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*S&M of Exile*

A review of *The Ministry of Pain* by Dubravka Ugrešić, translated by Michael Henry Heim (HarperCollins Publishers, 2006)

Dubravka Ugrešić's latest novel, *The Ministry of Pain*, is the story of Tanja Lucić, an exile from Yugoslavia who ends up teaching at the University of Amsterdam. Tanja's job (teaching Yugoslav Literature at the Department of Slavonic Languages) proves completely bizarre: she is supposed to teach the literature of a country that doesn't exist anymore in a language (Serbo-Croatian) that doesn't exist anymore to students who have no country to call their own and who are having a hard time expressing themselves in the language that was once theirs. The students are mostly Yugoslav exiles or refugees, not much younger than their exiled instructor, who are taking the course principally to retain their status and keep their visas. Tanja's class resembles less a literature class than group therapy, where her students should share their thoughts, pains, frustrations, stories, memories, and destinies. But, as it turns out, "Yugonostalgia" and the relics of a lost time are not what the students are after. At the beginning of the second semester, they denounce her, leading to a warning from her boss. In self-defense and defiance, she goes to the other extreme, turning the class into a rigorous, if absurd, literature lesson, which punishes everyone.

This story of exiles deals with the topics of lost identity and the search for a new one. Here the feelings of frustration and despondency with the exilic inability to either fit in or surrender entwine with the oddly pleasurable pain of their nostalgic memories. The characters in this novel are foreigners in the country that offered them refuge and when they visit their homeland they feel like strangers, lost and abandoned by everyone. Their situation is hopeless and it doesn't offer any way out:

1. What was the name of the country in the south of Europe that fell apart in 1991? a) Yugoslovakia, b) Yugoslavia, c) Slovenakia.
2. What was the name of the inhabitants of that country? a) The

Yugoslavs, b) the Mungoslavs, c) the Slavonyugs. 3. Where do these people, whose country has disappeared, live now? a) They are no longer alive, b) They are barely alive, c) They have moved to another country. 4. What should people who have moved to another country do? a) They should integrate, b) They should disintegrate, c) They should move to yet another country.

It may seem as if *The Ministry of Pain* is yet another book taking advantage of the notoriety of the former Yugoslavia and its recent, bloodthirsty war, but that is not the case here. At least not entirely. Dubravka Ugrešić tells many exile stories; some are the narrator's (Tanja's) most intimate thoughts, nightmarish accounts of moments of complete abandon, while others are the stories of Tanja's students or just random people in the street that she recognizes as Yugos. Several accounts of (Yugo)nostalgic songs, poems, or stories add to an already interesting fusion of genres, ranging from almost documentary accounts to diary-like confessions, that paints a realistic and honest picture of the life in exile. Truth, pathos, and nostalgia are present here as well, but they are the usual baggage of any true exile, refugee, or émigré. One of the peaks of the novel—and another sign of its reality—is the absence of an easy way out; there is no cheesy, romantic image of a happy end. Instead, there is yet another image of sadomasochism and hopelessness.

Still, what remains is the question of who this book is actually for. Refugees and exiles from the former Yugoslavia living all over the world—readers who will suffer the same sadomasochistic feelings as the novels' characters—would probably describe it as having too many Yugonostalgic sentiments. It might be irritating to real-life exiles to find their likenesses strolling over the pages; I am not entirely sure the exilic community wants or will cherish such clear reflections. Other readers? Lost identities, borders, displacement, exile, etc., can definitely be of interest to many. Numerous references to the former Yugoslavia scattered all over the novel might be a little too much to handle. But in the end that's what this is all about, about the inability to fit in, about the hopelessness of the situation, about the search for identity, about souls, spirits, selves lost and found—and this novel very successfully mirrors it to the tiniest thread of its texture.