

A Muslim Voice in Bulgarian Poetry

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Tash's poetic talent emerged in testing times, during the final stages of the so-called "Revival Process"—the state-sponsored attempt at mass assimilation of Bulgarian Muslims, carried out in the last decades of authoritarian rule. The Pomak (whose mother tongue is Bulgarian) and the Muslim Roma were forced to relinquish their "alien" names in the 1970s. The Turks were subjected to the same measures in 1985, when Tash was twelve. He wrote his first poetry in high school—not in Bulgarian, but in "rudimentary, yet melodious English," in "linguistic revolt" against those who had changed his name.² His subsequent engagement with Bulgarian literature Tash credits to his first poetic mentor Christo Stoyanov, who did not hesitate to acknowledge openly

Aziz Tash (Aziz Nazmi Shakir) was born in 1973, in the city of Smolyan, where he graduated from an English-immersion high school. He holds a BA in Arabic and Turkish philology from the University of Sofia, and a Ph.D. in the History of Science from the University of Istanbul, where he currently teaches. His mother tongue is Turkish, yet Tash maintains a notable presence on the Bulgarian cultural scene, publishing poetry, prose, and translations from the Arabic, Turkish, English, and Russian.

mon lore to all "People of the Book," they are intelligible to Jews, Christians, and Muslims alike. Besides, the author seems aware that only the most pivotal cosmic events of sacred history—the Creation, the Fall, the Flood, the Exodus—could be readily summoned in popular consciousness. Fifty years of robust state atheism under Communist rule placed the foundational religious texts—the Bible, the Gospels, and the Quran—beyond the reach of the laity.

Thus—at the end of the 1980s—three generations of Bulgarians of all confessions had little way of knowing the scriptural legacy of the great religious traditions, to which they nominally subscribed. Although still carried on, religious observances had sunk to the level of folk practices and popular customs. Next—to ensure the uninhibited empathy of his diverse audience—the author endeavours to override even the mythopoeic "context" of the Bible. The familiar Biblical stories are fragmented and rearranged into quizzical surrealistic patterns. Tash's enigmatic, laconic, yet oddly evocative writings arguably aim to incite empathy rather than understanding. The density of religious allusions and imagery in his poetry is a startling "innovation," which sets him apart from most Bulgarian authors published over the last five decades.

Tash's latest book, launched by the innovative Bulgarian publishing house Stigmati in May 2004, accentuates more openly his dual identity. It comprises two collections of poetry, and has two titles: one on the front cover, the other on the back. The first title—At 22—flanks a view of the Galata bridge in Istanbul, Turkey. The second—Rain Apocrypha—hovers above a photo of the distinctive spindly oaks of the eastern Rhodope mountains in Bulgaria, Tash's birthplace. However, the designations "front" and "back," or "first" and "second" are arbitrary. The two cover designs (and their respective sections of the twin poetry collection) stand back to back, "head to toe," both facing the reader, who is left to decide on which to confer precedence. From either side, this slender volume looks like any other Bulgarian book. But at the heart of it, at the point of conjoining, an opaque page-divider emblazoned with a swirling calligraphic design

in Arabic script, proclaims the Muslim credo "La ilaha illa'l-Lah" (There is no god but God).

Each collection comes with a different biographical note. The flap-jacket of Rain Apocrypha imparts the essentials of Tash's curriculum vitae in dry and precise legalese. The biographical note of At 22, on the other hand, bears the hallmark of Tash's ironic and often bemusing style. It challenges our cultural preconceptions; establishes the author's creative pedigree; and states his poetic credo: "[Born] at the end of the 14th century of the Muslim calendar, this author was named after a great-grandfather of his, who went missing in Yemen in the 19th century after Christ, while on a 7-year tour of duty [in the Ottoman army]. Said author took his first literary steps on a stone dislodged from the garden-wall of his grandfather's house, and eventually assumed the nom de plume Tash ([Turkish for] stone) ... A. has no quar-

Riptide

To Yashua

"We accept baptism only from God..."
(Quran 2:138; Tr. A. Tash)

Our souls, overgrown with thorns and stones,
we crucify within our living bodies.
The tears, shed inwards, we wall up inside,
and the thorns blossom inwards in the mud.

And there—swarms of reapers cut
and gather the blossoms—herbs of death.
She gathers her apprentices along:
The living take the harvest instead of her.

And weighed down with tears and those who reap,
we baptize our bodies in rivers of mud.
But who of those immersed will live to see
the day his body crucifies his cross.

to acknowledge openly Tash's Turkish identity, include the young poet in his literary workshop, introduce him to the literary circles in Sofia, and eventually serve as editor of Tash's first published collection, *Grounds for a Sky* (1993).

The slow-burning rage, which permeates this collection, finds expression in startling surrealistic imagery, rooted in the chronology of the Revival process. The forcible name-change resonates in allusions to baptism in mud, or crucifixion of souls within the bodies ("Riptide"). The loss of identity evokes images of death or drowning (an oblique reference to the use of

water in the Christian ritual of baptism). The mass exodus of Bulgarian Turks in the summer of 1989, which brought the regions of mixed population to a standstill, can be gleaned in veiled allusions to the Biblical Exodus. Recurrent images of a purging "flood" evoke the tidal wave of popular protests in the fall of 1989, which swept away authoritarian rule in Bulgaria, as in the rest of Eastern Europe ("Before a flood"). A major component of that "flood" were the mass demonstrations of Bulgarian Muslims, demanding the reversal of the Revival Process.

An important feature of Tash's poetry is its ability to engage audiences across ethnic and religious divides. His early work addresses topical issues of the late 1980s with a raw immediacy, as if birthed in the throes of the unfolding outrage. Yet none of the poems is dated. Events are not directly mentioned. Tash treats reality as unprocessed ore: It must pass through the crucible of poetic imagination to be transformed into art which is compelling, rather than merely topical. He then casts the smelt in the mould of religious parables, meant to lend universality to the message. Curiously, most religious references in his first collection are not to Muslim sources, but to Biblical stories from the Old Testament: Com-

I have always lived
on the cusp of
two languages,
two cultures, two
religions, and that
has made of me an
advocate for each to
the other.¹

rel with the traditional view that poets write out of a need to be admired, but he also believes that the written word should call to mind the Creator of the Word.”³

As in his first collection, reproduced here under the title *At 22*, few clues link individual works to the reality from which they arise. Apparently, this “denial of context” is a matter of principle. Tash views poetry as “an attempt at sanctification of the words,” which otherwise “lose their original gravity to daily usage.” He makes a conscious effort to “guard all his writings from the tyranny of the topical and the concrete,” because “the glut of the mundane, of information as such” often hampers our ability to communicate meaningfully with each other, and with our own souls.

Rain Apocrypha presents newer pieces, many in poetic prose. In the “Metaphysics of the Bridge,” an old man spends a lifetime building a bridge from river stones with his only arm. His efforts are aided by a mysterious force—perhaps his own resolve, compensating for his missing arm and for all his human frailties. The bridge seems to be life itself, hence the old man can never cross it (and return). Stepping on the other shore is tantamount either to death, or to the mystical state of non-existence—*fana*—which dervishes strive to attain. For Sufi mystics, *fana* is an ecstatic state of momentary union with the Divine, when the limitations of physical existence fall away, and with them—all distinction between “this side” and “the other,” “here” and “beyond,” “now” and “then.” The old man attains his goal only when he abandons the bridge—his lifelong labour—to the surging river, forgets his fears, and boldly follows his resolve across, walking upon the waters.

“Rain Apocrypha” is yet another parable. Its opening statement echoes the popular saying, “If the mountain would not come to Muhammad, Muhammad would go to the mountain.” The next line, which alludes to the loving first encounter between the unnamed prophet and the mountain, counters a long-standing assertion of the Bulgarian grand-narrative that Islam was introduced in the Rhodopes through violence and forced conversions. The vignettes which follow bring together the prophet, a Gypsy fortune-teller and a stonemason. The narrative weaves together allusions to local Muslim folk rituals like the communal “rain prayer,” and oblique references to the mass exodus of the Muslims, and their subsequent return. There is a powerful affirmation of belonging—of Muslims to the mountain; of the Rhodopes to the people of the mountain. The turbulent memories of the author are still there, but his vehemence, which in earlier work churned just under the surface, has subsided. The central themes of this parable are self-discovery and reconciliation.

The collection *Rain Apocrypha* abounds with religious references that are predominantly and specifically Muslim. Tash’s poetic imagination—while still exuberant—is less idiosyncratic, and thus these pieces are easier to decode. The explicitness of Tash’s Muslim sensibilities is predicated not only on the greater openness of Bulgarian society to the evidence of religious sentiment, but also on the knowledge, that his potential audience is more familiar with Islam and its cultural legacy.⁴ Many of the symbols and images Tash utilizes grow from recognizable Muslim referents. Thus “The Dervish, His Jugular Veins, and...” has three thematic foci: the whirling dance of the Mevlevi dervishes with its complex system of cosmic symbols; the need for spiritual enlightenment, expressed in Quranic terms; and the Sufis’ yearning for a mystical union with God (“the target” of their ecstatic quest). The religious consciousness, which irradiates these writings, is that of a seeker, and not of a preacher: A seeker for whom the unity of all being is a reality, and its diversity is not an obstacle but a miracle. There is sincere religious commitment to this poetry, but no zealous desire to spread the Word. Muslims would find here plentiful reminders about the Creator of the Word. To the rest of us Aziz Tash speaks of our shared humanity; of the ethical fibre that holds our universe together; of love and rage; of remembrance and reconciliation; of our frailties, and never ending quest for enlightenment.

Notes

1. Aziz Tash, interview by Emilia Mateina, *Etno Reporter* (Sofia), May 2004.
2. Personal letter, 12 December 1995.
3. Aziz Tash had a strong bond with his paternal grandfather, who was an amateur stonemason who restored a number of small rural mosques in the eastern Rhodopes.
4. The Qur’an was translated into Bulgarian by Tsvetan Teofanov and published in Sofia in 1997.

Before a Flood (excerpt)

With our bodies we await a flood
so that we can return to earthly life.
But they re-bury us—one life after another—
alongside our borrowed gods.
With our bodies we await a flood...

Metaphysics of the bridge (excerpts)

6.

“As for the bridge. God gave the bridge the purest of shadows. And gave a river to the bridge. And to the river—a bridge. Then He took some of the shadow of the bridge, and gave it to the river. In the name of God, most benevolent, ever merciful.”

God makes the heavenly bodies move. The shadow of the bridge moved with them also: the bridge caressed the waters of the river. God created the heavenly bodies to deepen the shadows. And to the river he gave the shadow of the bridge. Before that shadow, the waters felt impure. They kept passing under its veil, and—seeing the wedding ring placed there by the old man—they sped on with the hope that some day, after a torrent upstream, they’ll stop parting with the bridge before they depart. On that day, they would reach the shadow purified and heavy with the greetings of all waters unable to attend.

7.

And also: What makes him set out, every morning, after the communal prayer, towards the river (with the words): “In the name of God, the Beneficent, the Merciful, if you see me coming back again—if you see me coming back without having crossed the bridge—then kill me with the stones.” And—so they say—he would point to the pile of river stones, heaped in the middle of the village. By these stones the villagers kept track of the days. Each stone marked a day after the building of the bridge. The villagers measured by them the passage of time, while the old man measured by them his powerlessness.

Rain Apocrypha (excerpt)

1.

The mountain did not go to the prophet: He himself came to the Rhodopes, caressed the stones, and fell asleep in their arms. When he awoke, the Gypsy maiden was leaning over him, reading quietly the lines on his palms. The prophet looked at her. He didn’t even lift a hand to check on his ribs, for he was sure that she was a part of him. And then I understood the saying about Mohammed and the mountain: The mountain always wanted to come, but first he had to tear it away from his eyes, in order to see it and to understand that he was a part of it.

The Dervish, his jugular veins, and...* (excerpt)

To Mesha Selimovic

1.

I swear upon the revolving orbit, the footsteps, and the road; I swear upon the dervish’s dance; upon creation, the Uncreatable and the created, both; upon the dervish who revolves and turns, coiling creation around his jugular veins; I swear upon the road, which turns and winds upwards—from the feet towards the sky, towards a sky the road to which remains still untrodden. That’s why the dervish would rather dance—the road winds and remains untrodden, untrampled by his feet. The dervish moves lightly. His jugular veins point the way towards the moving target, and the target dances in sync with the swelling tide of roads. From below and downwards.

* See Quran 50:16 “We verily created a man and We know what his soul whispereth to him, and We are nearer to him than his jugular vein.” (Tr. M. M. Pickthall)

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