

If this is a writer

The presentation of my latest novel, *P/F*, took place on 26 September 2020. Just a few hours after the event, explosions marked the start of the second Armenia-Azerbaijan War. On 9 November 2020, a ceasefire was established. And 9 November 2021 is the day of the official ceremony of the European Union Prize for Literature. Prizes are always a thing of doubt. It is unfair when you win. It is unfair when you lose. I have been found worthy of this prize, which neither my novel deserves, nor do I as a writer. I am confident that in the near future, the talented writers of Armenian literature will compensate for this and fill the visible vessel of invisible values.

During this last war, the Azerbaijani army made use of drones, the explosions from which caused human bodies to be reduced to thousands of pieces. Drones deprive human beings of their bodies, of the wholeness of their physical selves. There is a Zen Buddhist teaching, which says that human beings are not simply their bodies. Those drones and the people that controlled them took this teaching literally and turned this profound spiritual expression into a “naked truth”.

The title of Primo Levi’s Auschwitz memoir comes with a shadow of doubt – *If This is a Man*. When it comes to my novel, *P/F*, I have heard similar expressions – “if this is a novel”, “if you can call something like this a novel”. Fragments of random writing without an identity; pieces that are neither literature, nor anti-literature, neither human, nor non-human. At my insistence, the cover of the book *P/F* contains the visibly-printed phrase – “A novel”. This was a joke of sorts on my part, a provocation for all those who think they still know what a novel should look like, what literature should look like, who think they still know what is human, that humans have bodies. This was a poorly justified, desperate and weak attempt on my part to give definition to something without shape or character. I keep repeating this like a mantra to myself – “if this is a body”, “if this is a novel”, “if this is a writer”. Following the battle between doubt, denial and acceptance that comes after a tragedy, language cannot afford to lose meaning, which was its greatest achievement in the first place. I do not deny my own responsibility. I am guilty, because over the past years I have done nothing to contribute to the prevention of an Armenia-Azerbaijan war, except writing books. “If this is writing books”.

I apologize for my unclear message and haughty tone. The unclear message is not an attempt to avoid language or responsibility. It is a reflection of our world without shape or character, which is my world too, of course. It does not reflect the postmodern, second modern, or even an eighth modern. It is simply close to the unknown, close to our current absence.

So, allow me to express my gratitude to you and to say thank you to European culture and European literature, which has given me so much, and which I consider a school where I have always been a student. As the great Armenian poet Vahan Teryan said, “We are students of Europe.” As a student that has been enchanted by literature, let me recall and mention the names of all my teachers. They have created and continue to create Europe, and they have borne and continue to bear European culture – Paul Valéry, Krikor Beledian, Simone Weil, Marcel Proust, John Berger, Primo Levi, Robert Walser, Susan Sontag, Cesare Pavese, Bruno Schulz, Elias Canetti, Ruben Filyan, James Baldwin, Hermann Broch, Annie Ernaux, Alexander Kluge, Danilo Kiš, Claude Simon, Naguib Mahfouz, Roland Barthes, Pierre Guyotat, Bertolt Brecht, Witold Gombrowicz, Patrick Modiano, Juan Goytisolo, Pier Paolo Pasolini... thank you!

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