

Croatian myths

Julian Evans reviews *The Ministry of Pain* by Dubravka Ugresic.

Julian Evans

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The literary exile - that "poet unhoused and wanderer across language", in George Steiner's words - is both victim and observer, condemned to migrate by war, racism and multiple other oppressions, even by language itself. Why has Tanja Luci'c, the Croatian narrator of Dubravka Ugresic's novel, quit Zagreb and found herself in Amsterdam? There are many reasons, but one of them is that, as she says, speaking about Serbo-Croatian children's fairytales, "in other languages children sleep the sleep of the just and in mine they sleep the sleep of the butchered".

Such is the sad state of our world today that there are a good many writers who have access to such imagery. Reading **The Ministry of Pain**, one of the first things you realise, though, is that there are few who handle it as sharply and unfussily as Ugresic. These are the details in which God (and the devil) hides. Ugresic shows as much genius for them in her fiction as she has in her essays, *The Culture of Lies* (1998), and the recent, marvellous *Thank You For Not Reading*.

In her hands, negligible factors suddenly reveal themselves as central to the tragedy. Wars begin with words. Tanja is one of the mass of Balkan refugees semi-forced from Yugoslavia in the 1990s. Her boyfriend in Zagreb, Goran, is a Serb, so to her fellow Croatians she becomes "that Serbian bitch". The couple flee first to Berlin, because the Germans require no visas, but when Tanja decides not to accompany Goran to Tokyo, where he looks like being offered a job, she quits Berlin for the tolerant alternative of Amsterdam (this, of course, is Holland before Pim Fortuyn). The real reason for leaving Goran, however, turns out to be that he cannot make his peace with events, with being removed from his university post overnight and becoming a non-person. (A light Croatian dig at Serbian pride.)

The novel is thereafter a kind of exploration, from several angles, of what it means to make one's peace. "A love story ends with marriage," Tanja says, "the exile's when he acquires a passport from another country." But it is not so simple. She finds herself a temporary post in the Department of Slavonic Languages at Amsterdam university, where most of her students are young ex-Yugoslavs in limbo, prolonging their stay by studying. Their moods are hesitant, depressed or dogmatic because their lives have in some way ceased and not begun again.

One of the students, Ana, puts her finger on it. "In emigration you are prematurely old and eternally young." Ignoring the syllabus, Tanja takes them on a journey through "Yugonostalgia", beginning by constructing a shrine to familiar objects from "home". These connections and memories, pathetic and all-important, restore the foundations of identity, and her raft of castaways is temporarily intensely united in a kind of happy infatuation with something that no longer exists - their country - until violent calamity dashes their vessel on reality's rocks.

Ugresic's wit, driven by light lashes of irony and recurrent gallows humour, and her language, graceful and simple in Michael Henry Heim's superbly painless translation, make her themes - exile, absence, the coping stratagems of homelessness - more easily grasped than one might expect. This is not at all to suggest that she over-simplifies complicated matters and feelings (there are, in fact, some slight longueurs in the novel's second half). But, partly from having lived through the loss of her country, hijacked by Franjo Tudjman's nationalists, and still more from having found a well-armoured voice in which to explore both the greater surreality of the Balkan darkness and the individual unreality of exile, she has produced a novel of insights and shocks for those of us who have not endured either. It is one that is both profound and brilliantly illuminated by a very humane clarity.

After reading Ugresic, I felt that if I'd had to be in a Balkan foxhole in the early 1990s and had had her for company, I wouldn't have lacked for jokes, or a decent chance of survival. So sure is her grasp of her themes, in fact, that it really constitutes a further pillar of her own argument: that perhaps the only way to attempt to make peace with events is to write about them. Exile equals defeat, Tanja reflects, and then the return home equals the return of memory. It is therefore a kind of death, so the moment of departure is the only true moment of freedom. Or the moment of picking up a pen, she might have added.