

THE MILLIONS

Poshlost Highway: In Praise of Dubravka Ugresic

By ARNON GRUNBERG, March 20, 2013

1.

The Russian word poshlost, according to a seminal essay by **Vladimir Nabokov**, has a number of possible definitions — “cheap,” “inferior,” “scurvy,” “tawdry” — but is perhaps best grasped by example. He cites a character from a story told by **Gogol**. A German tries, unsuccessfully, to seduce a young girl who sits each evening on her balcony along a lake. At wit’s end, he decides at last to go swimming in the lake each evening with a pair of swans, prepared by him specially for that purpose. He succeeds in embracing both swans while swimming. The ritual repeats itself for a few successive evenings. The girl resists at first, but finally, in Gogol’s telling, “the lady’s heart was conquered.”

Poshlost, then, is the generation of sentiment in the hope that it will elicit someone else’s favor. Or, as Nabokov puts it, a form of sentimentalism “so cleverly painted over with protective tints that its presence often escapes attention.” It is an imitation of values that “are considered, rightly or wrongly, to belong to the highest level of art, thought or emotion.” An imitation, in other words, that is not recognized as such. Had the girl in Gogol’s story thought, *This poor man who embraces his swans evening after evening beneath my balcony is in dire need of help*, then we could not speak of *poshlost*. And had the German, in the event of a film version, been played by **Buster Keaton** or **Jacques Tati**, or **Mr. Bean**, then we might find ourselves in the realm of slapstick. But because the gambit is effective — because the girl surrenders to the seduction, to the machinery of sentiment, (and because, in his perseverance, the German is a bit heroic after all, isn’t he?) — this is *poshlost*.

Poshlost grants primacy to the sentiment, but, as Nabokov himself emphasizes, it is an imitation. *Poshlost* is a burlesque of tradition (the swans, the lake, the girl on the balcony) without wanting to be aware of that itself. The quintessence of door-to-door sales, that is *poshlost*: sentimental through and through, but also cynical through and through. Seduction being the means, sales the end.

2.

Seduction is one of the great themes of the Croatia writer **Dubravka Ugresic’s** essays...but not — or only rarely — the seduction that takes place

between two lovers. She is far more interested in the seductive tactics of generals, intellectuals, wartime profiteers, academics, and businessmen (the latter category being one in which she also places publishers). Seduction, she suggests, is not only the lead-up to the conquest of a lover, but also the lead-up to war, ethnic cleansing, and the rewriting of history. No ideology, no sales, no religion, no democracy, and no dictatorship without seduction.

The bitter truth behind all seduction does not escape Ugresic's notice, either: the seducee is merely an obstacle. The seducer conquers like a supreme commander, without worrying too much about the collateral damage, focusing solely on efficiency, on the result. *Poshlost*, Ugresic observes, is an inevitable byproduct.

Indeed, *poshlost* is one of Ugresic's favorite words, cropping up all over her five collections of essays. For her, it is linked inextricably to Nabokov's earlier essay, and is often deployed alongside her own formulation: "a gingerbread heart." But what continues to amaze and agitate her in these essays is that the imitation, the gingerbread, turns out to be so seductive. Indeed, it is the lie that seduces us, that makes our hearts skip a beat. Two swans embraced by a German in a lake at dusk — how could one ever resist that?

Poshlost is, of course, a subspecies of kitsch; it is kitsch that is no longer recognized as such, that is to be found everywhere, including in what we may call "great art," and from which one can never escape. The writer himself is caught up in the thick of it. He too, after all, is a seducer, he too wishes to sell something, and to the extent that he has ever felt ashamed of that, he stopped noticing a long time ago.

Ugresic, and this speaks in her favor, does not feign coyness about this situation; coyness, after all, is one of the hallmarks of *poshlost*. No, she is very much aware of the fact that she herself is a part of the literary and intellectual machinery and its sales techniques. She knows that she, too, seduces in a professional capacity. (Ugresic cites approvingly another remark of Nabokov's: "In the kingdom of *poshlost*, it is not the book that 'makes a triumph', but the reading public.") An essay in *Thank You for Not Reading* discusses a prostitute in America who claims not to be a prostitute but a "pleasure activist." Ugresic ends the piece with the statement that she too is a "pleasure activist," and that no one may take her profession away from her.

Then again, the pleasures of Ugresic's essays are unusual ones. Some one

hundred and fifty years ago now, the Dutch writer **Multatuli** pointed out that the author has a great deal in common with the prostitute. Multatuli himself tried to maintain his dignity, he said, by haranguing his customers. Ugresic in turn, I believe, tries to maintain her dignity by not giving her customers what they expect from a Balkan-born writer. Gripping tales of communism and post-communism, for example, stories about standing in line for butter and about no longer having to stand in line for butter. Instead, she asks: What are we to do if we breathe in kitsch every day, if kitsch saturates even our private lives? How can intellectuals maintain a critical stance with regard to something ubiquitous, unless they, as **Isaac Babel** put it, become “masters in the genre of silence?” Ugresic’s melancholy conclusion is that there remains no position possible outside the world of *poshlost*, not for the intellectual either. A position like that would be a pose, insincere and misleading: *poshlost* itself, in other words. Ugresic concedes, in short, its inescapability. She admits that it would be deceitful to pretend that *poshlost* has not won the final victory. To become a master in the genre of silence, then, is not Ugresic’s ambition. She continues, however unwillingly, to take part in literary festivals, even as her essays speak out against the “festivalization” of literature. *Nobody’s Home* includes an account of “Literatuurexpres Europa 2000,” a project in which some one hundred writers from 43 countries traveled around Europe and visited eighteen cities. It relates, among other things, how in Minsk a female colleague “was deeply shocked when a waiter served her red wine that had been cooled.” Before the person of letters can go on to display shock concerning murder, repression, and other catastrophes, it seems, the temperature of the red wine must be sorted out. But this observation on Ugresic’s part is not a denunciation, or at least not only a denunciation, for in her own words: “Intellectuals are also only people who badly want to be needed by someone.”

3.

Perhaps it would be wise at this point to establish a distinction between the novelist and the intellectual, though there are some intellectuals who cannot resist the temptation to write novels and some novelists who like to pass themselves off as intellectuals. Ugresic’s essays are above all interested in the intellectual in the classic sense of the term: a person who intervenes in certain matters, mostly matters that do not directly concern them, for the purpose of serving the common good.

Precisely because Ugresic realizes that a position outside *poshlost* is untenable, she has developed a sixth sense for spotting those intellectuals who think they can escape *poshlost* by combating it, thinkers whose

“intellectual subversion is judged by its commercial value,” as she writes in *Nobody’s Home*. She takes as her example **Bernard-Henri Lévy**, who has the dubious honor of forming a subcategory all his own within the world of *poshlost*. At another point she talks about the “moderate-radical” intellectual, the intellectual who “puts on a show of false radicalism,” an “intellectual entertainer” who she feels has a lot in common with Coca-Cola, or at least with the image of Coca-Cola: “Unconventional, fresh, avant-gardist, subversive, bold and never, but then never, boring.” A poseur, or perhaps more than that: a double agent. Ugresic rejects the idea that we live in a post-ideological era. The market itself, she states, is very much an ideology, namely the ideology of seduction.

No wonder then that the body plays such an important role in the machinations of the marketplace, for there is little more seductive (or more appalling) than the body. **Plato** wrote that the body and its desires causes wars, and Christianity too has had a troubled relation with the body, which it holds to be nothing but the dungeon of the soul. In our day, however, the renunciation of the body has been dealt with in radically summary fashion. In *Nobody’s Home*, Ugresic notes that this ideology deprives the body of its “right to its carnivalesque and grotesque ambiguity.” Because the body must serve as the vehicle of seduction and the temple of our ideology, it must also serve as ongoing publicity for itself and for other bodies. And if it is not a proper vehicle for publicity, then we have to do something about that. To that end there are health clubs, diet pills, and cosmetic surgeons. (What stars often have in common are their relatively flawless bodies. Sometimes within this cult a “freak” is fawned over — take **Michael Jackson** for example — but that might be simply to underscore the belief in the body-as-temple.)

Public intellectuals operate within the same parameters, according to Ugresic; Bernard-Henri Lévy’s statements are an aside to his white shirt, to his navel. Yet she shows compassion and understanding for the intellectual who serves *poshlost*. Reading her work, one cannot help but conclude that it is precisely inside the free spirit, i.e. the intellectual, that the spirit of the valet lives on. Serving is what he loves most. No matter whether the intellectual serves the kingdom of *poshlost* or a revanchist and neo-fascistic regime in Croatia, he is prepared to do a great deal in return for a few privileges. Embracing two swans at the same time would be all in a day’s work for him.

4.

At the root of all cravenness, Ugresic suggests, is the deepest of human

fears: the fear of being expelled. It is this fear which she says serves as the foundation for fascism, and it is this fear which makes her skeptical about the defeat of totalitarianism, because the human fear of expulsion is unsinkable.

Ugresic herself was cast out of the fold twenty years ago, on October 23, 1992, when *Die Zeit* published her essay “*Saubere Kroatische Luft*” (“Pure Croatian Air”). It was an essay, she has written, which in her opinion was about as devastating as a firecracker five minutes before the fireworks begin, but it exploded in her face. She and four other Croatian authors were accused of sedition and witchcraft. Ugresic was said to be a feminist who was raping the Croatian fatherland. (A feminist who commits rape — that appeals to some men.) In the title piece from “The Culture of Lies,” she writes:

This war is rather like a cake: everyone is trying to get a piece of it; politicians (at home and abroad), criminals and speculators, carpetbaggers and murderers, sadists and masochists, believers and philanthropists (also at home and abroad), historians, philosophers, and journalists. Anyone who compares a war, particularly one that is still raging, to a cake can count on offending the warmongers, male and female, who, as always, speak and act in the name of public morals. Soldiers, after all, do not die for a piece of cake, but for causes so much more sacred. In that same essay, Ugresic also talks about “the terror of forgetting” and “the terror of memory,” which can create false myths, those building blocks of falsified collective memory on which all nationalism is founded. There will always be “intellectuals” who offer their services in designing those myths, in bringing them to life.

On any number of occasions Ugresic has written about her expulsion, and about the exile that followed on its heels. Readers will understand that the painful thing is not so much the exile, although exile is another of Ugresic’s favorite subjects, but the expulsion itself. And it also becomes clear that the word “courageous” — a much-abused word which, I fear, must be relegated to the kingdom of *poshlost* — cannot be applied in her case. Ugresic, after all, had no idea of the consequences of publishing her essay in *Die Zeit*; she was absolutely not intending to perform a heroic deed. In a more recent essay, from 2010’s *Karaoke Culture*, we see that Ugresic still regards being expelled for speaking the truth as a humiliation, an open wound, not something of which she is proud. Pride is something people tend to feel concerning the wounds of others, not their own.

5.

That wars and nationalism produce especially malignant forms of *poshlost* is well known, but the *poshlost* of peacetime – during which we wage our wars elsewhere – is not to be underestimated.

In *Thank You For Not Reading*, Ugresic notes the similarities between Communist kitsch and the post-Communist tactics of seduction:

Contemporary, market-oriented literature is realistic, optimistic, cheerful, sexy, explicitly or implicitly didactic, and aimed at a broad reading public.

As such it contributes to retraining and reeducation, in the spirit of the personal triumph of the good person over the bad. As such, it is social-realistic. It is merely less boring than its Soviet-Russian predecessor.

We might almost think, reading Ugresic, that Communism collapsed under the weight of its own ennui. Certainly, boredom is the great foe of ideologies, especially our own, and to combat that boredom new warmongers, generals, and politicians will always arise, but also intellectuals and novelists, for they too love to combat boredom. *The Culture of Lies* cites a lovely passage from **Osip Mandelstam** about these boredom-busters:

“A writer is a bastard, a cross between a parrot and a priest. He is a parrot in the most literal sense of the word. If his master is a Frenchman he will speak French, but when he is sold in Persia he will say in Persian: ‘Polly is a nutcase’ or ‘Polly wants a cracker’. A parrot has no sense of time, and does not know the difference between day and night. When his master tires of him, he tosses a black cloth over his cage, which in literature is a surrogate for the night”.

Now that so many writers, readers, publishers, and intellectuals seem to have forgotten that writers are parrots, Dubravka Ugresic reminds us in her essays that parrots sometimes, from inside their cages, say things worth hearing. Even, or perhaps especially, when that infuriates their masters.

*Editor’s Note: A version of this essay was delivered as a speech at the 2012 Frankfurt Book Fair, where Dubravka Ugresic was awarded the Jean Améry Prize for her essays. It has been translated from the Dutch by **Sam Garrett**.*