

Aboard 'the Balkan Express'

MEREDITH TAX

THE MUSEUM OF UNCONDITIONAL SURRENDER. By Dubravka Ugresic.

Translated by Celia Hawkesworth. New Directions. 256 pp. \$24.95.

THE CULTURE OF LIES. By Dubravka Ugresic. Translated by Celia Hawkesworth.

Pennsylvania State. 273 pp. \$45. Paper \$18.95.

Remember the old folktale about Tam Lin, who was taken off by fairies and spent an enchanted night underground, only to find, when he returned to his village, that he had been away for many years and all he loved were dead? He could not go back to the world he knew, for it no longer existed;

nor could he live on normally in a place that had become so alien. A writer from the former Yugoslavia must sometimes feel like Tam Lin. Forbidden, long-submerged forces coming to the surface have transformed everyday reality, but, rather than sweeping away the writer, they've taken her country: It has become unrecognizable, and the inhabitants have lost their memories. Only the writer, who witnessed the transformation without participating in it, can tell what happened. But no one will listen. Pre-eminent among such writers is Dubravka Ugresic, formerly of Zagreb, whose two new books are guides to epistemological disorientation:

Was it really like that before? And who is speaking? Who am I? No one. I come from Atlantis. Atlantis does not exist. Therefore, I do not exist. If I do not exist, then how can what I am saying be taken as true? The truth has shattered into pieces like a mirror, from which every piece reflects its own truth. At this moment the peoples of the former Yugoslavia are zealously assuring themselves and others that everything before was a lie. Nothing like that ever existed, they say. Because if it had really existed, how could what happened afterward have happened?

Although not published here until 1998, most of the essays in *The Culture of Lies* were written for European journals between 1991 and 1994, during the breakup of Yugoslavia. This is the writing that cost Ugresic her university job and got her a ticket on "the Balkan Express," the metaphorical train that runs only one way. *The Museum of Unconditional Surrender*, a novel just published here but available in

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Europe last year, looks at the same experiences through an inner lens, both refractive and reflective. You could call these two books the left brain and right brain versions of what happened in the former Yugoslavia. But if you're looking for bloodshed and horror stories, look elsewhere. These books are about culture and the responsibility and plight of intellectuals. Ugresic takes the old-fashioned view—not current here since the Vietnam War—that the obligation of the writer is to tell her society the truths it least wants to hear. She looks at the part writers play in preparing and legitimizing bloodshed and, while giving Serbia its full due, pays most attention to her own country, Croatia. One essay enters the mind of the "ordinary" Croatian writer, who never took any particular interest in politics and now is called upon to accommodate to fascism:

The majority have adapted. They have accepted quite naturally the codes of behavior of a changed communicative situation and newly established reality, they have preserved quite naturally the old mechanisms of their guild life.... From the outside they appear to be innocently and contentedly submerged in the warm, sweet, smoke-filled collectivity. It is as though they have no inkling that what is in store for them is the destiny they have already lived through, as though a benevolent amnesia had wiped out their whole memory. Our writer sees his colleagues arguing with a zeal that sometimes surprises themselves over what needs to be done, arguing over whether the greatest classic of Croatian literature should be published in full, or whether his political essays should be omitted, particularly the ones dealing with Yugoslavism (is it the right moment?), or should such a writer be published at all. Our writer watches his colleagues discussing with a zeal that some-

times surprises themselves whether a colleague (who has in any case been getting up their collective nose for some time) should be destroyed, forgetting that they used to be guided by one set of principles and now they subscribe to another, and that, in fact, this is what used to be done to them.

The Culture of Lies is a book about this transformation in consciousness, from Yugoslav writer to Croatian patriot, from intellectual to policeman. It deals with other topics, too: popular culture, the media, the difference between socialist and nationalist kitsch, the "Yugo-male's" views on forced pregnancy (which depend on what ethnic group is doing the forcing). The author also discusses the way journalists and politicians (both home-grown and foreign) dealt with the war, wondering, Why do the English and American media prefer to hear our reality described by themselves rather than by us?

European (and American) journalists, intellectuals, artists, analysts, thinkers, experts on countries in transition, acquired with the war in Yugoslavia an opportunity once again to show off their colonial love, the love felt for a victim. They did not enter into a dialogue with the victim...they confiscated its tongue...they became its interpreters.... Dozens of West European (and American) writers, artists, film directors, photographers are today camping in the field of the Bosnian misfortune. They listen attentively to what the victims say and make notes so that they can later call the world to account, prick its indifferent heart, ennoble themselves through another's misfortune, give Western emotional standards a little shake. And who dares accuse the sated West of indifference? On the contrary, it is precisely feelings that have invaded the Western market.

Her tone is reminiscent of a slightly more benign Jonathan Swift:

It has taken just five years (and all possible repressive measures!) to create the first precondition for the final idiotisation of the nation. That first precondition is collective amnesia. And truly, the citizens of the new states, including Croatia, have forgotten both their own personal history and history in general. They have burned their party membership cards, thrown their own aunt from Smederovo (a town in Serbia) on the rubbish heap—some have done this with their Serbian husbands, wives and other relatives—

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they have forgotten that they were even in the partisans (that is, today it is better to have had a father who was an Ustasha, a Second World War one), they have forgotten all they said, did and wrote before, they have forgotten all they ever learned, they have forgotten their former life. And the only thing they can do now is to be born again, this time in the new Croatian state. This means that the citizens of Croatia are now just five years old.

The Culture of Lies is an indispensable book for those who wish to understand the former Yugoslavia and other post-Communist states, but it has much to say to those who care about the role of the independent intellectual anywhere. Like Ugresic, I know people who have accommodated to changing times, who suffer from political amnesia, who have forgotten they ever marched down the street chanting "Five six seven eight, organize to smash the state." I am not talking about the flagrant turncoats, whose rewards are all too apparent, but about ordinary people who, perhaps worn out, perhaps thinking of possible consequences, no longer do what they once would have thought was necessary. Ugresic is willing to accept the consequences of her beliefs and, lest her ironies leave anyone in doubt about where she stands, spells out her politics in a glossary at the end of *The Culture of Lies*, defining nationalism as "the ideology of the stupid" and "often only a nicer name for fascism."

The theme of memory grows increasingly prominent in the later essays of *Culture*—memory and nostalgia, including all the ambiguities of "Yugo-nostalgia," a term of abuse in Croatia today. In a time of "the confiscation of memory," even a simple personal image, like a picture on a milk carton, is dangerous, for it awakens thoughts of the old days: "Nostalgia is not subject to control, it is a subversive activity of our brain.... Nostalgia knows no hierarchy of values, the 'material' it deals with is not divided into good and bad, acceptable and unacceptable, clever and stupid, on the contrary some 'silliness' is often its favorite choice."

Nostalgia and exile are also central themes of *The Museum of Unconditional Surrender*, a postmodern edifice of stories, quotations, totemic objects, conversations, evocations and narrations, continually evoking loss, mirroring the back-and-forth movement of consciousness, a novel whose seemingly inevitable descent into self-pity and idealization of the past is continually disrupted by lists, puns,

repetitions, apparitions, interruptions by literary and artistic mentors, and self-satire. Works by contemporary artists who use "found" materials—Ilya Kabakov, Richard Wentworth—are called upon, as is a plaque in the Berlin zoo remarking on the contents of the stomach of Roland the Walrus, d. 1961:

a pink cigarette lighter, four ice-lolly sticks (wooden), a metal brooch in the form of a poodle, a beer-bottle opener, a woman's bracelet (probably silver), a hair grip, a wooden pencil, 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, a compass, a small car key, four coins, a knife with a wooden handle, a baby's dummy, a bunch of keys (5), a padlock, a little plastic bag containing needles and thread.

Like the contents of Roland the Walrus's stomach, *The Museum of Unconditional Surrender* is a collection of discrete artifacts, whose meaning and relation to one another must be interpreted. Some recurrent objects, invested with progressive layers of meaning, function as leitmotifs for complexes of thoughts and feelings: an old photograph of three elderly women with bare breasts bathing in the river, a glass snowball with an angel inside, a feather. Photographs and photograph albums appear frequently: Family pictures are altered to suppress past political affiliations; photos are rescued from bombed buildings in Dubrovnik; snapshots taken to memorialize a final meeting of friends come out blank. The detritus of recollection and the costs of keeping faith are laid out in simple words, so beautifully translated by Celia Hawkesworth that one forgets they were not written in English:

In 1991, after the definitive collapse of the idea which had been for my father a realizable truth, after the disintegration of the country which had been kept together by that same idea, Mother gathered my father's old medals...into a heap, put them into a plastic bag—as though they were human remains—saying sadly: "I don't know what to do with these." "Why don't you leave them where they were..." "What if someone finds them?"... But nevertheless, that same year when the names of the streets changed, when the language and

the country and the flags and the symbols all changed; when the wrong side became right, and the right side was suddenly wrong...when terrible heatwaves laid the land bare; when a lie became the law and the law a lie; when people pronounced nothing but monosyllabic words: blood, war, gun, fear; when the little Balkan countries shook Europe maintaining rightly that they were its legitimate children...my mother, despite everything, kept tenaciously to her dogged ritual visits to my father's grave. I believe that it was then that she looked for the first time at the moist gravestone and suddenly noticed the five-pointed star...and perhaps for the first time she had the thought, feeble and exhausted as she was, that it might be possible to paint out the five-pointed star carved into the stone, and then she thrust the thought aside in shame and kept the photograph of my father in his partisan uniform in the album—as her own. It was as though it was then, suddenly confronted with the little star above my father's name, that she really accepted her own biography as well.

When she got home, she sat down in her baking flat as in a train; she sat there with no defender or flag, with no home-

land, virtually nameless, with no passport or identity card of her own...not traveling anywhere, because she had nowhere to go, holding on her lap her only possession, her albums, the humble dossier of her life.

The photograph album itself is invoked as a formal precedent, humble, miscellaneous, amateurish and for that reason able at certain moments to communicate personal meanings to which art aspires in vain:

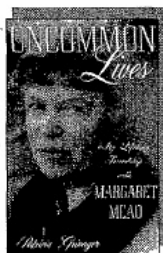
the very act of arranging pictures in an album is dictated by our unconscious desire to show life in all its variety, and as a consequence life is reduced to a series of dead fragments. Autobiography has similar problems in the technology of remembering; it is concerned with what once was, and the trouble is that what was once is being recorded by someone who is now. There is only one thing that both genres can count on (but they never do count on anything because calculation is not in their nature) and that is the blind chance that they will hit upon the point of pain.

While *The Museum of Unconditional Surrender* also aims at this "point of pain," it is not a painful book to read. It is struc-

tured like music, with recurring motifs: the glass ball, the photo of the three old women, the feather, the presiding spirits of Joseph Brodsky and Viktor Shklovsky. There are vignettes of odd types encountered in the narrator's travels, a love story involving a young man picked up in Portugal, a supernatural story of six friends from university days who are visited by an angel. At the heart of the novel lies a beautiful, delicate, extended rendition of the narrator's childhood and her mother, contrapuntal variations on the themes of memory, nostalgia, betrayal and self-betrayal, the photograph album and the camera.

Parts of Ugresic's narration veer perilously close to sentimentality, but whenever she gets near the edge, she pulls up with a start, showing she knows exactly what she is doing by, for instance, reminding the reader of the "free essays" she was taught to write in school, where an elegiac tone and the sound of autumn rain were prerequisites to getting an A: "In these essays, like tedious toothache, the same contemplative nostalgic tone rang persistently, generated by the precocious meditation on the leaves falling from a nearby tree and profound anxiety over the so-called transience of life." Then, abruptly, we are in her mother's mind and her mother's journal,

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which, like one of Ilya Kabakov's installations, is a way of memorializing and making art from the details of ordinary household life. Then we are in the mind of the narrator, trying to deal with her mother's demands, torn between anxiety and irritation. We slide back and forth between the two: the mother's memories of the fifties (pregnancy, hunger, bedbugs), the daughter's more idealized version of the same years, all becoming unstable as the mother's world contracts and the daughter feels increasingly responsible, increasingly annoyed. Then the mother becomes reclusive, her tastes grow tacky, she buys junky Italian washing powder, hoping to get a free camera in the box; and the daughter's voice flutes into a frenzy of irony, grasping for distance, unable to face the terrible humility of her mother's demands:

That detail hurt me like a sharp needle. Her naïveté (she expected to find a little camera in every packet of Italian soap-powder!), the innocence of her wish, that childish iron persistence to come by the desired object opened up a little gap, cast her in a new light. Perhaps that was all she wanted.... A little trifle that would make her life more bearable. A silk handkerchief from a hat, a dove, a magic wand, moving pictures. A snow-storm in a glass ball. An apple rose. Nothing more. Heavens, was that such a lot? Heavens, was that all?

Had there been no war in the former Yugoslavia, Dubravka Ugresic might still be writing comic novels like *Fording the Stream of Consciousness*, her sendup of the cold war espionage novel, set at a writers' conference, and *In the Jaws of Life*, her postmodern parody of a romantic novel, in which the search for true love turns up so many ridiculous imitations that when the happy ending comes, one cannot believe in it for a minute. These are delightful books, but times have changed, and there can be no growth without pain. *The Culture of Lies* and *The Museum of Unconditional Surrender* are major works of literature by a writer at the top of her powers, one who should be honored for the difficulty of the task she embraces, the complexity of her thought and the simplicity of her tone. As a citizen, Ugresic had little chance against the forces of contemporary fascism. But as a writer she has won, by holding on to her personal history and the history of the place where she was born, the very name of which is now taboo. She has earned the pride and defiance in the last definition in her glossary in *The Culture of Lies*:

Witches. A milieu which destroys books has no mercy towards their authors either. Several years ago, my (national) cultural milieu declared me a "witch" and burned me on a media pyre with undisguised glee.... As a "witch," I

was thrown out of local literary life. Today, from the perspective of my nomadic exile, I can only be grateful to my former cultural milieu. I invested my own money in the purchase of my broom. I fly alone. ■

There You Go Again...

ROBERT SCHEER

DUTCH. By Edmund Morris. Random House. 874 pp. \$35.

Our correspondent, longtime Los Angeles Times reporter and columnist Robert Scheer, has spent several hours over the years questioning President Reagan on a variety of subjects and in a variety of venues, yielding, among other things, hours of videotape and newspaper interviews. His anecdotes are thus verifiably factual, whereas many of biographer Edmund Morris's are of course rather notoriously fictional. But aside from this deviation from Morris's technique, Scheer has attempted to remain faithful to the biographer's style.

—The Editors

It was the spring of 1980, and the sun disappearing into the cold gray Iowa landscape as we circled for a landing could have been taken as a signal of departing optimism echoing the omnipresent doom that at that moment defined the Ronald Reagan for President campaign. A gloom that would not for long sit well with a man who had forsaken Dixon for Hollywood. A gloom that this man Dutch would himself forsake, as was his style, upon disembarking to greet an awaiting audience, pompadour and smile frozen tightly in time for his entry onstage—scripted, confident, ever alive onstage, only alive onstage, but let's not suggest that this is the whole story or there would be no reason to read on. There is a man beyond the actor, and I will find him, or there is no justification whatsoever for this enormous waste of an opportunity. (Dutch is that man, this is his story, and we continue quite marvelously without the faintest sense of obligation to indicate where we are headed, because the restraints of traditional biography would obscure that which is most interesting about Dutch and his world: his officially authorized biographer, or AB as we shall from time to time refer to him.)

—Notes of AB scribbled hastily eight years later in bathroom of Air Force One as it was preparing for a landing

Back to 1980. Bush up in polls, Reagan judged too old, headlines couldn't be worse, NR is bowling apples down

Robert Scheer, former national correspondent and now columnist for the Los Angeles Times, first interviewed Ronald Reagan in 1966.

the aisle of the campaign plane, [Mike] Deaver and [Stu] Spencer and [Ed] Meese are permanently stuck in a goopy huddle, and the comely blond volunteer smiles at AB. AB will not actually be present for another ten years, but even in his fictional incarnation he is clearly more interesting, sexually and in every other which way, even to her uncultivated mind, than that boy/man called Dutch. Although no one ever refers to him as Dutch, preferring Old Ron or Governor or later Mr. President, except AB, for whom the common moniker of Dutch clearly connotes the status of a subject unworthy of AB's attentions. What a relief, if AB would only forget all about Reagan and play exclusively with himself as the book's subject, which is all that really seems to interest him.

—Notes of RS on Post-it note stuck in Dutch while force-reading for overdue Nation review

Still the despair saturated the very air of that campaign plane circling the Iowa airport and was so compelling in its ability to detract from the larger purpose at hand that the candidate's handlers, even so dreadfully early in the primary season, had surrendered the prime seat next to their man on the plane, shiny cheek to scraggly jowl as it