

## REVIEW

P. H. Liotta. *The Ruins of Athens: A Balkan Memoir*. Garden Street Press, 1999. 74 pages. ISBN 1-882329-09-0 softcover, \$16.95

More than a decade ago Seamus Heaney wrote in «The Impact of Translation» (*Yale Review*, July 1986) that “...poets in English sense the locus of poetic greatness shifting away from their language” and toward those languages, read in translation, that “introduce us...to new literary traditions” serving to link our reading experience to “a modern martyrology, a record of courage and sacrifice which elicits our unstinted admiration.” In *The Ruins of Athens: A Balkan Memoir*, P. H. Liotta seems to have taken that condition as a given, skillfully positioning the poems in this collection (his second) in the “poetry as witness” tradition that Heaney is referring to and thereby enabling them to draw much of their energy and authority from an identification with languages and traditions outside the English language. While firmly rooted in contemporary American poetics, including a rich mixture of familiar forms, from free verse to sestinas and pandoums to prose poems, *Ruins* also offers the reader a strong dose of the exotic: poems often contain words and phrases, even excerpts from poems, from various Balkan languages, sometimes in their original alphabet. “Field of Blackbirds,” for example, is presented as an actual translation, a found poem of sorts, “[b]ased on conversation electronically intercepted by European intelligence officers by General Ratko Mladic...and the head of the militant Croation Interior Ministry forces...” (Notes). Place names are localized (and thus foreignized to the American

reader)--Beograd for Belgrade, Athinai for Athens--and each poem is followed by the name of the place or places, usually somewhere in the Balkans, presumably where the poem was written.

Foreignizing the text, though, doesn't simply give these poems a strong sense of place. Translation, not just of language but also of experience, often becomes the subject, as in "The River of Ash," a long elegy to Branko Mikovic, "the most prolific and influential Serbian poet of his generation" (Notes). A line from one of Mikovic's poems, which, after his suicide, became also his epitaph, functions in this poem as a litany that the speaker invokes time and again as he contemplates Mikovic's life and death, as well as the tragedy of the various peoples that comprised the former Yugoslavia. "*Ube me prejaka rēc*"--translated alternately as "too strong word kills me" and "words ran through me"--the speaker repeats as he remembers walking the poet's city, Beograd, talking with friends "of a country out of control and a people / poised on the edge," seeing an old woman cram "stolen bread into her mouth, the wild / look in her eyes beyond any concern / for what it would cost her..." and children playing in a schoolyard,

...charging each other  
at recess: *You be the dictator Tadjman*  
*and I'll be Milosevic...Now we will*  
*declare war on each other.*

The litany becomes a prayer as the speaker surveys in his mind the waves of conquerors that have swept over the Balkans--Celts, Romans, Huns, Avars, Turks,

Austro-Hungarians, all the way up to Nazis massacring children and Americans dropping bombs--each invasion "a fact of life" still alive in the memories of peoples who never forget. In the face of such horrors, the speaker has to admit at last the incomprehension of it all: "I cannot / translate you, Branko, just as I can translate / nothing from the chambered self."

These are big-hearted poems, embracing as they do a wide range of emotions (though weighted on the side of despair). The speaker--now riding a bus or boat or train crossing a border ("Falling Towards Belgrade," "A Nation of Poets"), now a visiting scholar ("The River of Ash"), now touring a historical monument or monastery ("Ohrid," "Resurrection of Christ Figure"), now a fellow poet ("Dinner at the Writers' Club"), an emigré or advisor to travelers ("Emigrés," "The Ruins of Athens"), or simply a father and husband watching the evening news ("The Language of Angels")--has enormous empathy for those he encounters as he bears witness to the intertwining enigmas of language, nation, history and religion that are both a source of identity for the various ethnic groups of the Balkans and reason to kill.

Another quality of Liotta's poems, as shown in the last lines of "Leaving Dubrovnik," is their ability to look deeply into the human experience of war and ethnic violence and communicate it to the reader with clarity, even while the observer himself is stunned into silence and despair:

Listener there is a tongue  
that has no voice, true

to everything it cannot say.  
*Hvala Bogu*, I could say.

Thanks to God. Or whomever.  
Whomever.

The poems even manage a modicum of hope, which the speaker occasionally expresses, not through faith in God or allegiance to any particular group, but in his love for his daughter, a presence in many of the poems embodying innocence and at least a chance for redemption in the midst of terrible destruction. “And when I wake / to the surface from sleep,” he says in “A Prayer for My Daughter,” the book’s final poem,

...it is your voice that will save me, your  
    life and all that you give, even the taut whip of anger  
that becomes an inheritance...  
    ...and whoever lays a head to your breast, years  
    from now, will hear me inside you, whispering anger and  
    hatred  
and love, the course of our histories like lines, like rivers, saying  
    our stories make sense only as much as our lives.....  
    ...Gaia, I pray you will know  
    how you must carry me with you, carry me with you.

The personal note these poems ring, and how they risk exploring the personal in the context of history, language and belief (and vice versa) also make this collection appealing. But other aspects of *Ruins* seem somewhat excessive and raise difficult issues. In what feels like a heavy-handed effort to establish authority for the voice in these poems, and to connect himself to the “modern martyrology” mentioned above, Liotta leads his reader through an Acknowledgments page in which the poet thanks

his wife and daughter--“They shared my occasional joys and endured my bouts with madness and literally saved me both from assassins and myself”--and various friends and acquaintances from the Balkans “for taking us in as family during a time of political struggle and uncertainty. We owe them our love and these poems.” Then comes a page in which he dedicates the collection to Gaia, his daughter, provides a quote in Greek from the poet George Seferis and another from Charles Simic, followed by a two-page envoi, “On the Failure Named Bosnia,” with an epigraph by Czeslaw Milosz. After the Title and the Contents pages come two pages of epigraphs from former travelers to the Balkans and two lines by James Wright--all that before one gets to the main body of poems. Add to these a statement at the end of the Notes indicating where the first and final drafts of the manuscript were written--enough, this reader found himself saying, you’ve made your point.

Moreover Liotta’s claim to madness quoted above and articulated in some lines of the poems, whatever its validity in his personal life, feels excessive in an Acknowledgments Page and rings false when expressed in the poems. And his assertion in a note to “My Daughter’s Name Is Poetry” that “[a]s of this writing, I remain a target” of “November 17,” a well known Greek terrorist organization, begs too much for martyr status, even, again, if it is true. Milosz he is not, no matter how hard he tries.

A more complex and troubling issue comes out of what is not disclosed by Liotta. We know from the front material, poems, notes and closing biographical statement the

names of the poet's wife and daughter and how they have helped him, the names of his poetry mentors and many of his friends and acquaintances in the Balkans, the fact that he was a Fulbright Fellow in the former Yugoslavia and that his poems have been translated into numerous languages; we even know intimate details concerning his sense of his own mental and emotional state. But nowhere is the fact mentioned that he is, or at least was just prior to the publication of *Ruins*, "a professor of national security affairs at the Naval War College and served previously...as attache to the Hellenic Republic," as he is identified in a biographical note for an article published in *Parameters* (Winter 1998/99), nor does he disclose that he is a lieutenant colonel in the United States Air Force.

One's private life is just that--private. But if one chooses to base his or her poetry on the intimate details of one's own life, then the lack of full disclosure concerning the context from which the poems were written seems a betrayal of sorts, at least in the poetry of witness. As Heaney describes his experience of first reading a Milosz poem,

...[t]hat very bonding [between reader and poem and life of the poet bearing witness] is surely effected in great part by our awareness of the context from which Czeslaw Milosz's text emerges.... It counted for much that this poem was written by somebody who resisted the Nazi occupation of Poland and broke from the ranks of the People's Republic after the war and paid for the principle and pain of all that with a lifetime of exile and self-scrutiny (Heaney 3).

Milosz he is not. But if one can ignore the moments of excess and the poet's lack of appropriate disclosure, as this reader has struggled to do, then *The Ruins of Athens* is well worth reading, offering well crafted poems that are often moving and powerful,

admirable for their humanity, strong sense of place, skill at “translating” to American readers a part of the world most of us know too little of, and willingness to seek redemption even as they testify to yet another example of how western civilization, in Heaney’s words, has “become so unnerved by its contradictory history of atrocity that it could barely affirm the radiant categories upon which it was founded” (Heaney 3).

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