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. His subsequent engagement with Bulgarian literature Tash credits to his first poetic mentor Christo Stoyanov, who did not hesitate to acknowledge openly Tash’s Turkish identity, including 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 one: 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 smell 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: Common 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 events of sacred history—the Creation, the Fall, the Exoduscould 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 mythopoetic “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 embazoned 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-
rel with the traditional view that poets write out of a need to be ad-
mired, but he also believes that the written word should call to mind
the Creator of the Word.1

As in his first collection, reproduced here under the title Aziz Tash, 22
clues link individual works to the reality from which they arise. Appar-
ently, this “denial of context” is a matter of principle. Tash views po-
etry 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 con-
crete,” 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
“Mythologies 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 mis-
ing arm and for all his human frailties. The bridge seems to be life it-
self, 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 mys-
tics, fana is an ecstatic state of momentary union with the Divine, when
the limitations of physical existence fall away, and with them—all dis-
tinction 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 ech-
oes the popular saying, “If the mountain would not come to Muham-
mad, 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 to the Rhodopes through
violence and forced conversions. The vignettes which follow bring
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 affirma-
tion 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 imagina-
tion—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.
Many of the symbols and images Tash utilizes grow from recogniza-
ble 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 enlighten-
ment, expressed in Quranic terms; and the Sufis’ yearning for a mystical
union with God (“the target” of their ecstatic quest). The religious con-
sciousness, which irradiates these writings, is that of a seeker, and nag
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 re-
membrane and reconciliation; of our frailties, and never ending quest
for enlightenment.

Notes
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 Teofilov and published