cultural system of serious and competent thinking on literature. I didn’t have the ability and the time to absorb all this knowledge, but I developed respect for the literary text and attentiveness to the practices of its interpretation. I admit, I became a writer in a very fortunate historical moment when literature was still respected as a serious and important “practice” and literary theory and criticism were taken equally seriously. I say “fortunate” historical moment because in the meantime things have changed, and for the worse.

To make a long story short: I wrote five novels. The first, *Steffie Cvek in the Jaws of Life*, plays with the pattern of the romance novel. It also plays with the heavily stereotyped women’s commonplace (women’s magazines, fashion, cooking, advice, beauty parlor talk, gossip, Hollywood movie stars, and so on and so forth), and with literary works belonging to the literary canon, such as *Madame Bovary*, for instance. In *Steffie Cvek in the Jaws of Life* I bared the narrative devices, or, in other words, I made visible all my authorial tricks. Playing with the bare construction of the text was a self-sabotage of sorts. I was sure that my novel was going to be a failure in terms of popularity among the readers. However, in spite of the ironic play with the reader, the constant interference by the author and her “theoretical grumble”, in spite of the visible authorial “stitches”, *Steffie Speck* won the hearts of ordinary readers. That little female hero of mine appeared to be more authentic and bigger than her pretentious author (me). Ordinary readers identified with her, they loved her, they felt sympathy for her. There was no sympathy left for me, her creator.

My second novel *Fording the Stream of Consciousness* is also a “project” that I never repeated, e.g. I never wrote anything similar. It’s a novel about a literary conference in Zagreb before the fall of Berlin wall. Twenty-eight years have passed since its first

publication. I dare say this novel is still highly relevant, maybe because of the Bulgakov-like character of Mr. Flagus, Flaubert's nephew, and his dystopian (or just — corporate!) ideas of total control over literature. English critics said that my novel was written in the tradition of David Lodge and Malcolm Bradbury, which is simply not true. I hadn't read Lodge and Bradbury at that time, but I had read *Master and Margarita* by Mikhail Bulgakov, *Composer Foltin* by Karel Chapek, *Marshlands* by Andre Gide, and similar books about artists and their world.

My third novel is *The Museum of Unconditional Surrender*, a novel with a complicated structure that doesn't follow a single story, but links its parts together with interplay of motives. The novel works as a juxtaposition of different fragments and they do not behave like “bugs in a sack”, but they cooperate, support each other, and work together to produce meaning.

The Ministry of Pain is a different novel, it has a rich subtext, the city of Amsterdam (like Berlin in *The Museum of Unconditional Surrender*), which serves not only as topography, but as a metaphorical projection screen, a mirror to everything that is happening in the novel. As to the use of the city as a metaphorical space, *The Ministry of Pain* and *The Museum of Unconditional Surrender* make a match.

The latest novel *Baba Yaga Laid An Egg* uses a different narrative procedure than the previous four novels. It consists of three parts, each is written in a different style and genre. These three parts talk to each other, support each other, and enrich each other. The first part is the author's (first-person narrative) encounter with her dying mother; the second part is a “fairy tale” (third-person narrative) about three old hags in a luxurious health spa; and the third (an unreliable first-person narrative) is a long scholarly letter written to the editor of a book. The narrator of third part is a Slavic scholar (Abba, a young woman who appears as a character in the first part of the novel), who explains all the secrets and symbols used by the author in the previous two parts.

All in all, each novel uses a different narrative procedure, different structure, different composition. I would die of boredom singing the same song. Writers are supposed to explore, to create and to invent, to bring new forms and ideas, to surprise us with each new book, I guess. In any case, I aspire to that ideal. As a reader, I expect my favorite writers to be “new” with each new book, but also always recognizable. Their recognizability is their precious substance.

Your fiction is considered 'experimental', at least in terms of form and structure. Please tell me about your formative years as a fiction writer, how you developed your approach, perhaps touching upon your early literary influences?

We use the notion of “experimental” in contrast to predominant mainstream writing. “Experimental”, which is often just a synonym for “incomprehensible”, “complicated”, “heavy”, “challenging”, “unusual”, should have a more nuanced use, I guess, otherwise all “serious literature” (even the writing that follows the tradition of the 19th century realistic novel) might be subsumed under the umbrella-term of “experimental”. I have always been led by pleasure, the pleasure of reading first of all, and then the pleasure of making the text. When I use the word “making” it doesn't

exclude words such as “responsibility”, “emotions”, “moral responsibility”, “ethics”, “warmth”, “pleasure”, and so on and so forth.

In your essay ‘Can a Book Save Our Life?’ (from Europe in Sepia), you ruminate on the quantity, and impermanence, of books being produced today. What is your prognosis for the future of serious writing, and is there any way for us to escape the gross commodification of literature?

I don’t think there is an escape. There will always be various forms of personal, authorial escapes, forms of intellectual gestures; there will also be group initiatives, literary activism, and literary elitism, but as far as publishing and the creative industries are concerned, things will go on and on.

In that same collection, your essay ‘A Women’s Canon’, you highlight the power a male literary elite has over women authors, and the social and gender implications of forming a ‘women’s canon’. You state that “subliterary genres have had a greater emancipatory effect than middle-class culture”. What role can publishers play in helping move away from the problem of colonization, of women adapting to stereotypes?

I had in mind genres like comics, tv-series and movies, fantasy novels, speculative fiction, science fiction, and so forth. This cultural zone often produces female (and not only female!) characters, relationships, spaces that are much more emancipatory than those produced in other culture zones. The pleasure of emancipation could be the reason for the popularity of popular culture. The fictional character of Lara Croft had a huge emancipatory impact on young girls, I’d say. That impact can’t be compared with the impact of academic feminist theories. And the opposite, of course, books like *Fifty Shades of Grey* are able to (temporarily) enslave women much more than the preachings of popular “religious mullahs” .

How have your exile experiences shaped your attitudes to literature?

They definitely have. As Brodsky said exile is a lesson in humility. Exile does something to a writer’s personal literary “ethics”. A writer in exile is not protected by his/her national culture, language, institutions, readers, academies – and retirement plan. A writer in exile communicates with readers he/she doesn’t know and is exposed to the judgement of readers who do not know him/her. It’s a risky literary life. The harsh facts of exile make an exiled (or self-exiled) writer more modest. She/he is constantly confronted with his/her insignificance. At “home”, within the national literature, the writer’s vulnerable ego is much more protected and pampered. The “national writer” has a sense of his purpose and value within the frame of the national literature and language. The “homeless” author can’t feed his/her ego with such illusions. He/she is totally alone. The “out of nation” writer’s life is restless, he/she is constantly learning and keeping a fresh view of the world, even if it is a wrong one. It’s also a state of constant evaluation: it might be tiring, of course, but it might bring you an awarding sense of openness and connectedness with the world.

What do you think is the future of literature given free market economics dominating

most of the global allocation of resources?

I can't predict what is going to happen. As we know from the history of our culture some genres could disappear, (though, they also might re-appear in some other form); borders between arts might get blurred (they already are); things might get more "inter", "cross", "trans" and "post". The language might change (it has already) because of technology. The attention span has already changed because of technology. Not so long ago I was at the MET, attending an opera performance. The translation titles were displayed on the seats in front of us in the audience. This was a new thing for me, the last time I was at opera surtitles were displayed above the stage. It was a weird experience, listening and watching the opera singers and following the translation of their words on the small display on the seat in front of me, while at the same time being aware that the person behind me was reading his titles practically on my back. The situation was deeply inspiring, and as I listened to the opera, I imagined new ways of communicating. All in all, literature will exist, but probably not in the form we know it now. Who knows what will happen, maybe one day we'll all communicate in one language, the language of emoticons. Maybe future poets would use a combination of little round faces, pulsating hearts and all sorts of graphic signs to write their poems.

What do you think of the likely impacts of technology on the directions which literature can take in terms of form as well as function?

Soon we are all going to write, I'm afraid, and nobody will have time, or need, to read us. We are all going to produce art, but nobody would have time to see it, I'm afraid. The visitors to museums, libraries, and exhibits are going to be school children, no older than 12, because at that age children will already be producing their first novel, or/and their first piece of art and further on they won't have any time, or need, for consuming works of art. They will produce their own art using mostly copy-paste techniques. Copy-paste technique will enable the future creators to consume and at the same time produce literature, art, music...

Do we still have a literature of exhaustion, or is now merely an exhaustion of literature?

I am personally exhausted by literary-market manipulations, e.g. every minute of my reader's life I am distracted by warnings of a brilliant book that just appeared on the market and I'm missing it.

Good and dynamic book culture is the result of the interconnection of many elements that work together and support each other. For instance, literature does not exist without its readers, critics, literary theory, literary criticism, literary history, academia, institutions, book sellers, bookstores, supporters, translators, literary activists, literary agents, publishers, editors, literary magazines, professors of literature, literary educators . . . The system called literature is slowly falling apart. It seems that only the two strongest elements are holding the structure up: booksellers and readers. One might predict that soon booksellers and readers will get rid of the author. Because the author is obviously not the crucial element in the whole business. The book reviews

gradually shrink, for instance, and ordinary readers are more and more deprived of the “instructive” part of book reviews (e.g. how to read the literary text). Readers are almost totally in the hands of booksellers. Good bookstores and educated book sellers are gradually disappearing. Bookstores are standardized today, they all tend to look like airport bookstores. I recently took a train from Amsterdam to Frankfurt: the railway station bookstores in both towns had almost identical selection of books in the international section, just in different languages, in Amsterdam in Dutch, in Frankfurt in German. Imagine, after a couple of years of such a practice booksellers will be standardizing the taste of millions of readers and making them into an obedient army of book consumers. Did you ever ask yourself why the books of a certain author, an author with a good reputation, can be found in all the airport bookstores? Why this particular author and not another?! What is the secret? It seems that some authors in spite of their popularity, or quality, will never ever be exposed in airport bookstores and others will always be there. All in all, literature is not an innocent field and it probably never was. Buying food in eco-bio-whatever stores is no guarantee that you are consuming five-star food.

Are there lesser-known books or authors of particular significance to you, works untranslated or available in English?

I don't think translation is a crucial problem. Today books get more easily translated and published. There are prizes for the best translation, translators are appreciated, in some countries with strong translator's societies, translators are paid even better than the authors. The crucial problem is how to provoke the quality boost in the richer production of “cultural goods”. The problem is not a discovery of works of untranslated authors, but how to ensure a more sustained interest in authors and their body of work, how to slow this crazy and at the same time indifferent cultural production and consumerism, how to re-discover and re-read classical authors, how to raise the standards of reading and understanding the text, how to reconnect cultural “consumers” with cultural history, in other words, how to develop a culture of reading. The world has become fragmented and messy, and reading a book is not a moment for pleasure and contemplation, as it used to be. New generations of people spend half of their lives in fitness centers, many of them have been hooked on the prospect of improving their bodies. And human bodies indeed have become more beautiful than they were. Can you imagine a new culture, a culture of mental-fitness centers that would last long enough to produce a new generation of people, a generation of high-standard readers?

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