I would like to begin from a literary reminiscence with Puškin’s plays called “little tragedies” – “little” owing to the form, not to the issues. The last two plays entitled *The Stony Guest* and *Symposium in a Plague Time* were written almost simultaneously in November 1830 during the time of a plague, and they share some common themes. The statue of the commander, on the one hand, and the plague, on the other, appear in turn as guests and as foreign bodies: “contagion, our guest”, says Puškin. But with a difference. In the cemetery scene of the first play, the frenetic and inconsiderate Dom Juan looks at the dead commander as if he were a living enemy. As a consequence, his pitiless invitation to the one he killed arouses great fear in his servant Leporello. On the other hand, in the last tragedy, the chairman dedicates a symposium to the plague and to the opposed ethical positions related to it. “Absorbed in a deep reflection”, he crosses extreme attitudes of elation and fear, with a strong ethical emphasis on public responsibility. Finally, it is the loneliness of his position that inspires us with fear and pity.

**Hospitality and hostility**

This short reference to a somewhat tragic shift in modern hospitality towards an open hostility can introduce my first point. It concerns the similar shift in the word *xénos* from its original meaning in ancient Greek to its grafts in contemporary languages. In ancient Greek, *xénos* initially meant “guest” (or “host”) and then, in the derived form, “outsider, stranger”. In Latin *xéno* was translated by the word...
hospes, which had the same meanings as the Greek. Yet hospes was connected with hostis, which meant not only “outsider, stranger”, but also “enemy”. In fact, the hospes-guest was considered a potential enemy (hospes comes from hosti-potis, i.e. literally “the one who can become an enemy”). In the Roman world, the guest-host relationship was no longer only a positive model of attitudes towards strangers, like in Greece, but became a potentially hostile relationship.

Such a change will have a strong impact on western civilization, particularly evident in our contemporary languages and concepts. Ancient Greek had words like xenía or filoxenia, “hospitality” or “friendship with the stranger”, while there was no retraceable connection between xénos (or xenía) and fóbos, “fear”. Derived from other modern languages, the word xenofobia is present, on the other hand, in contemporary Greek, with the meaning of “fear, hostility towards the stranger”.

In English the transition to the word and concept of “xenophobia” is witnessed at the end of nineteenth century and is related to the raise of contemporary nationalism and colonialism. At first the words “xenomaniac” and “xenomania” (readapted from the ancient Greek verb xenomanein, “to be mad about guests or hosts”) with their negative connotation also betrayed their nationalist origin. They were soon replaced, at the beginning of twentieth century, by the words of a completely new coinage “xenophobic” and “xenophobia”. Often they stigmatized the sentiments of recently colonized peoples against their cultural assimilation; in addition, they indicated the typical prejudice of colonizers towards these peoples. All these neologisms connote a public obsession and a rejection reaction with regard to guests, seen as intruders and possible enemies.

It is likely that this new use of xénos exerted a deep influence when the same word was also grafted into contemporary biomedical language. The best example among terms of that new family is notoriously “xenotransplantation”, and the first recorded surgical experiments in that new medical field were carried out during exactly the same years as the early appearance of “xenophobia”.

Xenophobia and xenotransplantation

The two phenomena have a common starting point, conceptual and factual, illuminating both words. “Xenophobia” does not indicate intolerance for a particular individual, for an outsider, instead it is addressed to a community as a collective intruder: in particular to the community from which the partially assimilated stranger originates and where the features of a potential enemy appear.

On the other hand, the term “xenotransplantation” emphasizes its own opposition to the less difficult practice of “allotransplantation”: the first is relating to the transplantation between individuals of different species, the second to the transplantation between individuals of the same species. Making the donor’s organs