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**Open wounds, the phenomenology of exile and the management of pain: Dubravka**

**Ugresic's *The Ministry of Pain***

When all is said, what remains to be said is the disaster. Ruins of words, demise writing, faintness  
faintly murmuring: what remains without remains.  
Maurice Blanchot, *The Writing of the Disaster*

How do we remember the country, the place we have left, to which it is difficult, or often impossible to return, or which no longer exists? Do we want to remember it at all? Is remembering for some too painful? How do we remember the life, the 'home' we have been forced to leave? Such questions of loss, of nostalgia and memory, of alienation and dislocation, have been imaginatively explored within a long tradition of exile literature - a heterogeneous body of work encompassing a multiplicity of horizons and histories. In the East European context, this thematic concern has been resonating in literatures from the totalitarian periods, in the émigré and dissident literature, and most recently, in the literatures of conflict, especially those affected by the war in Former Yugoslavia.

As an already established writer in then-Yugoslavia, Dubravka Ugresic has been one of the few critical female voices in Croatia who found it a necessary political and ethical task to speak against the emerging post-Yugoslav nationalisms. Ugresic, among other vocal critics, mostly feminists, soon became a target of an intensive media campaign in Croatia, in what was perhaps one of the less well-known witch hunts of the twentieth century.<sup>1</sup> Labelled as a traitor of the new Croatian nation with her personal details publicly disclosed during the campaign, Ugresic subsequently left the country. Since then, she has been living in and writing from the Netherlands. It is ironic that she has become known in the West as one of the best Croatian writers, while 'back home', until very recently, she would be referred to as a

writer who went into a self-imposed and voluntary exile.<sup>2</sup> Yet Ugresic has always insisted on contextualising her own condition of exile and in one of her interviews she comments on the burden of such a position:

*At the same time, you disagree with those who try to identify you as an émigré, political exile or a fugitive ?*

In the places I live/reside in, I do not want this identification. It is reductive and extremely manipulative. Both exiles and the environment in which exiles find themselves manipulate with this identification. Exile is citational - it has had a long tradition and its meaning has petrified, so it happens that an exile is read entirely on the basis of this “exile complex”. And I do not want this. On the other hand, when I address my message to the place I had left - to Croatia and Former Yugoslavia - I then insist on exile, that is, on political exile.<sup>3</sup>

Ugresic here speaks against a traditional view of exile as an official expulsion, but also against a manipulation with exile as an in-between vantage point that offers a radical vision of the world, or as a metaphor for a new kind of humanism and epistemology. There are different stages of exile, as well as the inner ones, and even writers themselves can manipulate this idea. In her essayist works, *The Culture of Lies* (1999)<sup>4</sup> and *Thank You for Not Reading* (2003), Ugresic offers some sharp observations on the relationship between exiled writers and the literary market and writes ironically about the fact that an exiled writer is often expected to become a spokesman or a representative of the country he abandoned.<sup>5</sup> Further, Ugresic writes that an ex-Yugoslav writer “stands out from the general East European landscape through his exclusive right to unhappiness” (*Lies* 174). If the disintegration of Yugoslavia ironically signals the rise of a post-Yugoslav narrative of exile as a distinct variation on the theme, Ugresic is, however, still indebted to the literary tradition of East European exile which in her work comes through frequent references to the writers such as Brodsky, Nabokov or Kundera. Perhaps not being quite ‘at home’ within this tradition, Ugresic then does not only use citationality to explore the theme of exile and the citationality

of exile itself, but also succeeds in writing herself into this landscape. Reflecting on the literary theme of exile and return, one of the characters in her novel *The Ministry of Pain* timely observes that “in literature it’s always the men who go out into the world ... shed their ‘prodigal tears’”.<sup>6</sup> In both Ugresic’s exilic novels, *The Museum of Unconditional Surrender* and *The Ministry of Pain*, she explores such melancholia of exile, and also offers a gendered perspective of exile through the use of a female narrator. However, the discussion of exile in Ugresic’s fiction cannot be limited to the gendered perspective only, as it often intersects with the ex-Yugoslav *unhappiness* and with some wider questions of ethics in exile narrative, especially when it is concerned with the writing of remembering and the pain of displacement. In this chapter, I will seek to address these questions in the light of her most recent novel, *The Ministry of Pain*. If *Museum*, through a highly original and imaginative fragmentary narrative, deals with lyrical nostalgia, to borrow Eva Hoffman’s words (14), or the first stages of writing exile in which the focus is on the past and the lost country, I would suggest that in her most recent novel, *The Ministry of Pain*, Ugresic moves on to more international and cosmopolitan concerns (Hoffman, 40) and explores the citationality of exile even further, as a condition that is romantic in literature, but traumatic in reality.<sup>7</sup> That is, in *Ministry*, these two conditions are constantly conflated - the ways to write the Yugoslav *disaster* with a materiality of exile, the figure of a migrant *flâneuse* with that of a *Trummerfrau*<sup>8</sup>, losses with gains, remembering with forgetting. Starting from Freud and Bhabha’s ambivalent concept of “unhomely” which can serve as a useful term to unravel and examine these conflicted layers of exile in the novel, I will concentrate on the novel’s representation of remembering as unhomely - the writing of trauma and the violence of forgetting, ‘home’ as unhomely - where one does not feel at home, and the metropolitan city as unhomely - or writing of the effects of post-communist migration and globalisation.

According to Freud, the manifestation of the *Unheimlich*, translated into English as the “uncanny”, or “unhomely”, springs from something familiar which has been repressed and can be found in concepts such as ghosts, haunted houses, or dismembered limbs.<sup>9</sup> In this sense, his discussion of melancholia as an open wound<sup>10</sup> may be also read in terms of producing another unhomely effect. Exilic narratives are not only profoundly melancholic in their refusal to let go of what has been lost, but they are also narratives about bodily experience – the writing of a difficult condition of loss and discomfort felt on the body in a given unhomely environment. Therefore, the metaphors of an open wound or a “phantom limb” (*Lies* 230) through which these melancholic losses are often expressed, but also the metaphors of in-betweenness and the writing of an exile’s fascination with the objects he/she encounters in new surroundings, might all be considered as elements in exilic narratives that produce an unhomely effect.

Homi Bhabha, in his introduction to *The Locations of Culture*, further expands on Freud’s concept to talk about historical complexity and about what he terms as unhomely fictions, or the narratives that spring from “transnational histories of migrants, the colonized, or political refugees” (17). In his work, the return of the repressed that haunts the present is historicised and evoked in “the unspoken, unrepresented pasts”(26) that are imaginatively interwoven, for example, in the fictions of Nadine Gordimer and Toni Morrison. These unhomely moments do not only appear as haunting effects of slavery or apartheid, but also as further questions of witnessing and writing of/for the Other. Although Bhabha goes to great lengths to provide a list of such oppositionary imagination and creative impulses of *witnessing*, and advocates for the unhomely to be considered beyond a paradigm of colonial and post-colonial condition (13), Ugresic’s writing does not figure in his evidence of “a more transnational and translational sense of the hybridity of imagined communities” (7). Sadly, in Bhabha’s work, her writing remains in the uncanny shadow of “the hideous extremity of

Serbian nationalism”(7) - the dominant image. By overlooking the writer who has been disrupting and re-evaluating the newly imposed national homogeneity, Bhabha has left Ugresic where she has been ever since - outside the time-space of the (Croatian) nation. However, there is no space here to consider possible reasons<sup>11</sup> for Bhabha’s silence on the resistance to any forms of nationalism during and after the Yugoslav wars or of his unawareness of a strong feminist and peace movement in the Former Yugoslavia and we must end with a conclusion that the early 1990s Croatian witch h(a)unt was indeed successfully suppressed.

Despite this, Bhabha’s consideration of the unhomely and his belief in the symbolic function of unhomely fictions, and of literature and art in general, and his contention that they could perform a kind of psychic survival in the moment “when historical visibility has faded” and “when the present tense of testimony loses its power to arrest” (26) will be extremely important for discussing the novel’s ethical concerns. As we shall see, the novel’s emphasis on melancholic remembering, its evocation of the ruins and the metaphors of pain, is suggestive and may point to the urgency of confronting the recent past, but also to a difficulty and (im)possibility of writing grief and loss. Although Ugresic deals with a historically and contextually specific unhomely - that which symbolically incorporates in the act of writing the effects of the war in Former Yugoslavia - there is still something that remains in the writing of this particular unhomely, *something that haunts* and that begs for witnessing. In the latter parts of this essay, I will focus on the residual elements in Ugresic’s narrative, her evocation of different remains, and discuss if anything can emerge imaginatively out of her Yugoslav and other ruins. Indeed, as we shall see, the remains in Ugresic’s novel figure in both meanings of the word “remains” - as a dead body and as something (or some bodies) left behind.

### **Re-membering/dis-membering ‘home’**

*The Ministry of Pain* centres on a group of Former Yugoslav exiles in Amsterdam whose stories are tied together by a female narrator, Tanja Lucić. Having left Yugoslavia during the war, she has been lucky to get a two-semester post as a lecturer on Yugoslav literatures at the University of Amsterdam through a friend. Ironically, Tanja's students are mostly ex-Yugoslavs and her profession represents one of the last remnants of what all the local forces in the former Yugoslavia were trying to tear apart and which is about to disappear altogether alongside its country. Indeed, what brings Tanja and her students together is less an interest in a no longer existing subject and its country, but rather the effects of its dissolution. For most of the students, enrolling for a university course was a way of prolonging their stay in Holland, as Tanja soon finds out most have come with the war, some as refugees, others avoiding military service, some had real while others had 'imaginary' Dutch partners (*Ministry* 19). Ugresic thus begins to contextualise and complicate the condition of exile by juxtaposing these different losses and gains - the entangled legal and illegal paths of exiles, refugees and migrants with the question of passports/documents and privilege.

Aware of her ironic position, Tanja suggests to the students that instead of a proper literature course, they could play a game - a cataloguing of everyday life in Yugoslavia. During their course in remembering, they recreate a "*painless territory of the past*" (134, my emphasis) through a recollection of Yugoslav pop culture, "Yugogoods - food, drink, apparel and the like - and Yugodesign, ideological slogans, celebrities, athletes, events, Yugoslav socialist myths and legends" (*Ministry* 59). The act of nostalgic remembering may be read as twofold. First, it represents an affective investment that creates a sense of community in order to confront their inner fragmentation - the trauma and the pain of displacement. On another level, their nostalgic remembering may be read as a counter memory. In other words, when the characters remember their lost 'home', they recreate the forever lost Yugoslav cultural space and attempt to preserve personal and collective memories from erasure.

Ugresic here evokes a specific form of nostalgia -Yugonostalgia<sup>12</sup> – which represents a longing for the cultural space of Yugoslav identities and its positive values. Such nostalgic remembering is therefore subversive and acts against what Ugresic in her essayist works terms as “the confiscation of memory” and the repressive strategies of “oblivion and forgetting”<sup>13</sup> of the post-Yugoslav nationalist regimes in their attempt to erase everything that was related to a common Yugoslav past and redefine ordinary people’s lives along more restrictive national, religious, ethnic and other lines. Nostalgia could then be read as a symptom of the post-Yugoslav subjectivity constituted on the basis of this repression and as a symptom of Tanja and her students’ desire to return to more peaceful times. However, such construction of the past is often utopian and romanticised, and does not sufficiently address its bad features which Igor, another student, often brings up during their course in remembering. It is therefore important to ask who constructs the nostalgic ‘we’ and what nostalgia as an emotion may do and represent.

Nostalgia has often been considered as having similar symptoms to melancholia<sup>14</sup> in its refusing to let go of what has been lost and in its clinging to an imaginary past, but also as differing from it. The nostalgic symptoms have been considered as a sign of the collective longing, while the melancholic ones have mostly been relegated to the personal domain and personal history (Boym 5). It is not surprising then that the longing for home in nostalgia has often been associated with nationalism and conservatism. However, in some recent work on contemporary nostalgia and on collective mourning and/or melancholia, there has been much less emphasis on distinguishing between these two emotions, but rather a need to contextualise, historicise and politicise these expressions as they can mean different things in different times.<sup>15</sup> Following from a recent ethical ‘turn’ in literary and cultural studies and a renewed interest in affect, a clear-cut distinction between nostalgia, melancholia and mourning has been complicated by the fact that these affective states are often experientially

and historically contingent. Most of these critical responses, although indebted to Freud's distinction between the two stages of grief – melancholia as unhealthy or failed mourning and mourning as a productive, future-oriented and reparatory state, a successful letting go of the lost object - seem to focus not so much on this distinction, as on his notion of cathexis, or an emotional investment that goes into working through loss and grief. Nostalgia and melancholia may then not always be cast off as regressive states, but can act a defence mechanism against dismemberment<sup>16</sup> and their emotional energy can be invested in connectedness rather than in substitution. This seems to be what Ugresic does initially with affective and utopian (yugo)nostalgic remembering. On the other hand, the attachments to loss in melancholia/nostalgia can have ethical implications.<sup>17</sup> The nostalgic 'we' they create, can only do away with a loss of identity and trauma partially, but it cannot make the loss meaningful and Tanja then begins to wonder whether stimulating memory and evoking 'homely' terrains would reveal something more sinister:

I wondered whether by evoking endearing images of a common past I wouldn't obscure the bloody images of the recent war; whether by reminding them how Kiki sweets tasted I wouldn't obliterate the case of the Belgrade boy stabbed to death by his coevals just because he was Albanian; whether by urging them to 'reflect on' Mirko and Slavko, the Yugopartisans of the popular comic strip, I wouldn't be postponing their confrontation with the countless episodes of sadism perpetrated by Yugowarriors, drunk and crazed with momentary power, against their compatriots; or whether by calling up the popular refrain 'That's what's happens, my fair maiden, once you've known a Bosnian kiss', I wouldn't be dulling the impact of the countless deaths in Bosnia, that of Selim's father, for instance. (*Ministry* 58)

It's not only that the characters are haunted by the memories of a lost home, but there is something else that that haunts and threatens this nostalgic remembering. The novel here reveals the unhomely character of memory, which we could read as that which is traumatic. In some recent work on trauma, nostalgic evocation of utopian images and homely places "can



function to conceal another traumatic past” (Belau xx) and therefore the nostalgic defence mechanism may not necessarily be a healthy response. Through Selim’s story that interrupts, cuts through and disrupts the homely remembering, the novel begins to articulate that nostalgia cannot be separated from *what came after* Yugoslavia. In other words, remembering the smallest everyday things that make them alive also brings along the war victims and the war dead (*Ministry* 125). The lectures soon turn out to be an unsuccessful group therapy and the reanimation of their better past (*Ministry* 59) reveals a ‘home’ that is *sick* and haunted because of absence of the healing process. When Tanja goes back to visit Zagreb, she finds herself in an atmosphere of categorical refusal to confront reality (*Ministry* 99) and here the novel’s insistence on melancholia is a symptom of the unresolved post-war, post-Yugoslav condition. But it is not only that Ugresic insists on melancholic attachments because the work of mourning had not taken place. She also imaginatively explores whether mourning as a productive, restorative and reflective artistic practice can perform a certain collective work, and if it may open up the questions of ethical responsibility and ethical reading. If the work of collective mourning involves bearing witness and an articulation of a complex relationship between past, present and future, its final outcome would consist in the realisation that the lost object was not perfect (Klein, 158), in letting go of the lost object and in writing off the past forever. It is not surprising then that a successful management of pain in mourning is often expressed in the metaphors of *rebuilding* - of oneself or of a community. I will return to this in the final part of this essay and look at how and if the work of mourning takes place in the novel.

### **Unhomely homes**

Ugresic does not only explore the trauma of remembering, but also the trauma of living where one does not feel at home. Scholars who are concerned with a phenomenology of home “as the sensory world of everyday experience” (Ahmed, 1999), emphasize the

impossibility of homecoming to a place that was lived as home precisely because ‘home’, although it may represent “a mythic place of desire in the diasporic imagination, a place of return”, is also “a lived experience of locality”.<sup>18</sup> Ugresic explores these negotiations through the metaphor of in-betweenness - of an exile being ‘neither here nor there’. The fantasy of return is shattered when Tanja goes to Zagreb to visit her mother. She can't find her way because all Yugoslav street names have been changed. “Everything looked run-down and grey, now *mine*, now *alien*, now *former*” (*Ministry* 116) - Tanja observes and so the familiar and homely becomes strange and uncanny. Tanja soon realises that the longing for a home that no longer exists will be forever locked in ‘memory-time’ and in disjunction with the lived home. However, in Amsterdam, the place that should be lived as home, Tanja feels equally anchorless, as if not being able to fully inhabit this place. The drama of (un)belonging is played out in the metropolis towards which Tanja feels both fascination and alienation. Ugresic thus makes her character become a migrant *flâneuse*, an aimless wanderer who is streetwalking the metropolis: “If Amsterdam was a stage, I had a double role: I was both audience and performer, watcher and watched” (*Ministry*, 79). Ugresic’s migrant *flâneuse* is indeed an alternative observer, constantly sliding in her double role of the observer and the observed and to whom the city is an unhomely place waiting to be inscribed, re-read from the margins. As an observer, she discovers a hidden ‘homely’ topography of the metropolis, in landmarks such as flea markets, Bosnian cafes, the railway stations and trains, and conversing with other fellow travellers, beggars and street musicians. She is the one who can *see* the woman in Amsterdam’s red light districts as an East European trafficked woman, but it is the very doubleness of her *flânerie* that enables such a privileged observation.

As the observed, she experiences a particular sense of alienation and discomfort as a consequence of inhabiting a migrant body. Although the feeling of dislocation is partly assuaged by her students who represent her internal centre and a feeling of belonging, Tanja

notes that she and her fellow exiles are often seen as “the fall out of Balkanization, savages, foreigners, the beneficiaries of political asylum” (*Ministry* 58). The pain of living as an exile becomes a nightmarish experience, and the need to belong, the need for touch (38) expressed through this migrant melancholia is a response to inhospitality. Perhaps this is why, in Tanja’s words, “the ever present physicality” of Amsterdam has “no power to arouse” (*Ministry* 77). Her experience of Amsterdam as a transitory place, a miniature dollhouse, and of Holland as a country built on sand, that all evoke erasure, forgetting, and disappearance, further express her anxieties of turning into the observed, a body out of place, without a voice.

The questions of the power of the gaze, between observation and being observed are constantly conflated. This culminates in the novel’s handcuffing scene when Igor, one of Tanja’s students, comes to her flat to ask for an explanation as to why she had decided to fail him in their final exam. In the second part of the novel, Tanja is warned that some students allegedly complained that they were not doing anything in class and that she should start giving real lectures. A rigorous literature lesson that follows represents her inability to come to terms with her personal and professional loss as a professor of Yugoslav literatures, and a possibility that the post might end. This also alienates her from her students. In a reversal of the teacher-student relationship, the observer and the observed, Igor shows to the handcuffed Tanja that observing can only be partial. He reveals how Meliha, a ‘student’ with a degree in literature from Sarajevo University could have been the teacher, but instead worked in the red-light district, or Selim who was scrubbing toilets. The handcuffing scene is as much an expression of Igor’s own pain, who finds Holland as a country of forgetting more homely and in which one without papers might ‘disappear’, as it is a symbolic space of shame and humiliation, an interlude into Tanja’s switching on a “low-life visa”.

Interestingly, these layers of privileged and less privileged stages of exile are to be found in the most striking metaphor of pain, the novel’s title. It refers to a ‘sweat shop’ where

most of these Yugoslav exiles worked manufacturing clothes for an s/m club called “The Ministry of Pain” as it was one of the best paid jobs one could get without a work permit. The handcuffs, which the students gave Tanja for her birthday, metonymically stand for that *other knowledge* her students have. They represent another painful side of exile and migration, or the unspoken material conditions of ‘slave’ labour for the ‘western’ pleasures. Isn’t then Tanja’s mighty scream after Igor leaves her flat, a reminder of the pain that cannot be expressed in words, as much as it is her own? Perhaps Ugresic knows very well that romanticising exile and writing exile through the body may also entail violence and that as such it must always remain an unfinished narrative. Not surprisingly, soon after the handcuffing scene, Ugresic revisits the margins of the city once again, by way of inserting a story within the story, in order to tell a stronger tale of inhospitality towards the ‘barbarian’ migrant presence pushed out into the city suburbs. The story of the inhabitants of “Little Casablanca”, one of Amsterdam’s suburbs where Tanja now lives her low-life visa since her teaching position could not be extended, is narrated through an imaginary and gendered ‘we’:

We are barbarians. We have no writing; we leave our signatures on the wind: we utter sounds, we signal with our calls, our shouts, our screams, our spit. That is how we mark our territory. Our fingers drum on everything they touch: dustbins, window panes, pipes. We drum, therefore we are. We make rackets, rackets as painful as toothaches. We bawl at weddings and wail at funerals, our women’s convulsive voices battering the concrete facades like tempests. We break glasses and go bang: firecrackers are our favourite toys. Sound is our alphabet, the noise we produce is the only proof that we exist, the only trace we leave behind. We are like dogs: we bark. We bark at the lowering grey sky weighing down on our heads.

We are sleepers. The members of our tribe bear the invisible stamp of Columbus on their foreheads. We travel west and end up east; indeed the farther west we go the farther east we get. Our tribe is cursed. Returning to the lands whither we have come spells defeat. Hence the endless repetition in our dreams of the departure

sequence, the moment of departure being our only moment of triumph. (*Ministry* 222-3)

It is through all these references to the materiality of exile that the novel forces us to *remember* that writing of that condition is always half a story. Ironically, the other half of the story Ugresic concludes, can only be expressed through that bark or scream. But that half-story, half-language, half-sound, also reveals the limits of *knowing* (or writing) *another's* pain. By writing about the parallel world of a 'perfect' society and its borderline existence, Ugresic reminds us that its pain and anger often pass unheard and get lost not only in the violence of migration, but even in the narratives of exile. The precarious existence of 'Little Casablanca', that old and well-known migration route from Africa to Europe, the novel envisions, will be soon replaced by a new route, a new wave of migration of the emergent post-communist undergrowth:

Any minute now, any second, a new, completely different tribe will arise from the post-Communist underbrush bearing doctoral dissertations with telling titles like *Understanding the Past as a Means of Looking Ahead* ... They will form a vibrant young contingent of specialists, organizers, operators and, above all, managers, experts in business management, political management, ecological management, cultural management, disaster management — the management of life. They will be a genus that propagates itself with inhuman rapidity, as if propagation were their sole aim in life. They are the type that always lands on its feet, that has no qualms about living off the misfortunes of the people they help, because even misfortune needs to be managed: Misfortune without management is merely failure ... they will have multiple identities: they will be cosmopolitan, global, multicultural, nationalist, ethnic and diasporic all in one ... But on their way they will forget that the very flexibility, mobility and fluidity that catapulted them to the surface leave a nameless mass of slaves down below ... and some of them will travel all the way to the shores of Western Europe, where the more fortunate will pick asparagus in Germany and tulips in Holland and the less fortunate will scrub toilets. (*Ministry* 228-231)

New flows of migrants, exiles, émigrés and refugees come, but the time-space compression (Harvey, 1990) quickly manages the pain, breeds new forms of forgetting and engulfs. Ugresic asks us not to forget that the access to movement is twofold and that the capitalist machine breeds its own ‘managers’ of gains and losses. New flows of more privileged migrants will create their own mechanisms for the ‘management’ of pain, while the losses on the other hand, the pain of labour of the ‘slave class’, are easily forgotten and trodden upon in the speed of movement and ‘progress’. This passage is indeed a powerful and bleak outlook into the future of post-communist migration, globalization and the creation of new colonialisms. Perhaps it also provides a glimpse into the not-so-far future of East European narrative of exile<sup>19</sup>. Indeed, now that the post-Yugoslav states are aiming to ‘return’ to Europe and most of the post-communist East European countries have already done so, will the story of Yugoslav exile remain an interesting narrative, both ‘at home’ and in ‘the West’?. Are the writers going to continue marketing the margins (Huggan, 2001) in offering a commodified image of ‘Eastern Europe’ for the ‘Western’ market (*Lies* 161)? Shall we encounter fewer stories of exile and passports and more of those addressing new realities of Eastern European societies? Shall we witness a decline in the stories from internal exiles and see the emergence of new literary characters embodied in the image of a new East European migrant? These are some of the questions that literary history will certainly begin to address soon.

If neo-liberal changes turn post-communist or Yugo melancholia into exports, melancholia also arises as a symptom of the discrepancy of the capitalist everyday in East European countries.<sup>20</sup> Perhaps Ugresic recognizes well that when the past becomes marketable, the recent communist or violent past will inevitably become commodified, simplified and written forever. In keeping the melancholic wound open, her novel then speaks against such *management* of pain and tries to write the past otherwise. This brings us to our

final consideration as to whether this work is evoked through a slow process of clearing the ruins - in Tanja's character as metaphor of a *Trummerfrau*.

### **Ruins and remains**

Scholars who study memory point out that it was invented after a catastrophe, when the roof of a house collapsed killing most of the people at a banquet. An ancient Greek poet, Simonides, witnessed this tragic event and his remembering of the exact locations where people were seated helped identify the deceased and thus the art of memory was born.<sup>21</sup> When Tanja initiates remembering, she sets herself a task: "the house was in ruins, and it was my job to clear a path through the rubble" (*Ministry* 40). This may suggest a reading of her character as a *Trummerfrau*, or a complementary metaphor to Simonides. The employment of this metaphor which refers to the women who cleaned the ruins after the war in Germany, may symbolically suggest a difficult work of working through the rubble after the disaster - the work of mourning. But if women have been traditionally thought to show and perform the signs of mourning, collective mourning could be then discussed as a gendered cultural practice that should perform a renewal of a community and heal the national body. Certainly being aware of the manipulation with this 'women's work' and with women's bodies during the war in Yugoslavia<sup>22</sup>, Ugresic does not make her character take on the role of collective mourning. Rather in making Tanja a melancholic *Trummerfrau* and in *keeping the wound open*, Ugresic perhaps acknowledges that there is "something else that one cannot 'get over', one cannot 'work through', which is the deliberate act of violence against a collectivity, humans who have been rendered anonymous for violence and whose death recapitulates an anonymity for memory" (Butler 468).

The novel's staging of the particular post-Yugoslav uhomely and its weaving of the events that are both inside and outside the text, brings us back to Bhabha's difficult ethical

and political questions expressed in the need “to fully realize, and take responsibility for, the unspoken, unrepresented pasts that haunt the historical present” (18). In evoking a disaster that weighs down on nostalgic remembering, the uhomely in the novel continues to haunt as Blanchot’s gaping reminder - what remains without the remains. This is not only a question of bearing witness to “anonymous human flesh” that “has served in the battle for territorial, national and state designs” (*Lies* 194) which the novel evokes through the mute cries of the victims, such as Selim’s father’s death in Omarska concentration camp, another student’s suicide or through ‘slave’ labour and the violence of migration, but is also a wider question of writing *as remembering* and writing of/for the other.

Ugresic’s fiction struggles to find ways to write the post-Yugoslav *disaster*. It is a writing that in the very act of writing acknowledges its own disaster and its limits, of only being able to remember certain Others, but which nevertheless in that impossibility creates witnessing that will enable other witnessing. In one of her essays, Ugresic reflects on these difficult questions: “Everything that the author has written is just a footnote to the long list of names of people who have lost their lives, families, friends, homes or the homeland which was until recently shared, a footnote to the texts written by the warlords”.<sup>23</sup> In *The Ministry of Pain*, through a repeated conflation of remembering and forgetting, melancholia and mourning, Ugresic leaves an unfinished and precarious testimony that even a book can be a fragile witness, capable of being burned altogether like so many were during the war. Repeated remembering can constitute the act of witnessing, but it can also make us *tremble* to the possibility of a disaster that would render pain as “speechless, useless and only true witness” (*Ministry* 140). Ugresic’s narrative then imaginatively struggles to find ways so that the disaster does not “put people off” (*Ministry* 119) under a constant threat that the ruins might become “covered by indifferent grass” (Ugresic, “The ABCs of Exile” 283). In *The Ministry of Pain*, Ugresic successfully writes against the violence of forgetting, but also



against the violence in remembering. As I have discussed, the novel reminds that some stories are always mediated and fragmentary. That is why the work of successful mourning becomes suspended. Tanja's inability to feel pain throughout the novel is a reminder that the question of the Other that *touches* the reader with the demand to be heard can only be addressed through the notions of proximity and distance to an other's pain and will always remain unfinished.<sup>24</sup> Such reading involves ethics as a responsibility to the Other, to all the missing and hurt bodies, and ethics *as an impossibility of writing* embodied losses.

Towards the end of the novel, Tanja and Igor's need for human flesh to put out the pain (136) brings them together. Grief is here expressed by the tenderness of the touch of another. Tanja works as a babysitter, Igor as a builder and interestingly, it is Igor who is trying to perform that task of symbolic *rebuilding* "that by the sweat of his brow he is restoring a certain equilibrium, that for every wall he builds here one will rise out of the ruins there" (249). Tanja is the one who remains haunted by nightmares of a house floating and dangling in the air, (213,4) although she manages to run out of it before it collapses. She is not only a survivor, someone who didn't witness the disaster firsthand as some of her students have, but also a heroine of Ugresic's exilic narrative which is fundamentally a story of survivors and of those who are far from the ruins. Tanja is not a translator who will perform the work of mourning and Ugresic, in refusing to generalise or romanticise the condition of exile, expresses her doubts in the exilic narrative as such. After all, Tanja is not among the ruins, but in the Dutch clearing. She remains a melancholic Trummerfrau, an embodied memory of present and absent bodies, between memory and the person remembering. At the end of the novel, she remains to shape the pain with words, which Ugresic poignantly expresses in the catalogue of Yugo(Slavic) curses. The performative of Tanja's curse releases unhomely potential in that it embodies witnessing and the victim, in order to haunt all those who do not want to *hear*. This ethical demand expressed in Tanja's Balkan litany, can only be

told in a forked tongue, as she posts her “sounds” on a Dutch sandy beach “*to the nameless* like a message in a bottle”<sup>25</sup> - the nameless that continues to haunt beyond the pages.

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### Notes

The epigraph is from Maurice Blanchot, *The writing of the Disaster*. Trans. Ann Smock. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1995, p.33

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<sup>1</sup> Under the title “Croatia's Feminists Rape Croatia!”, a Croatian nationalist weekly, accused five Croatian women writers and journalists (Slavenka Drakulic, Rada Ivekovic, Jelena Lovric, Vesna Kesic, and Dubravka Ugresic) of being “witches” and of “raping” Croatia. Briefly, the article was provoked by a possibility of depriving Croatia of its right to organize the next PEN congress in Dubrovnik, because of the persecution of the above mentioned women. Further details, as well as summaries and English translations of these articles are available at: <http://www.wworld.org/archive/archive.asp?ID=157>

<sup>2</sup> For example, her first exilic novel, *The Museum of Unconditional Surrender*, first appeared in Dutch translation and it was only in 2002 that it became available in the language in which it was originally written, owing to a joint collaboration of a Serbian and Croatian publishing house.

<sup>3</sup> Ana Ristovic, Interview with Dubravka Ugresic, “Biti izvan: Dubravka Ugresic”, *Rec* 60.5 (2000):112, (My translation).

<sup>4</sup> Hereafter cited as *Lies*.

<sup>5</sup> Ugresic, *Thank You For not Reading*, (London: Dalkey Archive Press, 2003), p.135

<sup>6</sup> Ugresic, *The Ministry of Pain*, (London: Saqi Books, 2004), p.180; Hereafter cited as *Ministry*

<sup>7</sup> See also her recent collection of essays *Nikog Nema Doma*, (Beograd: Fabrika knjiga, 2005), p. 20. In English - *Nobody's Home*, trans. Ellen Elias-Bursac, (London: Telegram/Saqi 2007).

<sup>8</sup> Trummerfrauen - the “rubble” women who cleared the ruins during the Second World War in Germany. This metaphor also appears in her previous works “The ABCs of exile”, in *The suitcase: refugee voices from Bosnia and Croatia*, Julie Mertus, et al, (Berkeley : University of California Press, 1997), p.198, and in *The Culture of Lies*, p.250

<sup>9</sup>Sigmund Freud, “The Uncanny” (1919), *The Complete Psychological works of Sigmund Freud, Vol.17 (1917-1919): An infantile neurosis, and other works* (Hogarth Press, 1955), pp.219-253.

<sup>10</sup>Sigmund Freud, “Mourning and Melancholia”, *The Freud Reader*. Ed. Peter Gay. (London:Vintage, 1995), p.589.

<sup>11</sup> Could it be that Balkanist discourse is at stake here or perhaps the workings of strategic essentialism for the sake of a definition – (Serbian) nationalism versus unhomely fictions? In his book *Vampires like us: writing down "the Serbs"* (Belgrade: Belgrade Circle, 2005), Tomislav Longinovic asks how it is possible that a postcolonial critic such as Bhabha has been unaware of the legacy of Slavic unity against empires that has given birth to the Yugoslav idea and reality (pp.59-61). I think that a more recent example of the ‘witch hunt’ would serve timely and effectively as a supplement to Bhabha’s list. It could also be argued that an English translation of Ugresic’s first exilic novel *The Museum of Uncoditional Surrender* was belated and that therefore only a translated author ‘exists’, and even when translated, an East European writer rarely qualifies to be considered in post-colonial literary theory.

<sup>12</sup> See for example the project of The Lexicon of Yugoslav mythology at <http://www.leksikon-yu-mitologije.net/index.php>

<sup>13</sup> Ugresic, *The Culture of Lies*, (London: Phoenix, 1998), pp. 66-96

<sup>14</sup> For a very useful discussion of the history of nostalgia see Svetlana Boym’s book *The Future of Nostalgia* (New York: Basic Books, 2001). pp.3-57

<sup>15</sup> For example, in Paul Gilroy’s recent work, *After empire: melancholia or convivial culture?*, (London: Routledge, 2004), he argues against what he terms as ‘postcolonial melancholia’ that is locked in historical amnesia and advocates the importance of mourning for deconstructing the effects of racism in the British context and working through the legacy of colonialism. See also Judith Butler’s *Precarious Life: the powers of mourning and violence* (London; New York: Verso, 2004) for a discussion of a hierarchy of grief in post 9/11 melancholia and of mourning as a resource for politics. For the discussion of postmodernity and nostalgia see the work of Wendy Wheeler or Zygmunt Bauman.

<sup>16</sup> Radstone, S. qtd. in Wendy Wheeler, “After Grief: What Kind of Inhuman Selves?”, *New Formations*, 25: 1995. p.82

<sup>17</sup> For more on this see the essays in *Loss: The Politics of Mourning*, Eng and Kazanjian eds., (University of California Press, Berkeley, CA, 2003).

<sup>18</sup> Avtar Brah, *Cartographies of Diaspora: Contesting Identities*. (London and New York: Routledge,1996), qtd. in Ahmed, p.341

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<sup>19</sup> On East European writers in post-communism and on marketing of their works in the West see Wachtel's study *Remaining relevant after communism: the role of the writer in Eastern Europe* (Chicago, Ill.; London: University of Chicago Press, 2006).

<sup>20</sup> See Boym's book *The Future of Nostalgia* for an interesting reading of nostalgia in post-communist national cultures as a defence mechanism against the accelerated rhythm of change and the economic shock therapy of the free market.

<sup>21</sup> Petar, Ramadanovic, "Simonides on the Balkans" in *Balkan as metaphor: between globalization and fragmentation*, Eds. Bjelic, Dušan I. and Obrad Savic. Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2003. 351-365.

<sup>22</sup> See especially the work of Women in Black in Belgrade who by wearing black as a traditional sign of mourning protested against the war and Milosevic's regime in a *silent vigil*. More on <http://www.zeneucnom.org/index.php?lang=en>. Women in Black still continue their silent vigils around the world.

<sup>23</sup> Ugresic, *The Culture of Lies*, p.191

<sup>24</sup> Further on this see Sara Ahmed, "The contingency of pain", *parallax*, 2002, vol. 8, no. 1, pp.17-34. For a very insightful discussion of hearing and touch see also her reading of Mahasweta Devi's writing in *Strange Encounters: Embodied Others in Post-coloniality* (London: Routledge, 2000), pp.147-160

<sup>25</sup> *Ministry* 251; my emphasis