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Bitter-Sweet Yugonostalgia

The Sweet and the Sorrow of Nostalgia in Dubravka Ugrešić' *The Ministry of Pain*

After the mighty country of Yugoslavia had crumbled under the hands of nationalists, new countries have emerged from the ashes of terrible civil wars. While sweet memories of life in Yugoslavia had little space in the first post-war years filled with patriotism for the new countries and dismay over the horrors of so-called fraternal wars, in recent years former Yugoslav countries have seen a surge of nostalgia for socialist times. Catching up on a trend visible in most post-communist countries, nostalgia is a grateful subject for journalists, nationalists and artists alike. The academia do not fail to take part in this hype, yet I argue that they, by focusing on the sweet and reflective sides of nostalgia, have neglected a crucial and in Yugoslavia all the more obvious side of nostalgia, the traumatic side.

Nostalgia has often been viewed and criticized as either a bittersweet, reactionary escapism, or as a reflective manifestation evoking the past as a mirror image to the flaws of the present. But both of these bittersweet feelings for a past that was better only address the “positive” side, which is only one side of the feelings of these “nostalgics”. Like most people who are displaced from their homes and native lands, who in other words became refugees, these feelings carry negative, bitter memories with them – traumatic memories of times where suddenly the secure, safe world they knew collapsed. These negative and traumatic memories are the complicating other side of nostalgia. This ambivalent desire to recall those places and times inextricably entangled with negative and often traumatic

memories is hardly ever addressed in writings on nostalgia. This is the case for writing on nostalgia in general, but the gruesome wars following the collapse of Yugoslavia make this matter all the more urgent in the issue of “Yugonostalgia”; the nostalgic longing for Communist Yugoslav years in present-day former Yugoslav countries.

The aim of this essay is twofold. The first aim is to highlight different ambiguous manifestations of nostalgia in the celebrated novel of a ‘Yugoslav’ writer – as she calls herself; Dubravka Ugrešić’ *The Ministry of Pain*.¹ The second is to show how the ambiguity in nostalgia, and especially in Yugonostalgia, alternately and intricately constitutes a unifying and positive “self” and negative and segregating “other” in the story. The essay will highlight representations of different manifestations and workings of nostalgia in the novel by Ugrešić.² Thereby giving insight in the complexity of the ambiguous nostalgia and the workings and usages of nostalgia in terms of creating “selves” and “others” as represented in the book.

The Ministry of Pain is one of Ugrešić’ many books addressing the issue of trauma, nostalgia and Yugonostalgia. The works of Ugrešić are in many respects a unique, valuable and intriguing source of insight into the complexity of nostalgia, as they give way to detailed illustrations of how Yugonostalgia is experienced, including both positive and negative sides of the past. Ugrešić herself is an exile from her home country. While she left Croatia by choice, she did not have a say in ‘leaving’ her homeland Yugoslavia, as it dissolved before her eyes. Ugrešić’ background – in exile, nostalgic, lost, traumatised and full of memories – is reflected in her works, which make them well suited for this investigation in nostalgia.³

Theorizing Yugonostalgia

When we think of nostalgia, most of us do not think of it as a fatal or grueling medical condition. This is however exactly how nostalgia was considered for almost two centuries in the wake of nostalgia’s initial coining in 1688, by the Swiss physician Johannes Hofer. He was confronted with exiles, many of which were displaced soldiers, who yearned for their homes so badly they were deemed to be sick. Or in Hofer’s diagnosis, suffering from a condition he called nostalgia – a neologism Hofer derived from the Greek *nostos*, to return home, and *algia*, a painful feeling. Nostalgic symptoms were believed to be triggered by sights, smells, tastes and the like, and the

cure was to return these “homesick” back to their homes.⁴

Absence from one's home or homeland has always been, and still is, one of the defining elements of nostalgia. While medical interest in nostalgia mostly disappeared, nostalgia has been picked up by psychology and the social sciences in the twentieth century and today nostalgia and trauma are even buzzwords in the humanities. This is colorfully illustrated in the first lines of the introduction to the book *Post-Communist Nostalgia*, where Maria Todorova quotes Mitja Velikonja's playful paraphrase of Winston Churchill's infamous words: “From Stettin in the Baltic to Trieste in the Adriatic, what has descended is ... nostalgia”.⁵

While the meaning of nostalgia has gathered many connotations of ‘loss’ over the years, varying from trivial nostalgic feelings, to yearnings for a ‘lost childhood’ and a ‘vanished world of yesterday’, it is remarkable to see that much of the literature on nostalgia has focused only on the bittersweet, affectionate, positive feelings and attitudes towards that what is lost.⁶ These feelings, feeding idealization of the past and reactionary longing for times long gone, have angered critics of nostalgia and provoked strong denunciations of nostalgia as sentimental, elitist and escapist. This affectionate nostalgia is dubbed as “reconstructive” by Svetlana Boym, a Russian professor of Slavic Literature at Harvard University who published the seminal work on nostalgia; *The Future of Nostalgia*. This reconstructive nostalgia, and especially the intense and critical reactions to this in politics and the media, has guided scholars to examine this nostalgia. But nostalgia has also been seen more positively, as “reflective” nostalgia. Instead of a sentimental feeling for times past, reflective nostalgia is seen as presenting a mirror image to progress and thereby offering a critique of the way things are going as compared to the past.⁷

Both of these views on nostalgia have been prominent in discussions on Yugonostalgia. Yugonostalgia is a specific form of so-called *Ostalgie* or Red Nostalgia, understood as expressions of nostalgia for past times in post-socialist countries. Both reflective and reconstructive forms of nostalgia can be found among the ‘ex-people’ of Yugoslavia.⁸ Mitja Velikonja has written extensively on the matter of Yugonostalgia. He also takes Svetlana Boym's distinction between reconstructive and reflective nostalgia, loosely rephrasing them into *firsthand* and *secondhand* nostalgia. The firsthand nostalgia views nostalgia in a narrow, positivistic way, as prettified memory of past events that were “actually” experienced by the nostalgics, while the

secondhand nostalgia is a constructivist nostalgia, similar to the reflective nostalgia, as something that is a narrative and social construct; something adopted, borrowed, “stolen” from the nostalgic narratives of others, which – importantly – can be felt as strongly as the firsthand one.⁹

Velikonja states that if firsthand nostalgia is “serious, imitative, obsessed with realistic reconstruction of a lost past, then secondhand nostalgia is satirical, playful, deliberately eclectic and blasphemous”, criticizing the current state of affairs.¹⁰ Velikonja focuses on secondhand nostalgia and argues that it is important to look at the way this nostalgia is constructed from the bottom up, by actors who have political or commercial interests. Although the research of Velikonja has been hugely important and his concepts instructive Velikonja neglects one crucial side of Yugonostalgia: it’s traumatic side.

As Marianne Hirsch and Leo Spitzer point out in their paper “We Would Not Have Come Without You”: Generations of Nostalgia, nostalgia has more sides than the bittersweet, reconstructive or the critical, reflective forms of nostalgia. Hirsch, a professor of English and Comparative Literature at Columbia University and Spitzer, influential Romanist, literary critic and married to Hirsch, are both coming from the field of Memory Studies and mainly concerned with research on the memory of Holocaust survivors and their offspring. Hirsch and Spitzer have investigated the memory and the nostalgia of Marianne’s parents, as well as their own nostalgia to a time and place they have not lived through, by returning to the place of these memories; their parent’s old hometown Romanian Czernowitz, modern day Chernovtsy in Ukraine. In their paper investigating the findings from this journey, they argue two things. First, that nostalgia is not a straightforward longing for the past but that it is deeply ambivalent. Second, that nostalgia can exist both *rooted* and *rootless*.¹¹

People displaced from their homes and native lands, such as Hirsch’ parents, become refugees and carry many memories with them. Positive, sweet ones but also negative and bitter memories. Their recollections of their homes are ambiguous, consisting of positive and negative sides. Or as Hirsch and Spitzer phrase it:

these sites survive in Carl and Lotte’s ambivalent remembrance through a psychic mechanism of splitting. Like the small child who endows parental images alternately with good and bad qualities, the survivor (of the Holocaust - D.D.) needs to split off nostalgic memory from traumatic memory in

order sustain the positive aspects of nostalgia. Geographical and temporal distance, and the disruption of exile or expulsion, makes it difficult to develop an integrated memory of a lost home. Conflicting memories thus coexist without being reconciled.¹²

While Hirsch and Spitzer talk specifically of Holocaust survivors, I want to argue that the coexistence of the complicating “other” of nostalgia – the traumatic, negative side of memory, alongside more sweet and nostalgic feelings – can be identified in a more broad sense, for example in former Yugoslavia.

Representations of different kinds of nostalgia and nostalgic expressions can also be found in Ugrešić’ *The Ministry of Pain*. The forms of nostalgia found in the narrative are almost always ambiguous, and this ambiguity has a dynamic of its own. Going one step further than only displaying representations of nostalgia, the next part will look at the functioning of this ambiguous nostalgia, pointed out as it alternately constructs “selves” and “others” within the novel. By this, we will have a peek into nostalgia’s nature, not merely sweet, not merely bitter, but as a bittersweet coin, with two sides.

Dynamics of Self and Other in Nostalgia

I was, naturally, well aware of the absurdity of my situation: I was to teach a subject that no longer officially existed. What we called *Jugoslavistika* at the university – that is, Slovene, Croatian, Bosnian, Serbian, Montenegrin and Macedonian literature – had disappeared as a discipline together with its country of origin.¹³

This is the situation where the author of *The Ministry of Pain*, Dubravka Ugrešić, puts her protagonist in. Far away from her home country, spatially, but even more temporally, Tanja Lukić is a professor Yugoslav literature. She is teaching and living in Amsterdam as she has left her country Yugoslavian in dismay of nationalism and war. As an exile, she finds herself lost in, and unable to deal with, the confusing and ambiguous feelings and memories she has. Tanja sets out to find dry land for herself and her students – fellow exiles.

I had the feeling that we, by reconciling ourselves with our pasts, we would also obtain the right to distance ourselves from that past. That is why I chose for that what we have most in common as our *meeting point*: the pleasant and save area of our Yugoslav past.¹⁴

Ugrešić presents some important elements in this fragment. First of all she signals the meeting point; that what they have in common, that what is pleasant and save in their memory. Second, she deems it necessary to reconcile with the past, in order to live on without it. But right before this thought, Tanja contemplates the complexity of this reconciliation, of this meeting point, when she ponders whether the evocation of these positive images from their past would not crowd out the more recent imagery of the bloody wars back home (which is a commonly heard critique on idealizing Yugonostalgia, and a perceived threat). Tanja wonders whether evocating the popular line ‘That’s how it is love, when a Bosnian kisses you’ does not disregard the grim balance of the Bosnian war all too easily. However, she comes to the conclusion that all those things, all those save and pleasant recollections and those dreadful ones, are inextricably linked; the one does not exist without the other.

Exactly this is the ambiguity of nostalgia, where the negative, traumatic memory is the flipside of those nostalgic feelings. While there is a lack of attention for the painful side of nostalgic memory in most theories on nostalgia, I argue that in *The Ministry of Pain* there are abundant representations of this complex ambiguity and of the constituting and dismantling dynamics that are found in nostalgia. As we will see, and is admirably represented with great precision by Ugrešić, these dynamics are not easily discerned as they are inextricably entangled. Traumatic and nostalgic feelings are always present in the memory, alternately implicit and explicitly, as two sides of a bittersweet coin.

As Tanja and her class are trying to find their ‘meeting point,’ Tanja turns it into a memory game. This assignment would be their class project, with the aim to catalogue the past life in their former Yugoslavia. When Ana, one of the students, responded the first, recalling the red-white-and-blue-striped ‘gipsy bag,’ Tanja instructed the class to fill this imaginary bag with all the Yugoslav objects they could come up with. “What kind of objects?” they asked. “Mental objects. Everything you remember, everything you feel is important. Our country is gone, we have to make sure that something is being saved before we forget it all.”¹⁵

Her students came up with all sorts of memories, asking whether the memory of the big televised birthdays of president Tito were something to put in the bag, or the old Yugoslav brand bike many of them had. As this could all be put into their bag, Meliha, another student asked if *burek* and *baklava* – famous pastries from the Balkan region – would also be appropriate.

Of course! And also “noodles with poppy seed!” I said. That line, from a famous song by Balašević, got everyone more excited. “If noodles are ok, than everything is right?” Nevena asked. “Everything that cheers us up” I said. “Or hurts us?” Selim asked, squinting his eyes. “And what hurts us, yes that is also good...”, “And Omarska, would that be ok”?¹⁶

This fragment illustrates a sudden turn from fluffy childhood nostalgia to recalling bloody crimes that tore up the world these kids grew up in. It is revealing what happened here. While Tanja and her students were looking for a meeting ground, they seemed to find it in their pleasant childhood memories. These memories connected them, united them, into a group with a shared past, a shared fate. But, as the explosive question by Selim shows us, this was like walking through a minefield. This explosive character of their nostalgic project had two origins. While indeed their memories of their childhood are unifying them, the fate that they now share, living in exile, filled with traumatic memories, is implicitly present in their nostalgic memories. Their nostalgic game brought them together, however, the slumbering traumatic memories of the wars that divided them were never far away. It was a mere matter of time before these would surface. It was, after all, their home country Yugoslavia – and its multiplicity of peoples that Tanja and her students represented – that had caused the wars that ruined their homes, both literally and figuratively, and had left them with their traumas. When Ugrešić writes “Here in The Netherlands, they had the feeling as being looked upon as strangers, refugees or asylum seekers, ‘Balkanians’ or children of post-communism. The land where we are coming from is our shared trauma”, she touches once more on the unifying dynamic of their memories, of their nostalgia, of their pasts.¹⁷

This dynamic from positive nostalgia that unites to traumatic memories that divide, from creating a shared “self” for Tanja and her class, to dividing them sharply as hostile “others” is found throughout the whole story. However, this dynamic, like a pendulum movement, is even a bit more complicated than that. The trauma is implicit in the nostalgia and visa versa,

like the "other" is implicitly present in the "self" and the other way around. This ambiguity is confusing Tanja's students, while at the same time their memories are their only grip in their homeless world. This confusion is making them see the evil, "othering" and traumatizing elements in their – previously – shared Slav language, when they horror at the phrase 'my child sleeps like a dead', whilst most other languages children sleep like 'a rose'.¹⁸

The unifying and dividing dynamics of the intrinsically bittersweet Yugonostalgia is most clearly and chillingly represented when Uroš, who will later on in the book commit suicide, not able to cope with his trauma, brings up an old poem from the Second World War, known and recited by countless generations of Yugoslav schoolchildren. This happens after another long and pleasant session of nostalgic memorizing, this time in the pub at the occasion of professor Lukić' birthday. All the students gave Tanja nostalgic presents, from Bosnian *urmašicas* to Macedonian *ajvar* and so on, while Ante was playing all sorts of Yugoslav songs on his accordion. After hours of drinking beer, singing songs of all Yugoslav sorts – "partisan songs, songs from the city, *sevdalinkas* from Bosnia, Serbian *kolos*, songs from Međimurje, from Dalmatia, Macedonia and the region around Vranje, and of course the songs of Hungarians and gypsies, and Slovenian polka's [...]" – they all became increasingly excited and emotional.¹⁹

"Somewhere I felt that the cup might have been emptied and that the sweet feeling of affected collective nostalgia might flip in something else." This indeed happened, when Uroš raised and started reciting the poem.

*It was in a land of peasants
in the mountainous Balkans,
a company of schoolchildren
died a martyr's death
in one day.
They were all born
in the same year
their school days passed the same
taken together
to the same festivities,
vaccinated against the same diseases,
and all died on the same day.
[...]
And fifty-five minutes*

*before the moment of death
 the company of small ones
 sat at its desk
 and the same difficult assignments
 they solved: how far can a
 traveller go if he is on foot...
 and so on.
 [...]
 A pile of the same dreams
 and the same secrets
 patriotic and romantic
 they clenched in the depths of their pockets.
 and it seemed to everyone
 that they will run
 for a long time beneath the blue arch
 until all the assignments in the world
 are completed.
 [...]
 Whole rows of boys
 took each other by the hand
 and from their last class
 went peacefully to slaughter
 as if death was nothing.
 Whole lines of friends
 ascended at the same moment
 to their eternal residence.²⁰*

“We listened to him in silence. We were not so much hit by the poem or the way Uroš recited it, but by the act Uroš committed. He had punctured the protective balloon that we had created around ourselves, and the warm flow of nostalgia was gone. The magic of a moment ago flipped into a feeling of uneasiness.”²¹ Tanja is ignorant here, and Ugrešić knows this. Right after Uroš recital, the students wonder why it always turns into a mess with them, they come to the conclusion they are sick people. The balloon was more of a bubble, inevitably bound to burst.

Like this fragment, many more can be found in the story. These fragments are representations of ambiguous nostalgia as it is felt, as it comes to the surface, and as it unites and divides Tanja and the students. In the narrative, both the ambiguity of nostalgia, the bittersweet combination of

pleasant nostalgia and traumatic memory, and the dynamics of nostalgia are represented with great detail and incredible feeling for the complexity of the puzzling phenomenon of Yugonostalgia and nostalgia in general. This is not surprising, as Dubravka Ugrešić has found and finds herself in exactly that position in which she has placed Tanja and the students. This experience enables her to create representations of the complexity of nostalgia, which has not yet been able to be captured in the writings and theorizing on Yugonostalgia.

Conclusion

In life, things sometimes turn out to entwine so much with one another that it is impossible to determine what came first and what came after, and I would not be able to say whether I am telling this story to come to an end, or to a beginning.²²

These words by Tanja at the end of the story are exemplary, exemplary of the degree to which nostalgia is entwined with trauma, and thus illustrating its inherent ambiguity. The different fragments, as well as the narrative as a whole, ooze with the complexity, the uneasiness and the discomfort of the situation in which these 'ex-people' find themselves.

Nostalgia in general, and Yugonostalgia specifically, seems to be more than the sweet, reconstructive nostalgia that is so heavily criticized and is so visually represented in the post-socialist paraphernalia and films such as *Goodbye Lenin*. It is also more than a reflective, ironic and playful nostalgia, generated by good memories and discontent with the present. Theories of nostalgia would benefit greatly if they would take a broader view and would engage in what Holocaust studies have recognized as the ambiguity of nostalgia.

It is not hard to find impressive representations of the ambiguity of nostalgia and by looking at these representations we have a special opportunity of gaining insight in the appearance and dynamics of this phenomenon of Yugonostalgia, that is viewed so often as a weird Eastern European anomaly. Nostalgia is not only a reactionary feeling, nor is it a mere constructed resistance against the present-day situation. The yugonostalgic ambiguity in *The Ministry of Pain* harbours sweetness and sorrow, and at the same time blurs the divide between the two. The book shows a complexity and dynamic of nostalgia that can be found in most

personal accounts of nostalgia, if only we are willing to see it and stop focussing solely on the positive and sentimental sides of nostalgia. Both in Ugrešić's intriguing novel, as in nostalgia itself, when there are sweet memories, the bitter is never far away.

Notes

1. Dubravka Ugrešić, *Het Ministerie van Pijn* (Breda: De Geus, 2004).
2. Joep Leerssen, 'History and Methodology', in *Imagology. The Cultural Construction and Literary Representations of National Characters*, eds. Manfred Beller and Joep Leerssen (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2007), 17-32.
3. Other titles of Ugrešić are: *Nobody's Home* (2007); *Lend Me Your Character* (2004); *Thank You For Not Reading* (2003); *The Museum of Unconditional Surrender* (1998); *The Culture of Lies* (1998); *Have A Nice Day: From the Balkan War to the American Dream* (1994); *In the Jaws of Life* (1992); *Fording the Stream of Consciousness* (1991).
4. Marianne Hirsch and Leo Spitzer, "'We Would Not Have Come Without You': Generations of Nostalgia', *American Imago*, 59, no. 3 (2002) 253-276, 258. For more on Hofer's treatise and origins of nostalgia see the seminal work of Svetlana Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia* (New York: Basic Books, 2001).
5. The original quote: "From Stettin in the Baltic to Trieste in the Adriatic, an iron curtain has descended across the Continent," by Winston Churchill's on the 5th of March 1946 at Westminster College in Fulton (Missouri), USA, paraphrase found in Maria Todorova, 'Introduction. From Utopia to Propaganda and Back', in *Post-Communist Nostalgia*, eds. Maria Todorova and Zsuzsa Gille (New York: Berghahn Books, 2010) 1-16.
6. Hirsch and Spitzer, 'We Would Not Have Come Without You', 258.
7. Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia*, introduction and chapter 1, Hirsch and Spitzer, 'We Would Have Not Come Without You', 258-259.
8. As Mitja Velikonja, professor Cultural Studies at the University of Ljubljana, has dubbed the peoples of the former Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia. Mitja Velikonja, 'Lost in Transition: Nostalgia for Socialism in Post-socialist Countries', *East European Politics and Societies*, 23, no. 4 (2009): 535-551; Mitja Velikonja, *Titostalgia: A Study for Nostalgia for Josip Broz* (Skopje: Peace Institute, 2008).
9. Velikonja, 'Lost in Transition', 538.
10. Ibid.
11. *Rooted and rootless* nostalgia is a highly interesting division and concept. It somewhat relates to Velikonja's first and second-hand division, but in this instance points more at the possibility of postmemory, or in this case postnostalgia. Postnostalgia are the nostalgic feelings for periods people haven't lived through. This nostalgia is transferred mainly in families, internalized by children of exiles and refugees, members of the 'second generation', inter and transgenerational, with a leading role for photography. More in Hirsch, *Family Frames. Photography*,

Narrative and Postmemory (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1997).

12. Hirsch and Spitzer", "'We Would Not Have Come Without You" Generations of Nostalgia', 260.
13. Due to an absence of the English translation, fragments and quotes are translated by me into English from the Dutch version: Ugrešić, *Het Ministerie van Pijn*, 45.
14. Idem, 64-65.
15. Ugrešić, *Het Ministerie van Pijn*, 60.
16. Idem, 60-61. Omarska was one of the infamous concentration camps in Bosnia-Herzegovina during the Bosnian war, in the narrative of the novel the father of the Bosnian Muslim Selim was killed there.
17. Ugrešić, *Het Ministerie van Pijn*, 63.
18. Ugrešić, *Het Ministerie van Pijn*, 97.
19. Idem, 94-101.
20. Ugresic, *Het Ministerie van Pijn*, 99-101. Poem by Desanka Maksimovich, trans. by Sarah O'Keeffe, http://guskova.ru/~mladich/Desanka_Maksimovich/krvava_bajka_en (accessed on June 09, 2013).
21. Idem, 101.
22. Ugrešić, *Het Ministerie van Pijn*, 263.