



DUBRAVKA UGREŠIĆ'S *FOX*

July 10, 2018

by Andrea Scrima

If the spirit of the fox enters a person, then that person's tribe is accursed.

1.

In his 1953 essay “The Hedgehog and the Fox,” which postulates two quintessential moral dispositions at the heart of history’s main opposing ideologies, Isaiah Berlin divides the world’s influential writers into two categories of thought. Elaborating on Berlin’s dichotomy in her latest book *Fox*, which came out this spring in English translation, Dubravka Ugrešić distinguishes between “those who write, engage, and think with recourse to a single idea (hedgehogs), and those who merge manifold heterogeneous experiences and ideas (foxes).” Clearly, the fox sounds more enticing; Berlin equates the hedgehog with authoritarianism and totalitarianism, while the fox is deemed liberal and tolerant. The only problem is the questionable reputation it’s earned among the world’s oldest mythologies, fairytales, and legends: whatever it might have going for it in the way of “pluralistic moral values,” the fox has long been accused of “cunning, betrayal, wile, sycophancy, deceit, mendacity, hypocrisy, duplicity, selfishness,

sneakiness, arrogance, avarice, corruption, carnality, vindictiveness, and reclusiveness.” That’s quite an indictment—and all the more reason for Ugrešić to select the wily animal as patron saint of her new book.

Fox is subtle, virtuosic, and jarring; it’s also mordantly funny. In light-footed, deceptively playful detours and digressions, the book skips from Stalinist Russia to an American road trip with the Nabokovs, academic conferences and literary festivals to the largely untold story of the Far-East diaspora of persecuted Russian intellectuals on the eve of World War II. *Fox* is a novel, but its formal structure poses a challenge; some chapters read as essays, some as autonomous short stories, and while many recurrent threads reveal themselves upon closer inspection and reflection, unraveling the author’s narrative strategy takes time and attention.

Part One, “A Story about How Stories Come to Be Written,” contains many of the novel’s essential themes and can be described as a matryoshka game of nesting stories and digressions; it is also a study on the inherent cruelty of the writing practice. Ugrešić tells the story of Boris Pilnyak, who tells the story of how a Japanese officer named Tagaki marries the infatuated young Russian Sophia, summons her to a village outside Osaka, and proceeds to mine their seemingly happy marriage for material to produce a novel. Filled with intimate details and vivid descriptions of Sophia succumbing to her husband’s passions, the book quickly becomes a literary sensation. Long after Sophia has applied for repatriation to the Soviet Union, Pilnyak visits a temple dedicated to the fox located high on a mountaintop in Japan and is inspired to draw on Sophia’s autobiographical account to retell the story of a “rather silly” woman whose youth is insignificant—up until the moment the writer Tagaki seduces her to write his “splendid novel.” As Pilnyak ponders how stories come to be written and reflects on the symbol of “cunning and treachery,” he concludes, in admiration, that the fox is “the writer’s totem,” the consummate trickster.

But let’s have another look at the story. Its pattern is simple; it follows the form of a fairytale. “She shudders, enthralled by the mysterious Him. He will put a spell on her, subjugate her, humiliate her, and betray her, and in the end She will arise as a heroine worthy of respect and self-respect.” If these are the rules of the game, the odds are not exactly stacked in Her favor. The heroine’s role has evidently been devised by someone else, and for someone else’s gain. But while the women among us would drily observe that it’s clearly preferable to be the author of one’s own narrative, Pilnyak claims that everything Sophia has written about her life before meeting Tagaki is a “bore.” Beware, Boris: the fox is not only clever; she’s

unpredictable. Reversing the asymmetry in agency and power—who, for instance, is free to tell whose story—, the tables are turned and Dubravka Ugrešić, asking once again how stories come to be written, recounts Pilnyak’s less than glorious end: arrested at home and led away by a “painfully courteous” man in white, he was betrayed by the very consular staff member who introduced him to Sophia’s story in the first place. It’s like a Russian fable: Pilnyak the Fox—the shyster operating on a slippery moral scale—meets his demise at the hands of a hedgehog in Stalinist Russia: an authoritarian bureaucrat pledged to a monomaniacal ideology.

2.

Fox is, among other things, a fairytale about the ethics of writing. Threading throughout the book, however, is an equally compelling feminist subtext. While the word “fox” is masculine-gendered in most Western languages, it is not only feminine in China, Japan, and Korea, but is the mythological symbol of a female Eros. Considering the moral characteristics generally attributed to the fox, the obvious deduction is that female desire is treacherous and duplicitous. Thus, the essential question *Fox* repeatedly leads us back to—who is permitted to write, and who must submit to being written about—presupposes another, equally urgent question: whose desires are deemed socially and morally acceptable and worthy of being fulfilled, and whose are deemed dangerous?

Ugrešić’s approach to writing the book is itself foxlike; stories are woven together in a logic that’s not always apparent at first glance. Her method is suggestion and allusion; she circles around her themes, picking up fragments along the way that reverberate in unsettling ways. There is no one overarching truth, but a kaleidoscope of observations that merge into one another seamlessly, surreptitiously, giving rise to subtexts that percolate just beneath the text’s surface. It’s not merely a narrative form that Ugrešić is invested in here, however; it’s precisely this strategy of deflection that makes her circular mode of inquiry so effective.

This is why it comes as such a surprise, and why it feels all the more ironic, when Ugrešić seems to say that she’s not really privy to the cunning of the fox. Committed to literature despite its ever-diminishing readership, she presents herself as a hedgehog: haplessly adhering to a life purpose and to long-held

intellectual ideals—among them a concept of literary citizenship that encompasses translation, editing, literary history, criticism, and theory—while everyone else is busy devising strategies for adaptation and survival. When a literary festival invites a motley assembly of expatriate authors to lecture on European migration and émigré life, the gathering soon comes to resemble a circus in which participants are required to perform their signature tricks. The event confronts the narrator with the sobering truth of her profession and her own position within it; her “disquisition on [...] the inclusivity and exclusivity of cultural environments (only great cultures are inclusive, which is what makes them great; only small cultures are exclusive, which is what keeps them small) [...] left the audience cold.” Regardless of how hard-won her insights and observations might have been, or the amount of lifeblood and sweat spent in arriving at them—indeed, regardless of the singular, urgent pertinence they might have held for the event at hand, had anyone bothered to listen—, they pale in comparison to the personal anecdotes and overwhelming popularity of the celebrated widow of a famous literary exile.

The widow, it turns out, is no fool. She is elderly, but elegant and upright; she befriends the narrator, taking a tender, almost maternal interest in her. And she knows a great deal about the marketplace of preconceived notions and her own place among them: in terms of succeeding or failing in the writing profession; of manufacturing myths to secure one’s place in posterity; of what’s deemed greatness, and why. She is not a writer; instead, she has devoted her life to the legacy of her husband, the Russian author of a refugee novel titled *The Peninsula Hotel*. “Into the foundation of every male national literature (there are only male national literatures) are built the time, energy, and imagination of nameless female readers,” she states unceremoniously. “Men value me. Why? Because I know ‘my place.’ Obediently I served and facilitated the literary talent of a man, I served the mind of a man, I am, therefore, a dream-woman for many men. I am also their dream-widow.”

The narrator is fascinated by the widow’s candidness; the older woman’s words—astute, reflective, in the serious business of exposing and dismantling illusion—exert a hypnotic effect on her. When the widow’s observations turn to her new acquaintance, however, the narrator grows increasingly uncomfortable:

“You’re besotted with your own voice and you neglect to keep an eye on the things around you. You think the beauty of your voice suffices, everybody will hear it, and it’s your job to sing. Yet as you yourself know, things don’t work that way. And

meanwhile you're no fox, the fox is most definitely not your totem."

"What does that mean, being a fox?"

"Celebration of betrayal."

"How can I be something I'm not?"

The widow issues the narrator a warning to "come clean" with herself about a few basic truths; what ensues can be called the fox's soliloquy, an admonishment to essentially wake up and smell the coffee. Get smart, says the fox. Take a look around you. Watch your back, because no one else will—and stop worrying about setting the record straight, because there's no justice in a world in which stupidity, malice, and envy are paramount. But the narrator is offended at the uninvited intimacy; the widow has seen through her, her pride is at stake, and her tone sharpens. She counters the widow's observations with sarcasm, yet they stick to her like barbs; her wounded vanity can only absorb them in retrospect, when she is reminded of her own acts of mean-spiritedness toward people who deserved her generosity.

And yet. In Greek mythology, the siren Parthenope flings herself into the Gulf of Naples when her attempts at seducing Odysseus with her divine song fail. Female creativity that strives for recognition on the part of its male peers has slim prospects for survival, Ugrešić seems to be saying. And then she cites another myth in which the muses win a musical competition against the sirens and, as punishment, pluck the sirens' feathers to make themselves victory wreaths as the sirens plunge to their deaths in the sea. If the sirens are understood as the expression of female creativity, and the muses as female servitude to male genius, then this is a tale of feminine rivalry in which female genius is made to pay the ultimate price for daring to assert itself against female obedience.

3.

Fox is a book of meandering paths; it conceals its irony in dark, unsparing observations that digress into territories where the boundaries between essay and fiction become blurred. Apart from Ugrešić's signature concerns—the dangers of

nationalism, the exile's plight, the sorry state of contemporary literature as just another commodity on the cultural marketplace—*Fox* brims with footnotes, with the curious phenomenon by which certain persons and works become inscribed into history as seemingly insignificant, but all the more enduring asides. In a reversal of the famous Bulgakov quote from *The Master and Margarita*, “manuscripts don't burn,” Ugrešić writes that “the only thing that cannot burn is the absence of a manuscript. And if we were to bet on eternity, perhaps it is precisely this absence of substance that would have the greater chance for victory than its presence.”

Ugrešić has described herself as a “literary smuggler.” Committed to literatures from Central and Eastern Europe largely (and regrettably) unknown in the West, she reacquaints us with a history we are growing less and less familiar with. Her essay-like chapter on the brief life of Soviet avant-garde literature in the years just prior to Stalin's purges—“one of the greatest moments when art flourished, yet one of the most savage scourges of artistic minds in world cultural history”—describes a time when words were born from “vortices in the history of culture,” when they were dangerous and carried weight, casting contemporary literature's relative powerlessness into stark relief. Konstantin Vaginov, Leonid Dobychin, Daniil Kharms, Alexander Vvedensky, and Velemir Khlebnikov were all dead by the age of forty or shortly thereafter because of statements and works that either landed them in prison, had them summarily executed, or provoked circumstances that led to suicide. “If I get a mobilization request, I would punch a commander in the face, they can shoot me but I will not wear the uniform and will not become a soviet soldier,” wrote Kharms before dying of starvation in a psychiatric ward. Anglophone readers are probably more familiar with the playwright Vladimir Mayakovksy, co-signer of the Futurist manifesto *A Slap in the Face of Public Taste* and author of the famous satirical plays *Mystery-Bouffe*, *The Bedbug*, and *The Bathhouse*, whose 1930 funeral was attended by 150,000 people, than with the rest of the Russian Futurists and members of the OBERIU group. Yet Ugrešić chooses to tell us a tale about the obscure Doivber Levin, “one of the briefest of footnotes in Russian avant-garde literature.” She details the meager catalogue of historical records his name appears in; she assesses the evidence of his literary production, none of which, it seems, has survived. Levin has secured himself a place in history by virtue not of what he has written, but by the utter absence of any tangible accomplishment. But when Ugrešić cites the dubious claims of his biographer, the fictional Ira or Irina Ferris (a “memorable name especially because it sounded so much like a well-designed pseudonym”) who presents several, evidently falsified, documents and postulates that Levin faked his death and escaped to Birobidzhan and subsequently to Shanghai; when she conjectures that

he most likely did not, as reported, die heroically defending Leningrad, but survived elsewhere under an alternate identity, the reader wonders if maybe, just maybe, Levin—a native speaker of Yiddish born in the early years of the twentieth century to an Orthodox Jewish family, who quite possibly fled to Shanghai and then, on the heels of the Japanese military defeat, to Hong Kong, where, like countless others, he remained stranded at the Peninsula Hotel (of course!), hoping to emigrate—is, in an unlikely coincidence, the very same Levin the celebrated widow was married to. Considering Levin’s imaginary biographer’s love for the foxes that she claims visit her, unbeckoned, in her south London home, the fox becomes not only the writer’s totem, but a recurrent omen alerting the narrator to an imminent twist in fate. When she asks herself why the story has stuck with her for so many years, Ugrešić concludes:

My empathy for Doivber Levin was not, it seems, merely empathy out of principle for a man-footnote. It turns out that it was anticipation of what I was yet to experience, though I would have sworn (at the time) that such a thing could never happen to me. [...] And I, too—having earlier inscribed on my inner map a random trajectory—found myself living abroad, becoming a person with two biographies, or two people with one biography, or three people with three biographies and three languages. [...] In Levin’s case what remains is not a text but the absence of a text, a hole, a yawn, a pale sketch that spurs the imagination. [...] The text’s absence glows with a magical light, it pulses, it is every bit as authentic and alive.

4.

In “The Devil’s Garden,” the most story-like, and saddest, chapter of *Fox*, Ugrešić’s fairytale totem makes an appearance as an elusive but curious animal that might possibly, finally, bring her luck. Relating how the experience of marginalization in and eventual exile from post-war Croatia eventually caught up with her, Ugrešić describes a period of “cracking,” an “internal erosion, [...] crumbling, [...] sliding” marked by an overwhelming sense of futility. “Our deepest desires pounce on us from unexpected places, snatch us by the throat, and steal our breath.” She concludes that she needs to overcome the anxieties and

traumas of the exile and create some kind of home for herself: “the urge for home is powerful, it has the force of primal instinct [...] the mind-set of the short-term—nourished and entrenched over time into a pigheaded moral principle—was more dangerous than I’d thought; it could turn against me if I didn’t toss it a morsel and staunch its hunger, if, in other words, I didn’t make a home from which, one day, if I so desired, I could catapult out again.” When she is unexpectedly bequeathed a house by someone she barely knew, despite all her misgivings, she returns to Croatia and for a brief time, against her better judgment, allows herself to believe in reconciliation with her past; in happiness and love. But just as the fox seems about to be tamed, just as it draws closer to the narrator’s life—literally brushes up against her leg in a playful tease—its trickster nature turns out to be all the more devastating. In more ways than one, the house and her native country turn out to be mined territory; the only way to survive is to pack one’s things for good, take one’s leave, and never look back.

Fox takes the principle of intertextuality and applies it to war and exile; the publishing industry and the future of writing in the information age; and the convoluted paths by which cultural and literary production are preserved. Navigating the webs of illusion history weaves, and creating new fictional strategies to lure the unsuspecting reader, Ugrešić teaches us that it’s not the obdurate principles of the hedgehog, but the wiles of the fox that are required to survive. “The world is a minefield and that’s the only home there is”: We are Scheherazade, we live with a sword above our heads, and we spin our stories as best we can as the red-haired fox “bound[s] around the garden like a coiled spring.” And we are also the fox:

[...] forever a stowaway, a migrant moving with ease through worlds, and when it’s caught without a ticket, then it spins balls on its tail, performs its cheap tricks. The flash of admiration it receives—ah the myopic susceptibility of the fox—is its substitute for love. These are its glory days. All else is a history of fear, flight from the hunter’s bullets, the constant baying of the hounds; a history of persecution, beatings, licking of wounds, humiliation, loneliness, and cheap consolation [...].”

Andrea Scrima is an artist and writer based in Berlin. She writes literary criticism for *The Quarterly Conversation*, *The Brooklyn Rail*, *Schreibheft*, and other publications. Her novel *A Lesser Day* was published in a 2018 second edition by Spuyten Duyvil Press to coincide with the German edition, *Wie viele Tage* (Literaturverlag Droschl). You can visit her website at www.andreascrima.com.

[MAILING LIST](#)
[CONTACT US](#)