

AND OTHER STORIES

Georgi Gospodinov. *And Other Stories*. Alexis Levitin and Magdalena Levy, trans. from Bulgarian, Northwestern University Press, Evanston, IL 2007, ISBN-13: 978-0-8101-2432-5, US \$ 14.95

Georgi Gospodinov (b. 1968) is arguably the brightest star among the Bulgarian literati who came of age in the 1990s, that is, during the transition from communism to free market capitalism. A literary scholar at the Bulgarian Academy of Sciences and an editor of a cultural magazine in his native Sofia, Gospodinov has three collections of poems, a novel and a collection of short stories to his credit. He received several national awards, most notably the Bulgarian Award for the Best First Novel for his short, but fascinating *Natural Novel* (1999). The novel appeared in translation in several languages, including English (Dalkey Archive 2005).

Gospodinov is a writer of stunning wit and intellectual inventiveness. He draws in equal measure from the Borges-inspired narrative games and from the gritty realism of pre- and post-communist life. The stories in this collection tend to be relatively short and playful. Many of them begin with labyrinthine and even surreal set-ups that lead to unexpected epiphanies and sharp punch lines. There is no sharp division between various types of stories, however. Some operate on a principle of a Chinese box or like stories within stories; others are more akin to fantastic modern-day fables, urban legends and fairytales.

His writing, characterised as it is by subtle humour, is often teasingly ironic and self-deprecating while at the same time attempts to chart serious subject matters: Western metafiction meets East European metaphysics. Gospodinov's stories are full of wonderful surprises, imaginative turns and engaging language, but their main concern seems to be the pursuit of redeeming distance from the ugly immediacy of facts. These facts are more often than not facts of recent history of the region that is spelled out in terms of political dictatorship, cultural inferiority and social backwardness. These stories, however, are far from gloomy reports on the oppressive regime: the banalities of (post)communist everyday life provide a trigger for a sly exercise in darkly comic meditation on the two halves of Europe, its rational West and its passionate East.

In these stories, the line between reality and fiction is blurred but the unmistakable fingerprints of communist experience reveal themselves time and again. From the mundane troubles of hapless Bulgarians in German coin-operated public toilets (Station Story) to the horrible choice between blindness and deafness (The Eight Night); from the gentle sadness at parting of souls (Pionies and Forghet-me-nots) to the light irony that mitigates against despair in the face of fateful miscommunication (A Second Story), Gospodinov trains his inquisitive gaze on the unusual and the unexpected as it flashes through the layers of trivial daily commerce. Honest about his own mistrust of words and the institution of authorship, Gospodinov meditates on the village philosopher, so completely immersed in other people's thoughts, memories, and writing that he lacks his own story, that is, his own genuine self. In another story, however, Gospodinov offers a simple and moving tale about the vagaries of love and its evanescent character.

This collection of short stories is entertaining as it makes us see the cold war Bulgarians treating »abroad« as a distinct country, on a par with France and Italy; it is aesthetically attractive in its weaving together of speculative and fecund aspects of reality, and it is ethically credible as it understands (and properly pokes fun at) that reality itself is never accessible other than through unstable, elusive, but irresistible words.

Gospodinov's narrator more than once suggests that words coming out of his mouths surprise him, too. This moment of transgression in which imagined realities overlap with pedestrian life, may turn out to be a delicious epiphany or a confirmation of banality. Either way, Gospodinov attempts to capture these moments in a highly original voice.

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