



WRITING IN BERLIN  
GYÖRGY DRAGOMÁN

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Born in 1973 in Tîrgu Mureş (Romania) I emigrated to Hungary with my family in 1988. I studied English literature and philosophy at Eötvös Loránd University in Budapest, but after graduation I left the Academia to become a novelist and translator. I published four novels and a volume of short stories. My novels have been translated into more than 30 languages. I also work as a literary translator, having translated books by Isaac Bashevis Singer, Samuel Beckett, Irvine Welsh, Mickey Donnelly, as well as various texts by James Joyce, Ian McEwan and Sebastian Barry. Publications: *A fehér király* (novel). Budapest, 2005 (English: *The White King*, 2008; German: *Der Weiße König*, 2008). *Máglya* (novel). Budapest, 2014 (English: *The Bone Fire*, 2019; German: *Der Scheiterhaufen*, 2015). *Oroszlánkórus* (novel). Budapest, 2015 (German: *Löwenchor*, 2019). – Address: Fövény u. 2, 2040 Budaörs, Hungary. E-mail: dragoman.gy@gmail.com

“IT IS ALL YOUR FAULT.” This phrase, an axiom as it were, is painted in huge black block letters on the otherwise white walls of my study. Or perhaps those letters are red, or maybe it is a neon sign crackling and shimmering in bright orange. It is an imaginary sign, the color and type does not really matter, what matters is the stark reality it signifies: when you write you are all alone, and everything you do or do not do is entirely dependent on you and you alone, whatever you write or do not write is yours to own, and own up to, nothing and nobody else is to blame, faulting the circumstances would be a form of self-deception, a way to find an escape when in fact there is no escape, you are all alone, locked into the structure you are trying to create; your study is a prison of sorts, a world of its own, a place of total confinement and absolute freedom, where you are your own

tyrant and your own servant, locked into the reality or unreality of the novel you are trying to create.

In the past year, this imaginary sign hung on the walls of my office J10 in the Villa Jaffé, and I would sometimes carry it with me to the bedroom of our apartment number 142 in the Villa Walther, and its significance became even more poignant than ever before. When I devised this imaginary sign as I started out as a writer in my twenties, it served as a tool for self-discipline, a tool to ward off complaints and procrastination, a tool serving to distract my attention from the writing conditions, which often were far from ideal; now, in the almost utopian comfort of the Wiko, it slowly morphed into its opposite, it became a sort of a warning, constantly drawing my attention to the ideal working conditions, making me very much aware of the location.

Yes, the axiom meant that I could and should be able to work anywhere, that circumstances did not matter, that inner calm and inner freedom were supposed to be achieved anywhere, but when this was mirrored by the calm and almost limitless freedom of one's surroundings, circumstances gradually began to take hold and matter, and I realized I was being affected in a curious way. While working away on my fragmented novel about the imaginary city ravaged by civil war that is trying to rebuild itself into some sort of functional existence after the effects of destruction – a location brewing a web of stories that have been haunting my dreams for more than a decade – I gradually began to notice a subtle change in my attitude towards my surroundings.

The reality that I was working in Wiko began to matter, the circumstance that I was in fact working in a building with such a rich history somehow became more and more important, that every morning I passed the *Stolpersteine*, that I was in fact working in the heart of Berlin, that my early morning runs in Grunewald led me to the Teufelsberg, a hill built on the ruins of a destroyed and war-torn city, started to rattle me, the here and now of being in Berlin started to assume an ever stronger importance, and disregarding it seemed less and less possible. I kept working on my novel, but the images I kept seeing slowly fused with history, perhaps aided by my immersion in the German language (Eva's classes were really wonderful, we read quite a lot of literature in our advanced group with Tung-Hui Hu and my partner Anna), my attitude towards my own language began to change in a subtle way – some of the images I saw demanded to be put into writing, and the lines I wrote did not fit into the structure of the novel, nor did they belong to the short stories I was writing in parallel to the novel, so after a while I noticed that to my utter surprise I started writing poetry. Up to my Wiko year, I only ever wrote one single poem,

which came about by relentlessly cutting down a long and not very successful essay into eight lines of text, but now I was writing with a different attitude, and by the end of my Wiko year I had half a volume of poetry ready. This was an entirely new development for me, I am still unsure what to make of it.

As the fragmented cityscape of the novel I was writing kept developing, I was also constantly working on unrelated short stories. The conversations I had with the other Fellows often were sparking ideas that I was quick to put on paper, many of the stories I published in my weekly science-inspired short story column bordering on sci-fi, the ones I have on the website qubit.hu called “The Bright Future”, were direct or indirect consequences of the discussions we had over lunch, coffee or dinner. I am sure that, when these stories will be published in English, many of my Wiko friends will be keen to discover a lot of the ideas we had conversations about. One example out of many – thinking about the evolutionary consequence of matchmaking algorithms, led to a conversation with Elizabeth and Joan, inspired my story “Társkereső” <https://qubit.hu/2019/02/14/tarskereso>, in which an artificial entity in the guise of a serial killer sets out to reintroduce randomness into the partner-finding process that has been taken over by false preferences and expectations.

Living in the Wiko often felt like being in the eye of a storm. We were leading an ideal and somewhat secluded life, but when we sat and talked, the problems facing humanity all over the world, from Ukraine to Brazil, to Syria, Turkey, Venezuela and Kenya suddenly became tangible. When forest fires and prison camps and civil wars are just a handshake away, the world can get uncomfortably small; as a consequence, I often noticed being reminded of the importance of the work we were all doing and of the beauty and burden and fragility of our privileged position. Here I was, sitting in the most perfect, peaceful location, writing about war, trying to somehow scare myself and everybody else into realizing the precious and ephemeral nature of our way of life. Here I was trying to scare myself into believing that what I did, what I was working on, did in fact matter. That every line I wrote counted. So I created another imaginary sign, and stuck it on the wall, near the other one. It was less harsh, more encouraging. It looks something like this: “DO YOUR WORK. IT MATTERS MORE THAN YOU KNOW.”

I took it back home to Budaörs, it is now there in my study, along with the other one. I am slowly getting used to it, doing my best to learn to believe it, to believe in it.