

I am a Literary Smuggler: An Interview with Dubravka Ugrešić. Michal Špina and Strahinja Bučan. *Krytika polityczna&European Alternatives*, August 4, 2017.

Our interview must have a title and a subtitle. Firstly, let's agree on the subtitle. By default, it would say 'An Interview with the Croatian writer Dubravka Ugrešić'. But would it be better to write 'Post-Yugoslav writer'? Would any of these labels accurately represent you as a writer?

It's better to avoid all these labels, though post-Yugoslav doesn't sound senseless. Ethnic labelling is not only incorrect, but simplifies things completely. I have lived in the Netherlands for almost twenty years, and I have a Dutch passport and a fierce loyalty to this society that has left me in peace to do what I know best; write. My cultural identity has hardly anything to do with Croatia (I studied comparative literature, and my cultural baggage is much greater than just Croatian literature). My ethnic identity, if that is something that interests you, is also difficult to delimit: my mother, for instance, is Bulgarian, and I learnt to speak Bulgarian when I was little, or big enough to understand that there were other things in the world beyond Croatia, Croatians and Croatian. True, I write in Croatian, because I was too old to switch to another language when I left Croatia. Post-Yugoslav, post-national, transnational – all that fits me perfectly well.

What was it like to become a Croatian writer without intending to?

The majority of my fellow writers consider ethnic labelling as something unquestionable and 'natural.' For me it's a form of cultural violence. I was not allowed to choose the nation with which I was associated as a writer, or whether I wanted to belong to anyone at all. I was forced to belong. When I expressed scepticism towards the very idea of belonging, I was attacked by my cultural community and expelled from it.

Could you describe the mechanisms of that expulsion? Why were you, alongside Slavenka Drakulić and other feminist writers, identified as one of the 'five witches'?

The 'five Croatian witches' is a label which was given to me and four other Croatian journalists, writers, activists, and professors, by Croatian spin doctors. They wanted to identify us as a dangerous political group, as a dangerous female group (if five women have been accepted as dangerous, then all women are potentially dangerous). The fact that we are all educated women also contributed to their fear; all educated women are potential traitors. All in all, Croatian spin doctors used an age-old pattern: witches are evil, only women are witches and only women worship the Devil. Who is the Devil? The Devil is a foreigner; a Serb, Yugoslav, commie, anybody from the East, and so on. It's a very efficient ideological shish kebab, you can always add another piece. At the time Croatian society was marinated in military spirit and in hatred

towards Serbs. Enemies, including witches, helped to present the illusion of a homogenous society and to construct a nationalist morale.

One of the focal points of your criticism has been the ‘Yugo-male,’ i.e. patriarchal rule in Yugoslavia. Is a ‘post-Yugo-male’ different?

No, it is worse! It is worse because both the male and the female population of Croatia are militarised. The post-Yugo-female has become worse too. Women today go to church, they are prominent members of pro-life organizations, protesting against abortion and worshipping a militaristic cast system. This reverence comes from the Croatian president Kolinda Grabar-Kitarović, who is so eager to take pictures with Croatian soldiers and military officials and to wear in military uniforms. She is the Croatian soldier’s favourite Barbie doll.

In *Culture of lies* you say that Yugo-nostalgia – and nostalgia in general – belongs to the sphere of the heart, just as music does. How do you respond to Yugoslav popular music today?

My heart does not react as readily as it used to. Before, I had believed that things vanish irrevocably. Today the Yugo-nostalgic marketplace is rich with ‘products,’ in large part thanks to the digital revolution and the internet, with sites like You Tube and social networks. This abundance of ‘Yugo-products’ sets in motion a process of reevaluation. Yugo-culture does not exist anymore; nevertheless, it has not yet been properly researched, destigmatized and evaluated. Today I pick only those ‘products’ that really mean something to me. I say ‘products’ in order to avoid the word ‘souvenirs’, which would be arrogant and incorrect.

You have written that you don’t like musical folklore which, during the Yugoslav era, was an instrument of conformism. Does Yugo-nostalgic music have any political potential, or does it act as an opiate?

Music, in the guise we are discussing, in discontinued societies, is the easiest way to establish continuity. A sort of memory box. People in power, especially in Croatia, constantly try to erase the memory of Yugoslavia: they want to link contemporary Croatia with the Nazi-puppet state of Croatia that existed in WW2. Many books, movies, visual art, and authors from the Yugoslav period are forgotten today, but popular music is still alive, maybe because it is easily retrievable. Great cultures are great as a result of continuity; nothing there is ever forgotten. Small cultures act according rules imposed by powerful political structures. In such cultures there is no continuity, everything seems accidental. Croatia, Serbia, Bosnia are all such cultures...

On the other hand – did Yugoslavia really ever die? Not everyone in post-Yugoslav countries follows the doctrine of the elites from the 90s. Is there something to the notion

of a living 'Yugo sphere'?

Yugoslavia really did die, but the common territory, history, language and/or languages, culture, connections, memory, and so forth – all of that is still kicking somewhere, thanks to acts of remembrance by survivors, and thanks to the interest of young, educated people, who have decided not to buy into the lies of their parents. Yugoslavia is, as I said, still kicking, because life hasn't become better today, but much worse. The people in power can't bear the comparison, because it will be clear that they have failed: they have only managed to destroy everything that was built during the Yugoslav era. They have destroyed it economically, financially, materially, culturally, morally, and politically. That's why Yugoslavia is remembered by many as a golden age for the region.

Does it seem that post-Yugoslav societies are cursed by their history? Serbians still suffer from the battle of Kosovo Polje, while Croats seem obsessed with the idea of not having had their own state since medieval times...

This is all a policy of petrification. Our post-Yugo autocrats, criminals and thieves like 'petrification' because it means that they will stay in power forever, that nobody can touch them. They have inherited this notion from the communist regime: the communist regime also lost a sense of time, but at least they promoted a form of modernism. These new autocrats have only brought destruction in the name of some dusty idea of national identity.

In your book, you describe Tuđman's 90s Croatia as an ultra-nationalist 'postmodern dictatorship' with many examples of a rehabilitation of the Ustaša- ideology. Has anything changed in the last decade, or has it only become even worse?

In 1991 I wrote an essay Clean Croatian Air. Last year I re-published it on an online portal, with additions and appendices. In the process I realized that I am unable to finish this essay. The title is, *An essay that began its journey a long time ago but hasn't yet arrived*. Why? Because, in the meantime (a period that has lasted a quarter of century!), things have got worse. Nationalism is a form of exploitation of people which is financial, ideological, and emotional. And the people who exploit it know that it is effective. Nationalism works on the simple presumption that one tribe is better than another. Croats are better than Serbs, Serbs are better than Croats. Who profits from this? Local people in power profit, manipulative politicians who have been chosen by blinded and self-destructive voters.

Does this affect the Croatian diaspora too? For instance, their incredible support for the far-right Croatian Democratic Union (Hrvatska demokratska zajednica or HDZ) or the results of the 2013 same-sex-marriage referendum...

The old diaspora has many HDZ voters, the people who brought Tuđman to power, but refused to 'enjoy' the results of their vote. They voted for Tuđman, but remained in Australia. Similarly, Turks in Europe voted for Erdoğan but stayed in Germany, Sweden, and the Netherlands, for example.

A couple of months ago, you signed the *Declaration on a common language*. What was its aim? Why do (not only) intellectuals and artists now feel the urge to confess to something like the 'Serbo-Croatian' language?

The Declaration on a common language (Deklaracija o zajedničkom jeziku) is a polite, benign, reasonable and obviously unsuccessful attempt to stop the primitive and continuous abuse of our shared language. The violent separation of former Yugoslav republics was followed by the malicious division of a shared language into four separate languages: Croatian, Serbian, Bosnian and Montenegrin. This divorce took on not only a grotesque, but also an oppressive form. To make a long story short, 'illiterate' people imposed themselves as arbiters of what is right and what is wrong in all matters, including language, literature, history and culture. Deklaracija came too late. The job is complete. The damage is done.

How do you explain the success of nationalism to yourself? Even when it is evident that it is incredibly unsuccessful, if you consider the economic situation, corruption and the exodus of young, educated people...

Societies ruled by nationalism are kingdoms of inadequate people. And the majority of people in any society are not quite adequate: they are inadequate in their jobs, in their lives, and in their families, they are inadequate as sexual partners... A society based on nationalism is a refuge for such people, because a nationalistic society does not require competence. It only requires the correct blood type.

You have been living in exile since 1993. What influence has it had on your identity? Do nationality and language play a role in our 'migration-society' at all? In *Nobody's home* you speak in this sense about a 'proletarian' identity...

Today I see the world in terms of a constant migration of 'human cargo' (incidentally, this is also the title of a good non-fiction book by Caroline Moorehead about modern migrations), and of ideas and influences too, of literally everything. The world is obviously supposed to be, and actually is, a liquid place. We all swim in the same waters.

But wouldn't it be naive to say that we all swim in the same waters if there is no common consciousness of this? In the so-called 'migration crisis', the non-privileged usually show the greatest prejudice against migrants or refugees.

I'm not speaking of the harsh reality of migration today. I just want to say that things are fragile. Don't forget that in this very moment many Americans are applying for Canadian documents! I am sure that many former Yugoslavs, who were refugees of the war, today support Donald Trump and his idea to build the wall between USA and Mexico. When you are a refugee you are confronted with a lack of empathy from all sides; from 'your own people', who chased you out, and from the people who were supposed to take you in.

Nationalism is on the rise not only in the Balkans, but also in the UK, Poland, and Hungary. Would you say there are parallels between the situation before the breakup of Yugoslavia and the current crisis in the EU?

There are parallels, of course, but constellations are hardly ever the same. The fall of Yugoslavia happened within the old ideological frame: ethnic hatred, democratization, the fall of communism, and so forth. I don't think that the leaders and voters of Europe are today attracted by strong ideology. People have the feeling that anybody can be a politician and influence our lives today. And people are right; this is exactly what's going on.

You have often quoted Radovan Karadžić's phrase: "I am not a monster, I am a writer!" Let's admit, some people could well be both. How does a writer become a monster?

People can't be both and they rarely are. But their reception is the result of cultural standards and a cultural evaluation in their cultural environment. Real monsters will dare anything; however, it is readers who make the decision. Let's not forget that many people respected Hitler's paintings, as many respected Karadžić's poems. Former politicians are like pop stars; they receive millions of dollars for their books. Bill Clinton, for instance, will join the community of fiction writers with his first novel...

Your novel *Steffie Speck in the Jaws of Life* features numerous female characters. One of them, Jarmila from Brno, speaks Czech in the original (Serbo-)Croatian text. Hašek and Hrabal are mentioned too. What attracted you to Czech culture and language?

I was attracted to Czech culture because of its particular sense of humour. I was exposed to Czech culture mostly through literature (Bohumil Hrabal, Milan Kundera, Josef Škvorecký, Ivan Klíma, Jaroslav Hašek, Karel Čapek, and so on) and film (Miloš Forman, Jiří Menzel, etc.). In my novel *Steffie Speck in the Jaws of Life* I make constant references to a 20th century masterpiece, Bohumil Hrabal's *Closely Observed Trains*. One of my favourite books is *Too Loud a Solitude*. I feel like I am smuggling neglected Central and East European literary values into World literature. In all my books I try to make references to Central and East European literatures, because they do not get the recognition they really deserve. In my novel *Baba Yaga*

Laid an Egg, and in my new novel Fox, which is about to appear soon, I intentionally make use of references to the languages, literatures and places of Central and East Europe. I am delighted when my book is translated into some 'big' language, like English, for instance, because, among other things, I feel like I am smuggling neglected Central and East European literary values into World literature.

Much has been said about a Czech sense of humour or a Hungarian melancholy, but do you think that Central and Eastern Europe are present in common literary or cultural values?

Central and East European cultures are not connected or integrated into a global cultural market. I know it is a cultural cliché, but it is also a great truth. I think that the whole of Central European culture had some specific, recognizable narrative. Now, all that is gone, Central and Eastern Europe doesn't interest anyone, unfortunately. Central and East European cultures are supposed to be connected to and integrated into a global cultural market. But they are not, and they can't be, for a multitude of reasons. Culture has lost its power and appeal in countries like Hungary, the Czech Republic and Poland. In many cases the function of cultural subversiveness has been replaced with a nation-building function. It is not for the first time in history that culture, especially literature, is often understood as an intellectual service to the state and nation. As Dobrica Ćosić, once a Yugoslav, now Serbian writer has said, "I am here to serve you!" He meant that he is there to serve his people. Many of my fellow writers have rushed to serve, as if they were some sort of literary waiter!

Most post-Yugoslav novels recently translated into Czech are concerned with disintegrating communities and migration. Does the contemporary literature of the region offer other challenging themes?

The region's system of literature has been destroyed, so it is very difficult to talk about contemporary literature. We can only talk about certain names. Croatian writers have had the opportunity to see what will happen to them if they don't conform. There were the cases of book-burning, of 'cleansing the libraries', and of 'deleting' some writers from the literary scene, cases of rewriting school books and university curricula, a policy of censorship and bans, and the fierce reactions of illiterate protesters (good Croats, Catholic fundamentalists, nationalists, local fascists) against any 'subversive' work of art. The latest case is that of the theatre director Oliver Frlić.

Your texts have been often labelled as 'postmodernist'. What does this concept mean to you today?

Concepts are good, they are tools for reading the world around us. The absence of concepts is what frightens me. I am afraid that we are witnessing just this, today; a lack of concepts. We are surrounded by unstoppable, powerful and chaotic production. And there is nobody here to facilitate, control, evaluate or articulate it.

Some time ago you said that “the language of the essay is the language of heresy.” Do you still feel like a heretic?

I didn't say that, I sort of quoted Theodor Adorno. His idea is that an essay should contain heresy at its core, in its heart, or structure. I completely agree with this definition. The essay is the narrative form of heretics and dreamers.