

SPEECH BY GEORGI GOSPODINOV

What can Literature still do ?

Dear Ladies and Gentlemen, dear Guests,

I am excited, of course... First, I owe gratitudes. I am grateful to Vera Michalski for her courage to found this prize, and to the esteemed jury members that have chosen a book coming from my part of the world. I am grateful to my translators, thanks to whom this book was read – Marie Vrinat-Nikolov in French (who is present here), Alexander Sitzmann in German, Angela Rodel in English. And also to my publishers – Intervalles, Droschl Verlag and Open Letter Books. I would like to thank the writers with which I was nominated. It was an honor for me to share this shortlist with Julian Barnes, Dzevad Krahlasan, Aatish Taseer and Navid Kermani. And I am thankful to all of you gathered here. And of course to my wife, Bilyana, and to my daughter, Raya. She was 5 when I was finishing this novel and she was always ready to help with a cat or dinosaur story when I was stuck. Raya who asked me one evening why all of my books have sad titles and I promised the next one to have a cheerful title, Physics of Joy or the like. I haven't kept this promise.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

The book, thanks to which I have the honor of speaking in front of you, is called The Physics of Sorrow. An editor gave me a friendly advice to change this title because nobody would want a novel with such a name. The sorrow doesn't sell. Have you seen a melancholy Mercedes being advertised? I didn't follow this advice. Тъга – this is how the word for sorrow sounds in my native language. The word is short but the condition it describes is long and not easy to be translated. (If now you try to say slowly ТЪ-ГА, you will feel your Adam's apple move, something getting down your throat, as an attempt to gulp, to suppress).

In the beginning was this scene that happened to be part of my childhood. A boy stays at a dusky basement room in the endless afternoons of the 1970s - his back to the dark and his face to the window. The window is at sidewalk level, the boy counts the passing feet and cats. Alone, every afternoon, with a vague feeling of abandonment. Then the Minotaur appeared – just an abandoned child with a bull’s head locked in the underground labyrinth before becoming the monster we know from the myth. The 1970s boy and the child-Minotaur shared one and the same tragic sadness. The sadness of the abandoned. I tried to write this book about the minotaurs locked inside us, about the century we lived in, seen through all its afternoons and nightfalls, through the fears of a child with enormous empathy, capable of entering other people’s stories.

Dear friends,

I come from a country that is the world champion in sorrow. The saddest place in the world – that is how Bulgaria was called by the Economist journal, according to an annual research on the feeling of happiness in different countries. While I was writing the book and wondered where this sadness was draining from, it had flooded all over Europe and, in a sense, all over the world. As a writer, I know that the long accumulated sorrow, the concealed sorrow is a dangerous thing ready to explode. That is why it should be freed, narrated, tamed through the story. It should be danced out, if you like. And this is one of literature’s capabilities.

Now I would like to say a few words about what literature is still capable of in a world like ours today.

It is capable of doing simple things. Like saving a life for example. You tell stories and thus you postpone the end. We know this best by Scheherazade - stories in exchange for life (simple deal). When the victim tells a story she inhabits another, protected zone. While the story goes on, her life is guaranteed. This is the special guarantee of literature. This is the strength of the weak one who narrates. I must have known this instinctively as a child because I always chose to read books narrated in first person. I knew the simple rule that the

hero wouldn't die as long as he or she keeps telling the story. I tell a story, therefore I am.
Narro, ergo sum.

What else can literature do?

Stand on the losing side. There are times (like our) when it is especially important to be there – on the side of the weak person, the hurt, the troubled one, Homo anxius. I find this to be an essential trait of good literature. We know that the History is written by the victors but the stories are narrated by the defeated. And they are more interesting and closer to the truth.

What else can literature do? Cultivate our taste. This shouldn't be underestimated at all, it is not just aesthetics. People of taste are less prone to the influence of cheap propaganda. They can recognize the political kitsch.

Let me remind you at this point of a few lines from *The Power of Taste*, the wonderful poem by the polish poet Zbigniew Herbert:

*It didn't require great character at all
our refusal disagreement and resistance
we had a shred of necessary courage
but fundamentally it was a matter of taste
Yes taste...*

Ladies and Gentlemen,

It seems to me we slowly begin to understand that the world cannot be explained only through the first pages of the newspapers, the political statements or markets, banks, etc. Because we are not made of economics and politics. We are made also of sorrow and hesitation, of such fragile and inexplicable, sometimes irrational things. And here comes the role of literature, of its expertise, if we use that language. I've always believed that if the politicians read more Chekhov, Proust and Borges, our crises would have been different.

We are in need of storytelling that awakens empathy. Empathy which today is important both personally and politically. We could say it is the God's particle, the glue of the human world, the Higgs boson (because we are close to the place of its discovery). The Physics of Sorrow begins with a phrase of incorrect grammar but right meaning, I hope. This is my definition of empathy: We am, or I are.

I know literature and empathy can not stop the truck that ran through the crowd in Nice but years before they could stop the man who would get into it. They could give him some other meaning. And this is not a small thing, it is everything.

A critical mass of hate and insecurity has accumulated worldwide, a madness, if you wish, that is easily multiplied and intensified by the new fast media. We are getting harshly radicalized in our opinions and words. This internal jihadism hidden in each of us is one of the most dangerous conditions today. Now the great battle goes on not just over geographic territories but **over** the territory of the human. There are limits of human nature that shouldn't be overstepped. Because historically, the human kind comes before ideologies, before states. And the migrants today are part of a great migration of sorrows. And this migration of sorrow is something we should think over and try to narrate.

Once my daughter was playing teacher at her room and asked her toy animals: "Kids, how are you today?" And then, passing behind their backs, answered: "Better than tomorrow." Probably this was just a mistake. "Better than yesterday" is what we usually say. "Better than tomorrow" implies a higher alert level. We are frozen at a point when our future is more disturbing than our past. There was more future in our past than in our today.

It seems to me that apart from the visible crises (financial, political, the exhaustion of oil reserves, etc.) there is one more invisible and much more alarming. I would call it The Exhaustion of the Reserves of Meaning. Harsh deficit of future. That is why I envisage good times for literature as generator of meaning. Something like an alternative energy source. Or a source of consolation at least for someone. Or a small suitcase, an emergency kit with

stories for every occasion. And this is not insignificant. I hope we will be able to postpone the moment when the timetable of the world will announce “Future Cancelled”.

In the end of this short laudation of literature I will only say that sooner or later everything turns into a literary topic. Our sorrows and crises, too. As Mallarme wrote in a quote much loved by Borges, “Everything in the world exists in order to end up as a book”.

Thank you, Ladies and Gentlemen, for sharing a few minutes together in one of the sentences of this world.

Thank you for the feeling.

Georgi Gospodinov