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Dorothy Parker with a Ph.D.

by John Domini

Not only does Dubravka Ugresic's novel appear in translation; you could say it's *about* translation. The latest from a busy, brainy Croatian—her 14th book, half of them fiction—*Fox* consists primarily of worrying at various texts, though not all of them are literary. The first of its six “Parts” spins a kaleidoscope before “A Story About How Stories Come to Be Written,” a 1926 piece by the Russian Boris Pilnyak, while looking also at the man's crazy quilt of a career, which ran from sacred Kyoto to garish Hollywood. “A Story About How Stories...,” it turns out, itself ignored narrative norms; ante-meta-fiction, it toyed with love-story conventions while citing an actual Japanese novel and a dubious Russian memoir. The tale ends in Derridean deconstruction: “it is not for me to judge other people, but to reflect about everything.”

Fox tells us all this and more, looking also at the source works; the chapter even has footnotes. Still, here as in the other five sections, whether the subject is Greco-Roman statuary or Nabokov's American driver, the effect is nothing like scholarship. Part One even detours into the courtship of Ugresic's parents, since her mother was born the same year as the story, and “I... imagine the existence of a poetic connection.” Also, inevitably, the author speaks of her own rickety balance between cultures, after years of exile from her homeland. She now lives in Amsterdam and has been called a “citizen of literature,” and these reinventions suggest a more disturbing link to Pilnyak and his story. The chameleonic Russian came to the same bad end as most of his freethinking comrades: execution by Stalin's thugs. Small wonder Ugresic cites the story's definition of the fox, a “totem for cunning and treachery.” As the earlier author foxed his characters, history foxed him, and indeed the metaphor bears on all the improvisational lives of Part One, in particular the narrator's. Pilnyak termed the fox “the writer's totem,” and at chapter's end Ugresic comes “full circle,” like a fox that “lies down to rest, and... sucks the tip of her

tail.” The Ouroboros remains a fine symbol, but it doesn’t amount to a story. Rising action, climax, and such plainly don’t interest Ugresic, no more than they did W.G. Sebald, an obvious model for these accumulating drifts of meditation. The displaced Croatian, however, has a more spritely feel than the displaced German; she allows for more dialog, some of it crackling:

“Writers are a little like motorcycle enthusiasts...”

“How?”

“Haven’t you noticed how motorcyclists always choose compatible life-partners, featherweight, petite little women who fit snugly...”

The quip packs a punch, too: a woman writer, refusing to sit snug and quiet, gets in a dig at her cross-gender colleagues. Note, too, the redundancy “petite little;” both colloquial and cutting, it shows the care taken by translators Ellen Elias-Bursać and David Williams. The novel’s feminist jabs all deliver a decent poke, and at times I thought of Dorothy Parker with a Ph.D. in Comparative Literature.

Ugresic has such a diploma, and she needs to teach, and this status provides her with another tasty cup of rue. She places herself among the “economy-class” writers, as opposed to “business-class,” celebrated for “what they receive for their advance.” Worse, as she travels in steerage, the narrator comes to learn that even stories of forced migration like hers have entered “the faddish slang of literary scholarship;” they’re called “*miglit*.” She’s been foxed, in other words. In a time when “culture and business have begun so handily cohabiting a bourgeois marriage,” her best response is a snicker at the ironies of her artistic calling. The second chapter finds Ugresic at a conference in Naples, and she falls under the ancient seaport’s spell, its “unequivocal beauty.” Yet the end of the trip leaves her with fresh doubts about “the magical package people call a ‘work of art.’” Now, for Pilnyak, as for most of the Russian Modernists, that magic proved fatal. This chill out of the past falls over *Fox* throughout, even in Naples, and there’s a recurring line from Pilnyak’s contemporary Mikhail Bulgakov, his long-suppressed novel *The Master and Margarita*. Had that book appeared when it was written, of course, it would’ve gotten people killed, and for Part Four of *Fox*, Ugresic uses the quote as an epigraph, then goes on to sift the ashes of other KGB victims, an avant-garde Leningrad workshop

named OBERIU. The chapter tracks the lone survivor of this proto-OULIPO, a bizarre odyssey that renders the man alternatively a traitor, savior, and fool. His reversals recall the conundrums Ugresic faces currently, and the backdrop is even bloodier than hers. This pattern never flags; again and again “the secret of a well-told story” proves unnerving, an “interplay of light and shadow.” Yet clever as the reiterations can be, their consistency can wear you out. How many times do we need to be shown that the artist’s lot is moil and that the powerful would rather see her or him dead? Thus a crucial element to this text’s success—it’s a startling and seductive piece of work, overall—is the one section that refrains from constantly refracting experience through the prism of high culture.

This exception comes in Part Three, “The Devil’s Garden,” and it offers what most American readers would consider the stuff of novels. A man and a woman, neither of them young and one of them Ugresic, find themselves thrown together in a comfortable cabin in the Croatian countryside. Each reveals a sympathetic side, letting down their guard, and before too long they wind up in bed. The sex is handled too brusquely for my taste, but then far more compelling are the horrors of local history. Nearby lie vast minefields, and the conflicts for which they were planted have left this man ruined. Formerly a judge, he now works as a “de-miner.” Even revealing this, he remains likeable and lighthearted, but against the grim reality of his work, turning up tens of thousands of mines for a pathetic salary, the narrator’s gallows humor offers glowing relief: “Conversation with you,” she says, “really does lift the spirits.” Maybe not, and the affair tumbles ultimately into tragedy. Like other chapters, too, this one has its digressions; Ugresic visits a couple of shadowy figures and obscure artworks. But just as “the Devil’s garden” is another name for a minefield, one touched with poetry, so this episode offers an important alternative glimpse of the fox, devious but also marvelously adaptable and undeniably lovely. “The world is a minefield,” thinks the narrator, heading away, “and that’s the only home there is.”

CONTRIBUTOR

John Domini's latest book is *MOVIEOLA!*. In early 2019, he'll publish his fourth novel, *The Color Inside a Melon* .

