

EUROPE IS NOT IMMUNE TO THE VIRUS OF THE PAST

(Seminar of Georgi Gospodinov's novel *Timeshelter* at the University
of Naples "L'Orientale")

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Abstract. The report argues the meeting with the Bulgarian writer Georgi Gospodinov, awarded with the Strega price 2021, took place in the city of Naples, hosted by the University "L'Orientale". During the meeting and presentation of his latest novel, "Timeshelter", a variety of topics were discussed: from the concept of time, to the youth's hope for a better future and the impact of such a controversial, prophetic novel.

Keywords: Georgi Gospodinov; *Timeshelter*; time; past; future; memory; bomb shelter; nationalism; Bulgaria

A cycle of seminars dedicated to Bulgarian culture and history, the current social and political situation has been organized from the Department of Slavic philology, Bulgarian language and Bulgarian literature of the University of Naples "L'Orientale". Over the course of six weeks, in April and May the guests are welcomed to take part in the seminars: Bulgarian writers and italianists, Italian bulgarists, Italian experts who live in Bulgaria and professors from the university of Sofia "St Kliment Ohridski". The topics programmed are various and include different aspects of Bulgarian society and cultural life. In such a way, the organizer's intention is to catch student's attention towards the country, the relevance and beauty of Bulgarian language and literature but also to bring up possibilities of professional outlets and scientific development in Bulgaria. The involvement and synergy of the lecturers will contribute to make Bulgaria more familiar, closer and desirable, to attract friends and "ambassadors" in Bulgaria.

Gospodinov's works not only have been well-received by the Italian audience, but have met its taste very accurately. The reason for his success in Italy also lies in the precise translation work by Giuseppe Dell'Agata. Both Gospodinov's novels and short story collections: "*Romanzo naturale*" (*Natural Novel*, 1999), "*Fisica della malinconia*" (*The Physics of Sorrow*, 2012), "*E tutto divenne luna*" (*And*

all turned moon) and “*Cronorifugio*” (*Timeshelter*, 2020) and more, have been published by Volland.

As to demonstrate Gospodinov’s impact on Italian readers and public opinion, the journalist Andrea Bajani wrote an article entitled: “Gospodinov, an Eastern European Proust” (Gospodinov, un Proust venuto dall’Est), delineating a fine comparison between the two writers and their common interest in the matter of the past, seeing in the Bulgarian author, Proust’s natural heir.

The seminar of the Bulgarian writer has provoked great interest among the students. Their immediate curiosity was over what makes Gospodinov’s style so fascinating, against the background of European literary context? The answers to this question can only be partial, as we face the difficulty of reducing his kaleidoscopic style to a single genre or a few adjectives. What really pops to the reader’s eye when he tries to approach such a complex novel, as *Timeshelter*, is the thin line between the narrator and the other characters: the writer, who plays the role of narrator, and Gaustin fictitious and elusive character, who turns to be the writer’s alter ego. The readers are called to travel and discover a world that is both dystopic and actual, scary and familiar. The writer-narrator has expressed his idea to write a novel about the virus that is spreading in Europe: the virus of Alzheimer. He asserted that due to the disease, which passes through the eyes and ears, collects recent memories and burns them to ashes, the infected person is unable to live in the present. And that’s when the controversial scientist, Gaustin, comes to help by building a nursery home “of the past”: each building floor is a perfect reconstruction of one decade of the 20th century. Answering the student’s question, Gospodinov explained that the residents feel instant ease and live a fulfilled life, each of them in their decade, where everything is old, from the past. It’s a safe environment, as Gaustin likes to underline: time can’t be mixed and so the residents from different “times” (and floors) are not allowed to meet or even to get out, as they could suffer from the shock of seeing the real world. When the virus’ outbreak comes at its highest peak, the government’s of the European Union decided to take action and hold a referendum to decide in which decade of the 20th century go back to. Pros and cons of a certain decade are listed and explained, according to each country’s history, since every decade of the past, or even certain dates, can bring back political movements or historical events no one is willing to live again.

Some students noticed the thin irony that comes in different forms in Gospodinov’s masterpiece: one of them is in the use of words. In fact, the etymology of the word referendum, as he also explained during the meeting, traces back to the ancient latin “to go back” or “to refer to the past” (re-ferendum). The novel, which seems prophetic in this regard, ends with the army on the borders with Poland. It was supposed to be a staged fight, to reconstruct the beginning of the Second World War, but someone used a real shotgun and a real war began.

As the author pointed out during the event, he wrote this novel before Covid-19 outbreak and, of course, before the Russian-Ukraine crisis, but in this regard seems sadly prophetic. A variety of topics emerged during the event and from the numerous questions asked by the audience. The topic of the future has been the core of one of the questions: since we had to face a world crisis during the pandemic, the most common feeling among younger generations is that the future has been stolen from them, leaving them exposed, fragile and taking comfort in the past. At the question: is there still a future for younger generations in Europe? The answer is rather optimistic, hopefully the future will still be accessible for young people. Moreover, the author also provides a hint of what it meant to be young in Bulgaria: back in the days, the future was a promise. Time-propaganda was focused on how good the future will be compared to how bad the past was. Now, it seems like the tables are turning and the most appealing time is the past, sprinkled with nostalgia. The message within the lines of his book is that the past is good only for a short stay-over. And it's really dangerous to attempt to bring a whole society or country back to the past, because no one belongs to the past forever. No person should be doomed to live a lifetime locked in the room of the past.

Talking about nostalgia, which is a prevalent element of the past, there is a quote from the novel that got the reader's attention: in Bulgaria, described the author, there was still the image of Stalin on the bus, even after the fall of Stalin's cult of personality. And how is it linked to nostalgia? In some cases, said the author, we can come across with two different kinds of nostalgia: personal and historical. What really happens with people feeling nostalgic about some cruel regimes it's not that they miss the hard times but they rather miss who they were back in the days: maybe just a kid in the '50s, maybe a young man in his prime.

"Europe is not immune to the virus of the past". And the war between Ukraine and Russia is one of its clearest outcomes. Europe's immune system is too weak and we are falling for the disease of the past. In *Timeshelter* it's clearer than anywhere else: we live everyday in a suspended time of the past, choking with it, getting infected and ill with the virus of the past. The air we breathe seems to be the one of the 1st of September 1939 and everyday is 5 am.

The topic of nationalism was discussed, coming down from a quote to both a personal interpretation and an historical overview. For the novel's main character, there is no Bulgaria that fits him. He's struggling to find its place in that very same country that, as a jewel case, was supposed to save all his memories. And as he walks down the streets of Sofia, like a modern Orlando Furioso, obsessively and impatiently looking for himself, is left with nothing but ashes in his hands. There were two Bulgarias and none of them belongs him. There is an historical reference that might be difficult to catch for readers who are not familiar with Bulgarian history: the two faces of the same coin are represented by the revolutionary, nationalist Bulgaria of the 19th century and the nostalgic of socialism. The main

character leaves the day before the closing of Bulgarian borders. Because he knows that, if he hadn't left the country, he could have been trapped in. That's where the most personal side of the matter comes out: the inaccessibility for Bulgarians to travel to Europe during socialism is a generational trauma. The idea of being trapped, the inability to go abroad easily, is one of the wounds socialism has left. And Gospodinov's words open a window on this problem and adds a consideration: traveling for a Bulgarian nowadays has a deeper meaning. When a Bulgarian in these days travels, is carrying the legacy of a whole generation who wasn't allowed to.

Strictly speaking about politics, the nationalist party described in his work has roots in Bulgarian contemporary history. It was both an allegory and a description of reality: when the nationalist party gathers in one of the biggest parks of Sofia to hang the huge Bulgarian flag in the sky using drones, the author imagines someone shooting in the air and hitting one of the drones. As a result, the flag falls on the crowd, who start suffocating under the weight of the flag. Under the weight of nationalism.

Finally, in a world where the past seems like an odd, painful prediction of the future, *Timeshelter* is a sign of the times.

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