

The Invisible Crises. By GEORGI GOSPODINOV. Sofia: Janet 45. 2013. Pp. 200. £5.00. Paperback. ISBN: 978-954-491-905-4.

On the power of aesthetics and our invisible crises

*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.*

Zbigniew Herbert (The Power of Taste)

The Invisible Crises is a collection of stories and essays by Georgi Gospodinov, which have originally been written for a wide array of Bulgarian and European publications over the recent years. For the first time these stories have been published together, conjoined by the given title, at the beginning of 2013. The book is conceptually split into two parts: *The Negated World* and *Marked by Literature*.

The theme is telling and topical – these are stories of events, which are lacked and have never occurred; words of our ubiquitous miss-timings with history, the history of ourselves. They have no claim to fill the black pages of the Bulgarian contemporaneity; on the contrary, they aim to make them seen, to problematize the notion of their very existence, to lead each and every one of us to dig deep and search within ourselves for our one (in)visible crisis.

The personal is political and, as such, the private stories are of great importance to Georgi Gospodinov, who with his characteristically light and sensitive style of writing, so graciously captures their intimate relevance and contribution to the truth: their contribution to being different, being heard, and being shared.

In *The Negated World*, we clash headstrong with what has happened and has not happened during the years of socialism in Bulgaria; with the dreams of the negated Europe, so often regarded as that Other and Foreign land, unthinkable to the imagining subject. The reality and the dreams of the Bulgarian individual are equally dependent on this inherent process of negation and gradually she becomes isolated within a no man's land, a limited and limiting space, where the intersection with difference and otherness is not only a solely antagonistic relationship in itself, but one whose very existence is, in principle, impossible.

Together with the irony and disappointment we can gaze into the contours of that 1968, which remained invisible to the Bulgarian subject, and which was also the inauguration of the author's biography. While Prague is blossoming and the French students are rebelling in the Latin Quarter in Paris, while the Bulgarian tanks penetrate the borders of Czechoslovakia and the soundtrack of Europe is one of protest and freedom, co-written by The Beatles, The Rolling Stones, and Jimi Hendrix, life here in Bulgaria is 'always elsewhere' – slowly and linearly flowing into the ticking steps of the day-by-day. 'The censorship in Bulgaria obstructs the possibility of noticing the censorship in Bulgaria' and this, most likely, creates one of the worst kinds of invisible crises – that, in which the absurd is gradually masked by the sign of normality.

‘Sometimes time and geography are violently mismatched’ and this is painfully true for a nation like Bulgaria. 1968 is an event that happens everywhere in the West, yet the otherness of the Bulgarian then-contemporaneity refuses to let it slip into its repressive reality. 1989, for a large majority of the people, as well as for uncle Peycho, sole hero in one of the stories, occurs there, on the TV screens: ‘On November 10, we were told by the TV, that we were now free’. He awaits change with an equivalent patience, as he remains within the depths of his private oasis materialized by his chair; he awaits sobering up into a new and different world. A wait, which can, and does, last a lifetime and which by no means should be seen as bearing no guilt.

These are the stories not only of our negated past, but of our stolen past, stories of the enforcement of a foreign subjectivity upon an obedient nation. The invisible crises show the black hole of the Bulgarian reality but also find the ability to offer solace and hope. This truly resonates in the second half of the book. There we find a diagnosis and also a way out of this existential crisis of the given epoch. That exit lies dormant within the literature and the ability to know yourself within your surroundings – both in the past and in the present; within the sharpening of the aesthetic recognition of the beautiful; within the implicit path of a nation like Bulgaria to progress of as a part of Europe, ‘secured by literature’, a Europe in which the fundamental values of freedom, justice, and equality have not lost their universality. A Europe as culture and identity.

My first encounter with *The Invisible Crises* was personal and, as I see it now, monumental. I read it in a single breath, a day before the initiation of the summer protests in Bulgaria. It was my entry ticket and guide into the Independence Square. Then, in the first days of the protest, my decision to walk there alone and understand the nature of the situation, was incredibly eased by these 200 pages of personal sadness for the invisible Europe, which I must have, unknowingly, carried with(in) me. There, on the yellow brick road in central Sofia, the crises began emerging and forming knowable objects in front of my eyes; they found their limbs, speech, memory.

Today, seven months later, I still wonder if we have a better institution for those critical limits, which define us in time and space. Are those crises of our unknowable past capable of being recognised? Can we speak, name, and think them as our own? Have we succeeded in overcoming the culture of silence and amnesia, hammered into us with brutal precision year by year? In weathering the storm, one is never left the same. That is also its true purpose – instant metamorphosis. The same holds for those crises – we must overcome ourselves; produce ourselves as new autonomous subjects. The rest, I believe, is a question of taste.

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