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Demystifying Nationalism: Dubravka Ugresic and the Situation of the Writer in (Ex-)Yugoslavia, Postmodern Culture v.5 n.3 (May, 1995)

I envy the 'Western writer.' I envision my colleague the Western writer as an elegant passenger who travels either without luggage or with luggage that is elegantly invisible. I envision myself as a passenger with a great deal of luggage all pasted with labels, as a passenger who is desperately trying to rid himself of this burden which sticks to him as if it were his very fate.

Dubravka Ugresic, "Baggage and Belles Lettres"

[1]These lines exemplify Dubravka Ugresic's refusal to be plotted in the recent narratives of national revival proliferating throughout Croatia and the other republics of(Ex)-Yugoslavia. Dubravka Ugresic is the author of three novels --Stefica Cvek u Rajnama Zivota (\_Stefica Cvek in the Jaws of Life\_); Forsiranje Romana-Reke (Fording the Stream of Consciousness\_); and Zivot je Bajka (Life is a Fairy Tale) -- as well as of short stories, screen plays, and anthologies and criticism of Russian avant-garde literature. Her fiction is not overtly political but her playful obliqueness is in itself the expression of an implicit political stance.

[2]What seems frivolous on the surface has serious implications in the context of Balkan politics today. In all her writing, Ugresic rejects the nationalistic fiction of a fixed and immobile identity constructed through blood, the secret soil of one's origin, the distinctiveness of national character, the metaphysical privileging of one's ethnic group, and other monolithic discourses. Like Deleuze and Guattari, Ugresic sees literature as being fundamentally "like schizophrenia: a process and not a goal, a production and not an expression" (quoted in Massumi 179). Ugresic is a "nomad," perpetually traveling on the border between "high" and "low" culture, between "kitsch" and "art." She "deoriginates" her fiction through the use of clichés, of a multiplicity of genres, and of a continual masquerade of styles. She challenges the unity of the nationalistic narratives that have recently proliferated throughout ex-Yugoslavia; she stands and moves in the borderlands, occupying sites of difference in the strategic manner described by Homi Bhabha: "never entirely on the outside or implacably

oppositional...a pressure, and a presence, that acts constantly, if unevenly, along the entire boundary of authorization" (Bhabha 297).

[3] Ugresic has written of two opposed currents in the Yugoslav literatures: "one which contests the so-called tradition of national literature, demystifies the notions of so-called great literature, usurps entrenched systems of genres, defends the autonomy of literature, and bespeaks a cultural cosmopolitanism-- while the other, its antipode, endorses the very same notions that the first group questions" ("Made in Yugoslavia" 10). In unapologetically embracing the first of these currents, Ugresic responds to the totalitarian currents which have manipulated literature in Eastern Europe. After 1948, Yugoslav literature was fairly free from the aesthetic norms of socialist realism advocated in other Eastern European countries. Post-war Croatian and Serbian literature was known for creative explorations of different genres and styles. The Yugoslav writer was placed on the border between East and West. This border culture allowed the intermingling of traditional political concerns with avant-garde and later postmodern aesthetics. Such a culture was also premised upon a promiscuous cross-fertilization of the various Yugoslav nationalities. Ugresic herself is a product of this intermingling of styles and cultures. She observes that the "Yugoslav writer lived in a common cultural space of different traditions and languages that intermixed and intercommunicated. It meant knowing Latin and Cyrillic alphabets, reading Serbian, Croatian, Macedonian, and Slovene writers. It meant living in Zagreb, having a publisher in Belgrade, printing a book in Sarajevo, having readings in Ljubljana, Skopje, Pristina. It meant living in different cultures and feeling they were his own" ("Intellectuals as Leaders" 679).

[4] Nonetheless, for fifty years, discourse in Yugoslavia was subordinated to the demands of a hegemonic Titoist politics. "Bratstvo i jedinstvo" (brotherhood and unity) was all too often an excuse for demanding narrow-minded conformity. But in the last few years, the cliches of Serbian and Croatian nationalism have simply taken over the space formerly occupied by the slogans of communism. Ugresic's playful cosmopolitanism, her twisting of gender stereotypes, and her refusal of politically prescribed rhetoric together define her writing as a practice of resistance.

[5] The physical and metaphorical breakup of the former Yugoslavia has unleashed a collective paranoia, involving the surfacing of old, worn-out myths of each of the ethnic groups. Writers and intellectuals have unfortunately contributed to this. Even the most cosmopolitan writers have become virulently nationalistic. Ugresic sardonically remarks that

Milorad Pavic, the writer of the famous Dictionary of the Khazars, has "traveled the world explaining to the Jews that his Khazars were really Jews, dropped in on Croatians to hint that the Khazars might have been Croatians, claimed to the Basques that the Khazars were none other than Basques. Today, after joyfully sliding into the Serbian warrior camp, Pavic explains that the Khazars are simply Serbs" ("Intellectuals as Leaders" 681). In Serbia and Croatia alike, Ugresic remarks, "instead of interculturality we are witnessing a turn to cultural egocentrism" ("Made in Yugoslavia" 11).

[6] Ugresic's novel *Fording the Stream of Consciousness* was published in Zagreb in 1988. The setting of this novel is an international literary conference taking place in Zagreb. The conference is attended by writers and literary critics from both East and West Europe and the United States, as well as critics and writers from Zagreb. Literary critics and writers are the source of endless delight for Ugresic's sharp eye. Ugresic ironically analyses cliches and idiosyncracies of both West and East in the novel, presenting them primarily but not exclusively through the eyes of a Zagreb writer named Pipo Fink and a nameless Minister of Culture, a communist party hack who started out as a butcher in pre-second world war days. As the Minister observes at the beginning of the novel, "the ones from the Eastern block came to buy their wives bras and panties, and the ones from the West to wash their cevapcici down with plenty of sljivovica" (Fording 29).

[7] Indeed, each writer of the conference parodically embodies a national type. Mark Stenheim, the American, lists his numerous educational degrees from various universities, from writing programs, and even from deep sea fishing school, obsessed with the fear that he will not be considered sufficiently intellectual. For his part, the Czech writer, Jan Zdravila, is tormented by guilt as he works for years on his lengthy and unpublishable "masterpiece," while earning his living by censoring the works of other writers. Yugoslav writers are not spared irony, either. When Jean-Paul Flagus, one of the writers visiting the conference, enters the Writers Club and asks the bartender where are the Yugoslav writers, the response he gets is "Writers? We have no writers. No writers, no literature. Life writes the novels in this country; nobody gives a damn about literature" (Fording 61).

[8] Indeed, Ugresic takes to the limit the notions of the work of literature as a form of life and of life as a fictional construction. Truth, lie, copy, simulacrum, cliché, high art, film, "real life," and writing are intermingled to the point of indistinguishability. It is

appropriate that the literary conference ends with a banquet at which the characters actually eat all the dishes described in *Madame Bovary*. The novel itself combines a wide variety of genres and styles: it includes elements of a detective and mystery story, together with diary fragments, parodic rewrites of previous literary works, film-noir allusions, and pastiches of the fantastic literary tradition. The information constructed by any one narrative voice challenges, undercuts, and supplements the perspective of the other voices. The text exposes its seams and discontinuities, and the effect is a constant dislocation of meaning. The montage of voices and perspectives leads to a condition of fragmentation, flux, and continual transformation. Ugresic rejects the creation of a unified theory, of an absolute meaning, and of the search for some ultimate truth (whether ideological, artistic, or philosophical). Fording the *Stream of Consciousness* starts with a quote from Voltaire: 'How can you prefer stories that are senseless and mean nothing?' the wise Ulug said to the sultans. 'We prefer them because they are senseless.'" There is no "truth" and "meaning" in Ugresic's text; we can see how it functions but not what it means.

[9] This continual play also leads Ugresic to question the idea of the "originality" of the literary work. One of the writers at the conference, the enigmatic and idiosyncratic Jean-Paul Flagus, rejects the idea of originality and embraces the role of author as mass producer: "a literary Andy Warhol producing a series of cloned stories, cloned novels. All one need do is make the reading public believe they represent 'brilliant' cynicism, a 'dazzling' recycling of everyday experience" (Fording 186). Flagus, however, is later revealed to be an international scammer and forger working in so-called "literary espionage"; in revenge for his own feelings of literary incompetence and mediocrity he manipulates the lives of other writers at the conference as if they were themselves characters in a novel. (Flagus and his mysterious servant Raul are themselves Ugresic's sly versions of the characters of Mephistopheles and Behemoth in Bulgakov's *The Master and Margerita*.) Elsewhere in the novel, a real-life friend of Ugresic is recorded as commenting that "more often than not, good literature comes from trash" (Fording 220). Ugresic herself plays the postmodern game of "literary appropriation," or recycling trash, with great glee in some of her other works: most notably in the short story "A Hot Dog in a Warm Bun." This story "plagiarizes" and updates Gogol's "The Nose," making what was merely implied in the original story hilariously explicit. In Ugresic's rewrite, the phallic order is disrupted when an actual penis (rather than a nose) becomes detached from its owner and creates confusion wherever it appears. Sexual and textual politics are conflated, and identities and points of origin become unrecognizable.

[10] As this example implies, Ugresic simultaneously mocks the cultural authority of literature and its institutions, the political constraints imposed by both Communist and nationalist regimes, and the subordinate position of women in traditional Yugoslav society. In connection with the latter, there is a wonderful scene in *Fording the Stream of Consciousness* where two young women writers take revenge on a vicious male literary critic who accuses them of writing "women's literature that represents the lava of babble as it issues from kitchens the world over, in short kitchen literature." They decide to torture him accordingly, with kitchen utensils: "Let the bastard stew in his own juice. Picture a meat-grinder or an electric knife if you are up for castration" (Fording 132).

[11] Ugresic's previous novel, *Stefica Cvek u raljama zivota* (Steffie Speck in the Jaws of Life\_), is literally "kitchen literature" since it begins and ends in that traditionally female space. It is an ironic deconstruction of the stereotypes of masculinity and femininity in traditional Yugoslav culture. The title character's unrelieved sexual frustration is a result of her futile attempt to conform to the myths of feminine passivity. She is a good natured but lonely typist from Zagreb, trapped within fiction, especially the clichés of women's magazines, Lonely Hearts advice columns, fairy tales, and traditional folk wisdom. (All of these sources are woven into the texture of Ugresic's book). Stefica's attempts to find a man invariably end in calamitous mishaps: for all the male characters she meets are equally trapped in the ridiculous limitations of their roles as virile seducers.

[12] In terms of form as well as content, Ugresic works to subvert the phallic order of conventional narrative. There is no hierarchical distinction between the different sorts of discourses that make up the book: authorial self-reflection, inane newspaper clippings, and popular sayings. Ugresic realizes the impossibility of escaping clichés, and so she embraces them instead. The novel's subtitle is "Patchwork story": instead of a table of contents, we are given a set of pattern instructions for knitting a garment: tacking, hemming, fastening, interfacing, the author's zigzag stitch, and so on. In place of a conventional conclusion, the novel trails off into a series of supplements to be used as the reader desires, so that the story can be expanded indefinitely. A whole range of endings, from happy to tragic, is made available. The author even at one point asks her mother, the next door neighbor, and assorted female friends for advice on what to do next.

[13] The novels I have been discussing were written at a time when Communist Yugoslavia was starting to fall apart, but when nobody yet foresaw the tragedies that are taking place

today. Gender politics and nationalist politics are yet more strongly intertwined now, as the former Yugoslavia is torn apart by civil war. In addition, the nationalistic and strongly Catholic government of Croatia seeks to restrict women's right to abortion, and to push women out of the workplace and other public spaces, and back into traditional family roles. In such a context, there is all the more value in Ugresic's playfully ironic fictions. In an authorial interruption in *Fording the Stream of Consciousness*, Ugresic writes, "I love my country because it is so small and I feel sorry for it." Indeed, in the face of recent events, this hypothetical cosmopolitan Balkan country has shrunk to virtual invisibility. But Ugresic's prose still provides a refreshing counterweight to the recent flood of self-glorifying nationalistic novels, plays, and essays emerging from the former Yugoslavia. As Hans Magnus Enzensberger remarks, we don't need "the National Writer exalting the mysterious spirit of his own tribe and denouncing the inferior crowd next door in a constant flood of verse epics" ("Intellectuals as Leaders" 686). Or as Nietzsche cleverly put it, "I only attack causes that are victorious; I may even wait until they become victorious" (*Ecce Homo* 232).

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