

The Quaterly Conversation, issue 17, 2009

## CITIZEN OF LITERATURE: DUBRAVKA UGREŠIĆ

Essay by *Karen Vanuska*

Discussed in this essay: • **Have a Nice Day**, Dubravka Ugrešić (trans. Celia Hawkesworth). Viking. 240pp. • **The Culture of Lies**, Dubravka Ugrešić (trans. Celia Hawkesworth). Pennsylvania State University Press. 273pp, \$31.95. • **Thank You For Not Reading**, Dubravka Ugrešić (trans. Celia Hawkesworth). Dalkey Archive Press. 211pp, \$13.95. • **Nobody's Home**, Dubravka Ugrešić (trans. Ellen Elias-Bursac). Open Letter. 297pp, \$16.95. • **Fording the Stream of Consciousness**, Dubravka Ugrešić (trans. Michael Henry Heim). Northwest University Press. 225pp. • **The Museum of Unconditional Surrender**, Dubravka Ugrešić (trans. Celia Hawkesworth). New Directions. 256pp., \$15.95. • **Lend Me Your Character**, Dubravka Ugrešić (trans. Celia Hawkesworth, Michael Henry Heim). Dalkey Archive Press. 250pp., \$12.95. • **The Ministry of Pain**, Dubravka Ugrešić. Harper Perennial. 272pp., \$13.95. • **Baba Yaga Laid an Egg**, Dubravka Ugrešić. Canongate. 256pp., \$24.65.

Here's the scenario. Amidst fiscal chaos, the U.S. government permits states to form their own independent countries. As the citizens of these new countries apply to for new passports, they become caught in a bureaucratic web that ultimately evicts many of them from their homes.

"State of birth?" asks a passport official.

"New York."

"And you are applying for a California passport?"

"California has been my home for twenty years."

"You are a New Yorker. Passport request denied."

Now, we are ready to discuss the works of Dubravka Ugrešić.

Dubravka Ugrešić is Yugoslavian. When the country of Yugoslavia dissolved, she was robbed of her national identity and forced to become a

Croatian because Zagreb was her home. Choices had to be made. Does she accept her new identity? Does she join the battle to claim the preeminence of Croatia? Does she take this opportunity to quietly leave and establish her home in an entirely new country? Does she say, "Hell, no! I'm Yugoslavian!" Ugrešić is of the "Hell, no!" variety. Using her pen as her weapon, she declared war on those who wanted to rob her of her Yugoslavian identity, and ultimately she was forced to leave Croatia. Though time has softened some of her rhetoric, Ugrešić's wounds are deep, and she continues to plumb their depths. Her readers are rewarded with works that combine the personal and political to reveal the universality of the experience of displacement.

There's a scene at the end of Ugrešić's 1993 essay collection *Have a Nice Day: From the Balkan War to the American Dream* where the author describes an encounter that occurred while waiting in line for her I.D. card in Zagreb. When asked her nationality, she declares, "Anational." Some standing behind her in the queue speculated that she's afraid to admit she's Serbian, others urge her to declare she's a Croat, or better yet, a Gypsy. Ugrešić declared that, "As long as belonging to a particular nationality makes one citizen of this state politically, socially, and humanly acceptable, and another unacceptable, I refuse to be reduced to any blood group." She finally convinced the clerk to put her in the category of "others" and vows that she values her hard-won Croatian passport, "a dark-blue booklet with the red and white (Coca-Cola) design," because of "the long drawn out battle for it." She might have savored that victory, but her identity war was just beginning.

Reading Ugrešić's three subsequent essay collections, the most recent of which, *Nobody's Home*, was released last year by Open Letter, it's possible to say that Ugrešić has reached a truce with her displacement. She has moved from seeing herself as a former insider to an outsider, and she seems resigned to and more objective about her status than she once did, especially when she was writing the vitriolic essays in *The Culture of Lies*. In the 1992 title essay from that collection (issued in 1995), Ugrešić's tone speaks to her deeply passionate engagement with the troubles in former Yugoslavia.

Indeed, I am convinced that that outside world, that so coveted arbiter of civilisation, that Europe—so called upon and so desperately depended upon by the Croats (*Danke Deutschland, danke Genscher*) and the Bosnians and the people of Sarajevo (who for months have been

expecting the mythical Sixth Fleet to sail into Sarajevo)—that Europe has also played its part, bears its heavy portion of blame, has its problem of a “Western” culture of truth and lies. And the root of that problem, whether Europe wants it or not, lies in Bosnia. And that is why Karadžić’s dark and terrible shadow is already sitting, comfortably settled, in the armchairs of European homes.

Words and phrases like “coveted arbiter,” “heavy portion of blame,” “truth and lies,” “terrible shadow,” and the sharp declarative tone speak to Ugrešić’s understandably less-than-neutral political stance.

One of the more fascinating moments in reading the essay “What is European about European Literature?” in *Nobody’s Home* is seeing how Ugrešić’s passions have been reduced to a simmer, letting the flavors of her essays become much more complex. Pointedly, in this latest collection she devotes more time questioning her responses and the responses of others to concepts like nationality and the impact of labels on the reception of literary texts. Instead of conjuring images of dark shadows, truth and lies, blame on a nationwide scale, her arguments have become personal, softer around the edges yet sharper at their center, as in this case where she extends her passport experience into a larger question of how we define national literature.

Ten years ago I held a Yugoslav passport, with its soft, pliable, dark red cover. I was a *Yugoslav* writer. Then the war came, and the Croats, without so much as a by your leave, shoved a blue Croatian passport at me. The Croatian government expected a prompt transformation from its citizens, as if the passport itself was some sort of magic pill. Since this didn’t go down easily in my case, they excluded me from their literary and other ranks. Croatian passport in hand, I abandoned both my newly acquired and formerly demolished homeland and set out into the world. With impassioned, Eurosong-like glee, the rest of the world identified me as a Croatian writer. I became a literary representative of a place that no longer wanted me. I, too, no longer wanted the place that no longer wanted me. I am no fan of unrequited love. Even today, I still, however, haven’t shaken free of the labels.

Again I hold a passport with a soft, pliable, dark red cover, a Dutch passport. Will this new passport make me a Dutch writer? It may but I doubt it. Now that I have a Dutch passport, will I ever be able to “reintegrate” into the ranks of Croatian writers? Possibly, but I doubt it.

What is my real problem? Am I ashamed of the label of *Croatian* writer that still trails after me? No. Would I feel any better with a label like Gucci or Armani? Undoubtedly I would, but that's not the point. Then what is it that I want? And why am I, for God's sake so edgy about labels?

Why? Because the reception of literary texts has shown that the luggage of identification bogs down a literary text. Because it has further been shown that labels actually alter the substance of a literary text and its meaning.

Notice not only the number of questions in these paragraphs but also how Ugrešić subtly revises her own story about the acquisition of her Croatian passport from a battle won to a passport forced upon her. Should such revisions lessen her literary stature? Not at all. Looking back and seeing our personal histories through different lenses is a decidedly normal part of transforming experiences into wisdom. Frankly, if she'd not revised bits of her history, she would fall into the category of if-you've-read-one-book-you've-read-them-all.

Given Ugrešić's biography, her perspective on how national labels affect literature is an especially intriguing aspect of her developing philosophy regarding literature, art, and criticism. In both *Nobody's Home* and her previous essay collection, *Thank You For Not Reading*, she turns from the topics of national identity and displacement to the effects of books being treated as commodities rather than art forms. In "The Writer and His Future" (from *Thank You For Not Reading*) Ugrešić argues that "the dividing lines have faded between high and trivial literature" and that "the individual voice is increasingly rare." Furthermore, she approaches the question of labels and literature from a slightly different angle than she did in *Nobody's Home*:

The writer today is more than ever before plastered with identity labels, and these labels determine his place in the literary market and the kind of understanding there can be between himself and his readers. "Identities" do, admittedly, facilitate market communication, but they badly reduce the meaning of the text, impoverishing it or simply distorting it. The literary text is read more than ever with a key: gender, racial, national, ethnic, cultural, sexual, political. It is also diminished by a market which sells books just like any other commodity, according to categories and not according to value. Milan Kundera's *The Joke* can be found in the humor section and Gyorgy Konrad's *A Feast in the Garden* among the gardening

books.

Subsequent to the publication of this essay in *Thank You For Not Reading*, Ugrešić told the *Boston Globe* that Stephen King's National Book Award was "a fall of the Literary Wall: a final unification, not of good and bad literature but of literature and trash." Let us remember that the genre of the novel at the beginning had only one function: to be cheap, mass entertainment. Some other genres, like poetry, had been valued much higher. However, fiction—which meant to be an amusement—managed to have its glorious history, its peaks, especially in the epoch of modernism. Ugrešić opens up relevant avenues of debate and opportunities for refinement of one's personal philosophy on the nature of contemporary fiction as art versus entertainment.

Americans have a tradition of permitting the marketplace to anoint literature of merit and lumping books in with movies and music in the category of entertainment. Additionally, we often consider the honoring of literary works based on artistic merit as suspicious, smacking of snobbery, academic exclusivity, or simply being anti-democratic. As such, there is merit to Ugrešić's argument that our literary wall has fallen. However, that particular wall must have fallen centuries before Stephen King received the National Book Award, even if Ugrešić is right that the novel form was created to take literary amusement beyond the limitations of poetry. Valuing literature as art before entertainment, in the tradition of the Slavs, does not make it an inherently better system of literary assessment, simply different.

## FICTION

When reflecting on the entire body of Ugrešić's work (excepting her earliest translated novel and her latest), it's difficult to keep straight which of Ugrešić's works are essay collections and which are fiction. Perhaps this is a problem of reading these works one after another in a short time. Perhaps it's also a function of Ugrešić's predilection for the first-person narrator. And perhaps it's Ugrešić's distinctive authorial voice, undiminished by translation, that's at the root of the confusion. Although Ugrešić's fiction is clearly fiction, the themes of both the fiction and the non are mutually reinforcing: while her essays elaborate on themes she approaches more obliquely in her fiction, her fiction illustrates the complexities of these themes.

Unlike the essays, with Ugrešić's fiction we are fortunate to have access to translations of a novel, a novella, and short stories that pre-date the dissolution of Yugoslavia—thus, we have her pure Yugoslavian voice, if you will. It's difficult not to read these works and wonder what kind of writer Ugrešić would have been if she remained a "Yugoslavian writer" rather than develop into an "Anational" one.

Interestingly, *Fording the Stream of Consciousness*, winner of best Yugoslav novel of 1988, seems to anticipate some of this, as it examines the clash between Eastern European and Western European cultures. She sets the novel at an international literary conference in Zagreb and uses her characters to explode both Communist and Western cultural stereotypes. There is a sense of irony and playfulness to the story that mirrors what is found in her most recent novel, *Baba Yaga Laid an Egg*, and which is not nearly as prevalent in *The Museum of Unconditional Surrender* and *The Ministry of Pain*. The following excerpt from *Fording the Stream of Consciousness* demonstrates that Ugrešić mined the theme of national identity even before she found her self cast into the world of "Anationalism." Here Troshin, one of the novel's Russian characters, bitterly reflects on foreigners and freedoms afforded them by their passports.

Foreigners. He envied them their light, easygoing way of doing things; it came from their personal freedom, something you could not acquire, something you had to breathe in with the air of the country where you lived. He admired the ease with which they entered into conversation with door-keepers, reception clerks, cloakroom attendants, janitors—that ever-present, terror-inspiring band of geezers that constantly aroused Troshin's anxiety. Or used to admire them, admired them until the day he witnessed a skirmish on the streets of Moscow between a no-nonsense policeman and a foreigner and watched the foreigner's self-assurance melt and the familiar, home-grown, humiliated look of fear spread over his face. Troshin knew the mechanisms of fear like the back of his hand, yet it was only after that incident that he realized how tenuous personal freedom, inner freedom, actually was. A foreigner played the tough guy as long as he had his passport in his pocket.

There's that ever-important passport once again being used as a symbol of identity. However, here the passport is free to stand for more than Ugrešić's personal battle with identity. Here, she uses it to contemplate the freedoms afforded by some passports as opposed to others.

*Lend Me Your Character* begins with the 1981 novella "Steffie Cvek in the Jaws of Life: a little patchwork novel." A key to symbols found in the margin of the novella's text, such as "..... = stretch and ////// = gather" help guide the reader through the narrative in much the same way as a dress pattern uses symbols to direct the seamstress. A "pattern" outlining major plot points is also provided, and then finally the story of Steffie Cvek, a woman in search of a man to love, begins. After reading Ugrešić's essays, this novella seems like a left turn—Ugrešić writing a love story? Have no fear. Such comical scenes as cheating husbands showing up at Steffie's door for afternoon quickies and Steffie taking bad beauty advice from magazines are part of a more ironic twist that makes the story a study on modern feminism. In highly ironic tones, Ugrešić elaborates on this point using the fictional device of a third-person "objective" narrator at the end of the novella:

Having expressed at the outset her intention of writing a women's [sic] story, the author took into account several predominant characteristics of so-called "women's writing:" the main (female) character's search for personal happiness, a feeling of isolation, love as the primary motive force, a powerful experience of the body, sensuality, passivity, an apolitical outlook, the banality of the everyday, social consciousness in the subtext, impoverished language, the impossibility of experiencing the world as a totality, etc. The author avoided all autobiographical tendencies and the predominant confessional tone. The author would like to point out that all these definitions have been taken not only from the current criticism but also from life.

In fact, all the short stories in this particular collection, all published in Yugoslavia in the 1980s and translated into English in the 1990s, examine issues of sexual identity and the creation of art. Stories like "A Hot Dog in a Warm Bun," about a man who loses his penis only to have it discovered by a woman who tosses it away as a bad hot dog, deals with sexuality in an overt and comic way, while the final story "Lend Me Your Character" balances humor and the battle of the sexes in the context of a creative couple, writers: the man wishes to borrow a character from one of his girlfriend's stories to use in his own. This glimpse into Ugrešić's identity as Yugoslavian writer is also a glimpse into her future.

*Baba Yaga Laid an Egg*, released this spring, is part of Canongate's *The Myths* series, a series where ancient myths from many different cultures are re-imagined by contemporary authors. Ugrešić takes the traditional

Slavic tale of the witch Baba Yaga, who lives in a house built on chicken legs and kidnaps children, and turns it into a humorous and, at times, somber tale of women and aging. (Interestingly, Ugrešić opens one of her short stories in *Lend Me Your Character* with a quote from Soviet writer Alexei Remizov: "Baba Yaga hatched an egg.") In Ugrešić's take on this myth, she weaves together the story of a writer's journey to Bulgaria to satisfy her aging mother's wish and the story of three elderly women who travel to a hotel spa to live the life of luxury for a week. When one of the women dies in the midst of this vacation, secrets emerge and lead to a future that none expect. The visceral details in this excerpt from the opening are classic Ugrešić, offering dead-on observations with a dash of dark humor:

Sweet little old ladies. At first you don't see them. And then, there they are, on the tram, at the post office, in the shop, at the doctor's surgery, on the street, there is one, there is another, there is a fourth over there, a fifth, a sixth, how could there be so many of them all at once?! Your eyes inch from one detail to the next: the feet swelling like doughnuts in the tight shoes, the skin sagging from the inside of the elbows, the knobby fingernails, the capillaries that ridge the skin. You look closely at the complexion: cared for or neglected. You notice the grey skirt and white blouse with the embroidered collar (dirty!). The blouse is worn thin and greyed from washing. She has buttoned it up crookedly, she tries to unbutton it but cannot, her fingers are stiff, the bones are old, they are getting light and hollow like bird bones. Two others lend her a hand and with their collective efforts they do up the blouse. Buttoned up to her chin, she looks like a little girl.

What's decidedly different about Ugrešić's writing in this excerpt is how the humor arises from the collective image developed by the prose while the details themselves paint a sympathetic portrait of these old women; Ugrešić closes the distance between narrator and characters in a way that she doesn't in much of her other fiction.

In concluding notes wrapped in irony and the fictional cover of an academic explaining the myth of Baba Yaga to non-Slavic readers, Ugrešić gives us a clever footnote on how the egg in the book's title is a grim symbol of female creativity.

Female artists are Baba Yagas, isolated, stigmatized, separated from their social surroundings (they live in the woods or on its edge), wholly reliant

on their own powers. Their roles, just like the role of Baba Yaga in the fairytales, is marginal and constricted. On the other hand, the same title can be read as a cheerful apology for women's creativity.

Isolation. Female creativity. Stigmatized. Ugrešić seems to have combined the creative themes of her "Yugoslavian" writing with that of her "Anational" writing. It's rare that a book by an established author, one who has decades of writing in her portfolio, makes me eager to read what will come next. However, that is where I found myself when I turned the last page of *Baba Yaga Laid An Egg*.

The loss of Ugrešić's Yugoslavian nationality was a death that she's been mourning through her art. Memory and loss permeate *The Museum of Unconditional Surrender*, her first novel based on her experiences as an artist adrift from her national identity. Ugrešić uses narrative devices to dissect the very nature memory of how and what we remember. The very way that she constructs this somber narrative—paragraph breaks on nearly every page, numbered paragraphs, snippets of Joseph Brodsky quotes wedged between snippets of dialogue—creates a sense that the reader is floating on a narrative river whose current keeps bumping them from the "present" shore to the "past" shore.

*"I sometimes think I have forgotten everything. Why does a person live at all if he forgets everything anyway?"* asks my mother.

"Memory betrays everybody, especially those whom we knew best. It is an ally of oblivion, it is an ally of death. It is a fishnet with a very small catch and with the water gone. You can't use it to reconstruct anyone, even on paper. What's the matter with all those millions of cells in our brain? What the matter with Pasternak's 'Great god of love, great god of details'? On what number of details must one be prepared to settle?" says Joseph Brodsky.

*"Even what was mine, and only mine, I remember so little of it . . . "* says my mother.

"A normal man doesn't remember what he had for breakfast. Things of a routine, repetitive nature are meant to be forgotten. Breakfast is one; loved ones is another," says Joseph Brodsky.

The intrusion of memories is frequently as disorienting in real life as it is

in this excerpt. The advantage of these intrusions occurring on the page is that we, as readers, have the luxury of re-reading this passage and finding clues as to what's really happening. Here, the narrator is "remembering" Brodsky's quotes on memory and using them to respond in her head to her mother's confusion and frustration over her own memory problems. Ugrešić brilliantly uses prose to capture the very process of the present slipping into the past and the future slipping into the present. Similar to Joan Didion's *The Year of Magical Thinking*, *The Museum of Unconditional Surrender* uses prose to capture the process of grieving for a lost identity. However, free of the bonds of "truth" that limit personal essays or memoirs, Ugrešić takes full advantage of artistic devices such as shifting points of view, dialogue, and multiple narrative voices that permit this novel to transcend the personal to ponder compelling questions of an artist and their identity with a nation versus their identity with art.

Shades of this can be seen in *The Ministry of Pain*, where Ugrešić moves her story of personal grief from sorrow to anger. However, instead of as would be expected of a sophisticated artist, she leaves overt wrath out of her narrative. The narrator of this story is a professor of literature who has fled her native Croatia and now teaches a class of Yugoslav exiles at the University of Amsterdam. Still coping with her own feelings of loss and problems of her new adjustment, the professor decides to let the class indulge in Yugonostalgia rather than study literature. When one of the students submits an anonymous complaint to her department head she angrily returns to the syllabus, much to the disappointment of most of the students. At the end of the semester, she issues a failing grade to the student she suspects of complaining. In a moment that stands alone in Ugrešić's fiction and, even her essays, there is a confrontation between the professor and the student that is filled with great anger and a surprising moment of violence. The student expresses the true source of his anger with his hostage, the professor.

"Tell me, has it occurred to you that all that time you may have been torturing us? Has it occurred to you that the students you forced to remember were yearning to forget? That they made up memories to indulge you the way the Papuans made up cannibalistic myths to indulge the anthropologists? Your students aren't like you. They love this country. Flat, wet, nondescript as a country without pain. People turn into amphibians here. Of their own accord. They turn the color of sand; they blend in and die out. Like fucking amphibians. That's all they care about:

dying out. The Dutch lowlands are one big blotter: it sucks up everything—memories, pain, *all that crap* . . . ”

Mining memories can be a dangerous undertaking for those who are fleeing them. This is a theme touched upon in the *Museum of Unconditional Surrender*, but not explored to the depth it is in this novel. Additionally, upon reflection, the absence of more displays of anger and violence in Ugrešić’s fiction is admirable; where such sensational scenes have a tendency to send fiction flying off the shelves and line the pockets of authors and publishers with cash, it can be seen as no less than a noble artistic vision that has guided Ugrešić in not giving her readers the kind of story one would expect given the former Yugoslavia’s recent violent history.

## “A LITTLE RED DOT”

In the essay “A Little Red Dot” in *Thank You For Not Reading*, Ugrešić writes of a visit to the Slavic Department Library of a European University. The visitor finds all the Yugoslavian books living together “in an enforced library community” on one shelf—Serbian, Croatian, Bosnian, Slovenian, and Macedonian—and is sad to see such a small collection. Then the visitor notes that some books have a red dot and learns from the librarian that books with a red dot may not be taken from the library because they are usually stolen.

The visitor knows that the little red dot on the spine of the book is the greatest literary prize that is possible for a writer from the Yugoslav literary provinces to achieve, more significant than a Nobel Prize. It is the result of a secret ballot, in which anonymous visitors to the library—Croatian, Serbian, and Bosnian—have chosen the only cultural heritage that they recognize as alive and meaningful.

Ugresic writes in Croatian and relies on translators to bring her works to the English-language public. Searching through interviews and biographies, I could not find her explanation for this choice and decided to indulge in some extrapolation. Based on all that she’s exposed of herself through her essays and fiction, I speculate that writing in Croatian remains her personal and everlasting defiance in response to being denied her Yugoslavian identity. They can take away her passport, they can brand her a witch, they can force her to pursue her writing in other countries, but they can’t change the language she chooses to write in.

She is a citizen of literature and a Yugoslav who writes in Croatian. Her books will join those from Serbian, Bosnian, Slovenian, and Macedonian writers on shelves of Slavic Department Libraries as one of the last remaining testaments to a Yugoslavia that once was.