

Time Shelter

Времеубежище (Vremeubezhishte)

Presented by: Ivana Perica

2023 winner of the International Booker Prize and highly praised by critics as a novel that summarises Bulgaria's historical and political experiences – in particular, the transition from state socialism to capitalism in the 1990s and Bulgaria's accession to the European Union – *Time Shelter* offers a profound meditation on disjointed European memory. Its political dimension is anchored in its dual focus: firstly on the EU as a political alliance and secondly on a novelistic examination of two dominant ideological and political forces that have shaped Europe's past – nationalism and socialism. It is not the mere fact that the novel turns to chapters from the past that makes it political; rather, it is the ideological framing of the narration.

The story begins in a café in Zurich, in a country on the edge of the EU but at the heart of Europe – in wealthy Switzerland, which is said to have been neutral throughout the 20th century. This situation is described as the Swiss “playing out of time” (276) – a neutrality that is cleverly turned into an investment, along the lines of “I’m not playing by your time – for a while. But I can measure it for you if you pay for it, I can stop it with a chronometer (of my own manufacture) and sell you watches, I can keep your paintings, your rings, diamonds and all your luggage while you play or fight.” (276) In Zurich, the narrator G. G. encounters a fellow exile, the mysterious Gaustín (or simply G.), with whom he engages in the therapeutic practice of healing individuals through a unique engagement with memory. Their method is to evoke in their patients pleasant memories of their best periods of life, usually divided into decades: 1950s, 1960s, 1970s and so on. This unconventional entrepreneurial duo creates a museum in which each decade is meticulously reconstructed in separate rooms and furnished with objects and artifacts that represent the chosen era.

Since historical time is never just a matter of personal memory but is always interwoven with collective history, their project soon outgrows individual horizons. In the next phase of their endeavours, they extend their practice to whole national collectives by taking them back to what they consider the happiest and most prosperous decades of the 20th century. As part of a collective therapeutic séance, the narrator and Gaustín organise referendums in all EU countries: Sweden, Denmark and Finland choose the 1970s, Germany, France, Spain, Austria, Poland and Greece the 1980s, whereas the 1990s are selected by the Czech Republic, Lithuania, Latvia, Estonia and, somewhat awkwardly, Slovenia and Croatia.

Individual and collective dimensions converge in a common “attraction of the past”, which is nothing other than the attempt “to reach that perfect place, however far back it may lie, where things are still whole” (170). This attempt is based on the highly symbolic image of a “time shelter” (Bulg. *Времеубежище*, *vremeubezhishte*) – the salutary illusion of a “protected time” (115). The turning point, the moment of an irreparable breakdown in regular historical progress, is found in this novel in

the German annexation of Austria in 1938, which was followed by further profound cuts: “Many buried things lay at the foot of this 1939.” (269)

Time Shelter blends into a panopticon of themes and motifs whose constellations change as the reader progresses from one part of the novel to another. The reader may therefore choose one of the following focal points to explore the complexity of the novel: in addition to the themes of recycling and restoring the past and the fear of the future (152, 302), remembering and forgetting, the whole can be viewed through the prism of space (the space of Bulgaria, Europe and exile, but also the time-space of the lost authenticity of childhood), the history of the clinic and the relationship between medicine and politics, population ageing and euthanasia, Brexit and apocalypse, the fly (Gospodinov’s recurring motif since his debut *Natural Novel*, 1999) and finally midlife and identity crisis (culminating in the disappearance of Gaustín and the change of identity between Gaustín, or simply G., and the narrator G. G.). The latter is written according to the motto of J. L. Borges: “I don’t know which of us is writing this page.” (285)

Gospodinov’s writing is alinear and associative, and invites us to make distant connections between seemingly unrelated elements of the larger European narrative. In terms of genre, it is, therefore, unmistakably postmodern, for which the unstable categories of individual memory and collective history serve as indicators. Today, the novel is also recognised as an ‘EU novel’, adding another example to a genre that is mistakenly associated primarily with Robert Menasse’s *Capital* (2017). To complicate the perspectives on Europe, however, this genre should also include other – and, unlike both Menasse and Gospodinov, contrapuntal and dissensual – perspectives on the EU, such as Angela Dimitrakaki’s *Aeroplast* (2015) and Jean-Philippe Toussaint’s *Les Émotions* (2020) (see Radisoglou).

Instead of dealing directly with EU bureaucracy and the difficult relations between its member states, *Time Shelter* is primarily about the restaging or recycling of the disjointed European pasts. What goes largely unrecognised by critics, however, is the novel’s failure to open up to alternative visions of Europe – possibilities beyond the dominant historical trajectories it explores. Imbued with a sense of social distance that functions as the only conceivable refuge from the relentless flow of historical time, the novel ultimately conforms to the liberal paradigm of ‘coping with the past.’ In this framework, history becomes something to reflect on, whose traumas can be healed through retrospection – but also something that, if detachment proves difficult, may also be subject to (self-)irony and ridicule. This is why reading this novel will lead to different experiences for readers of different ages, different countries of origin and, ultimately, different political orientations. This is perhaps most evident at the level of humour. Since the sense of humour is context-dependent, the use of clichés from socialist Bulgaria (e. g. Georgi Dimitrov’s embalmed corpse or the red flags and badges as emblems of the Communist Party or the workers’ collectives) will evoke different reactions in different readers – from laughing at others to laughing at ourselves in a (hopefully) politically productive way.

LANGUAGE: Bulgarian/български

CENSORSHIP STATUS: