Reading Dubravka Ugresic Through Six Selected Sentences

Context N°12

by Matthew Goulish

1. *Life must be useless, like a gift, said Kharms.*

Dubravka Ugresic's first English publication, *In the Jaws of Life and Other Stories,* features "The Kharms Case," in which writer Vavka Usic doggedly solicits the publication of her translations of the underground Russian surrealist Daniil Kharms from editor Petar Petrovic for ten years. The pursuit plays out in Usic's obsessively composed letters, equal parts scholarship, anecdote, dream interpretation, threat, and confession. Five years into the correspondence, reprimanding Petrovic for not returning her manuscript, Usic sends him an exhaustive catalogue of insults culled from Kharms's collected works: "Hideous, sweaty monster! Sniveller! Idiot! Bonehead! Cur! Swine! Loathsome, shameless creature! Insolent fool! Peasant! Dolt! Turd! Filthy beast! Nonentity! Lunatic! Wash your feet!"
Usic manages to hospitalize her would-be editor, then falls in love with him, moves in, and abandons him for a more serious Kharms scholar, a "Swedish Slavist." She never succeeds in publishing her collection."The Kharms Case" strikes an Ugresic key-note: a precise narrative of literary/historical/cultural commentary—outrageous and restrained social realism replete with vertiginous psychic hairpin turns. She links her post-Tito Yugoslavian lineage to the discursive surrealism of the early Soviet Kharms. In the story's background lurks a theme: publishing is for Ugresic what bureaucracy was for Kafka, the omnipresent, invisible hand of fate. Where Kafka's cosmology implied state machinations and law, Ugresic's suggests a closing web of commerce. The alter-ego voice of escape, in this case, becomes the unattainable object of publication. Usic tells her publisher/lover goodbye, quoting Kharms: "'All I care about is what is senseless, what has no practical sense. I care about life in its absurd form. Heroism, pathos, fearlessness, refinement, hygiene, morality, charms and risk—these are words and feelings I despise. On the other hand, I fully understand and respect thrill and rapture,

inspiration and despair, passion and reserve, debauchery and modesty, sadness and misery, joy and laughter.'" She goes on to tell him to handle the practicalities of separation as he sees best, and signs off with, "Life must be useless, like a gift, said Kharms."

2. *And a finger has also taken place.*

Thus concludes the 1993 author's afterword of Ugresic's second work in translation, *Fording the Stream of Consciousness*. She writes in response to an angry critic: "The novel you hold in your hands was originally published in 1988. Since then, many things have changed—even the country in which it was published no longer exists.
"The critic, neglecting to check the novel's completion date, had chastised Ugresic for writing "a satirical novel" when her homeland was immersed in "a bloody war." Nevertheless, Ugresic admits that the narrative's breeziness, as it unwinds its 51 chapters of intrigue, defection, death, and literary conflict at a Zagreb writers' conference, now seems anachronistic: "New walls have sprung up in Europe in just a few years. Trenches have been dug out between us. The telephone lines have been cut; letters are not carried; the roads are blocked."
The finger in question, the index finger on the right hand of the novel's (fictional) poet Prsa, has been paralyzed by an accident involving a microphone during a May Day poetry reading at a light bulb factory. Prsa titles his subsequent novel *The Golden Finger*, in turn inspiring the name of a new frankfurter while at a poetry reading at a sausage factory, thus causing literary critics to confuse the novel with the frankfurter.Ugresic concludes her afterword: "Others have written about it, about the last war, indeed. And the new war has taken place. I wrote about a finger. And a finger has also taken place."
She relates a 1992 (nonfictional) incident in which a poet tried to disrupt a conference and, in attempting to expel him from the hall, a nationalistic critic broke the poet's finger. The wars of Yugoslavia have many battlefields. As these wars intervene on her writing, Ugresic, rather than confronting them directly, zeroes in on her characteristic peripheral minutiae with renewed

diligence. The microfields she interrogates lack the emotional excess of more heroic domains. She fixes her relentless insights on the local. A secondary style emerges, Kharmsian uselessness intensified by context. We could call it *fingerness*.

3. *Because war is radiation.*

Ugresic's third work in translation, *Have a Nice Day*, an essay collection, begins to contemplate America through a Balkan lens. At a 5th Avenue nostalgia shop commemorating Coca-Cola, she produces a hybrid text by fusing ad copy with the 1989 words of an unnamed Serbian poet who warned of impending bloodshed. Pressed between two symbolic systems, she responds by replacing *Coca-Cola* with *knife*: "Have a Knife and a smile. Knife is it. When a Knife is part of your life, you can't beat the feeling. Things go better with a Knife—a Knife adds life."

The short essay enlightens by linguistic double-exposure, revealing the dual blind-spots of cultures that fail to recognize their own symbols. In doing so, implicitly, the writing in this book inaugurates a voice that speaks with the distance and authority of exile. Thus the book inevitably confronts Yugoslavia's disappearance. As if imploded into its own realized metaphors, Yugoslavia paramorphoses into Slovenia, Croatia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Macedonia, and the new Yugoslavia of Serbia and Montenegro. Ugresic concludes the collection by viewing the war, albeit askance, in juxtaposition with the Chernobyl disaster. This produces a chilling assessment of a future of surplus insensibility. Having returned to Zagreb, she observes everything the same, but different: "A new age has come. I'm afraid that in a few years' time we'll all become monsters. Because war is radiation. And we are all contaminated."

Quoting the Bosnian novelist Ivo Andric, winner of the 1961 Nobel Prize, she concludes that all wars borrow against the future, condemning generations to debt both material and psychic. As if from unseen nuclear fallout, survivors produce prodigies—". . . pale monsters with one eye, with three penises, with half a head . . ."—that foretell the new state, the permanent emotional damage

of victory.

4. *The past must be articulated in order to become . . . memory.*

This sentence occurs in the essay “The Confiscation of Memory” from the 1998 collection *The Culture of Lies*, which develops the quotidian fingerness theme into the organized accumulation of collection. The essay lists humble souvenirs under a Croatian (formerly Yugoslavian) bed. These forbidden objects recall the times and places of the recent past, of a multi-ethnic society expressing its ideals most cogently in the family holiday to the Dalmatian coast. The everyday has acquired a residue. By its nature, it now tells the story of children, once summer friends, growing up to find themselves on opposing sides of unforgiving ethnic divides. Ugresic quotes Umberto Eco: “One forgets not by cancellation but by superimposition, not by producing absence but by multiplying presences.” This Proustian notion, which she anchors in historian Frances Yates’s imagery of Simonides and his art of memory, accuses history’s brutal rubble pile as memory’s decimator. She locates memory’s confiscation in the unspoken, self-imposed bans: on the family photo album; on the children’s book; on the hand-painted Adriatic sea-shell memento. The essay aches with fathomless nostalgia, not for those times but rather for their possibilities, retroactive nostalgia formed in the wake of an unimaginable future, nostalgia for the very notion of possibility. Writing repositions itself as the act of articulation, recasting the past as memory by pointing at its uncomfortable detail. Distinctly contrasted with the grandiose histories buttressing all neo-fascism, these minor fragments discomfort the mythologies and power structures of ethnically cleansed master narratives. As a *Starsky & Hutch* rerun might remind Americans of gentler racial times, the mementos of Yugoslavia, hiding in closets, under beds, in the hidden domicile corners overseen by the women of the family, and rendered here in words, transmogrify. They become the unexpected impediment lodged in the cog of the war machine, with writing the conduit of resistance.

5. *In the glass case are all the things found in the stomach of Roland the walrus, who died on 21 August 1961.*

The 1999 novel *The Museum of Unconditional Surrender* opens with this Berlin Zoo display, enumerating the objects ingested by this vacuum-cleaner animal:

. . . a child's plastic water pistol, a plastic knife, sunglasses, a little chain, a spring (small), a rubber ring, a parachute (child's toy), a steel chain about 18 ins in length, four nails (large), a green plastic car, a metal comb, a plastic badge, a small doll, a beer can (Pilsner, half-pint), a box of matches, a baby's shoe. . . .

The reader experiences a momentary semiotic temptation, given the walrus's name's evocation of Roland Barthes, but the stomach contents resist definitive signification, standing instead as an ideal open system: consistent, accidental, useless, giftlike, adhering to elusive logic and circumstance. Walrus becomes writer, positioned in opposition to closed systems, both literary and social. A significant three-essay cluster in *The Culture of Lies* titled "The Palindrome Conspiracy" ruminates on palindromicity, the line that reads the same backward as forward, the versus diabolicus, the devil's line, as a model of totalization. Roland the walrus, on the other hand, heightens the possibilities of the fingerness collection, formulating it into a museum, a public memory display. *The Museum of Unconditional Surrender* emulates the walrus's creative impulse, unspooling its chapters each according to a different open system: language lesson, family photo album, Kinder-egg, bead-string. The novel recalls the early novella *Steffie Speck in the Jaws of Life* which designated chapters according to the labors of dress making—cut, stretch, take in, pleat, smock, knot, perforate—the writing echoing these tasks. But *Unconditional Surrender* achieves an epiphany of literature conditioned and shaped by social interaction and emancipatory in its responses. It formulates itself as a construction, leapfrogging chapters of numbered sections with chapters of snapshots, as much a masterfully sustained formal complexity as a collection of aphoristic micro-narrations. The carefully modulated interwoven rhythms, the unmistakable voice, restrain the experimentality, which remains nonetheless important—foreground: walrus; background: poststructuralism.

As she notes on the first page, Roland's death coincides with the week of the appearance of the Berlin wall. Condemned to the context of our birth, we remain embedded in history. Ugresic, the exiled Yugoslavian, despite her travels (New York, Berlin, Lisbon, Amsterdam, London) cannot escape the proximity of her thought to its birthplace, nor does she try. While dismantling Balkan stereotypes, she nevertheless acknowledges their dangerous persistence: ". . . the question as to whether this novel is autobiographical might at some hypothetical moment be of concern to the police, but not to the reader." Like Roland, she constructs her response to her cage.

6. *Perhaps reading is responsible for everything*.

Ugresic's forthcoming essay collection, *Thank You For Not Reading,* arrives into a world awash in optimism. In a somewhat bleaker but no less compassionate tone, and still tuned to life in its absurd forms, Ugresic surveys the new publishing landscape—the book proposal, the literary agent, the publishing bazaar, the Oprah Book Club, the memoirs of Ivana Trump. She notes that the most successful twenty-first-century writers succeeded first as skiers, millionaires, supermodels, movie stars, or mass murderers. Radovan Karadzic, Balkan genocide veteran, proclaims, "I'm not a monster, I'm a writer." Socialist realism has made a comeback in the underdog-overcoming-the-odds bestseller, inadvertently adhering to the Stalinist credo "Optimism strengthens the organism." In a world where Günther Grass competes with Bill Gates for bookstore shelf space, optimists make the most reliable consumers. Taking this terrorism of the market as her new context, she battles consumerism as she did nationalism, with an arsenal of literary history. Quotations proliferate, resulting in an urgent performance on the page, as if Kharms/Adbusters were now taking on Stalin/globalization. Yet this is less a book of ghosts, and more a turning point. The late Russian poet Joseph Brodsky, the book's patron saint, states, "In a way, I am grateful to Lenin. Whatever there was in plenitude I immediately regarded as some sort of propaganda. . . . Because of its plenitude, the future is propaganda. So is grass." So, now, are car commercials. So, now, is optimism. From the ruins of

twenteith-century utopianism, discredited by dictators, arises a continual present, suspect in its plenitude, unimprovable, supplanting the future with "one market under God" of Niketown and Disney's Manhattan. Money fills the ideological void. While consumerism proves an intractable foe, the book nevertheless reaches an exhilarating conclusion. When all become writers, a time of general silence pervades. The thought police responsible for the title's polite injunction, now in the intangible guise of "market forces," understand the possibility of their own undoing. The listener, not the speaker, holds the keys to power. Reader, in the age of globalization, becomes activist. Selected sentence becomes charged site of resistance. As Ugresic acknowledges that "perhaps reading is responsible for everything" in her life, so she admits its responsibility for everything in general. A broken life can be told only in fragments, said Rilke. Her meticulously observed, collected and arranged fragments, testify to Dubravka Ugresic's life, discontinuous, unflinching. They prompt us to ponder her choices and ours. To pay attention in this marketized world, she demonstrates, constitutes an act of creativity, and an act infused with the unparalleled fearlessness of one who despises fearlessness.

SELECTED WORKS BY DUBRAVKA UGRESIC IN TRANSLATION

The Culture of Lies: Antipolitical Essays. Pennsylvania State University Press, $23.95.

Fording the Stream of Consciousness. Northwestern University Press, $18.00.

Have a Nice Day: From the Balkan War to the American Dream. Out of Print.

In the Jaws of Life and Other Stories. Out of Print.

The Museum of Unconditional Surrender. New Directions, $14.95.