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An exile's memories of home

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- The Culture of Lies

The Museum of Unconditional Surrender by Dubravka Ugresic (translated by Celia Hawkesworth)

THESE TWO books about the dismemberment of Yugoslavia contain some of the most profound reflections on culture, memory and madness you will ever read. They also contain some overblown academic writing: Dubravka Ugresic taught at the Institute for the Theory of Literature at the University of Zagreb for nearly 20 years. For both reasons, good and bad, they are not always easy to read. But the difficulties are hugely worthwhile.

The earlier of the two, *The Culture of Lies*, is a collection of essays. Before the recent wars, Ugresic remembers, Yugoslavs aimed, at least, at unity and brotherhood, and were relatively free. But no one else remembers this now. Now everyone recalls that Yugoslavia was "communist", and "a prison of the nations", and there was a strong underground - to which they all belonged.

Everything that was bad for 50 years - nationalism, the right - is now good, and everything that was good for 50 years - anti-fascism, the left - is now bad. Streets and squares change their names overnight, people denounce each other, an editor becomes a policeman and a policeman an editor. And now no one is allowed to dissent; but no one wants to. When everything has changed so fast that no one knows what the truth is anymore - that is just when one truth is needed.

Nothing is easier to manipulate than trauma. So if you want to manipulate people, traumatise them first. Start a war, or tell them they have been in one for a thousand years. That is what the Serb leaders did, and then the Croats, abetted by other seekers of power - headed, in Ugresic's list, by the media and men. And it worked. Among 4.5 million Croats only 10 "public enemies" were identified: including Ugresic herself, who published one of the best of these essays abroad in 1992, and very quickly had to follow.

The Museum of Unconditional Surrender is a novel. Whether it is autobiographical, says a note, may be of interest "to the police, but not to the reader". I am not sure how Ugresic could get into more trouble than she already is; but let us take no chances. The book follows the narrator into exile in Berlin; into the loss of history and biography, and the attempt of art to reconnect them.

"Rilke once said that the story of a shattered life can only be told in bits and pieces," the narrator says. That is how she tells hers, in short, often numbered paragraphs, which juxtapose her memories to her mother's, her experiences to those of other exiles. She also tells it in quotations from other writers, and in descriptions of the work of other artist-exiles, all collagists like herself, trying to reassemble the fragments of their lost cultures; and in recurring images and symbols, like that of Roland the walrus, who died a week after the Wall went up, and whose stomach was just such a collage of lost objects.

The Museum of Unconditional Surrender is itself a symbol: a Russian monument to the defeat of Nazism, another chapter of history which has now been superseded by Russia's own defeat (the museum itself, the narrator records, was closed in 1994). Berlin, she tells us, is a city of museums. It is itself a museum, its three artificial hills containing 100 million tons of rubble from previous Berlins. In the same way, the exiles are museums of themselves, the only keepers of their country's

memories. But even in them the past is becoming confused and covered over by the processes of remembering ("What memory has in common with art is the knack for selection" - Joseph Brodsky) and going on living ("One forgets not by cancellation but by superimposition" - Umberto Eco).

All these post-modern doubts and despairs about memory are true, and important. But it is also important not to take them too far. Some memories, some books, are truer than others; and these two are. At the end of *The Museum of Unconditional Surrender*, Dubravka Ugresic cannot help wishing that, like her friends back home, she had been allowed to forget, and not been given the ambiguous gift of "tattered remembrance". But thank heaven - thank her - that she has.