

A LONG SPEECH INSTEAD OF A MINUTE SILENCE FOR PROFESSOR BOGDAN BOGDANOV

THE CODE OF IMMORTALITY

For one of the anniversaries of the New Bulgarian University the Board of Trustees voted a decision to publish a small booklet which would present everything that makes our University different, innovative, filled with a spirit, thriving and attractive – at that time, like a ‘tiny flower amongst nettles’, which, rather than a long history behind, has eyes for the future. We entitled the book “Why are we different?”. The book turned out well and we concluded it with the following text: “In 100 years we will probably be like Humboldt, Fichte, Schelling, and Schleiermacher, we will resemble Godric Gryffindor, Helga Hufflepuff, Rowena Ravenclaw, we will be eligible to have stone thrones erected in front of our University for us. A few centuries later our differences will appear pathetic, just like the creation of cinema, television, the telephone, the computer appears to people today, but our differences will always carry the feeling of a special world of freedom.” We thus merged the names of the founders of the Humboldt University – great philosophers and university professors, each one - with an undeniable contribution to life and the university idea, with the names of the lecturers at the School of Witchcraft and Wizardry from *Harry Potter*, setting for ourselves a horizon – from the strictly academic to the magically spiritual, in order to present the colours of our diversity.

Today we reached the point of knowing that, indeed, we ARE different and of re-discovering what we have always known – but on a scale longer than ordinary human time. We are different because we knew Professor Bogdan Bogdanov. This is the reason why whatever we say or write about him should never be sad, casting dark shadows, but brightened by the light of what he told us, the same thing with which he made the New Bulgarian University full of colour and appeared to have drawn the code of immortality – not just for himself, but for us, as well. This is the reason: ‘man is immortal also because of the long-drawn biological cycle of our world, and also – because of our strong attachment to different people.’

Professor Bogdanov presented the highly spiritual as an enhancement of the long-drawn biological flow, uplifting life on a broader scale, into which the specific individual, his connected-ness with other people is also such an enhancement-upgrade, equivalent to the soul. That was the type of atheism Professor Bogdanov subscribed to: that a man is all the more immortal, the more connected he is with other people. New Bulgarian University is the guarantee for this type of immortality of the soul.

Professor Bogdanov wrote a short biographical note for his website. However, a few details have stuck in my mind, which seem significant. One is a memory shared in several interviews and books in which as a baby, he is in his mother’s hands during the bombing raids above Sofia. Another one are his mother’s words: “Always be punctilious and ambitious!” Recently, to illustrate an article in the newspaper, he brought three childhood pictures, as we had asked, but wanted us to pick one only. One of them he had signed in a beautiful hand for his beloved grandmother. In the same way he had signed some of his first books, donated to the library of the New Bulgarian University, probably after the death of his father – the famous writer Ivan Bogdanov – about whom those well familiar with literary science know that he has shouldered a significant part of the history of the entire Bulgarian literature. And not only, and not in a peaceful and good-natured writer’s way, but precisely following the

principle not ‘thanks to’ but ‘despite’. That is why I can never help reciting at least one of his favourite examples selected from Stoyan Mihailovski and never spared in the book:

*Vulgarians you are – so you were born,
Vulgarians you are of the utmost vulgarity –
Vulgarians and that is it – as if you attended
A special school for vulgarity*

So from the three photos from his childhood, we chose one in which, leaning against a bookshelf, at the age of probably five, a young Bogdan Bogdanov is reading a children’s book. We asked him: “So, you had learned to read at that age?” “No, he replied, - but my father made me pretend that I could.”

That was precisely what we needed for the material we were preparing for the newspaper to introduce his new book *Text, Speaking, Understanding*. We wanted to illustrate it, just like in the film *The Tree of Life* – with more panoramic images, because the book was pushing for greater scope. Professor Bogdanov used to say that everything depends on the scale of the world in which you live – you can live in a small, practical world, or you can live in a much more spacious one, which was engendered even before humanity and therefore has outgrown what is yours, what is human, creating a more complex reality.

Professor Bogdanov’s biography is no secret – he started his career at the University of Veliko Turnovo, lectured long years at Sofia University, where he gave the greatest conclusive lecture when he left there, then was appointed Ambassador to Greece, then created the New Bulgarian University, where, until his last hour he was the man to whom everyone used to go for a solution to their problems. He seemed to have a magic approach to arrange things in such a way that everyone would feel protected, even when what they had wanted did not happen precisely as they had expected. Professor Bogdanov had the ability to teach people to think on a grander scale. That is why even his short biographic note published in www.bogdanbogdanov.net, gives us an idea of a longer text contained inside.

What does it mean to translate at a very early age some of the greatest of Plato’s dialogues under the vigilant eye of professor Georgi Mihailov, and God knows how many other professors: to translate the dialogue with the golden, sparkling Phaedrus, where the lover, at the sight of his beloved takes in this reminiscence of divine beauty, which, in turn, sets forth the re-birth of his wings, because earlier the soul used to have features, and thereby the lover begins to grow feathers once again. Or the other dialogue – Phaedo, to whom these words at the all-university seminar apply: “Anybody can have their own favourites, but I am telling you why I like this quote and why it has become my motto. And this is my motto. The dialogue I got it from is Phaedo. I have never seen anything like it before that. What is it - *False words are not only evil in themselves, but they infect the soul with evil.*”

This is the reason why I am always so tenacious in choosing my terms of reference. Yes, indeed, naming is a very difficult process and can incredibly easily spoil not only each and every moment of our life, but our whole life, indeed. This is precisely what Socrates does. Socrates wants to tell his students from a modern point of view that the body is not the man. The man is the significant other. The man is the other thing – we can put it in modern terms - when you die, the body ceases to exist – that much, and the body is no longer the man. But it is not easy to set the two apart. In the first moment when Socrates’ students ask him: ‘is there anything we can do to make you happy?’, Socrates replies: ‘take good care of yourselves’, yes! But he adds something more: ‘EACH OF YOU CAN TAKE GOOD CARE OF YOURSELVES PERFECTLY, IF HE TAKES CARE OF HIMSELF IN COMPLIANCE WITH WHAT WE SPOKE ABOUT.’ So, not just to take care of themselves, but in compliance with what ‘we spoke about’. That is to say, ‘what we spoke about’ is precisely

that the man is not the body, but the soul, that the soul lives longer or eternally and that the separation of body and soul is more of a festive, wonderful act and not something horrible and sad.”

In order to break the short biography and its hidden long speeches – we can imagine what it means to translate Epictetus’s Diatribes with all the manners of speaking in it and with all the pieces of advice which even today can save us from the winters of our discontent: “make an end of turning yourselves into slaves, in the first place of things, and then, in the second place, on their account, slaves also of the men who are able to secure or take away these things”, “when you are going to any one of the great, remember, that there is another, who sees from above what passes; and whom you ought to please rather than man”, “when, then, you see any man subject to another, or flatter him contrary to his own opinion, confidently affirm that this man also is not free; and not only if he does this for a bit of supper, but also if he does it for a government or a consulship: and call these men ‘little slaves’ who for the sake of little matters do these things, and those who do so for the sake of great things call ‘great slaves’, as they deserve to be.” “Heaven forbid I will not be so insensible of my own possessions. But if a person is fearful and abject, what else is necessary but to write letters for him as if he was dead? ” Pray oblige us with the corps and blood of such a one.” For, in fact, such a one is corpse and blood; and nothing more.”, “And there needs but little and a small deviation from reason to destroy and overset all. A pilot doth not need the same apparatus to overset a ship as to save it,”

And the greatest thought, formulated in the Diatribes: “But you take a journey to Olympia to see the work of Phidias, and all of you think it a misfortune to die without having seen such things. But when there is no need to take a journey, and where a man is, there he has the works (of God) before him, will you not desire to see and understand them?”

The people of the New Bulgarian University, everyone who knew Professor Bogdanov, everyone who gets in touch with the works of this University, everyone who has and reads his books – they do not need to go and seek the sculpture of Phidias, neither does a man need to be a foreigner or deceased to receive acknowledgement as great.

And this is the scope of all simple sentences in Professor Bogdan Bogdanov’s biography, which he humbly put up on his web site – with abounding speeches, formulating truths which cannot be expressed in other ways.

In 2009 Professor Bogdanov held his first forum at www.bogdanbogdanov.net, which he scrupulously maintained since its launch in 2006, by publishing for free access both his books and quite a few of his translations from ancient Greek. The same year saw the launch of his all-university seminar which, with different topics each semester, continued for seven years – passing through Plato, Herodotus, Aristoteles, *The Physics of Sorrow* and *Degrad*, through *Death and the Compass*, through Cavafy and Rastier, through Orhan Pamuk and Mario Vargas Llosa and against the background of one entire world, where he made us think about our tiny human souls so that we could get the Big Picture and attain great heights.

These seminars allowed everyone who had not had the opportunity to attend his magnificent seminars at Sofia University to experience this type of genuine academic training, this elevation.

‘Elevation’ is one of Professor Bogdanov’s favourite coinages. In the forum we often argued what is it that he names with it – could it be love? One of the crucial texts where this word comes up is the essay “An Attempt at the Idea of ‘yourself’ in the book *Together and Apart*” – where he says: “Of course, I usually manage to rise above a static aloofness, which I have grown used to and I have considered for myself. I do not know whom to blame. What I know, however, is that elevation is possible. Aloofness is to a great degree illusory. Its rigidity is rather desired and momentarily achieved. I have seen it in breech and advancement in other

people, sometimes – in me.” However, the answer came at a seminar: “when I say ‘elevation’ I mean all sort of extremities. A man can turn into both an animal and a God.”

Professor Bogdanov’s forum and seminar created strong communities – people who debated 169 topics and wrote 8356 comments. No other cultural institution, medium or school of thought can boast such an achievement. No personal forum has ever reached this persistence of long-lasting reflection – and I am not saying this now to simply match the tune of the eulogy, but to preserve the style of our long night-time posts and meetings at dusk – for instance, on December 23rd when all those who had kneaded their Christmas bread, when the route taxies to NBU had stopped, and then you suddenly get the present of, for instance, these background words for the whole world:

“WHICH IS THE ESSENCE OF THINGS? DOES LOVE HAVE AN ESSENCE? THE ESSENCE OF LOVE IS NOT TO FEEL LOVE FOR ONE SPECIFIC PERSON, BUT TO HAVE A PASSION FOR KNOWING THE WORLD YOU LIVE IN.”

Professor Bogdanov’s books are probably the most difficult thing to write about – they are books which need to be remembered as a person, as texts which are not only about a thing but also about a person. “The Ruler’s Misery”, “The Poor Account of the Victor” from the collection *Europe: Understood and Made; Separate and Together*; the only book whose title Professor Bogdanov refused to lower, *Narrative, Time And Reality In Ancient Greek Literature*, which was supposed to be entitled *Love and Narrative* and which received a special award at the Christmas party at NBU, *Narrative, Time And Reality for More Emotionality; Text, Talking and Understanding* - in which we have the text “The Tree of Life”; the infinite “Myth and Literature” and the yet grander timelessness of *The University: A special world of Freedom, The Change in Life and Text* and the heavy artillery of *Words, Meanings, Concepts And Things* are all a guarantee that Bogdan Bogdanov will never stop talking to us, and therefore – doing, and we will never stop learning to see the big picture of the world because “The truly good thing about happiness is not for it to happen and to simply hold it by doing what one’s real wishes and personal attitudes dictate. True goodness is in the joy of improved human uniqueness, in close contact with the external of a sufficiently spacious world.”

However, in those days when Professor Bogdanov left our small human world and headed for the vast domains of eternity, the difficult question hangs in the air: Will we be able to bear the Vardar Rhapsody without Professor Bogdanov at NBU? In the year when the University has grown older than its students, when we celebrate a jubilee of a quarter of a century? What has Professor Bogdanov done – he will no longer speak to us from his mysterious office, or arrive at 14.23 every day – but we will have conquered the outposts which allow us to truly make history, only because we have had our encounter with him, and not only because the convergence of many insides and many outsides makes a community shine bright with its own light, but also because this community was lucky to have a person who has taken the responsibility to signify it, who is, so to say, its individual expression for the moments when it is inclined to be a unity and not a disorganized human multitude. Professor Bogdanov left us to face responsibility.

In the Preface to *The World Expanding* - the collection of papers we dedicated to Professor Bogdanov for his 75th anniversary in 2015 I told a story which, like the speakers in Plato’s *Symposium*, I can repeat here as well – because the stories and our conversations are what carries us through and keeps the beat of a verbal rhapsody.

It was the day of the opening ceremony of the academic 2010/2011 year at the New Bulgarian University. The Auditorium was filled to capacity – the whole university burst at

the stitches. Usually once the dignitaries came in, dressed in their academic gowns – the Rectors and the Deans (Professor Bogdanov used to go in with them) – everybody would rise to their feet. The solemnity was unbelievable, among other things because of the inimitable music by Pancho Vladigerov – the Vardar Rhapsody, which raises the hairs on every member in such a congregation, because of the sumptuous gowns, and because of the ceremony itself. At one of the ceremonies, however, Professor Bogdanov went ahead of the solemn procession of the Rectors and Deans and came in on his own.

The President of the University does not normally wear a gown – so, alone, perfectly ordinary, *incognito* in his grey suit, in an Auditorium packed to capacity with students, parents, lecturers and guests. To his amazement, once he stepped in, without a signal, the very next second the Auditorium exploded in applause, everybody was on their feet, like in a big amphitheatre, where you could identify with the great hero through the community; like in the film *Beautiful Mind*, in the scene when everyone, in a gesture of respect, gave their pens to the Professor; like the magic of a royal light, in incessant crescendo, in which the sound of human clapping hands chases away the ghost of communism, and all other spectres (after all, in the hall there were about 2000 students born in the same year as the NBU, 1991), this wipes depreciation, lifelessness – so that we could make an entrance into a new era, like in that golden poem by Apollinaire *We understood my comrade and I/ That the little auto had driven us into a New Era/And although we were both already grown men/ We had just been born*.

My colleague told me that the people who were watching the ceremony on screens outside the Auditorium reacted in the same way – with applause; they greeted him in the same way, despite the fact that they were outside the hall and he could not see or hear them.

What I really want to say, in my garbled and rambling speech is this: because we know Professor Bogdanov, know him like those people there and then, like these people here and now, like people who will add to the trails of the history engraved in us tinges that weren't there, as people to whom he has said that the better hidden inside the good is the most difficult to understand, as people who have a greater scope, because they are connected. Cognition in all its shapes is the key to unravelling immortality. This is what he used to say:

“LOVE IS NOT TO MISS THE OPPORTUNITY WHEN YOU LOVE ANOTHER PERSON, TO USE THIS TO GET TO KNOW THIS OTHER PERSON IN A WAY THAT IS PRACTICALLY IMPOSSIBLE EVEN IN FRIENDLY SITUATIONS. THIS IS WHAT LOVE IS – KNOWING THE OTHER, AND THROUGH THEM, KNOWING ONESELF.”

Vesselina Vassileva, PhD.