

Praise for Dubravka Ugresic

“Like Nabokov, Ugresic affirms our ability to remember as a source for saving our moral and compassionate identity.”—John Balaban, *Washington Post*

“A genuinely free-thinker, Ugresic’s attachment to absurdity leads her down paths where other writers fear to tread.”—*The Independent*

“As long as some, like Ugresic, who can write well, do, there will be hope for the future.”—*New Criterion*

“Ugresic’s wit is bound by no preconceived purposes, and once the story takes off, a wild freedom of association and adventurous discernment is set in motion. . . . Ugresic dissects the social world.”

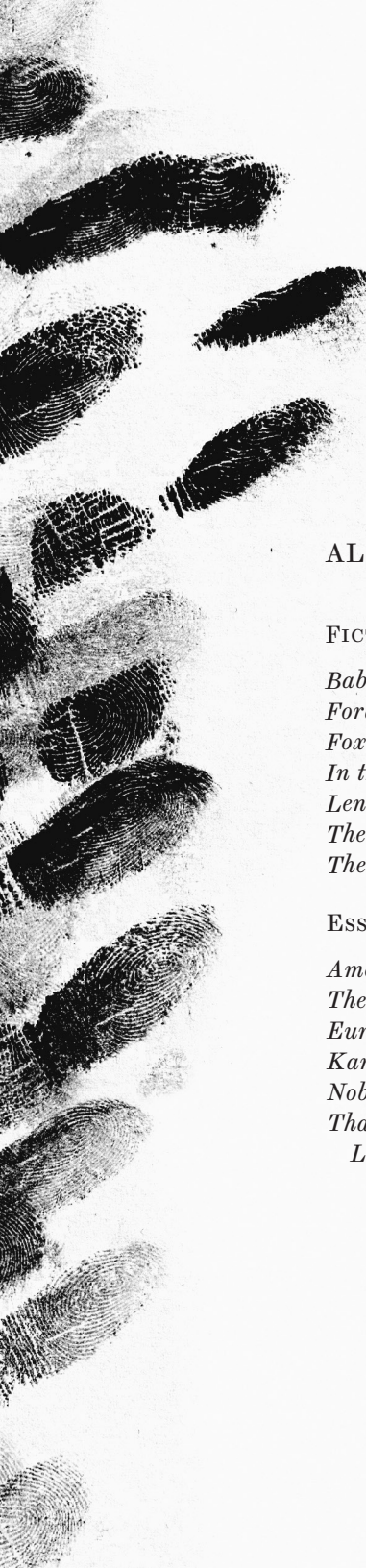
—*World Literature Today*

“Never has a writer been more aware of how one narrative depends on another.”—Joanna Walsh

“Ugresic must be numbered among what Jacques Maritain called the dreamers of the true; she draws us into the dream.”—*New York Times*

“Ugresic is also affecting and eloquent, in part because within her quirky, aggressively sweet plot she achieves moments of profundity and evokes the stoicism innate in such moments.”—Mary Gaitskill

“Dubravka Ugresic is the philosopher of evil and exile, and the storyteller of many shattered lives.”—Charles Simic



ALSO BY DUBRAVKA UGRESIC

FICTION

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Fording the Stream of Consciousness
Fox
In the Jaws of Life and Other Stories
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Nobody's Home
*Thank You for Not Reading: Essays on
Literary Trivia*

THE AGE
OF SKIN

DUBRAVKA UGRESIC

*Translated from the Croatian
by Ellen Elias-Bursac*

 **OPEN LETTER**
LITERARY TRANSLATIONS FROM THE UNIVERSITY OF ROCHESTER

Contents

The Age of Skin	3
Slow Down!	17
Why We Love Movies About Apes	31
Long Live Work!	45
Don't Take It Personally	53
Good Morning, Losers!	61
Unhappiness Is Other People	69
Invisible Europe	77
Artists and Murderers	97
Zelenko and His Missus	113
The Little Guys and "Gypsy Fortune"	121
L'écriture Masculine	131
The Scold's Bridle	145
La La People	161
A Fairy Tale Written By Feet	173
There's Nothing Here!	179
An Archeology of Resistance!?	221

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THE AGE OF SKIN

And on his way he met a man who was, with his breath, turning a millstone. The young man stood and watched. Then he stepped closer and inquired:

“What are you doing?”

“I’m grinding up people.”

Roma fairy tale

The Age of Skin

And so for a long, long time, Snow White lay there, always as fresh as she'd been when alive, she still appeared to be sleeping; all her beauty remained, for she was, as ever, white as snow, red as a rose, and her hair, black as ebony.

Brothers Grimm, "Snow White and the Seven Dwarves"

1.

I shudder when I hear the hackneyed (and strident) line that *life writes novels*. Let's be clear: if life wrote novels, there'd be no such thing as fiction. Literature may be on its last legs, but its infirmity is due not to the historic ascendance of life over literature but to literature's own self-destruction, brought about through the earnest efforts of the very people who propel the literary process: the avaricious publishers, laggardly editors, wishy-washy critics, unambitious readers, and authors lacking in talent but greedy for fame. As to the relationship between literature and life, things

stand, more or less, as follows: gossip lies at the heart of the literary story. We all love to know what happens to others, even what they ate for lunch. Big-time novels are, also, big-time gossip mills. Has this changed with the advent of new media? No, indeed, the appetite for gossip has only mushroomed. Gossipmongers tweet, text, like, post. Social networks are their natural habitat. *Reality* literature—delving with minute detail into the private lives of celebrities—has now reached its apotheosis. The earlier hagiographies on the lives of the saints have now evolved, genre-wise, into biographies, autobiographies, and memoirs. Once the greed for gossip has been whetted, putting a stop to it is a challenge. All of us are now saints. We flay our own skin, readily expose our inner organs; each of us is on display in the shop window at the local butcher's.

2.

English has a wealth of skin-related phrases: To *have thick* or *thin skin*, *get under someone's skin*, *jump out of one's skin*, *escape by the skin of your teeth*, *save your skin*, *strip down to the bare skin*, and sayings such as *beauty's only skin-deep*, *no skin off my nose*, *no skin in the game*, *skinflint*, *skinny-dipping* . . . Skin is intimate, and, as far as intimacy goes, it takes precedence over metaphors of the heart. While our heart is poised to love all of humanity, we are loved only by our skin.

The Slavic languages do not have distinct words for the two kinds of skin like English (*skin*, *leather*), or German (*haut*, *leder*), or Dutch (*huid*, *leer*), or Spanish (*piel*, *cuero*) or, for example, Italian (*pelle*, *cuoio*). Many Slavs use the same word for both our body's

envelope and the material used to cobble shoes. Perhaps this absence of linguistic diversity has to do with differences in civilization? Might this lapse in articulation be the source of the obsession with “genuine leather” among a certain class of shoppers?

Ex-Yugoslavs in the second half of the twentieth century traveled to neighboring Italy, to Trieste, to buy shoes, purses, and jackets (made, of course, of *genuine* leather). Later they trotted off to more affordable Istanbul and lugged leather clothing back to the Yugoslav flea markets. A man wearing a leather jacket and a gold chain around his neck was generally seen as a good catch. When the popularity of *genuine* leather was at its peak, the feeling was that a man wearing a leather jacket was ready for anything. Soon, cheap imitations eroded the appeal of genuine leather, and human males and females wearing leather jackets slipped for a time into the socially stigmatized human niche: “trash.” And leather slipped into a leather subculture where it became the “empress,” a fetish, a cult.

3.

Like all intellectuals with a humanistic bent, I drop to my knees before science. There is no one who can wow me more than mathematicians, physicists, astronomers, physicians, and statisticians; nobody can place things in their true perspective the way they can. So, an article was recently published in the Croatian press with the provocative title, “Countries with a fat population, like Croatia, are a burden to Earth.” Apparently, the United States holds first place as the fattest country in the world, with Croatia coming in third, right behind Kuwait. Among the skinniest are

the Asian and African countries, with North Korea in first place. The article quotes a recent study published in the journal *BMC Public Health*, which claims that the average mass of an adult on Earth is 136 pounds (significantly greater in the U.S.: 177.9 pounds). When all is added up, the world's adult population now weighs 287 million tons, of which 15 million tons are due to overweight people, and 3.5 million tons are due to obesity. Fat is distributed unequally: the people of the United States comprise only five percent of the world's population, yet account for one third of the human biomass. Professor Ian Roberts says scientists today think not about how many mouths there are to feed, but how much flesh there is. "Everyone accepts that population growth threatens global environmental sustainability—our study shows that population fatness is also a serious threat. Unless we tackle both population and fatness, our chances are slim," says Professor Roberts. The problem, therefore, is in the meat, in human flesh.

The stigmatization of fat people has found support in branches of science such as demography and ecology, medicine and socio-economics. Medicine has posited that obesity may, in fact, be contagious (the discovery of the Ad36 virus): those who fraternize with the obese may, themselves, become obese. Adele, a generously proportioned British singer, was criticized on several local TV stations in the United States during her tour. A local fitness instructor, as full of righteous indignation as only fitness instructors can be, claimed that Adele was a threat to the United States because she was sending a message to young American girls that one could be overweight and yet have great success as a singer, which was not—in the fitness instructor's humble opinion—the message young girls should be hearing. Who knows, perhaps in

the near future similar words will be heard when open season is declared on a future Adele, who will be promptly sent back to where she first dared let loose her divine voice, to the ghetto of the poor, the fat, and the talented.

4.

At one moment in history, men in black leather coats could do almost anything, but since then they have been all but forgotten. The book *Lenin's Embalmers*¹ is an unusual case of testimony about the dermis of the famous revolutionary who was the symbol of one of the greatest, the most thrilling, and perhaps, for that very reason, most catastrophic social experiments in the history of mankind. Ilya Zbarsky is the son of Boris Zbarsky, a Soviet biochemist who, with Professor Vorobyov, embalmed Lenin. Ilya Zbarsky, himself a biochemist, worked with the team of experts at Lenin's Mausoleum in Moscow for nearly twenty years. His story offers astonishing insight into the long life of a mummy, but also into the lives of the people who were involved in preserving it.

The most fascinating parts of the book are the descriptions of salvaging Lenin's skin, and the constant attention to its possible deterioration. We can only imagine how this whole team of top experts must have felt when, only two months after the (initial) embalming of Lenin's body, the special commission for assessing the condition of Lenin's corpse reported:

"The corpse had turned sallow, with more marked discoloration

¹ Ilya Zbarsky & Samuel Hutchinson, *Lenin's Embalmers*, The Harvill Press, 1998.

around the eyes, nose, ears and temples. Wrinkles and a purplish stain had appeared over the frontal and parietal lobes of the brain. The tip of the nose was covered in dark pigments, and the walls of the nostrils had become paper thin; the eyes were half open and sinking into their sockets; the lips had parted, leaving the teeth clearly visible; brown spots had appeared on the hands, and the fingernails were tinged with blue.”²

After this alarming report, Lenin’s lungs, liver, and other internal organs were removed, his eyeballs replaced with artificial ones, the inside of the body rinsed with distilled water and a powerful antiseptic, the body treated with formaldehyde, acetic acid, alcohol, glycerin, chloride, and other chemicals. This saved Lenin’s skin, and the lives, at least most of the lives, of the scientists on the team. Among the many unexplained deaths from those years was the death of Professor Vorobyov, the principal inventor of the Soviet method of embalming.

One of the “poignant” moments of the book is about Nadezhda Krupskaya (Lenin’s wife) who, with a woman’s regret, conceded—when she visited the Mausoleum in 1938—that Lenin still had a youthful look, while she had, meanwhile, aged.

By 1945, the original 1939 team of four scientists swelled to thirty-five top histologists, anatomists, biochemists, physicians, and others. Together they researched the structure of skin and subcutaneous tissue cells, and the autolytic factors causing tissue deterioration. Between 1949 and 1995, the institute associated

² Ibid. p. 79.

with the Lenin Mausoleum stepped into the international arena and embalmed the bodies of Georgi Dimitrov, Klement Gottwald, Ho Chi Minh, Agostinho Neto, Linden Forbes Burnham, Kim Il Sung, and Mongolian dictator Khorloogiin Choibalsan. By the 1990s, most of these famous mummies had been cremated or buried. Stalin’s mummy, after being displayed next to Lenin’s for nearly a decade, was cremated as well.

The Lenin’s Mausoleum team was not disbanded; instead it continued with its work, but now as a high-end funeral parlor. The customers of their costly services today are the wealthy of Russia and various underworld figures. Today, the embalmers use the same solvents as were used in the fluid for embalming Lenin, and they pump the same eight liters of these into the veins of the dead. The embalming is so effective that the body remains unchanged for as long as a year after burial. Ilya Zbarsky says that after injecting the embalming fluid into the veins, the skin of the deceased promptly changes from the bluish hue of a corpse to the color of ivory. In other words, someone who had a poor complexion during their lifetime may see it improved in death.

Today, Lenin’s Mausoleum, as an upscale funeral parlor, also sells caskets. The most sought after are the ones labeled “Made in USA.” The most expensive are the Russian caskets made of precious crystal, and the most popular is the “Al Capone,” a model copied from the casket seen in *The Godfather*.³

³ Apparently, since the demise of Communism, many morticians in the death industry have shown a creative flair. Zbigniew Lindner, of Poland, thought to enliven the business image of his casket-manufacturing company with photographs in his catalogue of caskets displayed with naked models, which appalled the more fervent Catholics among the Poles. “Our intention was to let people know that a casket

As to Lenin's mummy, its fate has been the subject of debate for several years now, and still there is no resolution. Russian newspapers and online forums reignite the discussion now and then, but only a smattering of voices air opinions for and against the Mausoleum.

5.

Peter van der Helm, proprietor of a tattoo parlor in Amsterdam, came up with the idea of purchasing pieces of tattooed skin. "Everyone spends their lives in search of immortality and this is a simple way to get a piece of it," van der Helm announced. His parlor is called *Walls and Skin*, and dozens of van der Helm's clients have already bequeathed their skin to the recently established foundation; they each pay several hundred euros for the procedure. When a client dies, a pathologist removes the patch of skin with the tattoo and sends it off for further processing. Floris Hirschfeld, a client, says: "People have animals stuffed and mounted in their homes, so why not skin? (. . .) If I can be preserved like this, yes, please." And besides, "some people mean so much to me that I want them with me always, and this is a way to accomplish this," says Hirschfeld, who had a portrait of his late mother tattooed on his back. "Vincent van Gogh was a poor man when he died. You and I can't buy a Van Gogh. Tattooing is the people's form of art," he adds.

needn't be a sacred object. Instead, I see it as a piece of furniture, the last bed you'll sleep on. It is not a religious symbol. It's a commodity," said Zbigniew, and added: "We decided to present both the beauty of Polish women and our caskets. So much effort is invested in them, yet they are seen only at the funeral."

6.

When we examine the cultural landscape surrounding us now, we begin to feel that focusing on any one thing is difficult because of the colorful array of shapes and objects. Yet if we look more closely and if, of course, hold off from snorting scornfully at ubiquitous popular culture, we might see that in this landscape now stripped of a divine hierarchy, what dominates is human flesh. The theme of human flesh under threat has long been a favorite topic of popular culture; it was the "outsiders," the aliens, vampires, zombies, and cannibals, who chomped on human skin. We find this in genre novels, comic strips, video games, and movies, and, together with a slenderer corpus of serious work, they join to build a modern mythical field for readers, building on contemporary human fears—primarily a fear for one's own skin. The trilogy of *The Hunger Games* by Suzanne Collins (the American version of an earlier novel, *Battle Royale*, by Koushun Takami) owes its popularity to a harshly draconian message: if the human individual is to preserve its own skin today, that individual will have to kill other individuals. There is a similar message in Kazuo Ishiguro's novel *Never Let Me Go* (and the screen version as well), where the world is divided into the "clones" (donors), and "normal people." A similar message is developed by Ewan McGregor and Scarlett Johansson, who play characters in *The Island*. The two of them are "harvestable beings," human clones designated for the "organ harvest."

For most people, popular-culture themes allow them to get a reading of their current reality and a sense of an imminent future. The hunt for human organs, for example, wrapped in protective,

religious-philanthropic cellophane, does, actually, exist, and the boundaries set to limit what is allowed in this arena are shifting with each passing day. The rule that organs must be harvested only from donors who have died—a practice that shocks nobody anymore—has expanded to include living donors, and then to the illegal sale of one's own organs (from blood, and so on) for the purpose of extending life. In the mythical story about organs, only the donor is (at least partially) disclosed, while the recipient remains hidden. The unnamed recipient, through illegal dealers, buys or takes whatever organs are needed, without examining their own ethical position. So it is that the boundaries limiting what is permissible spread to the point of ghoulish theft, such as in the recent news of a Chinese six-year-old who disappeared, only to be found several hours later, lying in the dust, his corneas removed. Sly organ thieves no longer come to us as aliens from outer space. Today they may be our next-door neighbors who might just be willing, for some pocket money, to point a finger at fresh and easily accessible kidneys or corneas. Even medical practice is pushing the boundaries outward by extending the life of the rich while cannibalizing the poor—blatant vampirism. For what else can we call the practice of replacing old blood with young blood, as is practiced by wealthy clients at expensive anti-aging clinics.

Popular culture—the new mythological field—helps its consumers digest indigestible reality, to make their peace with it, or accept it, or register it, or help them evade it, so ultimately they can defy it, some in one way, some in another. Popular culture does this in an incomparably more efficient manner than anyone

or any other thing. Hannibal Lecter, the protagonist of Thomas Harris's novel—which largely owes its popularity to the brilliant acting of Anthony Hopkins—has lost over the thirty years of the novel's life the profound disgust it used to evoke, and has now acquired an almost romantic caché. The antagonist, Buffalo Bill, obsessed with the idea that human skin is the most perfect fabric for use in sewing apparel, has his artistic "acolytes" today, such as Jessica Harrison, an artist who, in her "Handheld" series, exhibits miniature pieces of furniture that fit in the palm of the hand and look as if they are made from real human skin. "Skin," an art project by Shelley Jackson—who invited participants to have a single (English) word tattooed onto their skin, and, in return, receive a certificate verifying the authenticity of their word—turns Buffalo's dark obsession with human skin into the glorification of the art collective and the mortal work of art.

7.

The lines have blurred, and questions such as "What is art and what is reality?", "What is an imitation of life and what is life?", "What is an imitation of imitation?" have no obvious answers. Yet the most disturbing situation seems to be when our lives come to resemble a cheap horror flick. In January 2014, I watched as such a scene played out on a Zagreb tram. Zagreb is the capital city of Croatia. Croatia was recently granted membership in the European Union, and, as we learned from the *BMC Public Health* journal, is a "burden to Earth." All in all, Croatia is a country with a population of some four million, a half-million of whom are unemployed. The number of the impoverished there is staggering.

A modestly attired, overweight woman, getting on in years, was sitting on the tram. Next to her stood a short man who eyed her with a penetrating, edgy stare.

“So somebody, I see, is living well . . .” said the man in a vaguely general sort of way, and then peered sharply at the woman with a stare that seemed aimed at her through the bore of a revolver.

“Excuse me?” said the woman softly.

“Living well, eh . . . ?” repeated the man louder and more nastily.

“I don’t understand what you’re saying,” repeated the woman, though her facial expression showed she could only guess.

“All I’m saying is that some people sure are living it up . . .” the man would not back down.

The woman bowed her head, as if trying to make herself shrink.

“I weigh 88 pounds, I’m an engineer by training, and I’m unemployed . . .” the man lashed the woman with his words. Clearly he didn’t mind if the other tram-goers could hear.

“Is that my fault?! Why not ask for government support . . .” said the beleaguered woman, and stood up to go.

The scene was wrenching. Human flesh weighing 88 pounds was excoriating 200-pound human flesh, certain that 200 pounds of flesh could feel no hunger. And though the woman could have been the resentful man’s older sister or even mother, and though the resentful man might swear that such a thing had never crossed his mind, a practiced ear could catch in his protest the wheedle of sexual inadequacy. The woman had clearly upset him, through no fault of her own. She was like a phantom from his deepest subconscious, a banal symbol of his loserdom (fat = rich; thin =

poor). What he longed to do was punch her, wring her neck, make her bleed, bury his teeth in the flesh that weighed twice as much as his, slash the body that was sprawling on the tram seat, indifferent (“*Is that my fault?! Why not ask for government support . . .*”) to his pain.

8.

Many postcommunist, transitional societies have turned their citizens into zombies. In the twenty-first century, “social cohesion and participation” await us, as Willem-Alexander, the Dutch king, has said. “Self-management” as those quick of tongue who follow contemporary trends might call it. “Participation” and “self-management” are actually euphemisms for a scalpel-sharp message: people are being abandoned, today, to their own, bare skin.

An entire team of expert embalmers worked devotedly for years on their masterpiece, their mummy. The most famous mummy of modern times fed and clothed a full team of experts, and for a time it symbolized faith in the idea that a society of equality, brotherhood, and freedom was possible. Today’s tattoo parlors—miniature replicas of Lenin’s Mausoleum—will, for a mere four hundred euros, suspend their customers in the belief that their tattooed skin is an artwork deserving posterity. Yes, we live in the age of skin. Our age—the corpse we snuggle up next to—is not doing well. Its skin is sallow, purplish stains are surfacing, the skull from which the brain has been removed has cracked open and drawn with it the skin, threatening dark pigment is spreading everywhere, the nails are tinged blue . . . This is exhausting, the

embalming is never enough, we daub liquid powder foundation on the postmortem lividity and mask it with our bodies. The stench spreads everywhere, permeating our clothes, hair, lungs, nothing dispels it. Maybe we should throw up our hands and drag the corpse out into the sunlight. Maybe a ray of sunlight will shine upon it and ignite a spark, maybe the corpse will burst into flames all on its own. One thing is certain: fire is a powerful disinfectant.

January 2014

Slow Down!

I'm slowing down the tune,
I never liked it fast.
You want to get there soon,
I want to get there last.

Leonard Cohen, "Slow"

Zagreb, 2013

A late-autumn episode at a Zagreb post office rocked my world. I have known this post office for some thirty years: three slow-motion clerks, three windows with protective glass and a hole through which she, the clerk, and I, the recipient of her ministrations, exchange mutual, silent loathing, the dusty office plants, the philodendron, ficus, and pothos which will sooner or later be the death of them, the ladies behind the counter, a green noose tightening around their necks. The three of them, slow as Amazonian sloths, type with one finger on their keyboards, lit