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The Poems of Drago Štambuk

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A simple diction, a simple statement.

Here I am, constructing ruins
not even the strongest wind
shall harm them.

It is a compact manifesto. Drago Štambuk is a Croatian, and a witness of events in Croatia and Bosnia. Insofar as his poems are the product of war, they are "ruins". Yet such ruins also constitute a triumph. War (the strongest wind) destroys almost everything; but literature survives.

Dr Drago Štambuk is a poet, as well as a doctor, as well as ambassador for Croatia. Until 1991 he was a clinical researcher into AIDS at St Stephen's Hospital in London; as this book goes to press, in 1995, he is Croatia's ambassador in Delhi, India.

Štambuk's role as ambassador evolved by chance, from the time he took it upon himself to correct a reporter writing from Belgrade, whose report directly contradicted what Štambuk was learning on the telephone from friends and family. To convey the truth became something of a mission for him: as ambassador, as poet.

Born on the island of Brač in the Adriatic, Štambuk began writing at the age of 19 when he was studying medicine at the University of Zagreb. He was lonely: medicine overwhelmed him, he missed his family, and poetry was his consolation, his means of recreating what he missed. "When you are vulnerable you go back to your roots," he explained. "If I were dying, I would only speak my old language, my first language", and so, alone in the big city, he found himself writing in the language of his childhood, the Croatian dialect known as Čakavski. The impulse was personal, but in the context



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of Yugoslavia it acquired a powerful political meaning.

There are three languages in Croatia: Čakavski and Kajkavski, the older tongues, not much spoken now, and Štokavski, the standard Serbo-Croat tongue. Štambuk insists on the intimate connection between a people's identity and language; and behind this insistence is history, the time in 1850 when Štokavski — the similar but not identical tongue that neighbouring Serbia and Croatia shared — became the standard language of both countries. For Croatia it meant dropping its two older dialects, in which there already existed an important body of Croatian literature. It was a cutting off of roots, the start of a severance of a people from their history. "What we got was a politicized, unitarian concept of language." Slowly, under Serbian domination, the Croat variants of Štokavski started disappearing.

More than century later language had become a field of political conflict. In the 1980s, when Štambuk wrote a medical report using Croat words, he was warned by his superiors that using Croat dialect would be construed as an aggressively nationalist gesture. It was the same with his poetry. Štambuk began to fight for the right to use, simply, a Croat word; the right to be different. It's a fight to be what you are. "The Croatian Spring opened my eyes," Štambuk has said, referring to the loosening of control in 1971, that was followed by a slow clamp-down, a piece-meal imprisoning of intellectuals. "There is a hidden Croatia. I began to look for the books in these old dialects, I borrowed books from older people who remembered I discovered writers like Marko Marulić / who wrote in Croatian and Latin in the 15th and 16th century/."

The poems themselves unite Štambuk's three kinds of work: poetry, medicine, politics.

His Croatian poems could be called political, because they utilize all three Croatian dialects, a political statement in the context of what was Yugoslavia. The poems in this volume, written directly in English, are political in a different way: they refer occasionally, if obliquely, to Bosnia, but more often are concerned with the gift of life, and the fact of death. Or to put it another way, with the value of life even in the face of death.

As for the influence of Štambuk's medical training, this can be seen in the way Štambuk uses his words. He writes with hard-edged precision, as a doctor uses his tools, looking at objects with a clinical regard. And in so doing he turns his language into a new minted

thing, that makes the reader feel the weight of each word freshly.

At the edge of the night road
a dead hedgehog with its grist
of hatched viscera.

The beam of undipped headlights
has crystallized in its yellow eyes.

(“*Evaporation from the Iliac Pelvis*”)

There’s something of the scalpel in the “grist of hatched viscera”, and of the laboratory in that image of crystallized light. It is a marvellously condensed image, merging the cause of death (the car with its lights), the moment of confrontation preceding death (transfixed by the lights), and the awful petrification of death (the light in the eye). And there’s much about the way life goes on in the face of death in the final three lines:

Dead hedgehog,
and I neither quickening my heartbeat
nor slackening my pace.

Death pervades these poems.

You slept through the night.
Extinguished stars lie on the table
among scattered clothes.

(“*Gaspard*”)

The extinguished stars are so compact
an image of the precious life gone.
Štambuk’s poetry carries its feeling
deep, doesn’t splash and lose it on its
sleeve. “*Voice*” is about a head severed
from the body.

The severance had been instantaneous,
his head had slipped into the green
wake and away.

He plucks out the man’s voice as the
last bit of his being, neither flesh nor
spirit; somewhere between.

His last statement was lodged in his
voice-box
as a guttural jewel, embedded there
to be spat out in the sea’s mouth.

Štambuk insists that life counts. A cry
is both transient and incorporeal, yet
Štambuk wraps it in an opposite meta-
phor — corporeal, valuable in the most
literal sense, and indestructible — a
jewel.

It is worth mentioning that Štambuk’s
tone is not always solemn. Take:

Jacob spent the night wrestling with
an angel.

Was he in fact having sex with a
stranger,
seeking an answer to his inner turmoil?
The following day was walking with a
limp, the Bible tells us. God knows
what he’d been up to.

Štambuk gently debunks and questions
this religious myth, tugs it down to
mundane earth with a comic pun (God
knows what he’d been up to). The sub-
lime image of the wrestling angel be-
comes the less sublime image of a
casual sexual encounter. Yet it is part
of his originality that he charges even
that encounter with meaning, gives it
its unclichéd and humanist due, makes
it Štambuk-particular, as the act of
someone “seeking an answer to inner
turmoil”.

In the course of *Incompatible Animals*
Štambuk has frequent recourse to
myth. The poem “*Zagreus*” refers to
Zagreb — however battered by war,
the city will live on, as an immortal
deity lives on.

How perfectly this slippery
name fits the city’s desolate
inconsistency, its half-
divine and half-human nature.

In the Greek myth Zagreus, child of
Persephone and Zeus, is destroyed by
the Titans. But Zeus rescues the child’s
heart, and reincarnates him in another’s
body, and blasts the Titans to ashes.
Thus:

Here, in the Croatian graveyard
I feel the Titans’ lust and eternal be-
trayal.

Reinventing the conflict in mythologi-
cal terms, Štambuk ends with a venge-
ful plea to Zeus, “the old king”:

Dear little hand, pass me the shabby
rattle,
and my anger’s teeth will trigger
the old King’s gnashing.

In his poetry Štambuk brings two
worlds together. There is the world of
modern medicine, where things are
named, even labelled, and bodies can

be broken into their discrete parts. This
is Štambuk the materialist, even the
reductive materialist. Then again,
Štambuk has roots in an old culture,
and all that that implies. Born on a is-
land, the sea comes back and back.
And, too, fire, stars, snow, night, day,
sun, moon, wind — the universal com-
ponents of myth and folk tale.

The combination is a good one: the
material and the mythic. It’s a dualism
reflected in his ability to denote the
particular and the universal at once.
In “*Narcissus in Clay*” he ranges near
and enormously far in the space of two
lines:

Close as the bedding I lie on.
Dear as the suddenly shining sun.

Or these ominous lines in “*Diocletian’s
Dust*”:

Beneath the rain’s curtain,
something rises that shouldn’t exist.

— where the rising evil feels curiously
unabstract. The preceding image of a
curtain of rain, where nature is invoked
as solid yet it’s elusive rain, somehow
makes the subsequent image of evil feel
palpable by contrast, makes it press-
ing and living.

The abstract and the particular are
united again in “*The Wall*”.

There’s this wall
buried in my memory, something
I Can’t circumvent, surmount...

By talking of a wall, Štambuk turns the
mind into a place. He goes on to say
that he cannot destroy this wall, and
therefore can not properly re-find this
part of himself. But he puts his ear to
it, and listens to the reverberations,
which repel and fascinate him equally.
The poem’s last sentence stands alone:

Now their feet have started pacing.

And in that one stroke, by giving his
lost memory something so literal as
feet, he gives that buried part of him-
self the beginnings of a frightening life.
This is real poetry, true to itself, and
going beyond itself.

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