

"ART ENTICES US UPON UNKNOWN AND DEADLY PATHS": AN INTERVIEW WITH
BULGARIAN WRITER

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"ART ENTICES US UPON UNKNOWN AND DEADLY PATHS"

AN INTERVIEW WITH BULGARIAN WRITER KALIN TERZIYSKI

"Bulgarian literature is exotic, crafted in an exotic language, and in this sense it is *somewhat* inaccessible to global communities, unified by world languages such as English, French, German, Russian," writes Antoaneta Alpieva in her overview of ways in which critics survey contemporary Bulgarian literature.¹ "This kind of trait [i.e., inaccessibility]," she continues, "is compounded by not entirely caring institutions that, undermined by domestic squabbles, do not secure an equivalent export for current production, do not have a long-term vision for a 'storefront' of our literary contemporaneity, do not seriously prepare external translators who are motivated to care for, that is, to earn their sustenance from contemporary Bulgarian authors."² Alpieva's assessment is substantiated by the much greater familiarity of international audiences with Bulgarians writing in foreign languages outside of Bulgaria, the most prominent of them being Julia Kristeva and Tsvetan Todorov, though this is also true for a younger generation of writers, including Iliya Troyanov (in German), Rouja Lazarova (in French), and Miroslav Penkov (in English). The position that Alpieva presents is also corroborated by a sentiment with a nostalgic underpinning, expressed by older generations of readers in Bulgaria, for the "great" or classical Bulgarian literature associated with the names of Elin Pelin, Yordan Yovkov, and Blaga Dimitrova, as well as Nobel Prize nominees Ivan Vazov,

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Penco Slavejkov, and Elisaveta Bagriana. Most of these and other classical Bulgarian authors wrote around the turn of the twentieth century and in the years before 1944, before communism became Bulgaria's political regime.

Since 1989, when that regime collapsed, writers have gradually emerged to form what is known as "the new Bulgarian literature." Critics, however, have voiced skepticism with regard to the actual novelty of current literary works,³ particularly in terms of the position of these works outside or against traditional institutions (i.e., "the establishment"), with some finding this literature to be distinctly postmodern, but in a hackneyed, imitative way.⁴ Others have attempted to define it differently: Plamen Doinov, for instance, delineates the parameters of a kind of literature that he dubs *intercenturial*: "Precisely that state of ambiguous anticipation of literature after the end of a century is what I call literature in the intercenturies or intercenturial literature," he notes, "it is neither-nor, neither 'old,' nor 'new.'" Regardless of trends and definitions, Bulgarian readers generally cite two names as the primary representatives of today's literary production: Georgi Gospodinov and Kalin Terziyski.⁵ Although there are, in fact, many more Bulgarian writers currently enticing the attention of an avid national and international readership,⁶ Terziyski stands out as the winner of the 2011 European Union Prize for Literature for his short story collection *Има ли кой да ви обича?* [*Is There Anyone to Love You?*] (2009) and as one of the most prolific of the new literary generation. He is the author of seven short story collections, three books of poetry, and four novels—*Алкохол* [*Alcohol*] (2010), *Лудост* [*Insanity*] (2011), *Войник* [*Soldier*] (2012), and *Любовта на 45-годишния мъж* [*The Love of the 45-Year-Old Man*] (2013). He is also one of the writers most intensely involved in the activity of a contemporary public intellectual, an engagement that is literary as well as social and political.

Born in 1970 in Sofia, Terziyski graduated from the Sofia Medical University in 1996. He specialized in psychiatry and worked for four years at the second largest psychiatric hospital in Bulgaria, "St. Ivan Rilski" in Kurilo. Although in 2000 he terminated his employment as a doctor and dedicated himself to writing, Terziyski continues to provide help to people who are in need and whom he believes he can help. By turning away from psychiatry in order to write, he stands against a practice in the last couple of decades that critic Alexander Kiossev and others have observed, namely the withdrawal of literati from literature.⁷ Not only does Terziyski not inhabit "marginal spaces," but he embraces every opportunity to be publicly active. Both his expertise in psychiatry and his authorial acumen are in high demand by Bulgarian media. While his social, political, and cultural commentary can be found frequently on the pages of Bulgarian newspapers and magazines, he is continually invited on major television programs to comment on pressing cultural issues. As he explains, he does not like to turn down opportunities to offer the public a perspective different from the positions and attitudes that have become the norm, namely those espoused by entertainers and politicians.

Terziyski's experiences as a doctor in the psychiatric hospital, as an alcoholic, and as a soldier during his two-year mandatory military service before the regime change in 1989 are at the foundation of many of his works. His debut text, *Alcohol*, received, in 2010, the "Flower of Helikon" prize for writing skill and popularity. Part novel, autobiography, social and cultural critique, and case study of alcoholism, the work appears as a thematically apposite response to Doinov's question, "What are the possible compartments of Bulgarian literature in this state of severe hangover [after the century's end]?" *Alcohol* is co-written with Deyana Dragoeva whose "invisible part," as she explains in the foreword, was to "draw the lines upon which the pages were written. To assemble the pages in such a way that a story with form and plot would

emerge from the scattered puzzle of disconnected thoughts” (Terziyski and Dragoeva 9). Dragoeva writes, “It turned out that in his brain, until recently submerged in alcohol, float fragments of memories, feelings of excitement and defeat, and turbid waves drag in various interesting things—in my opinion— precious pearls, but according to him—decomposed bodies” (9). In 2012, the text was transformed into a multimedia stage performance by Tsvetelina Stoyanova-TSVU, which included Terziyski’s participation; the production further intensified the steadfast interest of the audience,⁸ disproving to some extent Kiossev’s contention that “literary works written in Bulgaria over the past decade...are read quickly and negligently, while their vogue spans a short time, a few years or even months.” *Alcohol* does subtle introspective work; it follows the multiple threads entwined in the fabric of a consciousness, particularly by endeavoring to separate the self into an observer, who monitors the tortured body from a critical distance; an addict, who becomes the material upon which sensations emerge; and Alcohol, a subversive force, a power both within and without, a shield against one’s impotence on a global scale as well as, and perhaps most significantly, an autoimmunity. One of the prominent aspects of the text is that of the Bulgarian cultural heritage. It is unraveled with an analytical eye and an idiosyncratically acerbic tone:

They survived, making humiliating compromises with their dignity. They resembled anguished people, eternally lamenting. If one thought about it, it was precisely Bulgarians, who did not even fight the war for their own independence, that had no reason to act anguished. I knew—my only, dear Bulgarians were anguished by shame. They felt shame at being afraid to disturb even slightly their philistine peace. To take on struggling a bit for justice and for some neat, grand idea. My Bulgarians were coping with their little lives. No one thought about an honest revolution in those most dishonest of times. No one allegedly had money, but all were coping, making disgusting obeisances. Bulgarians lived like wily—having out-wiled even themselves—brutes, winking, they assured themselves that they will be all right somehow, as long as they bow their heads more adroitly. And everyone coped, even I until a certain time, until I was gripped by monstrous nausea, and I gave up. (Terziyski and Dragoeva 242)

Mass political protests in Bulgaria were in the news for most of 2013. Bulgarians expressed their dissatisfaction with governmental politics as early as February, when the government resigned after a collision between protesters and police turned bloody in the streets of Sofia. Writing for *Deutsche Welle* two days after the resignation in the middle of March, Terziyski asserted, “In Bulgaria there was a revolt. But suddenly Boyko⁹ exited the stage. At that point the revolt started to resemble swinging a knife at a curtain behind which no one is standing.... The person swinging yells ‘Oops!’ and lurches forward driven by inertia, tumbles ridiculously and humiliatingly, and no one is killed. A futile tumbling” (Terziyski, [“Pathos”]). Though he does not consider himself a leader of the protests, Terziyski was in the streets with thousands of fellow Bulgarians since a prolonged period of unrest commenced in June 2013. He insists that, contrary to certain accusations, intellectuals were some of the most active participants. While the second round of demonstrations continued for over three months, protesters were unable to prompt the subsequent government to tender their resignation, although, almost immediately, the latter made official decisions that a great part of the population perceived as “ordered,” or “bought.”

In the same way in which Terziyski has not withdrawn from social activity, he has no intention on giving up on literature. His latest novel arrived on the market just last year, and this year he published a

short story collection, entitled *Аскетът в мола и други разкази* [*The Ascetic at the Mall and Other Stories*]. The latter marks the fourteenth year of Terziyski's contribution to Bulgarian literature and culture. In a series of conversations with me at quaint bookstore cafes in Sofia, Terziyski spoke of these years, of art and writing, political protests and the place of Bulgarian literature in the world, as well as of the transformations of the body and the self. As he does with long strides across the Sofia cityscape, his work traverses vast and complex thematics, including alcoholism, psychiatric disorders, friendship, illness, forgiveness, non-conformity, and the will to create one's self uncompromisingly in a context that tends to crush such a will at one time through communist practices and at another via capitalist attitudes.

Kalin Terziyski: Doctor, Poet, "Scribbler"

Mihaela Harper: You say that you will do whatever you must for literature. How do you understand the term "literature," and what do you mean by "everything" when you say this?

Kalin Terziyski: Once it becomes known that there is literature in Bulgaria, the genres will stand out and the finest of craftsmen will emerge. However, in Bulgaria right now no one knows that there are writers. It is true, nevertheless, what Deyan Nedev—perhaps the best, the most well-known Bulgarian short story writer—said to me: "You became indecently renowned for a writer." But this is a way of thinking: if a writer is quite well known, it is indecent. I would like to be at least one hundred times more renowned than I am now in order to reach the true state of the matter. If I were one hundred times more renowned now, then I would be as famous as a *чалга* (pop-folk) singer or as a criminal. On the front page of all major newspapers in the course of twenty days appeared a *мутра* (criminal),¹⁰ who shot someone or caused great havoc. Meanwhile, I appear on the last page in a small square, but to the people of culture and art this seems "indecently much." I should be on the first page along with other writers. The people who somehow have the strength and intellect to do good things must come to the fore.

I myself am an exceedingly happy writing martyr. I write "as myself" not in the sense of one's own triviality, but rather as a holding in and releasing of sadism, masochism, and rage—you show yourself how not to write as "yourself," especially because to repeat yourself is an underhanded thing to do. I am disgusted by old writers, driven by laziness, inanity, and the fear of not being understood. A change in thinking is needed, since writing cannot be what it was before without descriptions to match things as they now are—the pastoral "scorching sunny"¹¹ is replaced by a contemporary concern with melanoma. So, I don't look for words; I work with first associations, but it is a process of straining, of holding in and releasing tension, of running along the rocks down a river. To look for words is to introduce something deformed, reason. Writing is not about control over the arrangement of words, but rather about observing that which pours out; not about word-seeking, but about intuition and sensation, intuition in the sense of microscopic acts of thought. Professionally, I have sought to develop a barrier against the trivial, a reflex or an intuition that is not superficial, but seeks the unusual. My imagerial expression has altered.

Harper: Can we speak of a kind of hierarchy regarding that which you consider yourself to be—psychiatrist, poet, writer?

Terziyski: I have always been proud that I am a doctor, and I have also been a little ashamed. If I had not been successful in writing—I think that I have been successful—I would have been tearing myself up in shame and sorrow that I am not a doctor. In other words, it is somewhat of a failure to abandon such a

substantial and significant thing—being a doctor¹²—in which I was (not to a small degree) disappointed. But still, on a fundamental level, I am proud. Of course, if I descend further down and probe things, I am not all that proud. One has to acknowledge that doctors are distributors of medicinal substances and servants of the corporate, because the medicinal corporations are the most powerful in the world and have their own incognizant agents. The role of doctors is not all that magnificent in today's society. They are not saviors or messiahs, but distributors of medicaments. However, the one who deals with life and death is different from other people, and this has always elicited a somewhat childish delight in me.

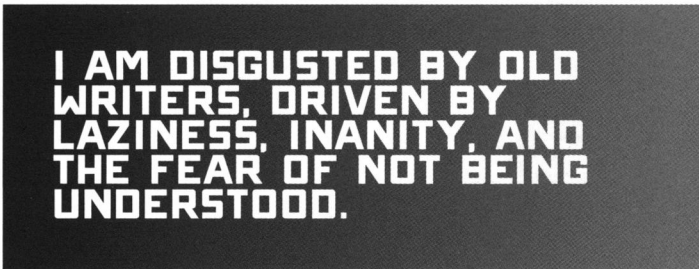
Harper: Besides a psychiatrist, are you not also a psychologist, when you are analyzing, especially when you are the one with the notepad, the bystanding “I,” watching the agonizing body in the play *Alcohol*?

Terziyski: I am a psychologist in the broad sense of the term—[one] who understands human thoughts, feelings. I understand in a very narrowly specific way, along a line of understanding, within a paradigm—the

psychiatric—and, moreover, of the psychiatry that I have studied. I have read a fair amount of Freud, Jung, and am familiar with other psychiatric schools; through these, I can explain certain human qualities. But, more and more, I prefer to explain things through my own experience and my self-observations. To say that a person understands because he is a psychoanalyst

means that he understands in a particular way—as if they are looking at the human being through a small hole, a narrow interstice. I am attempting to widen these interstices or to remove the barrier altogether, which is not exactly possible, but, as much as I can, I try not to look at a human being as a psychoanalyst, as a doctor. I try to look at them as if I were one hundred things—a painter, a colorist,¹³ a nurse sometimes (which I was).

There were months in my life, and even years, during which I looked at people's arms, but also at their necks where there are veins, to assess how well venous manipulations could be performed on them. I used to work at the Oncological Hospital and there, for one hour in the morning, from six to seven a.m., up to thirty manipulations must be completed. For instance, five chemotherapeutic systems must be turned on—this is quite difficult and responsible work, as it involves highly toxic substances. If vincristine, which is administered venously, leaks outside of the vein, it causes massive necroses, decomposition of the flesh. This meant that I have to be exceptionally fast, precise (I worked as a nurse not because of an internship, but to make money—that was the work that I could do then)—and I saw people only as objects walking about, to whom I was going to some day, or to whom I could possibly, attach a system. You suddenly understand that a human becomes a ball of something with many veins and small hoses on him; and that's it—you look at him in this manner. If you are a shoemaker, you will look only at his shoes, right? Man will be an addition to the shoes. The psychoanalyst looks at a person as an auxiliary to his id, for instance. But I want to look at a person in a hundred ways. You enter the metro and you start seeing as Cézanne, for example—what ambits, what colors!



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Harper: And this is where education comes in perhaps, since it gives one an occasion for...

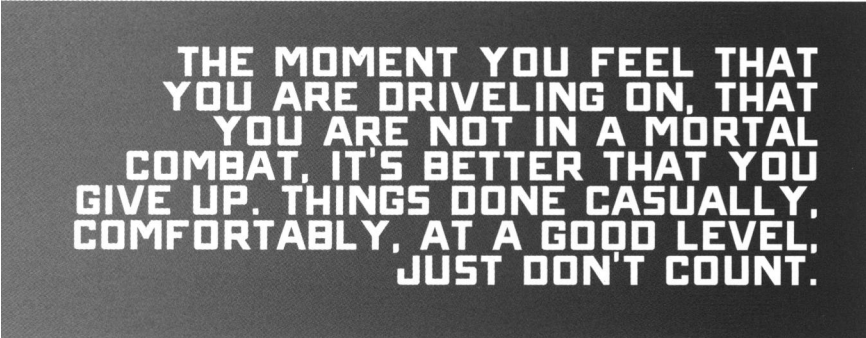
Terziyski: ...multiple perspectives. And mine is a broad and unsystematic education—I studied whatnot and have supplemented with self-edification.

Harper: Even though, over the last few years, you seem to have turned to prose, primarily to novels, do you still see yourself as a poet? In fact, how would you describe the trajectory of your writing?

Terziyski: Yes, I do, but the *pose* of a poet writing couplets is equally narrow and painful. It is as if you are an electrician, but you only work with three-phase electricity—"I don't touch two-phase electricity and only heating units, but not refrigerators." Wait a minute! Are you not a human being? Immense? Mine is not a formal engagement with poetry, but rather with poetry in the true, broad sense. If there were an inclination in contemporary society for reading poetry, if it were a good channel of communication, I would write only poetry. But now it is incomprehensible; it is a narrow channel of communication—things are said there that are said only there and for an exclusive circle of people. It suddenly becomes a peripheral channel, peripheral, because few people read it and they are too particular, and this means that suddenly you are tremendously immobilized.

Harper: You are in the public eye often—on TV, in newspapers and magazines, live. Why do you take on so much, and is it not exhausting?

Terziyski: In Bulgaria, a person could earn a living from their books. But they have to be in the eye of the public; only this way will their books sell. I have multiple projects at the same time: working as a



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psychiatrist (which I cannot refuse), writing a novel, producing a play, participating in the performance *Alcohol*, and writing for newspapers and magazines. I also suffer from the sense that I don't exist (somewhat like Alf), from "an unfulfilled presence in reality." It is

as if I am missing a "self" (as if I'm looking into a mirror, as if I don't exist); maybe I've always had this feeling—everything *is* but I am not. An existence must be declared, but not necessarily publicly, though to declare it publicly bears a stronger sense. There is a feeling of anxiety, tension, vacuity, emptiness, nonexistence. Perhaps it is the successes accomplished that provide an occasion for loosening up. If I stop, I start to feel quite unwell. Without the image that I want to see, I am left with a few unpleasant facts. It is similar to being on Facebook where personalities are created. Everything else is the product of biological forces. This is *I*—the image is better, or more desirable; the rest are memories, a broken life. Both bear truth, but one is desired and the other is not. Like a creator, I fashion a phantasmic body, virtually.

On Writing and Writing Well, Literature and Art

Harper: In another interview you indicate that “writing torments” you and that you perceive it as “very arduous labor. Like running down a helluva steep mountain trail—down into the dark, from rock to rock, and you could destroy yourself”; you say that you hyperventilate when you write (Valkova 10). A reference to the idea occurs in *Alcohol* as well when the narrator asks: “Had writing destroyed my life or had it been just drinking? I drank too much precisely since I started writing seriously. Strange!” (Terziyski and Dragoeva 201). Can you describe your writing process a bit more comprehensively?

Terziyski: I experiment with methods of transformation by creating a frame and filling up history through short stories, chapters that ruminate on a theme, events not connected by action, but by the theme. And yet, history is actions, movements, and each thing means something. While I find the idea of history irritating, I like the idea of the entry of seemingly unconnected things; I write unconnected things, so that readers can discover their own connections. In the artificially arranged things (contemporary literature is full of such degenerates), fearful writers cannot sense that life has its own arrangement, though we dislike its norms. When the frame is narrow—a frame of normality within which only particular things are appropriate—there is none of the richness of life. The novel must be released, so that it can become what it will on its own. Many writers, people of the arts, are afraid of losing control, including this kind. And literature is a means for exhilaration to enter into life. Without literature there is no exhilaration. Literature’s function has not been established, but common opinion holds that books are objects of entertainment, a part of showbiz. In a retributive, repressive culture, reading is enforced—a duty that leads to shame if not fulfilled. For the merchants, reading is entertainment. But what is literature? An opulence, a joy—this is said rarely, if at all—that helps one become civilized and cultured, that torments and enlightens, that “scratches your itch.” Good literature uplifts, and it is pleasurable to read, a pleasure due to [one’s] being elevated.

Harper: One often hears of a responsibility “to write for the future.” How do you understand this expression?

Terziyski: It means to write *well*, and writing *well* means writing so that the table shakes. Uncompromisingly. The moment you feel that you are driveling on, that you are not in a mortal combat, it’s better that you give up. Things done casually, comfortably, at a good level, just don’t count. Unfortunately, in contemporary Bulgarian literature, a great deal of things are precisely such—written *to be* good, “well-written” things. Such things are burned at the stake, particularly by me.

Harper: In other words, you have something completely different in mind when you say “good literature” and “writing *well*”?

Terziyski: Indeed—completely different. Something “well-written,” just because it is in accordance with the standard of a good level, is revolting. By writing *well*, I mean writing as if you were about to die in a second, or you have died already, that is, writing with an utmost strain on your powers. Whatever you have to say, say it now, and that’s that—there will be no more telling of things in this world. And when you say things thus, it is as if these are or will be the last words said by a human being—then you are writing *well*. Someone might say “if it’s the last word, then it doesn’t matter how it is said.” Well yes, but

if your entry in heaven or hell depends on it, then it matters. In other words, you write with the sense that you will go through Judgment Day and not in the inane sense that then we should write well-intentioned and goody things. No, no sycophancy can do there.

Harper: To write honestly then?

Terziyski: Yes! Intelligent critics immediately place matters on a personal, biting basis and say, “Do you do this? Do you?” No, of course not. But I am on the way, and I know what needs to be done, and I make very serious efforts for it to be like this—never to write “well,” decently, in accordance with Western standards, but to life and death, as if tomorrow at ten o’clock Judgment Day will take place. In my writing the gravest matter is subjected to ridicule.... All superior things have to do with the deconstruction of composed matters, with a blurring, a traversal of times, with a vitiation of the logic and structure of language. The pleasure comes from demolishing a taboo, fracturing stable structures—in the rhythm of a disintegrated logic is an attempt to return enchantment to this art [literature].

Harper: What does “art” mean? How do you understand the function of art?

Terziyski: Art is something that is difficult to explain, but can be felt. Someone might say “is it possible for a fictive, fabricated literature that is not artistic literature¹⁴ to exist?” That which is made up, which is fiction, is necessarily artistic; that which is not made up, which describes, is documentary (nonfictional) and non-artistic. When the foundation, that which remains and engages the reader, is solely in the facts discussed, then we speak of non-artistry. And in this case, the greater part of the contemporary, inane, made-up, “fiction” prose is non-artistic (nonfiction)—some *things* are being said. There is artistry in *how* they are being said, not *what* is being said. When you note only what is being said and not the way in which it is said, then—when it remains and it is impressive, and it matters but is only the told facticity—it is non-artistic [like] all of the Dan Brown-likenesses, crypto-historical nonsense.

Impressionism appears with the emergence of art—before that, it was the drawing of occurrences; in these it was not art that mattered, but the occurrence itself that came to the mind of the painter—to paint the *Oath of the Horatii* (1784), for instance, in an interesting way. It is an incredibly tedious academic painting. Actually, it is quite majestic, and it is art, but I’m thinking of it as an example of the telling of an anecdote, of an occurrence—there is no art; you don’t see it. [On the other hand,] Van Gogh paints his room, and inside is art itself. In [Paul Gauguin’s] *Grape Harvest in Arles* (1888), there is a space of triangular shape, hand-sized, that is only orange paint, and it does not mean anything—[Gauguin] just “went wild,” as the saying goes. He had to spew out even more pure art, pure emotion. And *изкуство* (art in the Bulgarian) derives from the verb *изкусявам* (to entice), that is, to lead along unknown and deadly paths—to lead along, to lead on, to derange, to entice.

Harper: Is there a connection between politics and art? And does literature assist in having or developing a political consciousness?

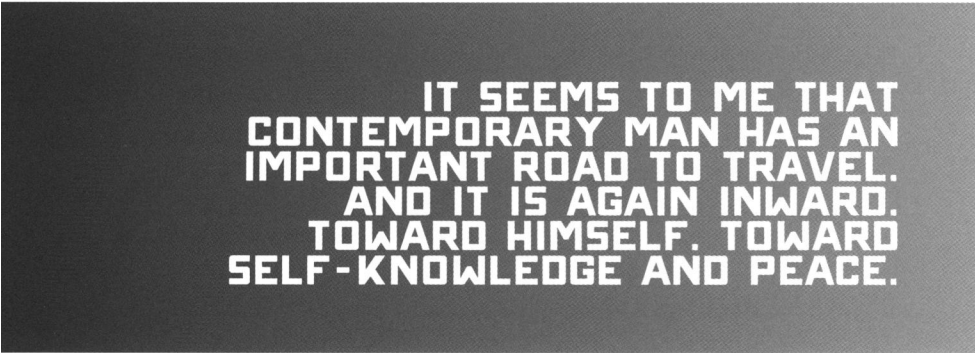
Terziyski: People should have a strong and clear stance regarding the justices and injustices of the society in which they live, and that is politics. I have been extracting myself from politics [proper] more and more. It appears to me that, in this seven-billion [population] world, politics is such an abstraction, such a virtual

game, that it is not worth a serious person's involvement with it, and by "politics," I mean world and national politics. If under "politics" one understands the governing of human interactions—then, yes, the politics of my apartment building entrance and of my street in my neighborhood does interest me, but still rather minimally. It seems to me that contemporary man has an important road to travel. And it is again inward. Toward himself. Toward self-knowledge and peace. I would like to study the politics of one's relation to oneself, and I hope that my literature will aid me in this. It also seems to me that an involvement in politics is just an unnecessary diversion from this most important road...that a world made of people who are good and have come to know themselves would be a good place in which to live. Much better than [one made of] those who take their interest outward, outside of themselves, who greedily, rapaciously and agitatedly sniff and bite the world. The direction is inward. I prefer the poetry of introversion to the prose of politics.

Harper: In *13 Парчета от счупеното време* (*13 Pieces of the Broken Time: Stories and Drawings*, 2013) you bring together two kinds of art, the literary and the visual. Tell us a bit about their difference and their coexistence in your work.

Terziyski: The drawings are a play with lines and colors, while the verbal is more categorical. There is liberty in the visual, an eruption of visual conceptions, an opening of palettes—it is a playful, sneering

liberty, the liberty of a child. And liberty has to come before responsibility; it allows you to choose your responsibilities. Responsibilities that come before liberty are not consciously volitional—they are bondage. The drawings are an occasion for a mocking kind of merriment, without reaching a point of violence:



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taboos are shaken but not demolished, so that no one is hurt. When I was young, I hurt others and mostly myself, but then I decided that it should not be like this, that I should not hurt even myself. As a doctor, I played the part of a savior, saving people's lives as well as saving them from suffering. But the wise person is very cautious with suffering—he tries not to cause it and encourages others to take charge of it. People must learn for themselves how not to suffer, since one's suffering is proportionate to their perspective on suffering. Herein lies a paradox. A person must make themselves of iron, impervious to suffering. Someone might ask, "How can there be love without suffering"?—we could aim for this (and this is a subject of my new novel¹⁵). There will be death, but the question, of course, is what to do before that. If we start from zero every time, then everything will be an affirmation. This does not mean to take the positive as a foundation, but to return to zero—death—and to delight in everything.

Crystal Globe: The Transforming Self and the Good Person

Harper: In one of your poems you speak of the utility of poses, particularly of the poses that we adopt throughout our lives. But what of the poses that we inherit, that we repeat, that we do not want? What is one to do with one's "baggage"?

Terziyski: One day a person must come to an extreme state, to a cathartic state—I don't know what else it can be called—to experience himself alone, naked, and half-dead on a bare, rocky seashore. And whatever is at that moment, from then on, to start making what will be. In other words, at a given moment, to feel himself and to discard everything that is an addition to him, and that which he cannot discard, possibly to embody (in himself), to acknowledge it as his own. What can I discard? The legs I cannot, for instance; the stomach I cannot; the head I cannot. But the clothes, the profession, all of the foisted things, the ideologies, heaps of things, i.e., really to shipwreck, so that he is left with nothing—a Robinsonian metaphor that I have just discovered. You are left with absolutely nothing and, after, whatever remains from that point on, beyond this passing through a needle's eye, only that which is most fundamental to him goes into his subse-

quent metamorphosis. For instance, a particular upbringing has been foisted upon you, some ideologies, some religions,

some conceptions, some debts, some prejudices—all of these things.... You have to experience such a disturbance, such a jolt, so that whatever needs to fall away can fall away, whatever is not truly an essential component of you is destroyed, shaken, and disappears. And then, whatever is left, you acknowledge as your own, and you go on.

Harper: How does this take place in practice?

Terziyski: Well, you drink to death or you do something else, but you do it to death. It must be a fierce, an extreme, and a near-death state, not just anything. As Jean Genet says, a very high price is paid for immortality, most often life in its entirety. And that too—the finding of one's self—is paid with the entire life. There must be a coming to insanity, not insanity, but catharsis.

Harper: What is the place of education with regard to this experience?

Terziyski: Education can give a person the thought, the taste for ruminating on these things, [it can] give him a path so that he can start in that direction, to guide him toward a freeing from everything excessive in himself and to self-consciousness. It can nudge him in that direction and give him a road, but it cannot bring him there. Man walks alone the final, most difficult—as every Everest climber knows—hundreds of meters alone, in diluted, deadly air.

WELL, YOU DRINK TO DEATH OR YOU DO SOMETHING ELSE, BUT YOU DO IT TO DEATH. IT MUST BE A FERCE, AN EXTREME, AND A NEAR-DEATH STATE, NOT JUST ANYTHING.

Harper: Speaking of the things one ought to keep and to discard, what have you kept?

Terziyski: My body, which changed unbelievably, actually it returned to its condition from my twenty-fifth year, but better, the twenty-third or twenty-fourth maybe. Notably, I drank then and now I don't, so I am better. It is very important that one keep their body. The body is a very significant source of things...of everything. It is the source of the soul. It is not a repository, a home, or whatever else; it is the *source* of the soul. It is that out of which the soul of man seeps, and it is a very good thing for one to have a kind, sensible, and caring attitude toward their body. Of course, he should be able, whenever necessary, to observe it from the outside—as it happens in the play *Alcohol*—not to attach himself to it excessively either, because death, too, must take place. What is [man] then? Well, he is something else, that which in *Alcohol* stood and watched, because the soul is feelings, grief, exhilaration; the body is pain, sweat, and all such things. But you are on the outside and observing with an implacable gaze, hard as a diamond.

But, with regard to the question about what I kept—the body and the soul in their fundamental modes. This is why they regenerated somehow, because whatever passed through the finest sieve, remained, endured, and regenerated. My basic qualities remained. But I realize that the sieve was quite fine, since what remained is an ecstatic person, a person of ecstasy, which I have always been; I have never been a person of repose. I have not been a bohemian in that sense of a bohemian who lives for the sake of pleasures and with pleasures, and feels good...on the contrary, more accurately, [I have lived] with ecstasy. Ecstasy is not derived from pleasures so much; much more so, ecstasy proceeds from the great struggles, the great conflicts. I became a psychiatrist in order to meet horrors head-on and not so that I feel nice. To me, a life without ecstasy, an ordinary life, would be painful and terrible. As it is in *All That Jazz*...—now when I saw it as a non-drinking person, I said to myself, “This is about the person who is afraid of being commonplace.”

For years I had lived exactly like that, you know [Terziyski makes a motion that indicates incessant drinking], and I used to move like that because my hand would go numb since I was about to have a heart attack, and so on, the day would start. I understood that, actually, the idea of an ordinary life has always terrified me—for there not to be ecstasy and immense perturbations.

Harper: What makes your life extraordinary now?

Terziyski: The sense of extraordinariness—when you know that things are not ordinary, they become extraordinary. I will give a very basic example, which is not particularly accurate, but whoever needs to will understand me: a person looks at a computer and says, “an ordinary computer,” but I know that the seven billion people living now and the twenty who lived before have contributed every bit of their sweat and thought for this to occur, and if this thing is ordinary and normal, well, then, what isn't? If you eat a banana that was brought this morning from Ecuador, what are you actually thinking? “A typical banana.” But imagine instead how someone sick with Chagas fever, bitten by mosquitoes, had gotten up at five a.m. and picked these bananas, and had then died in the arms of the overseer, let's say. What ordinary thing do you see in all of this? I live in an extraordinary world, because I know that it is extraordinary. But, some say “well, computer—ordinary business; banana—I will eat it.” Have you heard of Chagas fever? Do you know what the structure of the gastrointestinal tract of the mosquito that carries it is like? Do you know what is in the head of the person who picked the bananas two days ago? There is nothing ordinary in this world.

Harper: In other words you have reached a different understanding of “extraordinariness.”

Terziyski: Yes, and this is why I write about journeys around the neighborhood. They are the most magnificent, unusual, poetic, and wonderful, as is, for every fool, going up the Eiffel Tower. But, to me, a walk around the neighborhood is a great thing. Well, I, too, live like a fool some of the time, until I remember that this is not how life must be lived.

Harper: Speaking of extraordinariness, would you define your own break with alcohol and ending your alcohol phase, if we can call it thus, a kind of revolution?

Terziyski: Yes. Actually, alcohol is the final addiction of all dependencies, not for everyone, but for me it was the final addiction—you are independent of other things, but you depend on alcohol. For the alcoholic who has hit rock bottom, it is so—he does not care about anything, does not depend on anything; he does not even eat...I used to eat a piece of cheese, because it is one of the richest foods and this is all I could muster, or an egg, or a banana. I drank sweetened wine because it activates the Krebs cycle. This is how Kerouac died, actually—drinking liters upon liters of sweet wine most probably without eating. When this is your only dependency, and you are, in actuality, free, all that is left is to cut that dependency as well, and you become really great [Terziyski smiles]. Afterwards, other dependencies begin to stick to you again: “But what if I lose my job? But what if...?” Cut it out immediately—there is nothing. If you have a thousand leva, toss it somewhere and continue without it—complete freedom. But for this one must train; one must be careful, since it really befits man to cling and to become dependent on this and that—on their status, on their position under a rock or in the underwater cavity where they are comfortably dwelling. That’s why, if you’re lying comfortably, jump up and start in the cold on a ten-kilometer walk in the mountain, so that you may feel yourself different.

Harper: So, this is part of the issue of which you speak earlier—in one’s transformation to abandon dependencies that may result in hurting others? How does rejecting dependencies coexist with caring for others? Where does “I’m doing this for myself” end, and “I’m doing this for another” begin?

Terziyski: This is part of the issue of living outside of oneself as well. That is, if I live in Sofia, I must walk along the streets of Sofia and, even more so, I must protest. It is why I must do this, as well. In general, to think about others is a forlorn affair; it has no chance, because you don’t know what they are. Think about yourself, only about yourself—how you yourself can be good, noble, how to be a *crystal globe*. I think that a crystal globe is much more significant because of the example that it gives of how everyone can become a crystal globe, that is, comprehensive and immaculate, as much as it is possible for man to accomplish this. He will never become a crystal globe, but if his ideal is such, he will seek to attain it and will do great things. To be calm, to be clean, to be transparent, to be unperturbed, to be noble, and many other things toward which it is good to aspire—by doing this for yourself and within yourself, you do much for others. For instance, to give someone money for his sake is a very hopeless business. To think for him is absolutely hopeless work. I have despaired of this: I give money to this one, or aid, or compassion, and I see that he becomes more and more dissatisfied and miserable because of it. It’s always like this. This is why you need to do these things on your own account. You give for yourself.

Harper: That is, you must know that you are doing it for yourself?

Terziyski: Yes, of course—you are the good person; you fashion yourself as a good person. You cannot satisfy others. You are not they. Instead, look after yourself, create yourself, perfect yourself, and this will be enormously beneficial to others.

Harper: What does it mean “to be a good person”?

Terziyski: Well, the crystal globe is good. It means for every person to feel intuitively the good and the bad in the quanta of life. In the microscopic events of life, one senses it, and not so much in relation to their value system, but to their senses and feelings—this is good and this is not good, because this makes me feel good and this does not.

Harper: This is to say that the good is not something one learns, but is something innate?

Terziyski: I very much hope that this is the case, and I think that psychiatry has helped much with this when it discovered that—because the idea of serial killers and psychopaths emerges immediately—none of them consider what they do to be good, truly; none of them derive pleasure from it. These [acts] are actually substitutes for their true joys, pleasures, for the things that are good for them. At the foundation are really the good things that we feel to be good. Eating ice cream may be detrimental, terrible, but it is so delightful. But why does it have to be detrimental and terrible? If you move, work a lot, and you have something to do with this energy, then it is a wonderful thing. This is to say that man is built quite properly, and feels, and is not warped, [not] a broken machine that must be taught what is good and what is not. He senses, but he must really cleanse himself somehow, in order to become again a good machine, a good implement, a good device for gauging good and evil on its own. I believe and hope that man is designed quite properly and on his own, without any external pressure upon his sensory faculties and feelings, senses what is good and evil.

Harper: Is there a moment when there isn't such pressure?

Terziyski: No, I don't think that there is. But, generally, one must conduct very thorough renovations and purges of the “cellars,” as much as they can, and to defy the pressure. That he defies, of course, always changes him again. But we should never wish for miracles and exceedingly great successes. No one can become a crystal globe, but if we walk on this road, it will be good for us. And, as I said, I hope immensely that man really has immaculate sensory faculties to gauge what is delightful, what is good.

Bulgaria, Bulgarians

Harper: How would you assess the cultural state of Bulgaria today, twenty-three years after the regime change and six years after the country's entry into the European Union?

Terziyski: At the moment, the country is inhabited by a people who rank somewhere near the sixtieth place in terms of well-being, which means that Bulgaria is toward the end of a leading group, among the first seventy of 200 countries, that is, the poorest of the richest and perhaps the saddest, most miserable and lamenting people in the world. We can say much here about the reasons for this [last part]: there is no faith and hope; they are brute materialists, deprived of ideas in which to find hope. Most people consider

themselves poor and anguished, which is not so at all. Perhaps only according to the happiness index is Bulgaria far behind, but according to the index of human development, which is one of the important models for measuring well-being, the Bulgarian is not poor at all. The first seventy countries are the richest countries in the world. There are countries with an index around thirty. But Bulgaria is further ahead than Russia, Ukraine—such massive forces—not to mention China and India, where the index is 5 or 4.5, and Bulgaria's is 7.5 or 8, that is, the Bulgarian index for human development is one of the higher and not of the intermediate indexes. And the index of human development is a multivariable indicator that includes life expectancy, access to education, to healthcare, other than the internal brute product per capita, which pertains to money, to the economic situation. It includes the segregation of society, illness, epidemiological factors, and this makes for a very good multivariable indicator of well-being. Bulgarians are not poor, not at all. But according to the index of human happiness—and there is, of course, a variable in this multivariable analysis, self-assessment of life—Bulgarians are at an exceptionally low level, i.e., people who live predominantly well and feel exclusively miserable, because they are perhaps the most materialistically inclined of all the civilized nations and most lacking in faith and hope in anything, except for some very murky conceptions of well-being—“we must be like so-and-so.” But what have you done to be like so-and-so?

One finds stability in a stable ideology, if you will, in a conception of the world; Bulgarians don't have that. Even communism no longer works for them, though it did do some serious work. Many people say quite genuinely that *before* there was a “bright future”¹⁶ for which to live, there was a society, as an idea, in which to hope—you work for it, fight for it, do everything for it. But even the patriarchal model of the family, this familial individualism—the ideal of struggling for the family; even this has been destroyed, or at least very powerfully shaken. And so, in Bulgaria, people have truly nothing to rest their hope upon.

Harper: *Alcohol* pertains to revolutionary transformations on the micro-scale, the individual plane, but can a transformation happen on the macro-scale as well—a metamorphosis of national proportions? In another interview, you claim that “[t]here are two Bulgarias. The Bulgaria of the good Bulgarians and the Bulgaria of institutions,” and you suggest to “take a look at those who have lost faith, courage, the distressed and the craven! This is what they say: ‘Well, is there any sense in education? There isn’t...you study, you study, and then what? You cannot find a job.... Is there any sense in democracy? There isn’t...you vote, you vote, and in the end there is still no money for a new case of beer...’—and so on. For the craven and the weak-willed nothing has meaning. And this is Hell” (Valkova 10). How would a revolutionary transformation take place for a people, the Bulgarian people, for instance?

Terziyski: I would not say that every person can experience such a transformation, but the main characteristic features of this transformation are universal—they cannot but be a good thing for a singular person as well as for an entire people. Whoever is not afraid that he will lose his life, he will gain his life. The Bulgarian people are constantly “surviving” in some negligible way; if they learn how not to survive at all, it will dawn on them—enough with this surviving!—we all humiliate ourselves, and we constantly lament. Whoever learns not to lament, but to be robust, and to regard his weakness, his survival at any cost, with disdain, from that point on he will be able to take a much fuller breath. Serbians, for instance, are happier than we are, because—though they grumble, dissatisfied with themselves as well—their negligible, philistine survival, their degrading “well-being” has never been the cause for compromises, such as the ones that Bulgarians have made.

Harper: In other words, to you, the compromises that Bulgarians are willing to make are a part of the reasons for the nonexistence of the kind of profound transformation of which you write?

Terziyski: These compromises are the religion of the Bulgarian: let's accept whatever indignity in order to be all right. I just wrote in an article for *Deutsche Welle* that all thinking people work for oligarchs, for the rich, the few; the many work for the few—it's always like this. They hate them—this is plainly clear. And they must speak against them. What are the ways? Either you keep quiet and you take your money, or you don't keep quiet and you leave. But you still need to eat, so you must go somewhere else, and you will again be in this scheme. Some have the alternative to be like Aesop, with invisible walls, to place invisible hot pepper in the wounds of the despot, of the master. What I do is [this]: I write whatever I want, whatever is in accordance with my conscience. And I say to the editors-in-chief, "You are the master's watchdogs; you are the ones who execute the politics of your owners, so you deal with it, but pay me and bear the smudges on your own conscience. I gave you what I ought." And so it goes, a playfully irresponsible, but serious politics.

Harper: How do you see a change in Bulgarians taking place? What must happen, and what would be an affirmative kind of change?

Terziyski: I see it as a movement toward a renaissance of the Bulgarian spirit, in the direction of self-respect, of dignity. This is to say, we, Bulgarians, must accumulate a lot of examples of dignified comportment, instances that would elicit self-respect, which we can lean on. We must garner these and shun accumulating examples of humiliation. The current protests must continue [Terziyski speaks here of the 2013 protests]; they must exist and must somehow have success in order for them to create. What would they accomplish? Nothing ever in the concrete sense, but what spiritual evolution for the soul of the people! If it turns out that they have absolutely no significance, no result, this would, to some degree, discourage people. But, on the other hand, people see their strength and their dignified comportment. Everything must be assessed on a psychological, a moral level, and not on a specifically political or an economic level. If people believe in their strength, if they believe in their dignity, in their integrity and a great deal of other such things that are beyond the material, things in the material, political, and every other sense will improve tremendously.

Bulgarians hate each other because they hate themselves, because they have not completed enough brave and dignified acts upon which to stand. Everyone must become a role model—this is the exit. Broadly speaking, what needs to change most of all is the direction of the critical gaze from outside to inside—for everyone to transform themselves, to make themselves a person worthy of respect. Then they will respect others. Such people, they work well with one another, help each other, and create great things.

Harper: How do you envision the place of Bulgarian literature in world literature?

Terziyski: Until now it had none; it could not find a place. Now that strong, energetic, and intelligent writing people are emerging, I think that it will find a good place.

NOTES

- ¹ Unless otherwise noted, all translations are my own.
- ² In her overview, Alpieva summarizes and synthesizes three central texts dedicated to contemporary Bulgarian literature: Svetlozar Igov's "Българската литература след 1989 година" ["Bulgarian Literature after 1989"] (2009), Alexander Kiossev's "С помощта на чук. Към критика на гилдийната идеология" ["With the Help of a Hammer: Toward a Critique of Guild Ideology"] (2004), and Plamen Doinov's "Литература в междувековието. Поглед към българската литература 2000-2003" ["Literature in the Intercenturial: A Glance toward Bulgarian Literature 2000-2003"] (2004).
- ³ Lea Koen's "За еврейските романи и предразсъдъците, които дебнат в литературата. Отворено писмо до Светлозар Игов" ["Of 'Jewish Novels' and the Prejudices That Lurk in Literature: An Open Letter to Svetlozar Igov"] <<http://www.svobodata.com/page.php?pid=1034&rid=61&archive=1>>. Igov's response "Да се сърдиш на огледалото. Отговор на Леа Коен" ["To Be Angry with the Mirror: A Response to Lea Koen"]. <http://litenet.bg/publish/sigov/lea_koen.htm>.
- ⁴ Plamen Doinov disputes attacks against "the Bulgarian postmodern" in his "Скритият дебат за постмодернизма в българската литература" ["The Hidden Debate Regarding Postmodernism in Bulgarian Literature"]. <<http://www.slovo.bg/showwork.php3?AuID=143&WorkID=11458&Level=1>>.
- ⁵ A poll conducted by Ivelina Ivanova and available on the academic project blogsite of students in the Publishing program under the directorship of Dr. Greta Dermendjieva also supports this claim. <http://publishingsofia.blogspot.com/2013/06/blog-post_5582.html>. Much has been written in Bulgaria and abroad about Georgi Gospodinov, whose writing and immense popularity have earned him both a dedicated readership across and beyond the nation and accusations of selling his craft cheaply.
- ⁶ Svetlozar Igov's "Българската литература след 1989 година" ["Bulgarian Literature after 1989"] offers a detailed (though not exhaustive) glimpse of the literary terrain.
- ⁷ Kiossev cites Sava Vasilev, Vladimir Yanev, Minko Benchev, and Yordan Eftimov, who describe the phenomenon as a withdrawal of writers from literature in order to become politicians, the transformation of the book into yet another commodity, etc.
- ⁸ It suffices to observe the dates of comments posted on various sites that sell the text to notice that interest in *Alcohol* endures. See *Goodreads*, for instance <<http://www.goodreads.com/book/show/8612714>>.
- ⁹ Boyko Borisov, the prime minister of Bulgaria at the time.
- ¹⁰ Literally, the word means a mug, an unpleasant face, but it has been used widely in Bulgaria since the mid-nineties as a term that typically denotes a low-ranking member of the Bulgarian mob of particular physical characteristics—male, exceedingly brawny or corpulent, with a thick neck, and shaved or nearly shaved head—as well as personal qualities—brutality, absence of conscience and education, greed, crudeness, etc.

- ¹¹ Terziyski is referring to a Bulgarian literary tradition for which the pastoral was characteristic and “прежулящото слънчице” (“the scorching sun”) over the Bulgarian village and fields was a staple motif.
- ¹² The abandonment of which Terziyski speaks invokes his decision to dedicate himself exclusively to writing.
- ¹³ Terziyski’s drawings appear in a short story collection, entitled *13 Парчета от счупеното време* [*13 Pieces of the Broken Time*].
- ¹⁴ In the Bulgarian, the terminological distinction between fiction and nonfiction is between *художествена литература* (artistic literature) and *документална, нехудожествена* (documentary or non-artistic literature). Thus, the connection to which Terziyski is pointing is an already existing one between artist and artistic literature, i.e., fiction.
- ¹⁵ *Любовта на 45-годишния мъж* [*The Love of the 45-Year-Old Man*] was published in October 2013.
- ¹⁶ One of the most prominent slogans of the communist regime in Bulgaria.

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