

THE FORTUNES OF A SLOVENE POET IN THE U.S.: THE CASE OF TOMAŽ ŠALAMUN

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Tomaž Šalamun's poetic opus is extremely large; he is among the most prolific and frequently translated Slovene poets. His literary recognition abroad has been greatest in the United States.¹ This article pinpoints some of the reasons for his success on this enormous and complex literary market in part by drawing parallels with the ways Slovene and U.S. literary critics have evaluated his verse.²

Šalamun was born in Zagreb, Croatia to Slovene parents, Branko and Dagmar Šalamun, in 1941, during WW II. The family fled to Ljubljana, which was then under Italian control, when his father learned that his name was on the list of those to be "liquidated." After the war his family moved to Koper, where he remained until 1960. Trieste and the Istrian peninsula were after the war divided into Allied and Yugoslav zones, A and B, and Šalamun came of age in the border area in Zone B, administered by Yugoslavia. After 1954 Koper became part of the Slovene Republic. For his development as a poet it seems particularly important that

the brilliant light along the Adriatic coast, which colored his imagination, gave him a new aesthetic orientation. If Vienna is the traditional lodestar of Slovene poetry (as well as of its politics and culture), Šalamun looked for inspiration to Venice and points further west.³

In 1960 Šalamun began his studies in history and art history at the University of Ljubljana. At the University of Ljubljana Šalamun earned an M.A. in art history and then went to Paris and Rome for additional

¹ Curiously, major Slovene literary prizes eluded the poet until 1999, when he received the Prešeren Prize for Literature, despite the sizeable body of Slovene critical response since his first collection of verse, *Poker*, published in *samizdat* in 1966.

² I wish to express my gratitude for help in various ways, in the making of this study, to the poet himself and to one of the translators of his poetry into (American) English, Michael Biggins.

³ Christopher Merrill, introduction, *The Four Questions of Melancholy*, by Tomaž Šalamun (Fredonia: White Pine, 1997) 18.

studies. After returning to Ljubljana he became assistant curator at the Moderna Galerija, Slovenia's modern art museum, in Ljubljana, and became affiliated with the conceptual avant-garde group OHO, which in 1970 was included in an exhibition of performance artists at the Museum of Modern Art in New York.

Šalamun's first trip to the United States and fascination with the opportunities offered by the country resulted in frequent subsequent journeys to America, into its open spaces that, as he once said, "open up my cells."⁴ In 1971 he became a member of the International Writing Program at the University of Iowa, then a resident of the Yaddo and McDowell writing colonies. After a few years at home in Ljubljana, he received a grant in 1979 enabling him to travel to Mexico, where he lived during 1979 and 1980, returning to Ljubljana in 1981. He then at first tried his hand at various jobs, finally becoming a free-lance poet. Since 1996 he has been cultural attaché of the Republic of Slovenia in New York, having thus returned to America, "a different planet and a different civilization."⁵ In New York the first time, almost thirty years ago, he wrote with typical Šalamunesque self-aggrandizement:

and I
suddenly
saw
with perfect
clarity
that it was only a matter of time before
New York City would vomit me
into the sky
like a star

("My First Time in New York City")⁶

Šalamun's career in literature may be said to have begun in 1964, when he was appointed editor of *Perspektive*, then the leading Slovene cultural and political monthly. It was then he wrote the prophetic lines of the poem "Mrk" ("Eclipse"): "I grew tired of the image of my tribe / and moved out."⁷ And so he has done ever since,

⁴ Merrill 18.

⁵ Aleksander Zorn, "Beseda je edini temelj sveta," in Tomaž Šalamun, *Glagoli sonca: Izbrane pesmi* (Ljubljana: Mladinska knjiga, 1993) 168.

⁶ *The Four Questions* 122.

⁷ *The Four Questions* 23.

constantly “moving out,” physically and spiritually. This stance of poetic detachment was necessary in order to step out of his “condition,” to gain perspective and see things more clearly. His poems represented a real shock, an unheard-of attack on the Slovene poetic tradition, the deconstruction of the stable poetic space, which found expression, for example, in his paraphrase and ironic reworking of Oton Župančič’s poem “Duma.” And in his poem “To the Deaf Ones,” Šalamun addressed the following rebellious line to his native Slovene “tribe”: “They won’t gild me into a sterile catechism like they did to Župančič.”⁸

Šalamun’s academic formation as an art historian is of seminal importance for understanding his poems. His collaboration with the visual arts group OHO resulted in the publication of *Poker* (1966), with which many contemporary readers still identify Šalamun. (It was reprinted in 1989 as a kind of cult collection of 1960s verse).⁹ Most of Šalamun’s poems are visual, even “installational,” and, as one critic and art historian wrote, “reistic.” Individual words are not subject to a Romantic or Symbolist metaphorical process but exist in their own right: “The word reads itself, it reifies its representative arsenal in totality, it is a thing that requires expert handling, one that needs space to fight for its own meaning; the poet is not its owner, but rather its user and in a working relationship with it.”¹⁰ Literary critics, however, with a number of exceptions,¹¹ found fault in particular with his use of jargon, irony, and provocative linguistic turns, as well as his derision of prevailing moral and political norms—in brief, with the destruction and undermining of poetic tradition. Šalamun himself denies any such programmatic intentions, since for him the poet is a shaman, a medium who “has a mission and the word goes through him simply because he is.”¹² This crucial collection of Slovene modernist poetry was followed by a period of travels, which has for Šalamun never ended, travels that provided him the desired “moving out” during which he has written most of his collections of verse, almost thirty by now.

⁸ *The Four Questions* 184.

⁹ Tomaž Šalamun, *Poker*, comm. by Tomaž Brejc, 2nd ed. (Ljubljana: Cankarjeva založba, 1989).

¹⁰ Tomaž Brejc, 7.

¹¹ See Boris Paternu, *Lirika, slovenska književnost 1945-1965* (Ljubljana: Slovenska matica, 1967) 213–20.

¹² Quoted in Zorn 165.

Three Slovene literary critics have paid special attention to the "new" poetry, including Šalamun's Boris Paternu, Taras Kermauner, and Janko Kos. Paternu assured Šalamun's reputation, and the descriptors he applied to the poet have continued to be valid: an existentialist whose work is characterized by alienation, puns, and the void, features which are traceable to *Poker* but which are also found in his later poems. Kermauner compared Šalamun with T.S. Eliot and, in addition to Paternu, saw his work as reistic, socially and politically critical, and, above all, nihilistic and essentially negativistic. He felt that a thing (*res*) could be linked with no-thingness (*le néant*). Reism is a useful term to describe Šalamun's poems, although the question remains whether it is sufficient, especially since the avant-garde conceptual art group OHO to which he belonged was reistic, too. The traditional humanistic and anthropocentric view was thus challenged by a reistic view of the world, and as a result of this there emerged a significant clash of values in Slovene literary criticism. Kermauner accepted the new kind of poetry only on an intellectual level, but was not able to identify with it on the emotional level. He thought of himself more as "an interpreter" than an advocate of this new kind of poetry; later he described Šalamun's works after *Poker* as "Luddistic," works which together with reism grow into "an ironic mysticism."¹³ Jože Pogačnik, in contrast, turning Paternu and Kermauner's views upside down, labeled Šalamun a structuralist lyricist with dadaist origins, "a sick humanist who is driven towards the dehumanizing consumer society."¹⁴

Janko Kos transcended these views and apparent polarizations by postulating satire as the foremost artistic merit of Šalamun's verse.¹⁵ He pointed at the contrast between the then predominant non-mimetic poetics of modernism with its negation of the subject and Šalamun's non-mimetic poetry in which the speaker of the poem is not completely effaced but simply replaced by a very apt, more abstract concept of a "trans-subjectivism," which explains Šalamun's tendency to self-divinization. Tine Hribar looked at Šalamun's work from a philosophical angle and found the merit of his verse in a dichotomy between reism and

¹³ Taras Kermauner, *Poezija slovenskega zahoda*, part 2 (Maribor: Založba Obzorja, 1990) 11–19, 196–98.

¹⁴ *Zgodovina slovenskega slovstva*, vol. 8 (Maribor: Založba Obzorja, 1972) 298–303; cf. Zorn 180.

¹⁵ Janko Kos, *Moderna misel in slovenska književnost* (Ljubljana: Cankarjeva založba, 1983) 172–77.

ontological difference and saw the poet as both a mystic and a searcher for God.¹⁶ In his introduction to the second edition of *Poker* (1989), Tomaž Brejc revealed the other angle, that of the OHO group and the visual arts, which Aleksander Zorn, in his fine study of Šalamun's poetry, defines as insufficient, saying that the OHO reistic concept of the word as a ready-made thing soon became too narrow for Šalamun, who was not able to deny his narcissistic divinization of the self.¹⁷ It does seem that some of Brejc's contentions do, however, hold true, especially the one about Šalamun's mobility and cosmopolitanism stressing the fact that "Šalamun creates a paradigm of an open, polyglot life of the Slovenes in this century, of a free-moving subject that moves from one language into another, just as he changes planes and taxis, newspapers and encyclopedias, money and messages."¹⁸

One of the recent Slovene commentaries on Šalamun's work is devoted to *Knjiga za mojega brata* (*A Book for My Brother* [1997]). Peter Kolšek writes: "Tomaž Šalamun is with his, I believe, thirtieth book of verse young and fresh just as he was thirty years ago. And more, it even seems that a certain reconstruction of his youthful poetry can be detected" What better compliment could a poet expect? Kolšek goes on to praise the typical Šalamunesque lexical-syntactic "bestiary," his shocking and enigmatic "phrasemes," concluding that "the freshness of the immediate, always new views of the objects of routine perception—this is Šalamun."¹⁹

Šalamun's first collection of verse, *Poker*, introduced "lyrical egocentrism" into Slovene poetry, a genesis of the reevaluation of the world already created.²⁰ *Romanje za Maruško* (*Pilgrimage for Maruška* 1971) employed irony as a means of seeing everyday things in a new light, with new links, ridiculing the traditional clichés, using a plethora of languages, a Joycean chaos therefore, which was, make no mistake, a controlled kind of linguistic chaos intended to baffle the readers only at a first sight. The collections *Amerika* (*America* 1973), *Turbine* (*Turbines* 1975) and several others written in America testify to the important

¹⁶ Hribar, Tine. *Sodobna slovenska poezija*. Maribor: Založba Obzorja, 1984.

¹⁷ Zorn 1993.

¹⁸ Brejc 14.

¹⁹ Peter Kolšek, "Tomaž Šalamun: Knjiga za mojega brata," *Delo*, Književni listi, 22 May 1997: 13.

²⁰ Zorn 188.

changes that took place in his verse when he came in contact with the New York School poets Frank O'Hara and John Ashbery: It became less disruptive and spiteful, more vulnerable, and mythological. During his stay in Mexico he produced several books in which mysticism and magic are closely intertwined and in which the poet turns from "an ego-God" into "an occult pantheist" looking for refracted reflections of his self in all beings and things.²¹ His verbal talent remains fresh and powerful, recognizably Šalamunesque, in his most recent collections, *Otrok in jelen* (*The Child and the Deer* 1990), *Ambra* (*Ambergris* 1995), and *Knjiga za mojega brata* (*A Book for My Brother* 1997).

III

The critical reception of Šalamun's poetry in America has been plentiful and, on the whole, extremely favorable. Could one, perhaps, agree with the view that Šalamun is nowadays more widely read in the U.S. than in Slovenia? His poetry has been translated into (American) English and also into a number of other languages: German, French, Polish, Swedish, Hungarian, Croatian, Serbian, Dutch, and Czech. He has read from his work at major world poetry festivals (e.g., in Rotterdam, Toronto, Malmö, and Jerusalem), in a number of cultural capitals of the world (e.g., New York, Madrid, Paris, Berlin, London, Budapest, and Vienna); at various universities all over America; the Poetry Center 192 Y (1992); and the Poets House in New York (1997). Šalamun's poems in English translation have been published in a number of literary journals in the U.S. and included in major world anthologies.²² There are several English-language, book-length selections of his verse.²³

²¹ Zorn 193. The collections are *Mera Časa* (*The Measure of Time* [Ljubljana: Cankarjeva založba, 1987]), *Balada za Metko Krašovec* (*A Ballad for Metka Krašovec* [Ljubljana: Državna založba Slovenije, 1981]), and *Soy realidad* (Koper: Založba Lipa, 1985).

²² Bernard Johnson, comp. *New Writing in Yugoslavia* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1970). Paul Engle and Hua-ling Nieh, ed. *Writing from the World: Poetry, Fiction and Criticism in Translation and in Original English by members of the International Writing Program from the First Ten Years of Its Life* (Iowa City: International Writing Program, School of Letters, University of Iowa, 1976). Howard Schwartz and Anthony Rudolf, ed., *Voices Within the Ark: The Modern Jewish Poets* (New York: Avon, 1980). George E. Emery, ed., *Contemporary East European Poetry: An Anthology*, 2nd ed. (New York: Oxford UP, 1983). Michael March, ed., *Child of Europe*

The Selected Poems of Tomaž Šalamun is the book that launched the poet in the U.S. and first introduced him to a large English-speaking audience. The Ecco Press published the collection in the Modern European Poetry series, where authors such as Czesław Miłosz, Yannis Ritsos, Fernando Pessoa, Robert Desnos, and Zbigniew Herbert had already appeared in English translation. The poems were edited by the American poet Charles Simic and introduced by the critic and poet Robert Hass.²⁴ In remarks on the cover, the poets Robert Creeley and James Tate stress that Šalamun's poems are "objectifying" (Creeley) and "blasphemous" (Tate); both praise the successful rendering of the poems into English.

American commentaries on Šalamun's poetry have thus dealt with issues of context, both socio-historical and literary, and the unique characteristics of the poet's works. Robert Hass's excellent introduction (to *The Selected Poems*) contextualizes Šalamun's poems from an American point of view and helps the reader view his work through American eyes while appreciating his popularity abroad as well. Hass begins in a cheerful, essayistic manner, describing his meetings in Ljubljana in the 1980s, at the Slovene Writers Union, the house of the American cultural attaché, and one of the Ljubljana bars. During his walk with Šalamun through the old medieval part of Ljubljana, the poet

(New York: Penguin, 1990), Aleš Debeljak, ed. *Prisoners of Freedom: Contemporary Slovenian poetry* (Santa Fe: Pedernal, 1994).

²³ *Turbines: Twenty-One Poems* (Iowa City: Windhover, 1973). *Snow* (West Branch, Iowa: Toothpaste, 1973). *The Selected Poems of Tomaž Šalamun*, ed. Charles Simic (New York: Ecco, 1988). *The Shepherd, the Hunter*, trans. Sonja Kravanja (Santa Fe: Pedernal, 1992). *The Four Questions of Melancholy: New and Selected Poems*, ed. Christopher Merrill (Fredonia, New York: White Pine, 1997). *Painted Desert: Poems*. (Chattanooga: U of Tennessee P, 1991). A new edition of *The Selected Poems* is *Homage to Hat and Uncle Guido and Eliot: The Selected Poems* (Todmorden, Lancashire: Arc, 1997).

²⁴ Hass's *Twentieth Century Pleasures: Essays on Poetry* (New York: Ecco, 1984) won the 1984 National Book Critics Circle Award for Criticism. The poems are a selection of Šalamun's best from before 1988 and were translated by various people, many of them working in collaboration with the poet himself and a translator, which is perhaps the best way to translate "untranslatable" poetry. The translators were Bob Perelman, Anselm Hollo, Charles Simic, Deborah Kohloss, Elliot Anderson, Sonja Kravanja-Gross, Michael Waltuch, and Veno Taufer with Michael Scammell.

counted among major literary influences Arthur Rimbaud, the Russian poet Velemir Khlebnikov (who was, significantly for Šalamun, a great admirer of Whitman) and, above all, the American poets Frank O'Hara, John Ashbery, W.C. Williams, and Wallace Stevens.²⁵ Hass was presented by the author with copies of Šalamun's first poems translated into English and published as chapbooks during his stay at the Writers' Workshop in Iowa. These poems had been translated, for example, also by Anselm Hollo and Bob Perelman, who later became some of the more prominent experimental L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E poets in the early 1970s, poets that rebelled against the established academism of the poetic tradition exploring the immanent possibilities of the language.

The following statement from the introduction is crucial for the understanding of Robert Hass's contextualization of Šalamun's poems. It is "typically" American in that it strives to draw comparisons, establish parallels, trying to fix a certain historical and socio-political context, which, of course, holds to some extent but is also somewhat condescending, as if Šalamun's idiosyncratic poetics were not highly original, or as if he himself were not anticipating new trends in the development of modern(ist) poetry:

Šalamun belongs to the generation of Eastern European poets—it includes Joseph Brodsky of Russia and Adam Zagajewski of Poland—who came of age in the 1960s. They grew up not with the searing experience of war and its aftermath that has marked the poetry of the older generation (Zbigniew Herbert in Poland, Miroslav Holub in Czechoslovakia, Vasko Popa in Yugoslavia), but in the postwar years, when the pinched material circumstances of economic recovery and the pervasive intellectual dishonesty of Stalinism were a kind of normality, the world as given.²⁶

Slovenes have generally disliked being numbered among the East Europeans, at least on political grounds, but some kind of preliminary context is necessary for a "minority"—though not minor—literature to come to feature in the mind of a "majority"—though not necessarily major—literature such as the American. Slovene poets were for a long time presented in various anthologies as Yugoslavs,²⁷ and there was little

²⁵ Hass xvi-xvii.

²⁶ Hass 20.

²⁷ The book cover refers to Šalamun as a "Yugoslav poet writing in Slovene."

mention of their nationality and language. The question of a former lack of context and the present need for creating an appropriate new one for Slovene poetry in an independent Slovenia was addressed by Aleš Debeljak, who maintains that the “broad” cultural context has existed in the recent past—it was a Yugoslav one. Today, however, the younger generation seeks a new, broad context in the global village—the narrower one being Slovene national cultural and literary identity and tradition. In the past, according to Debeljak, a recognizable cultural context has been lacking for Slovene poetry in the English speaking world. Šalamun superseded the question by “inventing his own idiosyncratic tradition.”²⁸

Hass justifiably claims that Šalamun—comparing his work with Joseph Brodsky and Adam Zagajewski—belongs to those modernists who are highly individualistic and who resent politicization, that his poetry is a rebellion of sorts, “a rebellion without a program.” At this point Hass extends the context of Šalamun’s poetry from “East European,” with its powerful political rather than geographic or esthetic connotations, to “European”:

This is not ... a poetics of revolution, or even of revolt. The issue isn’t justice. It has no millenarian program; it is oppressed by the language of a millenarian program. And so it has the quality of inchoate rebellion, rebellion without a program. It begins in a negative that is also an act of self-liberation, and its future is open-ended, even if, as in Brodsky’s case, the idea of open vistas makes one glum. It is this tradition, or this historical moment in European poetry, to which Šalamun, with his love of the poetics of rebellion, belongs.²⁹

Hass significantly furthers his “contextualization” of Šalamun’s verse in a discussion of Šalamun’s poetics proper: he appropriately compares his work with that of Walt Whitman. My thesis is that an inbuilt Whitmanesque quality, a typically American quality—I dare say, recognized by the critics or not—is certainly one of the reasons for the popularity of Šalamun’s verse in America. In his poetry there are Whitmanesque catalogues, self-mythologizing, an emphasis on the subjective view with the “I” in focus, a kind of transcendental self as the

²⁸ Aleš Debeljak, introduction, *Prisoners of Freedom*, quoted in Debeljak “Prisilni jopič anonimnosti.”

²⁹ Hass xxiii.

center of the universe, and, last but not least, a profound confidence in the power of imagination.

I am the people's point of view, a cow,
 the tropical wind, I sleep under the surface.
 I am the aristocratic carnivore, I eat form.
 I drum on cooks' white caps. I drum on their
 aprons, I am the green integration ... ("Drums")

Many of Šalamun's poems characteristically deal with a Whitmanesque building of the mythology of the self.³⁰ Hass is very perceptive in seeing that Šalamun became attracted to Whitman indirectly, through the works of Velemir Khlebnikov, a Russian futurist (also called futurian). Further, he argues a kinship between Šalamun's verse and that of the French poets Rimbaud, Lautréamont; the German expressionists; and the surrealist and dadaist "automatic writing" technique, but this had been previously noticed by Slovene critics. Šalamun himself admits to having been influenced by these authors. Hass perceptively traces the Whitmanesque poetics down to the contemporary American poet Frank O'Hara, whom Šalamun has acknowledged is one of the literary stimuli in his work. Yet, Hass writes, "it is one thing to have the Whitman descended through Williams to Frank O'Hara ... and it is another to inhabit a Whitman out of Khlebnikov and to stand in the middle of Ljubljana ..."³¹

It is surprising, however, that, with only a few exceptions in Slovene criticism, and despite Šalamun's own assertions, T.S. Eliot has not been noted by American critics as a major line of literary influence on Šalamun's poetry, at least as far as the modernist and radically experimental poetic language (lexicon, syntax) is concerned. Šalamun, for example, ended his poem "Homage to Hat & Uncle Guido & Eliot" (*Poker*, 1966) with the lines: "two days ago Eliot died / my teacher."³² In the entry on Šalamun in *Contemporary World Writers*, outrageous Eliotesque juxtapositions, combined in seemingly incongruous contexts, are pointed out—the extreme kind of modernism evident in the shapelessness of form and demolished syntax, which "represents a crucial formally aesthetic turning-point in the development of modern Slovene poetry" and postulates "poetic play as the paramount principle of the

³⁰ Igor Maver, "Tomaž Šalamun," *Contemporary World Writers*, ed. Tracy Chevalier (Andover: St James's Press, 1993) 455.

³¹ Hass xxvii-iii.

³² *The Four Questions of Melancholy* 29.

sarcastic and at times cynical parody of Slovene literary and historical tradition ...”³³

The most recent selection of Šalamun’s verse published in English translation, *The Four Questions of Melancholy*, includes an insightful essay (and new translations) by the editor, Christopher Merrill.³⁴ Some of the points in Merrill’s introduction are fresh and interesting. He is the first American critic to mention “melancholia” as a possible Slovene “national disease,” which is, he speculates, “a legacy ... of more than a thousand years of subjugation to the whims of stronger powers.”³⁵ It resulted, he continues, referring to Aleš Debeljak’s introduction to *Prisoners of Freedom: Contemporary Slovenian Poetry*, in the creation of a rich and melancholic poetic tradition, for “the only real home for Slovenes was carved out in their language and poetry.”³⁶ The title poem, “The Four Questions of Melancholy,” expresses this supposed Slovene trait in terms of a melancholic backpacker on an outing in the Slovene Alps. He contemplates, gazing at the woods:

What’s in the backpack? Why are you chewing straw?
 And why so sad? Shadows have consumed the valley
 now, and the last train has hobbled off to Bohinj.
 Have your Friulian neighbor put you on his tractor
 and drive you up the mountain. And on the ridge the two of you
 can settle back, compare the colors: pitch black by now
 and fading blue....

³³ Maver 455.

³⁴ Sample, favorable reviews are found in *Publishers Weekly* (28 April 1997), which called Šalamun one of the most popular and important European poets, comparing his style to that of William Carlos Williams, John Ashbery, and Walt Whitman, and celebrating his poetic invention, which is only occasionally replaced by frivolity. (Quoted in Igor Bratož, “Pesmi Tomaža Šalamuna onkraj vodovja.” *Delo*, Književni listi, 4 September 1997: 11.) A more typical American response is found in *The New Yorker* (14 July 1997), which in order to make matters clearer to its readers departs from the current socio-political situation of Slovenia and its recent independence, The note remarks on Šalamun’s nihilism, satire, and surrealism, as well as his resistance to to the “party line” in the past. The author admires Šalamun’s playful, horrifying, meditative, and rhetorically highly persuasive poems.

³⁵ Merrill 15.

³⁶ Merrill 16.

Another point Merrill makes is about the socio-political context of Šalamun's verse and its importance for American readers. He writes that Šalamun cannot escape his destiny in the Balkans. He cites Šalamun himself, who writes that the history of the Slavs is miserable, because in this area "some small nations (are) biting / each other, because the weather is bad."³⁷ Merrill also speaks about the changing political climate in the former Yugoslavia after Tito's death in 1980, which also certainly helped contextualize the poems. He concludes his introduction by saying that Šalamun's poems are "imbued with the tragedy the world has watched on television these past years."³⁸

"The Yugoslav Tomaž Šalamun" that could perhaps be more specific about his Slovene nationality and language, although, of course, an independent Slovenia did not yet exist, begins Richard Jackson's review essay of *The Selected Poems of Tomaž Šalamun*. Jackson then quotes Šalamun, saying that "the poet is a hunter, not an expresser," and this defines his poetry as a constant quest. Experimentation with the form as an ultimately political issue, true of most poets of "Eastern Europe," Jackson quotes Hass, that it "is not simply a freedom to write that is important, but a freedom in writing."³⁹ He further finds the expansiveness of Šalamun's verse and the mythologizing of the language and self Whitmanesque, choosing, effectively, the poem "History" as an example of Šalamun's poetic "bravado." The history of everyday, the history of himself living his everyday routine is indeed made into a powerful myth, so powerful and hyperbolic that it borders on the comic:

Next year, he'll probably be in Hawaii
or in Ljubljana. Doorkeepers will scalp
tickets. People walk barefoot
to the university there. The waves can be
a hundred feet high. The city is fantastic,
shot through with people on the make,
the wind is mild.
But in Ljubljana people say: look!
This is Tomaž Šalamun, he went to the store

³⁷ Merrill 18.

³⁸ Merrill 19.

³⁹ Richard Jackson, "The Elegies of Style." *Georgia Review* 42.4 (Winter 1988): 864.

with his wife Marushka to buy some milk.
He will drink it and this is history

(*The Selected Poems of Tomaž Šalamun* 1).

The final part of Jackson's essay focuses on Šalamun's desire to express "the inexpressible," "to catch the sacred seed of everything," he can do, in Jackson's terms, through an ironic or a more naive poetic vision. By quoting from Šalamun's poems "Dead Men," "Folk Song," and "Black Madonna," he concludes that only an open, "adaptable" style, such as one can find in Šalamun's poetry, is adequate to the process of observing the little, seemingly irrelevant details of life that take one beyond the surface reality of things.

In her introduction to *The Shepherd, the Hunter*, Sonja Kravanja, a Slovene native who has lived in the U.S. for almost twenty years, also finds in Šalamun's verse the individualism "of Whitman's proportion," that provides some sort of useful referential context for the American reading public.⁴⁰ She defines his poetry as that of puzzlement, taking one "to unknown lands, mythical and mystical landscapes of the mind." As to literary context, Kravanja briefly traces the development of Slovene poetry and Šalamun's place in it, even asserting that he "single-handedly changed the course of Slovene poetry." Another context, one readily familiar to Americans, is Šalamun's "radical imagism," which links him, if only indirectly, with the radicalism and the powerful imagery of the American Imagist school of poets from the beginning of the century.

Political context continues to be a problem in reference works. The entry in *The Princeton Handbook of Multicultural Poetries*, published five years after the independence of Slovenia and the dissolution of the former Yugoslavia, is "Yugoslav Poetry," which shows just how much there still has to be done in promoting Slovene literary production and identity in the United States. Šalamun is, in the Slovene section of the "Yugoslav" entry, hailed as "the most vocal and iconoclastic among younger poets," one who "writes associative poetry, using its seeming chaos as a freeing agent to drive his points home."⁴¹ The situation

⁴⁰ Sonja Kravanja, introduction, *The Shepherd, the Hunter*, by Tomaž Šalamun, 7-9.

⁴¹ T.V.F. Brogan, ed., *Princeton Handbook of Multicultural Poetries*, (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1996) 366.

concerning the accuracy of American dictionaries of literary biography has been successfully improved only recently by the publication of *South Slavic Writers Since World War II*,⁴² which contains nine modern Slovene writers out of sixty-four South Slavic authors. Michael Biggins contributed an entry on Tomaž Šalamun.

Another typical critical label that helps contextualize Šalamun's poems, one that may be fitting enough and do justice to his work, is that he is a Central European poet, although this cultural-political term is much contested in the countries belonging to the geographical area of Central Europe. This view is true also of the critical essay-review by Andrew Zawacki in the American journal *Artful Dodge*.⁴³ Zawacki is very complimentary about Šalamun's poetics, tracing the development of his verse from *Poker* to *Ambra*. He comes to the conclusion that the poems are "an artistic testimony to the three decades of creativity of one of the leading voices of Central Europe," although Šalamun himself feels that "In Central Europe the people are secured with wires, / August is always past," ("In Central Europe", *The Four Questions of Melancholy* 69). Zawacki quotes Robert Hass, saying that Šalamun broke with the preceding generation of Slovene poets who, with their "anti-Communist" allegories, rebelled against the state; he, in turn, helped to create a new, much less politically committed (perhaps politicized) poetry, returning thus to the visionary, spiritual roots of poetry, always aspiring to the divine. Zawacki points out that from the very beginning Šalamun differed from his "Eastern European" predecessors, in his epigrammatic technique of self-mythologization. Even in Šalamun's most recent collection, *Ambra*, he finds the poet still "vulnerable and on guard" in the period of Slovene aspirations to join the European community, the period of spiritual insecurity, as was true of one of Šalamun's teachers, T.S. Eliot.⁴⁴

Šalamun is also among the authors featured in the most important English-language anthology of contemporary Slovene writing

⁴² Vasa D. Mihailovich, ed., *South Slavic Writers Since WW II*, Dictionary of Literary Biography Ser. 181 (Detroit: Gale Research, 1997).

⁴³ Andrew Zawacki, "Kako sem močan, strašen in zvit," Rev. of *The Four Questions of Melancholy*. *Delo*, Književni listi, 29 October 1997: 16.

⁴⁴ There had been another collection, *Knjiga za mojega brata* (1997), which Zawacki does not mention.

to date, *The Imagination of Terra Incognita: Slovenian Writing 1945–1995*.⁴⁵ It is the first truly representative collection of its kind. In his review of the book, Zawacki stresses that the leading Slovene industry today is still “culture,”⁴⁶ as was observed by the best known American writer of Slovene descent, Louis Adamic, in his *The Native’s Return* (1934). Zawacki misses it in America, for “there are no celebratory cults of Whitman, Twain, let alone Morison or Ashbery.” He speaks highly about Šalamun’s poems, his bold improvisations, “engaged in a dialogue with Kocbek,” “written with great skill ...” The point that Slovene writers should take to heart is also his view that there is only one Slovene woman writer included in the book (Berta Bojetu-Boeta), and if Slovene literature is to be promoted and placed within the European or American context, he writes, this imbalance must be remedied.

Šalamun’s “place” in letters has been at the heart of the most recent articles on his work. In his study of Šalamun’s verse, Michael Biggins points out recent, notable innovations, which he sees as a dialog conducted with the younger generation of Slovene poets, “who began to gain recognition in the early 1980s and represented the first serious challenge to Šalamun’s twenty-year primacy in Slovene letters.”⁴⁷ Since 1997 Šalamun has appeared at several prestigious readings in New York (e.g., at The Poetry Project and the Greenwich House Music School). Two other studies Šalamun’s work is termed “transgressive,” metaphorically and literally, transgressing borders and identities, and called American as much as Slovene. In his analysis and comparison of the “Eastern European” poets Miroslav Holub and Šalamun, Matthew Zapruder points out that the latter’s poems stand out markedly “in the landscape of contemporary American poetry, which, with many exceptions, seems too often to favor a kind of miniaturism and self-

⁴⁵ Aleš Debeljak, ed. (Fredonia, New York: White Pine, 1997). The book belongs to the series of books published in the American (and English) cultural space since the Slovene state independence achieved in 1991 (e.g. *The Day Tito Died: Contemporary Slovenian Short Stories* 1993; *The Double Vision: Four Slovenian Poets* 1993).

⁴⁶ Andrew Zawacki, “Povej mi besedilo pesmi, rad bi pel s teboj,” Rev. of: *The Double Vision: Four Slovenian Poets*. *Delo*, Književni listi, 25 September 1997: 15.

⁴⁷ Michael Biggins, “Tomaž Šalamun,” *South Slavic Writers since WW II*, 288–94.

deprecating irony."⁴⁸ Brian Henry goes even further in counting Šalamun as a major influence for American poets. In his lengthy study of contemporary American poets, he names Šalamun among major literary influences on the new generation of *American* (emphasis mine) poets, along with such writers as Czeslaw Milosz, Pablo Neruda, and Yves Bonnefoy:

But I can also recognize the angles of attack employed by poets such as Neruda, Cesar Vallejo, Yannis Ritsos, Milosz, Zbigniew Herbert, Šalamun, and Bonnefoy. The international allegiances of these young poets make them distinctly American: what is American poetry, after all, but the absorption of the past and the present, the local and the distant, the familiar and the foreign into the mind and heart of a poet whose music is American English?⁴⁹

What is, then, the referential framework of Šalamun's verse in the U.S., the context which helps American readers identify a Slovene poet and his art? As it can be seen from the introductory studies to the U.S. editions of his poems, there is a double cultural referential framework at work. First, there is the historical socio-political element that American critics rarely forget to stress or put in evidence in their presentations of Šalamun's poetry. They place his poetry within the former Yugoslav cultural context, which did represent a certain helping crutch for Slovene artists to enter the wide world, within the sphere of authors witnessing the crumbling of the Iron Curtain, within the age of transition from the Communist to the post-Communist era, and finally, the Central European cultural sphere, which they, of course, see as a broader cultural phenomenon. Ultimately, they rarely fail to stress Slovene political independence, which emerged from long-standing literary creativity. Second, as important as the first framework, there is the context of literary influences the critics find in Šalamun's poems, especially those of major American poets, such as Walt Whitman and John Ashbery, while only some of them mention the paramount influence of Eliot.

⁴⁸ "Every True Poet is a Monster: Miroslav Holub, Tomaž Šalamun, and Poetry beyond Politics," *Verse: A Magazine of Unrepresented American Poets* (Fall 1998): 140–53.

⁴⁹ Brian Henry, "American Poetry Now," *Meanjin* 1 (1998): 30–46.

These two referential frameworks are, however, merely preliminary and represent a first phase, a starting-point in the making of a Slovene poet in the American literary sphere. The next stage, by far the most important one in this process, is the one unanimously underscored by all the commentators on Šalamun's verse: the intrinsic artistic value of his art transcending the borders of man's physical as well as metaphysical existence, its bold linguistic experimentation, its felicitous combination of the ethic and the esthetic, the aspiration for the perfect, its striving to express the "inexpressible." A possible way out of an onymity and relative isolation—writing in Slovene within the former Yugoslavia—for a Slovene poet was, as Šalamun's has done, to reach beyond linguistic and geographical borders, relying on radical individualism, emphasizing as well as visual and auditory effects.

The future of the Slovene literary presence in the New World seems bright and open, ready for the taking. In order to enter this literary sphere a continual presence in English is necessary and reliance on the national, nourishing root, while aspiring to the international, global, and cosmopolitan. Perhaps it is no exaggeration to say that, as is the case in Britain with the postcolonial and "transcultural" literary voices from the countries of the former Empire, in America, too, the market is ready for new, fresh literary impulses from abroad: Slovenes can and should take part in this literary New Deal. Šalamun's *The Four Questions of Melancholy* sold out in America (1500 copies of the book were printed) and was reprinted: so much for the proverbial lack of interest in Slovene literature.

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POVZETEK

SLOVENSKI PESNIK V ZDRUŽENIH DRŽAVAH AMERIKE: TOMAŽ ŠALAMUN

Študija analizira književni uspeh Tomaža Šalamuna v Združenih državah Amerike in skuša ugotoviti nekatere od vzrokov za njegovo popularnost na tem ogromnem literarnem trgu. Obravnava kritiški odziv na Šalamunovo poezijo v Sloveniji in v Združenih državah ter pride do sklepa, da večina ameriških kritikov poudarja pomen referenčnih okvirov in konteksta. Ti skoraj brez izjeme omenjajo zgodovinski družbeno-politični kontekst njegovega dela in vplive nekaterih ameriških pesnikov nanj, kar ameriškim bralcem pomega pri kontekstualizaciji njegove poezije. Kljub temu pa so si vsi ameriški kritiki edini pri izpostavitvi umetniške vrednosti njegovega dela per se, ki presega meje človekovega fizičnega kot tudi metafizičnega obstoja, za katerega je značilno drzno jezikovno eksperimentiranje in ki si prizadeva za dosego popolnosti ter skuša izraziti 'neizrazljivo.'