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Željko Koproščec

BY MEGHAN FORBES

WITHOUT COUNTRY

AN INTERVIEW WITH DUBRAVKA UGREŠIĆ

“As a woman I have no country. As a woman I want no country. As a woman, my country is the whole world.”

Dubravka Ugrešić often quotes these lines from Virginia Woolf’s *Three Guineas*, and indeed they are well suited to an author who defies national demarcations. Alternately described as post-Yugoslav, Croatian, Yugoslav-Croatian, or Croatian-Dutch, Ugrešić is not quite any of these things. But she is certainly a writer, and a prolific one at that, author of five novels and six books of essays, as well as various volumes of short stories, criticism, and books for children.

At the outbreak of the Yugoslav civil war, Ugrešić had held for many years a position at the Institute for Literary Theory at the University of Zagreb, which she relinquished when she left Croatia in 1993. This was a time when—as she describes in her essay “A Question of Perspective”—her books were burned and she was regularly slandered in the local press, branded as an antinationalist “witch,” a “feminist raping Croatia,” and a “homeless intellectual.”

Perhaps that last title had some unintended truth to it: Ugrešić, who now lives in Amsterdam, has, in the years since her exile turned emigration, resisted having her authorial identity subsumed by her “homeland,” depending to a large extent on her translators to reach an international audience. Ugrešić subverts a national canon and welcomes instead a reading of her work as transnational literature. Her essays and fiction lay bare the dangers of nationalism, and examine the impact of totalitarian regimes on collective memory and belonging. She has also turned her critical gaze to issues of popular, consumerist culture and the place of the female writer in a male-dominated society.

Ugrešić was in residence at Columbia University, at the invitation of the Department of Slavic Languages and the Harriman Institute, for the month of October 2015, to teach a four-week course and present the keynote lecture at a conference organized around her work, both of which were associated with the theme of transnationalism. It was fortuitous timing that during this same period, Ugrešić learned that she was the recipient of the 2016 Neustadt International Prize for Literature.

I was fortunate to have the opportunity to attend Ugrešić’s course and other public engagements at Columbia, and the following interview is a direct result of her trip to New York. But, fittingly, this conversation was conducted only later, via e-mail correspondence and across different borders, with Ugrešić back in Amsterdam and myself by then in Prague.

Popular Culture and the Essay

Meghan Forbes: Last October, while teaching a course at Columbia, you asked students to introduce themselves with their names and answers to the following questions: What problems do you have with contemporary culture? What books are you reading? I’d like to start by posing the same questions to you.

Dubravka Ugrešić: Let me introduce myself: my name is Dubravka Ugrešić, and I am a writer. I was born and raised in a small country in southern Europe, in Yugoslavia. One morning, I woke up and found myself in Croatia, an even smaller country, in a different time and political environment that perhaps most closely resembled 1941. As life is not a movie, and I am not Woody Allen’s Zelig, I decided to leave this country in order to stay sane. Now I live in the Netherlands.

The problem I have with contemporary culture is that today everything is treated as a product. Culture is a huge and shiny supermarket. As all products are announced as “brilliant,” the risk inherent in buying these products falls entirely to me. In that respect, I often miss “my butcher” and “my baker” and “my vegetable lady,” people I could rely on. These days, shopping and consuming—including consuming culture—have become more difficult. In such a context, I behave like any other cultural consumer: I buy books randomly, because I’ve heard of the author or the title, or I know the publisher’s taste, or a friend recommended something to me.

The Internet divided consumers into two groups: some still read essays; others would rather watch video clips of Slavoj Žižek's lectures on YouTube.

Forbes: Apropos of this new consumer culture: You have described the essay as a genre with a long-standing literary tradition, an effective means of protest, a form in which serious research is retold as literature. How do you think the role and quality of the essay has changed now that information and ideas are passed around quickly on the Internet in bits and pieces?

Ugrešić: The Internet divided consumers into two groups: some still read essays; others would rather watch video clips of Slavoj Žižek's lectures on YouTube. Some do both. The importance of the essay has not changed; in fact, I discovered it as a genre (that suits me) once the Internet had a wider circulation. In the speedy and hierarchized society (of fame and money) we live in today, I cherish the essay even more. It's a form of "underground" thinking, a quick articulation of phenomena, whatever the phenomena might be. It's a way of breaking down the hierarchies of our world. (For instance, I've written essays on the difference between the muffin, the bagel, and the donut, and the significance of hotel minibars, with the same pleasure and seriousness that I write about themes understood as "big," or "important," such as war.) [The late] Svetlana Boym, a great literary scholar, wonderfully explains the importance of "slow thinking" in a quick video statement (that now circulates on the Internet). The essay is probably the quickest way to inspire the reader to practice slow thinking.

Forbes: Is "slow thinking" a prerequisite for your ideal reader? In the most recent issue of *Music & Literature*, you are quoted as saying: "A careful reader only feels comfortable in the text when the author feels comfortable in there too: it's a secret communication between them." In your work, you foster a real intimacy with your reader. But,

if the Internet has turned readers into "consumers," who might first come to your work at far remove from its original context, do you feel that digital technologies have estranged you from the kind of reader you most hope to reach?

Ugrešić: I had in mind a specific honesty that is a precondition for the intimacy between a writer and a reader. This doesn't mean being truthful (nobody really cares whether what you describe actually happened or not; that sort of a truth is not the job of literature, after all, but the work of police reports and, hopefully, good journalism). What I mean is that the writer should feel comfortable with herself or himself as a narrator. A careful reader is able to recognize that. At least, I recognize such things.

And yes, digital technologies have estranged many readers from traditional literature, but they have also brought some readers back to literature. These technologies might give birth to a new literature entirely. I haven't bumped into any successful examples yet, but you just never know what could result from new technologies.

And to answer your first question, I am for slowing down. Writers who produce "literary hamburgers" also push their consumers to become fast readers. Although I adore some "speedy" novels (my favorite is *The Three Musketeers* by Alexandre Dumas!), I prefer slow food, not only preparing it but consuming it too.

Food is a high-quality dialogue. And literature is also supposed to be a high-quality dialogue.

Transnational Literature and Translation

Forbes: How is the intimacy you seek to cultivate with your reader related to the intimacy you share with your



Photo by Jerry Braun

translators, on whom you depend as a transnational writer writing outside of a major language?

Ugrešić: Writers write because they want to be loved. Gabriel García Márquez said precisely that in one of his interviews: “I write in order to be loved.” I liked this sentence so much that I wrote a novella that plays with the semantic consequences of Márquez’s poetic statement.

I depend on the love of the chance reader. That sounds like a sentimental line from some ambitious romance novel, but that’s how it is. I can rely only on the chance reader wherever she/he is coming from. In that respect, yes, I first of all depend on my translators.

Forbes: Is your translator your ideal reader then? Or more of a coauthor?

Ugrešić: Both. A good translator is that ideal reader. But a good translator is a coauthor, too.

Forbes: You have been a vocal champion of the concept of a “transnational” literature, which you see as existing both in parallel and in opposition to national literature. Can you speak a little about what you mean when you say you are writing transnational literature? And who are the other writers cohabiting that liminal space with you?

Ugrešić: If you do not belong to a national canon—and women rarely do—then your natural space is a cultural semi-underground. What does that mean? It means a “refugee” space, a “shelter.” It could also mean a space “outside the nation” (in exile, in another language, in other geographies, etc.). It could mean a space of “experimental” writing, a space of nonmainstream writing, a space of “subliterary genres” (like science fiction, romances, speculative fiction, Internet writing); all in all, the spaces that nobody can take from women.

Virginia Woolf had it right with her famous quote: “As a woman I have no country. As a woman I want no country. As a woman, my country is the whole world.” We might even say that she set the cornerstone for transnational literature. Gender itself is not enough, of course, for the person to feel excluded; neither is an exclusion from the national canon an automatic visa into transnational literature. The concept of minor literature, and belonging to a minor literature, is also not the only element that could lead to a transnational literature. Transnational literature is a work in progress; it’s a process. With time, its boundaries will become theoretically clearer. There are more scholarly books written about it every day.

Forbes: The concept of country as “the whole world” feels particularly relevant

today, as attacks like those in Paris come presumably from a nonnational entity. It feels like, more than ever, we must move beyond a conception of nationalism to something “trans”-national, or “non”-national, in order to observe and respect a collective humanity, and ensure justice for all people. And yet, the knee-jerk response to such attacks is highly nationalistic and regressive; I am thinking of calls to close borders and to block the path to immigration for those fleeing a similar sort of terror at home. Do you see any parallels between the current debate in the United States and Europe, over how many refugees to take in from the Syrian civil war, and the matter of displaced citizens from the former Yugoslavia in the 1990s? Is there perhaps some liberating solution in your conception of transnational literature to a nationalist, unwelcoming response to émigrés displaced by war?

Ugrešić: You are absolutely right! I believe that refugees (and demographers report that in the last year the number of displaced persons was so large that it is only comparable to the number during World War II!) are the ultimate test of humanity at this very moment. They are the test of the ideas, concepts, and practices of our societies — such as democracy, organizational principles of society, functionality of states, borders, citizenship, global and local political forces, a test of the

people in power, of human solidarity, of our values; just name it. If the response to the “migrant crisis” (as the media dryly calls this human tragedy of colossal proportion) is a resurrection of the swastika, then we will all find ourselves in big trouble.

Memory and Forgetting

Forbes: I recall a definition you gave of nostalgia as a poetic field that requires you to chase after memory as it runs away from you, which I found to be a particularly beautiful and compelling idea. To push that image a little further, if I may, are you constantly chasing the memories of your Yugo-youth, running after them in that poetic field with butterfly net? And why not let them just flutter away?

Ugrešić: I am not chasing the memories of my Yugoslav youth; in fact, it is the opposite. I don’t have the feeling that I am picking the themes; they pick me. I am not a writer who specializes in a certain genre—such as science fiction, or the detective novel, for instance—in order to emancipate myself from that reality.

Forbes: Since the Yugoslav civil war, you have been living outside of the former Yugoslavia, but the culture and politics of your homeland remain central to your writing. Vladislav Beronja, in the conference at Columbia dedicated to your work,

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described the “fragments and ruins of a once shared Yugoslav space.” Do you see your novels and essays, largely created outside of the post-Yugoslav space, as a means by which to piece back together or otherwise restore some of these fragments and ruins?

Ugrešić: Some of them are, such as *The Ministry of Pain*, and probably also *The Museum of Unconditional Surrender*.

Forbes: In the essay “Nostalgia,” you write that Berlin, where you were living in exile in 1994, turned out to be the “ideal cutting desk for the montage of memories” that would become *The Museum of Unconditional Surrender*. Was there something specific to living in Berlin during the period of German reunification that was particularly poignant as your own former country was violently splitting apart?

Ugrešić: Berlin was a perfect background, a city as metaphor, a link to different historical periods and meanings: Fascism, World War II, then the city’s division into two parts (communist and capitalist), then reunification. . . . Within Berlin there is an artificial hill, called Teufelsberg, or Devil’s Mountain, that is built out of the rubble of a Berlin destroyed by bombing. So, against such a background I could easily project my feelings, fears, obsessions; my status of exile (in a city that has a rich history of cultural exile); the Yugoslav war; the appearance of

a new fascism in Croatia and Serbia; and so on and so forth.

By the way, I recently took a boat tour around Manhattan and learned from our guide that American ships during World War II, carrying supplies to England, needed the same ballast for the trip back. So, the ships would carry rubble from the bombings of London and Brighton back to New York and unload it on the East Side of Manhattan. That rubble made Manhattan bigger, and many housing projects were built on top of it—on top of the ruins of London and Brighton.

Forbes: I had never heard that story. That is totally bizarre, and particularly apt when one considers that it was the Americans who built on top of that hill of rubble at Teufelsberg, too: an NSA listening station.

Ugrešić: Even if this story was perhaps invented by a tourist guide with literary ambitions, it sounds very good to me. It’s a story about interconnectedness. It’s a perfect metaphor for history, but also for this very moment.

Device

Forbes: A predominant characteristic of your work is the use of collage as literary device. What is it about this process that is so effective for you?

Ugrešić: I wouldn't say that collage is my predominant literary device. Collage is known as a technique of the visual arts: photography, film, etc. For me, collage is more a way of thinking than something to be used strictly as literary technique, I would say. And as a way of thinking, it is tremendously exciting: you put one thing next to the other one and wait to see what will happen. The two "things" talk, hate each other, love each other, change each other's meaning, enrich each other, give their existence new meaning.

Forbes: If the task of the writer is to subvert existing forms, in which of your novels do you feel you have been most subversive?

Ugrešić: "Subversiveness" depends on the context, and is defined by the context. One can't be subversive without the context. As concerns my novels, they do not obey or follow general preconceptions of a novel as a specific literary form—for example, a general idea of what the novel is supposed to look like. One of my novels has a little subversion implanted into its very title. That's *Fording the Stream of Consciousness*. In the original it is *Forsiranje romana-reke*. "Fording the river" is a military term. "Roman-fleuve" is a French term; it literally means "river-novel." A roman-fleuve is a long novel in serial form,

like Marcel Proust's *À la recherche du temps perdu*. So, I made a pun: "Fording the river-novel." Let us say that subversiveness is a way to express our relationship to surrounding cultural references (be they narrow, national, or wider, international); another way to reevaluate established aesthetic, ethical, ideological values, etc.

Gender Inequity in Publishing

Forbes: As a woman who writes, I have been very grateful for the vocabulary you've provided and the room you've made for us to talk about the lack of gender parity in the publishing world. In what ways do you think you have been most successful in drawing attention to this issue?

Ugrešić: I think that women who draw attention to this issue are not terribly popular, because the men—who still hold the power in our culture—don't want to hear such things. However, if you belong to a discriminated community, it's your duty to draw attention to that discrimination.

Forbes: You have remarked often of your admiration and deep respect for two male figures I also treasure: the Czech author Bohumil Hrabal; and the UCLA professor and translator, Michael Henry Heim. Could

you give us the names of a few literary ladies who have had a profound impact on your life and writing?

Ugrešić: I must admit that men had a profound impact on my life and writing. It's simple: the history of literature consists mostly of male writers. That's why I, and my generation of women writers, should be aware of the fact that our understanding of literature, culture, and the world has been shaped by male writers, artists, and philosophers. I personally started to publish very early and didn't encounter any problems—the opposite, in fact. However, that ease with which I achieved a place in literature (then Yugoslav) didn't make me blind; I was quite aware of the inequality of positions.

As concerns the literary ladies, I first think of the nineteenth-century Croatian author Ivana Brlić Mažuranić. She wrote some of the best fairy tales in the whole world of fairy tales, and she had a great impact on me when I was a little girl, and later. Even now I often read her tales. They belong to the highest level of classical literature. Although she borrowed a lot from Russian folklore, her fairy tales are unique and uniquely beautiful. Later, some other female writers came into focus for me, Virginia Woolf among them. Today, if we mention a couple of female Nobel Prize winners for

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literature—such as Svetlana Alexievich, Alice Munro, Herta Müller, Elfriede Jelinek, Doris Lessing, Toni Morrison—we become aware of how the general literary landscape has changed tremendously with them. Even a quick look at their names and oeuvres proves how diverse, interesting, and powerful literature written by women is. Thanks to that generation of women—who are building a contemporary woman's literary canon—many young women writers have managed to be recognized early, at their debut; for example, Zadie Smith or the charming Valeria Luiselli, a writer I am reading at the moment.

Forbes: And what about Lena Dunham? In class, you introduced yourself to us with a confession. You told us that you had just read Dunham's memoir *Not That Kind of Girl* on the plane from Amsterdam to New York, and said: "I must tell you one thing: I liked it." What did you like about Dunham's book?

Ugrešić: It has intelligence, juvenescent energy, a pleasant bluntness, humor, and honesty. I also liked Dunham's excellent little movie *Tiny Furniture*. Dunham, together with some other young women, such as Miranda July, are forging a new American, feminist-oriented cultural scene.

Forbes: In the essay "Soul for Rent!" you announced that you'd be renting out your soul to keep afloat financially during the recession. You instructed prospective clients—perverts and smokers need not apply—to send their contact details to your editor. So I've been dying to know: Did you receive any inquiries?

Ugrešić: No, of course not; the soul has a negligible market value anyway, almost like Albanian chewing gum. But this bitter and funny little piece is sort of an homage to Woody Allen and his hilarious story "Whore from Mensa" constructed on a simple inversion. It's a story about a group of talented young women, studying literature and completing their PhDs, who work in a sort of intellectual brothel. They offer their clients intellectual services: a lecture on Franz Kafka, for instance, or *Moby Dick*, or, while we are at it, a short introduction to transnational literature (that last one is my invention!). The story was published in the *New Yorker* forty years ago and it's still vital, maybe even more vital today than when it was written.

Forbes: Thank you so much, Dubravka, for answering these questions. I'd like to close without a question, just an open space, for you to have the last word . . .

Ugrešić: I can't have the last word. I am a writer, remember? Generals and prophets usually have the last word. But literature is about ongoing narration, another chapter, another sequel, another conversation . . . ■

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