

Un/worlding Literature: Dubravka Ugrešić as a Post-multinational Writer

Vladimir Biti

University of Vienna

Corresponding author emails: vladimir.biti@univie.ac.at

Abstract: In Dubravka Ugrešić's view, the usual celebration of the historical events of unification tends to disregard their disuniting corollaries. The right to the happiness of ones results in the unhappiness of others who, in given circumstances, must invent their mode of survival. The case in point are today's East Europeans, the inferiority of whose position in the united space of Europe is all too often disregarded. Faced with the West European 'marketing' unification of Europe, they adopt the technique of 'breathing under water' in order to survive. Considering literature, Ugrešić renders this asymmetry as follows: On the one hand the West European writers, tacitly supported by their worldwide acknowledged national traditions, confidently pave the way for the post-national market of world literature. On the other hand, the East European writers of petty post-multinational literatures are coerced to enter this market under their national labels. The latter transform them into exotic commodities, thus exemplifying what Heidegger called unworlding (*Entweltlichung*). As a result, world literature amounts to a discriminatory category that worlds some writers at the price of unworlding others. This polarization of its celebrated unification recalls the bifurcating effects of liberal democracy. "What democratic freedoms are left to the vast majority of people," Ugrešić asks, "who do not have money to pay a lawyer, dentist, doctor, educate their children, or provide them with a roof over their heads." In the final effect, willingly or not, world literature keeps (re)producing unworlded writers who master only one skill, breathing on the reed. In her writerly strategy Dubravka Ugrešić epitomizes this skill.

Keywords: worlding, unworlding, nationalism, multinationalism, breathing on the reed.

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Although Dubravka Ugrešić used to describe herself as a post-national or transnational writer, the hitherto unimplemented category of a post-multinational writer fits her much better. In the post-imperial world of emerging new nation-states, the socialist Yugoslavia's multinational populace was administered on the traditional imperial model, which provided Tito the attribute of 'the last Habsburg' (A. J. P. Taylor). Already toward the end of the eighteenth century the Emperor Joseph II established the Habsburg Empire's modern principle of administration, the much celebrated 'unity in diversity' (*Einheit in Vielfalt*). His replacement of Latin with German as the language of imperial institutions anticipated the unifying principle of the French Empire, whose political cohesion, efficiency and expediency, as is known, relied on the command of French¹. It is true that this seemingly generous principle of unification only gained international visibility with Napoleon's civic code, but in fact the Emperor Joseph II bears merits for its invention². Unfortunately, in retroactive perspective, its corollary was the tacit discrimination of his Empire's 'provincial' languages. His allegedly egalitarian unification of the Habsburg territory, that is to say, effectuated an asymmetry between its *civic* and *ethnic* residents. Since the Austrians spoke imperial German, they did not experience themselves in the 'retrograde' ethnic but rather 'progressive' civic terms, which is why solely the non-German speakers were considered entrapped in their ethnicity³. From the Austrian point of view, these 'provincials' obstinately refused to embrace the key instrument of their cultivation, thus failing to carry out the envisaged linguistic standardization. Because of such 'unreasonableness' of the Empire's 'ethnic families' (*Volksstämme*), the imperial administration applied different administrative policies upon them than upon the 'supranational' citizens. Whereas among the latter it fostered the emergence of the future-oriented individual identities, among the former it stimulated adherence to the past-addicted collective ones.

1. Brian Vick, "Language and Nation," in *What Is a Nation? Europe 1879–1914*, ed. Timothy Baycroft and Mark Hewitson (Oxford University Press, 2006), 159.

2. See Pieter Judson, *The Habsburg Empire: A New History* (The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2016), 77.

3. See Mark Cornwall, "The Habsburg Monarchy," in *What is a Nation? Europe 1879–1914*, ed. Tymotheny Baycroft and Mark Hewitson (Oxford University Press, 2006), 174–76.



After the collapse of European empires, such surreptitious 'egalitarian discrimination' was resumed by the socialist multinational composites, the Soviet Union and Yugoslavia⁴. According to Rogers Brubaker, the Serbs in Yugoslavia, like the Russians in the Soviet Union, did not only take Serbia to be their home but rather the whole multinational country.⁵ At the same time, the Yugoslav citizens of other, less numerous nations were torn apart between the political *affiliation* to their country and emotional *affinity* to their *Heimat*.⁶ After their secret longing thus parted ways with their official belonging, a subversive in-betweenness⁷ became their mode of existence. It nurtured unpredictable 'volcanic eruptions' in response to the varying intensity of the supranational pressure that was exerted upon them.

Supranational ideology was at the core of Yugoslav identity building. Following the Austro-Hungarian imperial practice, Yugoslavia "thwarted the emergence of modern national identities in the name of multinational or transnational harmony."⁸ Although the rights of its nations were officially acknowledged, they were expected to behave responsibly toward their 'shared heritage,' which was tacitly established and shaped by 'supranational' institutions. Since 'shared heritage' was the only binding force of Yugoslav nations, state citizens were obliged to constantly reaffirm it in their daily activities. Katherine Arens placed its incessant refreshing, reworking, and renegotiating at the basis of Yugoslavia's identity politics.⁹ However, it escaped her that precisely the 'supranational' construction of these 'shared values' ultimately fostered the state's national compartmentalization.¹⁰ As Robert Donia put it with regard to the Habsburg Bosnia and Herzegovina that was taken as the model for Yugoslavia's constitution¹¹: "[S]ecular education, far from churning out local followers of the regime, incubated resentment of colonialism and spawned revolutionary intellectuals who turned to radical European ideologies for their inspiration."¹²

Thus, by unreservedly resuming the Austro-Hungarian 'egalitarian discrimination,' Yugoslavia accepted to raise vipers in its bosom. Eventually, under the pressure of accumulated disappointments and frustrations during the country's two different political phases, the 'ethnic' representatives of its nations rejected its 'supranational' paternalism. They found the inspiration for their resistance in the East Central-European national revolutions (1848) whose carriers equally detected particular political interests behind the seeming supranational administration of their states. Countering the rise of the West European post-national ideology, step by step, East Central Europe entered "a *post-multinational* era through the wholesale nationalization of previously multinational political space."¹³ In this 'retrograde' part of Europe, contrary to the 'progressive' Western one, nations were on rise.

However, it has escaped the attention of experts up to date that the disintegration of multinational political entities such as the Soviet Union, Yugoslavia and Czechoslovakia resulted in what might be described as a *jockeying for supranationalism* between their former constituents and now nations in their own right. Their 'ideological self-purification' took the shape of *nesting supranationalisms*, as one might call the counterpart of what Milica Bakić-Hayden dubbed 'nesting orientalisms'.¹⁴ If the representatives of nesting orientalisms never stop (re)affirming the supremacy of Western culture, the representatives of nesting supranationalisms are at constant pains to (re)assert the superiority of supranational impartiality. They refuse responsibility for the 'dirty' nationalism by transferring it on others. It is *them* who are nationalists, the 'supranationalists' claim, since we are above such subjugation of others to our narrow-minded and selfish agenda! Such self-exculpating blaming of blinded others—regularly launched by the weak and/or denigrated agencies—is certainly not a recent invention but a maneuver with a long tradition. Taking advantage of it, the long-term objects of humiliation strove to transform themselves into their proactive subjects.

Thus, endeavoring to consolidate their fragile national identity, already the leading German intellectuals of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century stigmatized the Slavs as a self-enclosed bunch of 'ethnic families' (*Völkerstämme*). Johann Gottfried Herder, for example, portrayed them as the "dragged-along (*mitgezogene*),

4. See Rogers Brubaker, *Nationalism Reframed: Nationalism and the national question in the New Europe* (Cambridge University Press, 1996), 23–54.

5. See Brubaker, *Nationalism Reframed*, 74.

6. See Brubaker, *Nationalism Reframed*, 1–10.

7. Homi Bhabha, "Culture's In-Between," in *Questions of Cultural Identity*, ed. Stuart Hall and Paul Du Gay (Sage, 1996).

8. Karen Barkey and Mark van Hagen, "Conclusion," *After Empire: Multiethnic Societies and Nation-Building. The Soviet Union and the Russian, Ottoman, and Habsburg Empires*, ed. Karen Barkey and Mark van Hagen (Westview Press, 1996), 185.

9. See Katherine Arens, "Central Europe and the Nationalist Paradigm," *Center for Austrian Studies. Working Paper 96-1* (University of Minnesota, 1996). <http://hdl.handle.net/11299/90604>. Last access 16 December 2024.

10. See Regina Bendix, "Ethnology, Cultural Reification, and the Dynamics of Difference in the Kronprinzenwerk," in *Creating the Other: Ethnic Conflict and Nationalism in Habsburg Central Europe*, ed. Nancy M. Wingfield (Berghahn Books, 2003).

11. See Ana Foteva, *Do the Balkans Begin in Vienna? The Geopolitical and Imaginary Borders between the Balkans and Europe* (Peter Lang, 2014), 102.

12. Robert J. Donia, *Sarajevo: A Biography* (University of Michigan Press, 1996), 88.

13. Brubaker, *Nationalism Reframed*, 2–3.

14. See Milica Bakić-Hayden, "Nesting Orientalisms: The Case of Former Yugoslavia," *Slavic Review* 4, no. 54 (1995): 917–931.

auxiliary or serving peoples.”¹⁵ Being submissive and incapable of independence, characterized by a “terrible slavish inertia” (*Knechtsträgheit*),¹⁶ in his view they cannot qualify for the status of a proper nation that contributes to humanity. Like Native Americans in somewhat later Hegel’s rendering, they are used to obedience¹⁷ characteristic of people captured in the state of spiritual infancy and too immature for statehood.¹⁸ Herder accordingly advises the Slavs to stick to their myths, legends, rituals, customs, prejudices, parochialism, and mob-judgment.¹⁹ This encouraged Friedrich Engels to depict them in 1849 as a ‘people without history,’ i.e. passionately involved into their petty battles and unable to see larger developments beyond their local fence.²⁰ Although geographically belonging to Europe, they in fact much more resemble the Indians whose “idyllic village communities,” according to Karl Marx’s portrait of 1853, restrain “the human mind within the smallest possible compass.”²¹

This haughty imperial attitude was considerably softened in the successor states of the collapsed East-Central European empires in the aftermath of the First World War. As the German Jewish scholar Erich Auerbach remarked in a letter of 3 January 1937 to the other German Jew Walter Benjamin, his hosts Turks who are “used to slavery and hard but slow labour” (*gewohnt an Sklaverei und harte, aber langsame Arbeit*) nevertheless proved to be full of vitality.²² The German-Jewish exile who found his refuge in Istanbul concludes accordingly that these ‘exotics’ should be tolerated and accepted despite their primitivism that reminds him of the South Europeans.²³ His tolerant attitude to the ‘improper Europeans’ was anticipated by the prominent Austrian-Jewish writer Hugo von Hofmannsthal, himself stranded on the ruins of his Empire, who believed that Slavs can help the more mature European nations recall their childhood, stop their disintegration and reunite their societies. In terms of such soft colonialism committed to the affirmation of the ethnic other’s peculiarity, the ‘barbarians’ were invited to integrate into humanity, yet only as members of retrograde groups that require steady cultivation.²⁴ In fact, they were acknowledged only as long as their supposed inferiority nurtured their caretakers’ feeling of superiority that was for one reason or another seriously endangered.

In this way, the inclusion of Slavs “in the realm of the human” became “precisely the source of their exclusion.”²⁵ Around the mid of the nineteenth century, this conviction translated into the “first political fundamentalism” that rested on “two propositions: one, that every colonized group has an original and pure tradition [...] and two, that every colonized group must be made to return to that original condition.”²⁶ Such ‘paternal despotism,’ celebrated by Marx and Engels as the best way to administrate the Slav peoples without history, was omnipresent in modern Austrian literature.²⁷ In an essay of 1915, for example, Hofmannsthal admires the victorious Habsburg general Prince Eugen of Savoy (1663–1736) because he generously made the conquered Slavs benefit “from their bondage, leading them by his wise and skillful rule to the economic prosperity and a homogeneous community of peoples.”²⁸ In fact, this praise of general’s two centuries old supranationalism was Hofmannsthal’s response to the Austrian army’s bitter contemporary defeats from the Serbian ungrateful ‘nationalists.’

However, not only the representatives of the weak successor states embraced supranational attitude in order to heal their national wounds. Inheriting frustrations from imperial times, the leaders of the new multinational states resumed the same paternal despotism in their domiciles’ internal distribution of power. This is how ‘egalitarian discrimination’ became the political agenda of the two successive Yugoslavias, the interwar and the post-war one. In both, the ‘supranational’ Serbs who considered themselves the biggest victims of the centuries-long Austrian

15. Johann Gottfried Herder, *Ideen zur Philosophie der Geschichte der Menschheit*, in *Werke in zehn Bänden*, ed. Martin Bollacher et al., vol. 6. (Deutscher Klassiker Verlag, 1989), 702, trans. mine.

16. See Herder, *Ideen zur Philosophie*, 698.

17. See Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, “Race, History, and Imperialism: Geographical Basis of World History,” in *Race and the Enlightenment*, ed. and trans. Emmanuel Chukwudi Eze (Wiley, 1997), 113.

18. See Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *Elements of the Philosophy of Right*, trans. Allen W. Wood (Cambridge University Press, 1991), 378.

19. See Johann Gottfried Herder, *Auch eine Philosophie zur Bildung der Menschheit*, ed. Bernhard Suphan, in *Sämtliche Werke*, ed. Reinhold Stieg. Vol. 5 (Adamant, 1891), 510.

20. See Friedrich Engels, “Der demokratische Panslawismus,” in Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *Werke*, vol. 6 (Dietz, 1970).

21. Karl Marx, “The British Rule in India,” in *Marx Engels Gesamtausgabe*, ed. Internationale Marx-Engels Stiftung. Vol. 12 (De Gruyter, 1984), 173.

22. Erich Auerbach, *Die Narbe des Odysseus. Horizonte der Weltliteratur*, ed. Matthias Bormuth (Berenberg, 2017), 132.

23. See Auerbach, *Die Narbe*, 132.

24. See -Loup Amselle, *Affirmative Exclusion: Cultural Pluralism and the Rule of Custom in France*, trans. Marie Todd (Cornell University Press, 2003), 7.

25. Michael Rothberg, *Multidirectional Memory: Remembering the Holocaust in the Age of Decolonization* (Stanford University Press, 2009), 57–58.

26. Mahmoud Mamdani, *Define and Rule: Native as Political Identity* (Harvard University Press, 2012), 50.

27. Adam Kozuchowski, *The Afterlife of Austria-Hungary: The Image of the Habsburg Monarchy in Interwar Europe* (University of Pittsburgh Press, 2013), 72–77.

28. Nino Nodia, *Das Fremde und das Eigene: Hugo von Hofmannsthal und die russische Kultur* (Peter Lang, 1999), 63, translation mine.



imperialism, became state citizens so to say by birth, whereas the representatives of other nations, to qualify for the same citizenship, were first expected to detach themselves from their petty 'local' languages. These were considered a sort of 'dialectal deformation' of the central language. They were advised to learn Serbian language, as the popular saying went—"Speak Serbian so the whole world can understand you!"—in order to make themselves understandable. If the 'dependents' nevertheless 'irrationally' adhered to their language and culture, their Serbian 'parents' placed them under the constant care and protection, which, after the 'silly infants' decided to part ways with their 'caring' parents, suddenly acquired aggressive and violent shape.

Finally, no less than the socialist Yugoslavia itself, the new nation-states that emerged after its dismemberment inherited ethnically, religiously and culturally mixed population. Following the supranational model of their predecessors, their political elites started to wall off their non-national co-citizens, marking them as 'national minorities.' As in the soft colonialist period of the late empires, all 'peripheral' citizens were expected to belong to one and *only one* ethnic or national group.²⁹ Concerning late imperial minorities, public authorities stressed their sense of belonging to particular ethnicity at the expense of their supranational citizenship.³⁰ Put under the analogous pressure of their new states' 'nationalizing nationalisms,'³¹ new minorities, for the sake of their defense, forged transborder national alliances with their external homelands. This resulted in what William E. B. Du Bois, in the colonial context, described as 'double consciousness.'³² As in imperial times, the non-national citizens of the new nation-states were continuously torn between the political affiliation to their state and emotional affinity to their homeland, which was a potentially explosive mode of existence. In addition to this kind of danger, the new nation-states' political bodies were also imperiled by the internal 'zones of national indifference,'³³ remnants of multinational times which, unlike their new domiciles, welcomed hyphenated identities. These unprocessed residues of the new nation-states' accelerated nationalizing operations developed an intra-active transnationality, resisting both their states' nationalism and internationalism. In the understanding of the 'zones of national indifference,' if the declared egalitarianism of nation-states ultimately fosters the inequality of their residents, this is because the declared egalitarianism of the so-called international community surreptitiously promotes the inequality of its constituents. The latter inequality instigates and underpins the former. In both cases, there is a supranation which controls and governs relations. Zones of national indifference, in their turn, aim to exempt themselves from such egalitarian discrimination.

I propose to read Dubravka Ugrešić as a writer of precisely such a zone who suspects all 'egalitarian' projects of political unification, envisioning in lieu of them a nationally indistinct and politically non-identifiable togetherness of human beings. In her view, no political elimination of differences between them is bereft of its initiators' compensatory interests. Undeniable as it is, the right to the happiness of ones, as soon as it materializes, results in the unhappiness of others. The case in point is the widely celebrated fall of the Berlin Wall, which, while having liberated the East Germans, opened the door wide for the pernicious Westernization of other East Europeans. Embracing the model of Western nation-states, it did manage to reunite Germany but it simultaneously triggered the political dismemberment of Yugoslavia. According to the narrator's indicative remark in Ugrešić's novel *Fox*, "barely a quarter of a century has passed since the fall of the Wall, the dam burst and the water drowned millions of people like ants."³⁴ Next to sentencing innumerable Yugoslavians to the horrors of exile, the country's collapse terrified the rest of its residents, pinned them to the wall of nationhood, stripped them of alternatives, and nullified their complex identity by an imposed demonization of the "other." Yugoslavia was erased from the world map and Yugoslavians sentenced to the apocryphal existence of people who, due to their adherence to national indifference, were doomed to breathe on the reed. Beyond her personal destiny, Ugrešić recognized in their violent unworlding her literary destiny as well.

Unworlding takes place whenever a pressure from above "polices" an uneven political space, suppresses conflicts among its constituents, appropriates and translates everything into its own identity parameters³⁵. It presents itself as consensual although its all-equalizing pressure in fact discriminates those who do not fit its parameters³⁶. Spreading in the form of globalization, it narrows down the space of such 'misfits,' ultimately depriving them of "the right of bearing rights."³⁷ Instead of uniting, its platform of commonality thus divides and polarizes, invoking

29. See Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the origin and spread of nationalism* (Verso, 1991), 163–185.

30. See Gerald Stourzh "Ethnic Attribution in Late Imperial Austria: Good Intentions, Evil Consequences," in *The Habsburg Legacy: National Identity in Historical Perspective*, ed. Ritchie Robertson and Edward Timms (Edinburgh University Press, 1994), 81.

31. Brubaker, *Nationalism Reframed*, 4.

32. William E. B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk* (Vintage, 1990), 8.

33. See Tara Zahra, "Imagined Noncommunities: National Indifference as a Category of Analysis," *Slavic Review* 1, no. 69 (2010): 93–119.

34. Dubravka Ugrešić, *Lisica* (Fraktura, 2017), 166, translation mine.

35. See Jacques Rancière, *Disagreement: Politics and Philosophy*, trans. Julie Rose (University of Minnesota Press, 1999), 21–42.

36. See Giorgio Agamben, *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*, trans. Daniel Heller-Roazen (Stanford University Press, 1998), 63, 112, 181.

37. Hannah Arendt. *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, (Harcourt, Brace & Jovanovich, 1979), 299–300.

various kinds of resistance depending on the kind of labels that it distributes as its 'entrance tickets.' The inventor of the concept of unworlding (*Entweltlichung*), Martin Heidegger, described it as a "presumptuous handling" (*vermessender Umgang*), which allocates the *things* of the world to a mathematically measurable space of earthly facts.³⁸ In this way the things, which people used to *identify with* by delving into the familiar labyrinths of their worldliness, turn into calculable and manipulable items which they are henceforth, from a detached position, expected to *identify as* abstract commodities. Such marketing reorganization of the world drives many of its unfit residents, bereft of the prerequisites for the participation in the upcoming competition, into "breathing underwater." The case in point are the politically and economically underdeveloped East Europeans. Targeting the putative universality of democracy in the united Europe, Ugrešić asks: "What democratic freedoms are left to the vast majority of people who do not have the money to pay a lawyer, dentist, doctor, educate their children, or provide them with a roof over their heads."³⁹ She points out that whereas West Europeans join their forces in the fight against ageing, old people in East Europe kill themselves out of despair because of their miserable living conditions. While Westerners hardly strive to materialize their right to personal happiness, her countrymen passionately embrace their right to unhappiness. Their superiority complex grows out of the self-pity of eternal victims who turn their defeats into victories. Nevertheless, she identifies with such enforced losers, portraying them as "people who are secretly paving the way for the future unification of Europe" and calling them "members of the resistance movement" in the territory occupied by Western globalization.⁴⁰

Future Europe must resist the imported 'American' tendency⁴¹ of attributing market labels to each of its products, i.e. transforming its literature into a Eurosong competition in which everyone represents their country⁴². Such "identification baggage burdens the literary text," changes "its essence and meaning," and reduces it to a position in a "geopolitical field."⁴³ Being tacitly structured by the allegedly universal literary values of the big West European literatures, literary market thus exerts geopolitical terror on small literatures, coercing them to represent local, regional and ethnic peculiarities. However, East European writers borrow from colonized peoples the method of 'subversive mimicry'⁴⁴ in order to survive in such a 'happily' globalized world. They appropriate the discourse preferred by Westerners and pack into it the contents preferred by Easterners⁴⁵. Their consistent refusal to take political sides—as the key feature of their 'zones of indifference'—recalls the "either-and-or principle" of eternal postponement, which Robert Menasse singled out as the Austrian mentality's peculiarity.⁴⁶ Claudio Magris described the same hibernation strategy as "a squeamish muddling through" political alternatives (*zimperlisches Fortwursteln*)⁴⁷ whereas Ugrešić, extending it on all East Europeans, compares it with the 'breathing on the reed': "My memes are active, they remember the ancient Slavic art of breathing underwater."⁴⁸ It is from this faceless and indeterminate zone that she sends her subversive "letters in a bottle" to an allegedly "unspecified audience," supporting "the foundations of the future new literary house that will be called transnational literature and transnational culture."⁴⁹ This is her way to revise and reconfigure 'world literature' that, in its corrupted existing form, prevents the nationally indifferent writers of small literatures who refuse to accept national labels, to enter it.

There is a clear link between her insistence on writing from an 'outside of nation-zone'⁵⁰ and her addressing of an 'unspecified audience'⁵¹ because in this 'faceless' way she believes to be circumventing marketing mechanisms. When readers know beforehand whether an author is male or female, "belongs to a big or small literature [...], is young or old, Mongolian or English [...] homosexual or heterosexual,"⁵² literature falls victim of "media manipulation" and "the production of lies."⁵³ She refuses such marketing construction of her 'authorial persona,'⁵⁴ preferring to

38. See Martin Heidegger, *Sein und Zeit. Gesamtausgabe*, vol. 2, ed. Friedrich Wilhelm von Herrmann (Vittorio Klostermann, 1977), 111.

39. Dubravka Ugrešić, *Doba kože* (Fraktura, 2019), 68, translation mine.

40. Dubravka Ugrešić, *Nikog nema doma* (Devedeset stupnjeva, 2006), 119, translation mine.

41. Ugrešić, *Nikog nema doma*, 130.

42. Ugrešić, *Nikog nema doma*, 184.

43. Ugrešić, *Nikog nema doma*, 184–185, translation mine.

44. See Homi Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (Routledge, 1994), 94–132.

45. Ugrešić, *Nikog nema doma*, 226.

46. See Robert Menasse, *Das Land ohne Eigenschaften: Essay zur österreichischen Identität* (Sonderzahl, 1993), 16.

47. See Claudio Magris, *Der habsburgische Mythos in der österreichischen Literatur* (Otto Müller Verlag, 1966), 29–31.

48. Dubravka Ugrešić, *Europa u sepiji* (Profil, 2014), 31, translation mine.

49. Ugrešić, *Europa u sepiji*, 208, translation mine.

50. See Ugrešić, *Europa u sepiji*, 273–288.

51. Ugrešić, *Europa u sepiji*, 208.

52. Ugrešić, *Europa u sepiji*, 277–278, translation mine.

53. Dubravka Ugrešić, *Doba kože* (Fraktura, 2019), 68, translation mine.

54. Ugrešić, *Doba kože*, 241.



remain indistinct like the young rebels from the New York Zuccotti Park. In fact, she identifies the genre of her writings as a "rebel confession," which was invented by Fyodor Dostoevsky in his *Notes from the Underground*. But, because being a woman, she cannot count on readers' compassion that would promote her into a tragic hero like that of Dostoevsky's⁵⁵. Having to fight her own battle, she instead identifies with the forgotten ancient Greek heroine Parthenope as a symbol of the fight for artistic excellence, for high artistic standards, an anticipatory fighter against the horrifying modern noise, but also a symbol of unprecedented naivety: namely, most people are born with wax in their ears.⁵⁶ The only way for Ugrešić to break through that wax is therefore by drumming, i.e. taking recourse in a forgotten, faceless, and inarticulate technique of expression. From various zones of indistinction, she remarks, rebels "voice themselves by drumming." Nobody knows if they will one day pour out from this "limited space" into the streets "by joining those from London, Barcelona, Athens, Amsterdam, Berlin, Zagreb, Moscow and who knows where else."⁵⁷ From her indeterminate zone of indifference, she is drumming like them to invoke, one day, such an unrestrained world-wide solidarity. Until this happens, she must parasitize on the body of world literature in the same self-defaced way that her compatriots refugees are compelled to parasitize on the bodies of their hostlands.

In her novel *Fox*, a Japanese tourist guide puts forth the following significant reflection: "World literature is comparable to a whale, on which, like skilled pirates, sucker fishes are attached. They stick to the whale's body and suck pests from its skin. They use whales as a source of food, protection and means of transportation. But if these sucker fishes would not exist, the whale's body would be inhabited by intruders and it would disintegrate."⁵⁸ Let us translate the delineated unchosen cohabitation of whales and tiny sucker fishes into our terms: Whales are the writers of big literatures who do not need national attributes to make themselves visible. Sucker fishes are the writers of small literatures who certainly need such attributes to affirm their identity, but Ugrešić for her part, resolutely refusing national labels, prefers to vegetate as an invisible 'footnote' on the big writers' texts. Deliberately subordinating her insignificant position to the significant supra-position of 'whales,' she patiently feeds on their texts up until these, one day, become her own footnotes. This 'weak messianic' agenda recalls what Theodor Adorno once aptly designated as 'overwintering strategy.'⁵⁹

According to the narrator of Ugrešić's *Fox*, we all are footnotes, many of us will never have the chance to be read, we all are in a perpetual and fierce fight for our life, for the life of a footnote, to stay afloat before, regardless of all our efforts, we sink. Everywhere and ceaselessly, we leave traces of our existence, of our struggle against meaninglessness.⁶⁰ At the same time, others leave the invisible traces of their existence in our bodily memory archive. As a result, the narrator wonders if, so to say, we are not walking texts, moving around with numerous "revisions" of ourselves, of the existence of which we have no idea. What if the biographies of other people, whose existence we know nothing about, are constitutive parts of our own biography? What if these texts grow into us, what if each of us is inhabited by secret tenants⁶¹? This hybrid and composite nature of our selves can occasionally make our stories escape our control, act like rotating grass sprinklers and spray in various directions⁶². But if we manage to come to terms with this inescapable because unchosen cohabitation with others, Ugrešić believes, our story becomes capable of constant metamorphosis, feeding itself on everything that it runs into on its way, such as for example the personal history of its creator, bits of gossip, deep scholarship, daily politics, high and low culture, and certainly the irresistible labyrinths of the past. Following this whimsically squirming thread, she surreptitiously transforms her story into a kind of Moloch that ceaselessly demands new 'sacrifices,' expanding its appetite in all directions. Gradually, her life story's "appetite for alterity"⁶³ becomes enormous.

We all are but stories that we have not authored ourselves, she seems to believe, and when we pass away, if luck serves us, our immortality will be found in another such story. However, instead of waiting for such luck to happen, Ugrešić takes care to ensure her immortality beforehand by making her story as multidirectionally connectable as possible. As the narrator of her *Fox* spells out explicitly,⁶⁴ all boils down to the question who, in order to promote

55. Ugrešić, *Lisica*, 118–119.

56. See 111.

57. Ugrešić, *Europa u sepiji*, 21–22, translation mine.

58. Ugrešić, *Lisica*, 47–48, translation mine.

59. Theodor Wiesengrund Adorno, *History and Freedom: Lectures 1964–1965*, ed. Rolf Tiedemann, trans. Rodney Livingstone (Polity, 2004), 172.

60. See Ugrešić, *Lisica*, 34.

61. See Ugrešić, *Lisica*, 231.

62. See Ugrešić, *Lisica*, 231.

63. Kaja Silverman, *The Threshold of the Visible World* (Routledge, 1986), 181.

64. See Ugrešić, *Lisica*, 241.

and expand his or her own story, at the end of the day turns the other into its footnote. This means that the aforementioned jockeying for an all-devouring, Moloch-like supra-position never reaches its end. Despite the declared non-selfish objectives of Ugrešić's narrative authority, it does not exempt itself from this ongoing struggle but acts as its deeply involved 'small national' participant. Étienne Balibar once aptly remarked that, with regard to national bias, no "neutral position or discourse," no *supra-position* above the fray is available.⁶⁵ Yet the therapeutic chimera of supranational position nevertheless keeps operating as the mediator of the dialogue between the 'big' and 'small' national aspirations, an irresistible tool of self-empowerment on both sides. This remedial chimera sets in motion the idea of world literature. But however generous intentions a project of literature's worlding puts on its banner, it cannot but cast the shadow of literature's unworlding. Whatever its language, genre and modality, no literature applies equally to all. Precisely this unprocessed residue of its application pushes literature into restarting its un/worlding again and again.

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65. See Étienne Balibar, *Politics and the Other Scene* (Routledge, 2002), 57.



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