



## A SHORT LIST OF SECONDS GEORGI GOSPODINOV

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Georgi Gospodinov (1968) is writer and researcher, one of the most translated Bulgarian authors after 1989. He has published four poetry books awarded with national literary prizes. A volume of his selected poetry, *Kleines morgendliches Verbrechen* (Droschl), came out in German in 2010. His *Natural Novel* has been published in 19 languages, including English, French, Spanish, and Italian. It was praised by *The New Yorker*, *NY Times*, *Guardian*, and *Times*. The German edition, *Natürlicher Roman* (Droschl, 2007), was qualified as a “small and elegant masterpiece” (*FAZ*) and its author as a “humorist of desperation” (*NZZ*). Gospodinov edited *I’ve Lived Socialism: 171 Personal Stories* (2006), a collection of ordinary people’s memories of socialist times. His work in this field continued with the *Inventory Book of Socialism* (2006, co-authorship with Y. Genova), a catalogue of Bulgarian everyday life objects from the period 1956–89. He has written two plays, a collection of short stories also widely translated, scripts for short feature films, etc. His new novel, *Physics of Sorrow*, was published in December 2011. Georgi Gospodinov has a Ph.D. in Bulgarian literature from the Bulgarian Academy of Sciences. He has been awarded a year’s fellowship from the Berliner Künstlerprogramm, DAAD (2008–09). He lives and works in Sofia, Bulgaria. – Address: Mladost 1, bl. 129, entr. 1, apt. 4, 1784 Sofia, Bulgaria. E-mail: g\_gospodinov@yahoo.com

Sometimes the things we write about play strange jokes on us. They (the things written) suddenly happen. My Wiko project was to work on a book of essays with the title “A World Denied: Short History of the Unhappened”. How could one describe anything that has not happened? How sometimes the unfulfilled becomes more important in our

personal and collective biographies than the real facts of life. A history of what you have dreamed but never managed to achieve. It is both a personal and a historical feeling. How, for example, the desire to be elsewhere, a normal human desire, could expand in the totalitarian societies where it is impossible to leave.

These themes are my preoccupation both as a writer and as a researcher. I come from a place where there is a heavy accumulation of things unhappened and unspoken (besides, the two are correlated). So, while I was contemplating the three months of undisturbed work on my book dedicated to this topic, I broke a leg and found myself at the beginning of my own story of the unhappened and the denied world of Wiko. Yet, for the second half of these three months and with a crutch, I tried to make something happen, at least part of it. To have only a month and a half at this place instead of three months or a year, of course, is part of the world's injustice. It seemed just a minute. Yet, below I want to mark the seconds that live in that minute.

- The at first sight unthinkable but in fact wonderful mixture of evolutionary biologists, specialists in a rare kind of earth worms, wasps' society, phenotype plasticity, mate choice ... Ultimately everything, even nature, passes through language and narration. Sooner or later everything becomes literature. I dare say this as a naïve natural historian who titled his first novel *Natural Novel*.
- The King Lear seminar with Stephen Greenblatt. Another unforgettable moment. To listen to one of the best Shakespearean scholars and to witness how biologists carefully read a literary work, seek after its codes, and examine it as a separate species was quite an experience.
- The way Alfred Brendel listened to music and played the piano at his Liszt colloquium. How for a few seconds he was transformed into a child and the music became a physical sensation.
- The quietness of Grunewald – something you can hear in very few places in the world.
- The different nuances of green and the absence of a name for each of them.
- The Migration of Sorrows. Does sorrow have its own geography? Is the Bulgarian (Eastern) "tuga" translatable? These and other topics appeared in my light afternoon reading at Wiko, at my lectures at Humboldt-Universität and the Freie Universität, and during a discussion at the Literaturwerkstatt.
- Some nice afternoon talks with Andrei Pleșu, Jurko Prochasko, Edhem Eldem, Manja Klemenčič and Khaled El-Rouayheb, Katharina Biegger, Reinhart Meyer-Kalkus ...

- Wiko children: Ajda and Rami, Katherine and Eddie, Simon and Toma, Ella ... and my daughter Raya. This invisible and better Wissenschaftskolleg.

These are parts of the seconds written down in my small notebook, which I carry always with me.

As a writer and a researcher of the non-durable and perishable amid this academic world, I share one of the lowest levels of evolution. At the top of the evolutionary chain, of course, are the evolutionary biologists. Sometimes, I must admit, I was irritated at their firm and easy explanations of the world through models, percentages, and diagrams. I stay on the side of literature, which means on the side of uncertainty. While I hesitated to ask whether sorrow could as well be explained by evolution or whether it is a rudimentary trait, a waste by-product ... and my stay was over. I ask this question indirectly now.

I am sure about one thing after all that has happened in science, after the transcription of DNA: we are moving libraries full of unread books. Our genes are full of stories and the big reading awaits us. That is why the biology-literature relation will become stronger and stronger. And a place like Wiko that is not afraid to gather the two fields together has a good future.

And I hope to go there again one day and to finish my unfinished history of the un-happened. And to be careful what I invent.