

***What are our books made of?***

**GEORGI GOSPODINOV**

The honest way to start a lecture like this is to discourage expectations. Unlike in a classical detective novel, by the end of the lecture, and even by the end of the workshop, you won't know all about the literary crime – how it is committed and who the perpetrator is. The secret will remain a secret, and there is something good in this.

I will begin with a few points that don't ordinarily get discussed, at least not at the beginning. I am here to talk about how books are made. And the presumption is that I have experience. So here I am talking to you, standing on the uncertain and crumbly ground of this experience. And it is fair to admit, before I go any further, that I am in more and more doubt about the advantages of experience. It is simply the alibi of an older age. And like all alibis – it is somewhat suspicious.

And here it is. I've written poetry and prose, plays and short scripts, literary criticism and history, a doctoral dissertation, columns and articles, and I've done copy work for the advertising industry; for 17 years now I've been editor of *Literaturen vestnik* – the literary weekly, which since the 1990s is effectively the workshop for new Bulgarian literature; I sometimes think I've read more manuscripts than I've read books; I've been to international creative writing courses and I've been taught to teach; I've taught myself. And let me tell you – from experience – it never gets any easier. You always start from scratch, and the fears and anxiety, and a good deal of uncertainty, are always with you.

And that's what I'd like to discuss first – uncertainty. That's where it all starts for me.

We live in a culture that doesn't tolerate uncertainty. You learn in self-help manuals that you must be confident, you must know what you want and you must follow it with dogged determination. There are many writers who say that once they set their hands to work, they know all they need to know about their characters; they know the beginning and end of their books. They even know the first and the last sentence. It all sounds quite depressing to writers like me who belong to the opposite school.

If I could come up with any advice for you, it is this: don't avoid uncertainty, don't be afraid of it; examine your doubts and make use of them to develop your work and hypotheses. Try to domesticate your fears but don't chase them away. In my view, uncertainty is the natural state of man (and writer) and the sure sign of the most important

thing in our common craft -- sentience. Hence this praise of uncertainty. I don't have much trust in people who know all the answers, who are always on the right course, who never hesitate. Certainty, at least in my view, is suspicious. We work, after all, with the most delicate, elusive and ambiguous material – language. Incidentally, one of the epigraphs in my Natural Novel goes like this:

“I wish somebody said: This novel's good, because everything is uncertain in it.”

Speaking of language, let us dip a toe in its stream for a moment. I am certain everyone in this room has had the happy experience of letting themselves be carried away by language. The sensation of its push and pull, its sweeping force, its energies. The only thing you have to do is keep afloat and follow it. It can be like rafting through dangerous rapids and whirlpools. Or slow and calming, penetrating far and wide.

There are those who say that language only matters in poetry, and that it is an instrument in prose, in mere service of the plot. That is not my experience. I come from poetry, and, in fact, I've never abandoned it. Before I wrote my Natural Novel, I'd already written two books of poetry. Both were, I dare say, well read and well loved. Both are still in print, I cannot complain. Clearly, the writing of a poem and a novel are two separate and distinct disciplines. Poetry, in the language of sports, is a short distance event. I can compare it to the 100 or 200 m sprint: there is an explosive start, loads of muscle and tendon work, movement at high speed, and strain until the very end. Prose, on the other hand, is a long distance event: you've got to distribute your energy evenly; there can be long and boring stretches, a lack of focus; and the most important thing is to keep a steady rhythm. And breathe. I used to do both events – literally, not metaphorically – and in the end I gave up both when I had to choose.

But in writing my Natural Novel I chose the strategy of poetry. I made sure I listened to the language and paid close attention to every word. I kept up the rhythm – which, in my view, is a very important aspect of prose. There are novels made from building blocks (like chapters and paragraphs) and novels made from sentences. I prefer the latter. I always notice the difference: the sentences, the phrases, the images.

I knew that my novel would not be a classical narrative. I had vague ideas of “wanting to make a novel out of all the things that don't usually go into a novel”. And I was absolutely free. It was my first attempt and it was OK to fail. Let me take a brief detour here. Make bold use of your right to fail while you are still in the beginning. It is a liberating experience. And remember that a literary career is just that: walking on the edge of failure.

When I sat down to write my novel one summer ten years ago, I knew that it would be about disintegration, private and public – the breakup of a marriage against the breakdown of society in the 90s, in Bulgaria. Without being a political book, *Natural Novel* is rooted in the events of that decade. It also contains flashbacks to the communist period seen through the eyes of the protagonist as a child. I'd collected notes, thoughts and ideas in notebooks over several years and the "anarchism of the novel", which was pointed out by the *New Yorker*, has probably something to do with the anarchic nature of my notes. I wrote the novel in three months of daily work but the notes which gave birth to it were gathered in seven or eight years. I didn't make use of everything but what was included certainly provided much of the book's substance.

A happy discovery came through readings in botany and natural history. I was led to it by Michel Foucault's discussion of the natural histories from the 17 c. whose vision of the world was still one of unity and magic. Anything went into those histories – legends, personal stories, rumours, scientific descriptions, cooking recipes. And that's how I chose the genre of my book. *Natural Novel* is as much the title as it is its genre.

It's a book about personal childhood and the childhood of the world – the blessed 17<sup>th</sup>, 18<sup>th</sup> and even 19<sup>th</sup> centuries; about Carolus Linnaeus and the natural historians who so amorously sought to classify and label the world. I included excerpts from Linnaeus' scientific manuscripts, which today sound as a work of fiction. I found botanical magazines with translations of his works from a century ago. Here are two of his titles: "Introduction to the Mating of Plants", and "The Sleep of Plants". Excellent for a natural novel. So that's where the strange and naïve gardener in my book came from – the botanist who tries to bring reality and words back together by looking at analogies between botany and philology. He looks at words and weighs them; he studies their pollination and dissemination.

If we unpack my novel or tear it up in the middle, the way we tore up old toys when I was a child, these are the things that will come out of its belly: a natural history of the water toilet with all sorts of facts, stories and examples; lists of the pleasures of the 60s, 70s and 80s (the latter is the shortest); a bum who owns a rocking chair; a natural history of flies plus a bible of flies; an old Irish contraceptive recipe; overheard stories of marital infidelity; the notes of a naturalist; a novel made from the first paragraphs of famous classical novels, and so on.

So what could glue these assorted trinkets together? There is one straight answer: the personal story. Regardless of its subject -- love, separation, death ... There aren't that many subjects to choose from. In my case, it was a story about the inability to tell your story. Stuttering in the narration of his own life, my protagonist seeks salvation in various lists and other people's stories. He painfully needs to hear the material that novels and movies usually avoid.

"How can a novel be possible these days, when we no longer have a sense of the tragic? How can even the idea of a novel be possible when the sublime is gone and all we have is everyday life – in all its predictability, or worse, in the unbearable mystery of destructive chance?"

A few words about the meta-fictionality of *Natural Novel*. From the beginning to the end, the book constantly questions its making. "Yet this *Novel of Beginnings* will describe nothing. It will only give the initial impetus and will subtly move into the shadow of the next opening, leaving the characters to connect as they may. That's what I would call a *Natural novel*."

So in that sense this is a novel with a lot of space, with many silences and pauses, with areas of uncertainty.

It contains several different projects for novels, "a series of spontaneous abortions", as the *Village Voice* calls them. The first such project is for a novel made from the beginnings of other novels:

"My immodest desire is to mold a novel of beginnings, a novel that keeps starting, promising something, reaching page 17 and then starting again."

More often than not, the characters of most novels are happy until at least page 17, there are no failures. What my protagonist does is to collect such happy beginnings, almost like a true natural historian.

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He also attempts a novel made exclusively with verbs: "No explanations, no descriptions. Only the verb is honest, accurate and aloof." The hitch here is that he is unable to think of even the first verb.

Then there is the project for a novel written from the point of view of a house fly – a fragmented, multi-faceted narrative resulting from the complex structure of the fly's eyes. A novel full of detail, as mundane as the fly itself. "What kind of novel would we get if a fly could write a story..." "In the ideal novel individual episodes will be held together by the trajectory of a fly."

In addition to these three aborted novels, there is also the Bible of Flies, which I mentioned earlier, and two Socratic dialogues, where Socrates himself is a fly engaged in a serious discussion on the 1960s.

There are also numerous other short stories and inserts. A French critic called my book “a machine for stories”. Between us, I now regret inhabiting it with so many unresolved beginnings. But such is the genre of this unidentifiable literary object, the natural novel.

Of course, no novel is natural, and the expression “natural novel” is an oxymoron. I’d say that this novel is nostalgic for the 19<sup>th</sup> c. novel, or what we perceive of it – a slow, dense development, with a clear beginning, middle and end, and unambiguous causal relationships. Stendhal described it as a mirror you take on a journey to help reflect the world. According to my Natural Novel the mirror has been broken and novels can no longer be anything but multi-faceted. We see the world reflected in this broken mirror and we never get a complete and consistent story. Our own stories are stories of fragmentation and failure, they are made from silences. And so the theme and plot of Natural Novel, its trauma, revolves around the question of what we do with the stories we can’t tell. How we find a way to speak through recurring fracture and fragmentation. Our stories cannot stay the same. They’ve been truncated. Their point of view is made of facets.

#### Reception and Translatability

Natural Novel has had a good and, perhaps, inexplicable fate. In Bulgaria it was published at the very end of the 90s and has since had 6 reprints, with a readership that spans across generations. It’s been published in 12 languages, including English, and I am happy that my American publishers – Dalkey Archive Press – are here with us today. What matters even more to me is that the book seems to have found its readers. It was reviewed in the Guardian, the New Yorker, the Times of London, the Village Voice and by other publications, and it’s been included in the course programs of several European and American universities. A collection of short stories, which I wrote after the novel, has been met with similar interest. It was a source of worry to me, especially before the first translations, whether my stories are universal enough to be understood by people other than those with whom I share the same history. Will they appeal equally to American, German, French, Danish and Italian ears? How do I properly convey the sense of timelessness in Bulgaria of the 1980s, for example? How do I provide the necessary

background – the visible and invisible barriers, the bans, the rules that had become part of us, of our lives and language?

I now know that our personal stories are universal. It's a reassuring thing, especially for writers writing in smaller languages. The act of telling a story is universal – it's translatable and comprehensible for the minds and hearts of readers across the world. And that's because all stories, in the end, are stories against death, even if they are not *about* death. Each story earns us another night, like in *Scheherazade*. And we add meaning to the world. A much needed thing as global resources of meaning are drying up fast, perhaps irrevocably. Literature is a slow medium, slower than radio, TV, the internet, the movies and everything with a visual element in it. But the meaning it generates lasts longer and it takes time to be depleted.

I've heard various answers to the question "Why do you write?". One of the most sincere ones was: "I want to be loved". And that's a good enough reason. It was the driving force for me between the age of 15 and 25. It is Gunter Grass, I think, who said that he writes against the passing time. One of my short story characters, Gaustin, says something to the same effect: "We've lost the game strategically", he says, "but the empty moves of our story telling will keep delaying the end".

33 years ago I had a nightmare. It recurred for several nights. In it my mother, my father and my brother had all fallen into a well and couldn't get out. I was outside, "safe". I still remember that mixture of fear – the feeling that I was cosmically alone, separated from everyone close to me – and of guilt, the guilt that I'd survived. I tried telling my nightmare to my grandmother, with whom I was staying for the summer, but she told me that nightmares oughtn't be told, lest they should come true. And so what I did in this dead-end situation was the only possible thing – I wrote the dream down in a notebook. It was my way of tricking fortune – I never told anybody the nightmare but I managed to get rid of it. That nightmare was the first thing I wrote. And I can say that today, 33 years later, my reasons for writing are not very different.

There are many things I had to leave out of this lecture. I didn't say anything about editing and self-editing. Chekhov said that one should be one's own fiercest editor, to the point of tears. And I am not one to argue with Chekhov. I didn't say anything about irony and self-irony. Or about reading. Or about the importance of a writer's curiosity about the world and people, which is the basis of all literature. Every writer is one big curious ear. A hearing voyeur. And the world is full of untold stories, only if we had ears to hear them.

And yet, if had to conclude and say one thing that I think a writer couldn't do without, it would be this: an infinite awareness of everything that incurs pain, that wounds and brings joy. And not just on your own body, but on the body of the world. That, plus a devilish way with words, with the wonder of language. Nothing more, nothing less.

**Translated by Boris Deliradev**