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Dubravka Ugrešić and the Political Economy of Literature

We are already accustomed to the complaint that in the late twentieth century something went wrong with literature and its cultural status: everybody agrees that it ceased being the most important means of producing, exchanging and circulating images; when they meet, university professors worryingly compare notes about dropping student numbers in literature departments, and blame either weakened public education, contemporary culture, film and the Internet, or all of the above; your daily newspaper can go for weeks on end diligently reporting everything about reality show personalities of the day, without once mentioning the writers and books you grow up admiring. The public sphere the world over seems to have become infantile, trivial, over-sexualized and deliberately ignorant of what you think should matter. And to add insult to the injury, some hotels have begun to lock their minibars, a premonition of the return to the darkest totalitarian times.

With the exception of the latter, I share all of these concerns. Yet, one cannot but notice that never in recorded history have so many people had access to reading, including reading literature. More than two hundred thousand books are printed in the UK every year: this is at least one book per three hundred Brits, to be read as a printed copy, on Kindle, on your mobile phone, or to be listened as audio-book. And most of these books do find their readership. Even without formulating a conclusion resulting from carefully conducted research, based on coherent theoretical framework and exhausting collections of data, just a look at the number of passengers in the underground immersed in their books and other reading devices must reassure you that we are living in times of tremendous democratization of reading. Perhaps more reading is done at the beginning of the twentieth-first century in New York on any one day, than in a whole year a hundred years ago.

This is to a large extent a result of technological advancement: word-processors against typewriters, and e-publishing and printing press against writing of parchments or carving in stone. But technology alone could not have changed the nature of reading: historians claim that sometime in the eighteenth century the way people read changed, and instead of reading slowly and carefully one book many times over, today we read quickly and superficially many books only once. The second factor in this change, which gradually took place in the nineteenth century, was the book market. While technological changes revolutionized production, the market had the same effect on book dissemination. In conjunction with compulsory primary education and spread of literacy which European nation states introduced in the nineteenth century in order to turn peasants into Frenchmen, to use Eugen Weber's catching title,¹ these two revolutions created the astounding result: in recent years millions of readers have had an opportunity to read - *Fifty Shades of Grey*. This result makes

¹ Eugen Weber: *Peasants into Frenchmen. The Modernization of Rural France 1870 -1914*, London: Chatto & Windus, 1979.

some of us nostalgic for the times when carving in stone was the only way of expressing oneself in writing.

Of course, I am strategically exaggerating, following the model of tong-in-cheek exaggeration Ugrešić's offered in her dramatization of minibar as the last bastion of totalitarianism.² But if stripped of exaggerations, this will be, in a nutshell, the argument Ugrešić has put forward over many pages in her essays, especially in *Thank You for Not Reading*: the market has created the battle between literary works of art and literary goods, and the latter are definitely winning. Those books I admired in underground were, actually, merely literary goods; more people do read today, but the number of readers who know how to read carefully and critically is declining even among academics – this complaint is another standing item at academic gatherings, and not without reason; and among those two hundred thousand books printed in the UK every year there is precious little one would wish to preserve for the future. The main culprit is, in Ugrešić's view, the market: the logic of the market dictates the nature of literature written today, and if the aim is to sell the maximal number of copies to the widest readership available, literature must settle for the lowest common denominator, must become conformist instead of critical and challenging in its moral, political and aesthetic dimensions. If literature is charged with a task of meeting the market demand, it must give up on the tasks it had been gradually formulating for itself from the times of Romanticism, and which it reached in the best moments of Modernism: to be morally non-conformist, politically radical and aesthetically challenging. This historical construction assumes that the Modernist literature at its peak managed to occupy the position of perfect independence and autonomy with regard to moral, political and aesthetic conventions as well as the market.

However, this historical construction is the product of Modernism itself, and today we prefer to call it *aesthetic ideology**: this is how Modernism preferred to see itself in its most heroic moments. In reality, even when it really was morally, politically and aesthetically challenging – in various combinations of these three aspects - it was either indifferent to any market success and protected by independent income (Proust), day jobs (Joyce, Kafka, T.S. Eliot), patronage (Rilke), or openly and unashamedly marketable: Thomas Mann's diaries are full of his pedantic records of fees requested and received. Yet this position was experienced as the position of autonomy, and rightly so if we compare it with the previous historical constellations of heteronomy: protection from the church or a prince, or the dependence on a number of bourgeois subscribers whose patronage depended on the author's previous record of *not* challenging subscribers' moral, political and aesthetic values. The literary market in the nineteenth century was experienced as a precondition for artistic autonomy, and made possible every oppositional and critical stance. Of course there was a price to be paid for this autonomy: without independent income or powerful patronage, authors were either sentenced to regular day jobs and precarious bohemian existence, or to negotiating with the market forces and salvaging as much as possible in this give-and-take: many a Russian nineteenth-century novel could have been shorter were it not originally published in

² "Assault on the Minibar" in Dubravka Ugrešić: *Karaoke Culture*, Rochester, NY: Open Letter, 2011, pp.177-182.

instalments in one of the ‘tick’ journals, which paid monthly by word count. This was neither a fully-fledged autonomy nor a straightforward heteronomy: as NB recently claimed, the capitalist mode of artistic production is a *tension* between the two.³ But a greater degree of autonomy it certainly was.

This narrative is complicated by, as it seems from the present-day neoliberal vantage point, a *historical anomaly* to which Ugrešić frequently points: the mode of artistic production in socialist societies. Without this historical deviation, one could easily construct a teleological narrative in which technology, political developments and economic necessities all conspire towards a simple aim – the artistic production for the market, free from all other forms of heteronomy, but morally, politically and aesthetically constrained by the market. In a word, a triumph of the likes of *Fifty Shades of Grey*. The socialist mode of literary production, at least in its Yugoslav variety to which Ugrešić refers, also allowed for the market forces to take effect. There were authors who were able to achieve substantial market success, with all that goes with it, although at the price of sacrificing all morally, politically and aesthetically subversive concerns. The majority, however, was able to ignore the market: protected by the elaborate and extensive network of *social* (not state) patronage – the right to accommodation at subsidized rent, free medical and pension insurance through membership in writers’ associations, subsidized publishing companies which did not necessarily have to consider profit as their top priority and could offer writers a decent fee even for work which sold poorly – all these created conditions which encouraged writers to be morally and aesthetically, and to a lesser extent also politically subversive. Instead of imagining it as the constellation of straightforward heteronomy, as most of researchers of socialist societies do, it is more accurate to see it as a version of a tension between autonomy and heteronomy characteristic of the capitalist (but not neoliberal) mode of artistic production. The social patronage was not conditional upon explicit support for the authorities; everybody was entitled to it, providing they did not radically and explicitly question the cornerstones of the system. An example: Borisav Pekić’s novel *Hodočašće Arsenija Njegovana* (1970, translated in 1978 as *The Houses of Belgrade*) developed a full philosophy of the importance of private property, and was published in a socialist country which rested on the assumption that private property – excluding things for personal consumption – was the source of all evil. This was, of course, politically subversive. However, as the novel refrained from explicitly challenging the authorities and calling for their overthrow, the authorities did not react. Pekić’s novel is an example of morally, aesthetically and even politically autonomous, challenging and subversive literature, which thrived in a system which sheltered it from the market constraints. It is evident, however, that it had to be involved in complex negotiations between autonomy and heteronomy (withholding the call for regime’s overthrow was the price to be paid), but it is also obvious that, as full autonomy always and everywhere remains only an ideal, in this case autonomy prevails.

Why did the authorities not only tolerate such artistic production, but moreover sheltered it with an elaborate system of social patronage which neutralized the market pressure? The

³ Nicholas Brown: “The Work of Art in the Age of its Real Subsumption under Capital”, www.nonsite.org (last accessed on 24 August 2015).

usual and hasty answer to this question is: because the socialist authorities used writers as a part of the ideological state apparatus. This is inaccurate and cannot be corroborated by evidence. Although the authorities certainly welcomed all volunteer supporters with exceptional rewards, this kind of service was not required: authors' decision not to sacrifice their political autonomy, or even to use it for subversive purposes within the tolerable limits, did not provoke the loss of the entitlement to shelter from the market forces. The real reason belongs to the sphere of what is unthinkable and unmentionable in the present political climate: one of the tacit assumptions on which the socialist system in what used to be Yugoslavia was that *profit* if not the ultimate measure of everything. Based on Marx's utopian dreams of a different type of human existence, it allowed for spheres for individual and social existence which could not be subsumed under the crude means-ends rationality, and could not be measured with profit and use value. This system believed that even the smallest town should have a subsidized theatre and an art gallery, and built them everywhere: as those people who throughout their adult lives unconsciously follow their childhood dreams and leave the impression of irrationality in their behaviour, the socialist system of Yugoslavia – which could be cruel, unjust, and limiting in many other respects – perhaps unconsciously followed the childhood dream of early Marx about the fullness of human existence in which spheres without immediate use value and profit could find their rightful place. Cynics would immediately note that this might be one of the reasons for its failure. True: even if its record in other respects was brilliant, and it certainly was not, such a society would not be well placed for fierce international competition. But cynics are not best placed to appreciate the value of exploring the possibilities of language, of dreaming of the full extent of humanity, and of creating images of human existential satiation.