



# The T S Eliot Prize 2009 Reading Groups:

*The Burning of the Books and Other Poems*

**George Szirtes** was born in Budapest in 1948, and came to England with his family after the 1956 Hungarian Uprising. In recent years he has worked as a translator of Hungarian literature. He co-edited Bloodaxe's Hungarian anthology *The Colonnade of Teeth*. His previous collections include *The Budapest File* (2000); *An English Apocalypse* (2001); *Reel* (2004), winner of the T S Eliot Prize; and *New & Collected Poems* (2008). He lives in Norfolk and teaches at the University of East Anglia. The title of *The Burning of the Books and Other Poems* (Bloodaxe) refers to the events at the end of Elias Canetti's *Auto da Fe*.



## **The Burning of the Books**

### **9 Consuming passion**

To eat books is to have a stomach full of corners,  
Because the word is angular and has sharp edges  
That cut you: consonants, sibilants, gutturals,  
No sound is free from danger, everything harms you.  
Say you lie on the pavement, pounding your fists  
Against concrete, someone will come along and loose  
Razor-sharp words at your ear. Your ears begin bleeding  
And soon your mind and your heart are bloody,  
For we are sensitive creatures we lovers of language,  
Said the scholar. Yes, we spout nonsense and turn  
Talk into knives, but there is a higher order of knowledge.  
We are stupid, we splutter, we indulge infatuations,  
Loving those who despise us, the dwarf considered,  
And money is money. There is no truth in the world  
And this nose and these eyes are agents of strategy  
As much as the hump I carry on my back, for between  
Books and money, between abstraction and flesh  
There are oceans of blood, blood on the chess-board  
Where the pieces are restless, blood on the parcel  
You carry to assignments, blood on the contracts  
You present to your workforce and never a book  
Lodged in their stomachs, for their stomachs being empty,  
What they require is cash and food and a piece  
Of flesh to be squeezing or eating. It is ourselves  
Not the books we eat, our bodies are nourishment  
Beyond words or symbols or letters or paper.  
A thin man survives on a colophon. I am a thin man,  
The scholar replied: colophons, indexes, chapter headings.  
Life is annotation. Hunger and annotation. It is knowledge  
We hunger for, letters we drink, desire in our bloodstream  
For the fat, visceral, blood-bound flesh of our books.

## **Songs of the Wrestler József Szabó**

### **2 London 1959**

Land of green hills and fog and a sour dull sea  
Banging its head against concrete, offering free  
Gifts of clothes and employment, how we  
Loved you even as we puzzled out your ways  
Trying to pick through your language, through days  
Exactly like each other in off-season chalets  
Down promenades and piers among pools of beer  
And windblown papers. How we wondered at your queer  
Notions of amusement, your Christmassy cheer,  
Your drill halls, your cliff paths, your pubs, your cold  
damp sheets and grey blankets, your caddies and cups  
and cosies, your digestive biscuits, your shops  
brimming with bargains, your boiled sweets and pear-drops,  
the sheer tastelessness of your dinners. We became  
your walking clichés, playing the game  
of foreigners with souls. We laid claim  
to your manners. We filtered through into your short  
afternoons, your six o'clock news, into the sport  
you watched on your tellies. It was a superhuman effort  
entering your houses with their two up two down  
stairways, your suburbs, your overspill new town  
terraces, your slums, locating something we could own.  
Now here we are, hanging by a thread  
fed out by Fate, dangling, assimilated, accepted,  
lodged. Here I lie too. Here I can lay my head.

## **The Birds**

### **Primavera**

When the chill had lifted, but the afternoon  
was not quite warm and it was March, and the sky  
was lightening, and it was still too soon  
to go without a coat, and there was a dry  
edge to the early morning, I rose from myself,  
she said, suddenly younger than the calendar,  
and tried a few dancing steps as if half-  
intoxicated, nor could I help but wonder  
whether this dancing was just a peculiar mood  
brought on by the faint warmth, or an act  
of defiance against time, an attitude  
rather than true lightness, dream more than fact,  
but it was spring and it seemed right to dance.  
What else was there to lose? Why not take the chance,

because winter drags down the day, and we lose  
light and waking hours, and time, she said, seems  
like a hammer in the flesh, and who would choose  
such bitterness, if they could help it? Who dreams  
of winter as comfort and sweetness? We shrink  
away, she said, from our very selves, we hold  
our lives at a distance and feel we stand at the brink  
of a precipice in low light, in the freezing cold,  
despite the festivals, the decorations, the songs  
and the shows, in an endless February  
of mind and body and so it is a person longs  
to dance a few steps, for the dance to carry

us through an open door into the back of time  
so though we are skidding downhill we seem to climb.

Buy George Szirtes' *The Burning of the Books and Other Poems* from the Poetry Book Society's online bookshop: [www.poetrybookshoponline.com](http://www.poetrybookshoponline.com).

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