

The New Criterion, Books, September 2004.

Literature v. trivia

by [Tess Lewis](#)

A review of Thank You for Not Reading: Essays on Literary Trivia, by Dubravka Ugresic, translated by Celia Hawkesworth & Damion Searles.

Dubravka Ugresic Thank You for Not Reading: Essays on Literary Trivia, translated by Celia Hawkesworth & Damion Searles. Dalkey Archive, 225 pages, \$13.95

In 1988, the Yugoslavian writer Dubravka Ugresic published her first novel, *Fording the Stream of Consciousness*, an amusing satire of international literary conferences. Its plot includes, besides a dead poet and a stolen manuscript, a purported descendant of Gustave Flaubert named Jean-Paul Flagus who is conspiring to found the Agency for the Totalitarian Control of Literature. By fostering “bands of third-rate speed writers” who will poach ideas, themes, and titles from major writers, Flagus plans on “considerably accelerating the pace of literary inflation and ... undermining the myth of a great, unmatched, and unmatchable body of literature.” The novel’s English translation did not appear until 1993, after Ugresic’s nation had disintegrated into warring ethnic factions and she had become, against her wishes, a Croatian writer. Her outspokenness and her cutting wit, selected and translated in her 1994 essay collection, *The Culture of Lies*, soon made exile inevitable.

In the West she found herself, just as Flagus had fantasized, in “an era of Salieri rather than Mozart, a time in which literature is based upon production values, and production is something that, in principle at least, lends itself to control.” Yet the controlling powers were no longer Communist Party censors or politically ambitious megalomaniacal mediocrities, but the laws of the marketplace. Having no more patience for the follies and hypocrisies of one system over those of another, Ugresic took aim again.

In her political essays, Ugresic’s targets were primarily the collective amnesia embraced by or forced upon the populace in the name of nationalism, and the

mendacity necessary to sustain the pretence of a functioning Communist utopia. In the literary essays gathered in *Thank You for Not Reading*, she decries the cultural amnesia and intellectual frivolity that have allowed trivia to swamp “contemporary literary life, and become, it seems, more important than the books”—and that have fostered the “democratic idea that everyone can be a writer.” Celebrity authors like Ivana Trump and Joan Collins, astronomical advances, agents, scouts, and subagents, for whom literature is a lifestyle rather than a vocation, all earn her very pointed scorn.

But there are broader, even more insidious forces at work than merely the glamorization of the trappings of literary life. In “Come Back, Cynics, All is Forgiven!,” Ugresic notes that “Mainstream culture, about which the sophisticated speak with contempt, has gradually vacuumed up every cultural subversion, including the contempt of the sophisticated, and become simply culture. From the culture of camp, via the postmodern, ironic artistic obsession with bad art, bad art has become art itself.” No longer valuing wit, subtlety, and accomplishment, we have turned, as a culture, to fetishizing authenticity and sincerity.

This ideology of authenticity and sincerity, in which the highest value is placed upon “*ordinary* accounts of *ordinary* people about *ordinary* things,” has become a new fascism, a tyranny of the least common denominator, and its face is optimism. In “Optimism Strengthens the Organism,” Ugresic declares herself ready to join the ranks of the new populists. As a reformed pessimist, she knows that being a culture-optimist is more fun and easier. There’s little need to be consistent.

The fact that [the optimist] defends cultural populism does not mean that he himself has to drink Budweiser. Given a choice between Varteks (a former Yugo-slav brand of clothing) and Versace, he will of course choose Versace. However, when it’s a matter of literature, the culture-optimist will immediately take the side of Danielle Steel and agree with the people who are indifferent to Dante, because Dante “doesn’t relate to them.” Whereas Danielle “does.”

Value judgments are for the pessimists. And they are an unpleasant bunch: “complaining, apocalyptic, tedious, nostalgic, elitist, conservative, dogmatic, boring, defenders of traditional values, ‘professors,’ devoted worshippers of the Western Canon, polishers of busts in museums,” for a start. In her zealotry as a new convert in

the war against the “White Male Corpse” and in an effort “to repair the broken relationship between Culture and Labor” the Communists had assiduously cultivated, Ugresic decided to write letters to Gucci, Miele, and other companies. In return for featuring their products in her next novel, she wanted suitable compensation. Alas, in 2000, her idea was ahead of its time, or perhaps Fay Weldon and the luxury brand Bulgari simply borrowed it a year later.

Pessimists are also those likely to try to parse such conveniently vague, all-encompassing terms as globalization. In the essay “Questions to an Answer,” Ugresic notes that cultural globalization—or global multiculturalism—has succeeded in reconciling two opposing ideas: universalization and the “unassailable right to individuality and difference.” It has accomplished this by diluting real differences into harmless stereotypes. “Seen from the outside, globalization resembles a rainbow smokescreen through which the face of the Dalai Lama smiles and his voice rings out saying that there can never be enough differently colored flowers.” But the real, historical, and sometimes unpalatable differences that underlie these stereotypes remain, despite taboos imposed by political correctness. Ugresic saw those local stereotypes turn virulent when rabid forms of nationalism destroyed Yugoslavia. A false harmony between universalization and individuality is wishful thinking. The tension of this opposition will always remain, and we had better admit it. But, Ugresic concludes, if she has to choose, “Simply on the basis of my traumatic experience of the local, the global gains additional points, as long as we accept this opposition.” She is rueful but unsentimental about the dilemma of Eastern European writers whose cachet disappeared with the Iron Curtain. They have the freedom to write whatever they want, but cannot adapt to the unexpected freedom from literary standards in the Western publishing world: “The greatest shock for an East European writer who turned up in the Western literary marketplace was provoked by the absence of aesthetic criteria.” The literary and moral capital they had accrued by sacrificing themselves and risking all for the sake of strenuous criteria of literary evaluation was worthless in the Western markets.

If the displaced and disinherited Eastern European writers could just overcome their allergic reaction to socialist realism, Ugresic suggests, they would have it made. In “Long Live Socialist Realism!” she reminds us that “[if] we just ignore its victims for

a moment, then we can say that socialist realism was a happy art”: brave, healthy, muscular men and women overcoming disability and hardship, improving society by improving themselves. As the deluge of “How to” books in America shows, we have the same zeal for progress and belief in a brighter future. *How the Steel Was Tempered* has nothing on *How Stella Got Her Groove Back*. (There does not seem to have been a corresponding glut of self-proclaimed idiots and dummies among the socialist realists, however.)

Many of Ugresic’s complaints are familiar, and all of them are disheartening, but she states them with elegance and a sense of humor that preempts her wallowing in the cynicism that clearly tempts her. In these essays, she wears her “mask of the East European grumbler” with flair. Eeyore, after all, is the book’s presiding spirit. His epigrams introduce the various sections.

Ugresic is as wary of hope for the fate of literature as she is of despair, but there is hope—even for her. One need only turn to her novel *The Museum of Unconditional Surrender* for confirmation that excellent books are not only still being published but, despite the enormous odds against them, are even being published in translation.

Written in the early years of her exile, this highly autobiographical novel is a meditation on the themes of memory, nostalgia, and history and how these affect one’s sense of identity.

The Museum of Unconditional Surrender is narrated by Bubi, a professor from Zagreb who has fled the dissolution of her country and landed in Berlin. She begins her reminiscences by describing a display case in the Berlin Zoo showing all the indigestible objects found in the stomach of Roland the walrus when he died on August 21, 1961. The list is long: “a pink cigarette lighter, four ice-lolly sticks (wooden), a metal brooch in the form of a poodle, a beer-bottle opener, . . . a small doll, a beer bottle (Pilsner, half-pint), a box of matches, a baby’s shoe, a compass,” etc. The objects in their fortuitous assortment exert a fascination upon visitors who find themselves compelled to discern the objects’ “subtler, secret connections” and historical context. They may note, for example, “that Roland died one week after the Berlin Wall was erected.”

And so it is with the flotsam and jetsam of any life, preserved and altered by memory’s caprices. This is particularly so for exiles, separated from their pasts by more than just the passage of time. The anecdotes, diary entries, jottings, and stories

of the narrator's family and friends that follow reveal "the secret topography" of Bubi's life. But the true subject of the narrator's personal mosaic is slipperiness of identity with its shifting topographies, whether private or public.

Occasionally, in her fiction and in her essays, Ugresic is too facile when creating a literary effect or making a point, but she soon redresses the balance. As she notes in *The Museum*, the "power of banalities lies in the fact that they are for the most part accurate." True enough, but Ugresic is most interesting when exploring their inaccuracies.

Eeyore's words about gaiety and "song-and-dance" should buoy today's debased literary currency: "We can't all, and some of us don't. That's all there is to it." As long as some, like Ugresic, who can write well, do, there will be hope for literature.

Tess Lewis is a translator and essayist who writes frequently about European literature.

This article originally appeared in *The New Criterion*, Volume 23 September 2004, on page 71

Copyright © 2009 The New Criterion