

Works Cited

- Aleš Debeljak, ed. *Prisoners of Freedom: Contemporary Slovenian Poetry*. Santa Fe: Pedernal, 1994.
- Ihan, Alojz. "Kakor mi pesmi padajo na pamet." *Antologija Slovenske Poezije. Nova Revija* 100 (n. d.): 1071.
- . "New Poems." Trans. Tom Lozar. *Double Vision: Four Slovenian Poets*. Ed. Richard Jackson. Chattanooga/Ljubljana: Poetry Miscellany/Aleph, 1993. 52.
- Kocbek, Edvard. "Four Poems." Trans. Michael Scammell and Veno Taufer. *The New York Review of Books* 24 October 1991: 61.
- Rode, France. "Intervju: France Rode." Trans. Tom Lozar. *Jana* 24 June 1997: 46.
- Simic, Charles. Letter to the author. 8 February 1990.
- Traven, P. [pseudonym]. "Prva Naloga." Trans. Tom Lozar. *Mladina* 21 October 1997: 13.

Tomaž Šalamun. *The Four Questions of Melancholy: New and Selected Poems*. Ed. Christopher Merrill. Fredonia, NY: White Pine Press, 1997. 265 pp., \$15.00 (paper). ISBN 1-87727-57-1.

The importance of being a poet: Tomaž Šalamun, the one who wrote those twenty-nine books in his own language, Slovene. The one who had the courage to look for kindred spirits, in North America, and often prepare the grounds for a translation to take off, for communication to take place, by starting to transplant his texts into this other language, English. For an American poet to feel their vibrations, to sense their complexity, and to bring them completely into the new linguistic realm. When these two met, with synergy at work, with all the Muses called upon, for the essence of each single verse to be grasped and honored, then this beautiful book emerged, *The Four Questions of Melancholy*. For us to enjoy it, to be charmed, to be transformed, just as the poems were modified in the process of being integrated into another universe. Tomaž Šalamun worked closely with Christopher Merrill, a poet, and a professor, the editor of this book, weaving together this presentation of twenty and more years of work, of a lifetime. With poems taken from twenty-five volumes, with some of them already published in English,

representing different cycles of creation, yet appearing in this publication as a flow, as a continuum. It is indeed an editorial tour de force to assemble pieces transposed from this difficult language, into idiomatic English structures, making them resonate like originals, as a result of the project undertaken by thirteen different translators. These pieces create an enormous whole, a great testimony that we are witnessing one of the most powerful poetical expressions of our time, responding to what Life is teaching humanity at the end of this millennium.

With some two hundred bibliographical units, Šalamun appears to be one of the most translated foreign writers in the U.S., with an impact on the younger generations of American poets. His words are loved by those who wanted them to be read in the new context: those who don't speak Slovene, like Christopher Merrill, but who simply know, as poets often do, and also wish to venture in this enigmatic encounter with the unexplored. And then those who have learned Slovene so well, like Michael Biggins, a linguist and a librarian. Those who were striving for Slovene poetry to be placed on the bookshelves of this country, in its new outfit, in its new form. And then those Slovenes living in the U.S., like Sonja Kravanja, who won an important award for her translation of Šalamun's poems, and is appreciated for her innate sense for poetry and languages, which is the prerequisite for this "leading from one bank to another," as one might define translation. And all those others, participating in this book (and how can one mention anyone without hurting the others?), who must have responded, at a certain point, when the poet asked for someone "who could translate me into English from Slovene" ("My First Time in New York" 121).

Šalamun's poetical *modus vivendi* somehow starts with an observation of the universe (28), "things are inscrutable in their craftiness / unattainable to the rage of the living / invulnerable in their endless flight," from the poem "The Cross." Then the move occurs into acknowledging that this "U topos, where we are now" is linked to poetry. In "The Stage of the Manichaeans" (141): "Poetry, like beauty and / technology, is the field of perfect expression / of all forces in a void." Then comes the acceptance that "I live wherever God wants me to. / ... God burdens me with all these encounters" (in "Schooling" 163), together with: "I carry God in my heart, give Him away / like water to people dying of thirst, / ... I'm not a cynic, I'm a poet, a

prophet." ("To the Deaf Ones" 184). And this poet/prophet actually predicts the future to a "you" in the eponymous poem "The Four Questions of Melancholy" (215), simple questions and more than just four, echoing those existential ones, remaining unanswered, maybe for all of us, not only for the poet: "Why should I // have to live in a world / that despises / the life of the spirit? // ... Why do I sense // that irrational / fear, / resistance // to freedom and / human worth?" (untitled, 126).

Now, how to make it sound appropriate, in a book review, to recall one's own memories not about the poet? I never really knew him, although we were all acquainted, and although he was part of those important things going on in that particular, beautiful, pathetic, and extremely poetic country of ours (as Christopher Merrill points it out in his introduction). Not about the poet, but around him: about his grandma, nona, staying behind in that old Venetian style house, of which there were many in the town of Koper, after the family moved into a newly constructed building, and my own family moving right into their old apartment, above grandma's. And the grand old lady dressed in black trying to prevent my mother from beating us up, me and my sister, by banging with her broom against the wooden floor that separated the two levels. About my kid sister close to dying of an ear infection, and my father must have rushed to fetch the doc, papa Šalamun (no phones at that time), and an ambulance found in the middle of the night. And later, the grandma gone God knows where, and the kid brother, Andraž Šalamun, moving in there ("July 30, Andraž" 67: "we eat and meditate on the image"). And the older sister Katka gone to Poland, and a secret link still remaining between us. A secret link I may be discovering only now, understanding only now that Tomaž must have opened doors to the unknown, at the time when my own generation only vaguely sensed what the unknown could be.

Memories about his kid sister Jelka, whom I asked, at a school party where girls were dancing with girls—I must have been fourteen, and she was a year younger than myself—why her big brother was put in jail, and her confusion, and later on my mother scolding me for inappropriate behavior, Jelka asking her parents about it, and words traveling beyond my control. Memories about those other words, magical, from *Poker* (1966), I guess, which our whole high school probably knew, encouraged to read Tomaž's poetry by a teacher who believed in its strength, verses going something like "Another piece of parsley in the soup Raspberries are, raspberries are ..." There certainly

was no way to say that we understood them, nevertheless; he was our hero. Especially, considering that his footprints were covered by ours, a couple of years later, as we were discovering the same streets ("and if you walked down Glagoljaška Street / and seen an old boot lying" 27), the same gym, the same classrooms. And even now, reading "November 11, 1954" (128), I'm measuring in my mind, together with the text, the distance "between Loggia and the movie house," thinking that the access to "the Civic Library" still leads through the dark "entryway" of the poem; who knows, maybe for a similar experience I wonder at how my own images of the little town wander among poet's words, enrich them with my own experience, and my guess is that poetry always functions that way.

Now that this poetry strikes me in another language, it appears totally alive, totally modern, totally eternal, totally there. With poet's wits, his particular, fine humor: from "Homage to Hat & Uncle Guido & Eliot", "songs of songs of the Pan-Šalamunian religion / terribly democratic people's institution / which takes in everything" (29). With his art of making a quick move in his poetic flow, turning a poem upside down, abruptly choosing an unexpected direction: from "Let's Wait," "I think physics is an extremely interesting science / ... who's your girlfriend / ... then I kick her out because I have to work / ... how to create harmony / between art and women / ... it will end in marriage / ... because I'm a jew" (38). Then soothing his reader's anxiety, her surprise, inviting her to smile or even giggle over the mastery of the twist. Like in an untitled poem, "I / think I *am* a painter. I keep on laughing // or am melancholic as a monkey. / Actually, I'm such a Mediterranean rock / you can broil steak on me" (39).

One needs to get used to these acrobatic swirls: in "Dead Men," "where the Danube flows into the movie, from the movie into the sea / ... where the plums dry in the lofts and fall in the old songs" (52). Then another door opens, another avenue. Surprise making place for amazement, making place for this particular kind of awe which is recognition. From "Prayer," "Chain me down with your hatred, / so I can crush you into / love" (176). Which is thinking and recognizing and thinking and recognizing and understanding and thoroughly taking it in: "You divide lines with a shadow. / You open the door for love and death" ("Words" 56). Also, in "For Ana," "Don't believe in *yes but*, which has cost us thirty percent / of all Slovenian lives" (65).

Discovering universes step by step, discovering what the poet's imagination, intellect, and creative mind are ready to see, to read themselves in all these signs that they encounter. Signs arising between cultures, between epochs, between spaces, beyond distances; the physical ones, of course, since words know no boundaries. Among numerous examples: "King of Birds" (71), in which Acquackonock, in 1774, intersects with Lesbos, Catullus, Iowa City and Bob Perelman, the latter being one of the translators in the book. "September 20, 1972" (80), includes another translator of Šalamun's, Anselm Hollo (a poet himself, befriended in the seventies, in Iowa), and relates "a sacramental murder and / resurrection."

Words are the cement of all new constructions—new temples, so to say—where one can bow to one's own growth through the writing, often with irony, but also humbly and in reverence, since "The Word is the one and only foundation of the world," the "I" of the poet stating clearly that he is "its servant and its master" (99). Orpheus appears where one would least expect him: "Don't look back, my beloved," says the poet to "You for whom I felt the deepest devotion" (207). Past destroying present, yet this urge for the most beloved to look back, to scrutinize what was not devotion directed to her. Eurydice among other Grails to be uncovered: "The thief is my Grail," in "The Measure of Time" (207). The poet's journeying with women, spouses, Maruška's name appearing in a number of poems, up to "I Love You" (131–32): "Don't be sad, / don't worry, Maruška, / savor this moment of grace." Later in the book, in "The Fish" (168–69), another spouse: "My wife breathes like a small / bird. Her body soothes me. / ... Metka and I sit there, / watching. Her hands are like Shakti's." Metka Krašovec is actually very present in this book, with a reproduction of her painting on the cover. Journeying with family, lovers, and friends, as in "Man and Boy" (197), journeying with children, memories of them all, the creative self constantly brings all times and spaces back into one present poem, as in "To Read: To Love" (190): "You are the ultimate / feeling of fulfillment: to know where longing comes from." Also in "The Hymn of Universal Duty" (134): "we proclaim the sacred language forever spoken by all people: / I'm afraid, I'm happy, I love you, I want to eat."

In this newly created space people and places, the ones that I know myself, or have visited and befriended, live in the perfect yet totally restless harmony of a verse full of tension, as in "In Galilee,

1990" (248), moving from the Thames and Dickens to the Slovene region of Haloze and then to Coyoacan, and so on. All these images attract other connections, other associations, like magnets. In the poem "For Ana" (66), the names of "Milenko, Andraž, Marko, David" call back into times spent with conceptual artists and New Age philosophers. And a little further on, a poem about the father, "Branko" (68), and another one titled "In Central Europe" (69).

All this is happening not only around one central image, since those central images, the centripetal ones, are plenty. The process is more like a rolling stone, a snowball, a chain of analogies drawing on East and West, religion and scatology, acceptance of all levels of human experiences, conciliation of opposites. In the poem "Who's Who" (57), "Tomaž Šalamun" is addressed in a second person narration: "you are a genius / . . . you are the *speculum humanae salvationis*," yet, in "History" (77), "Tomaž Šalamun is a monster. / ... Maybe he is punishment from gods, / the boundary stone of the world." And then in "Folk Song" (143): "Every true poet is a monster." Love and fine criticism side by side, this critical approach is sometimes bitter, or just disillusioned, like "My tribe / does not hear / freedom anymore. // Does not recognize it, / does not see it, / when it's touched by it. // My tribe / thinks / the slow // killing / of their bodies / and souls // is natural" (196). And yet so Slovene, so terribly, so powerfully poetical, in the sense of poetry facing suffering, poetry taking on deliberately, and taking us through the suffering: in "Clumsy Guys" (140), "Poetry is a sacred machine, the lackey of / an unknown deity who kills as if by conveyer / belt. How many times I'd be / dead, if I hadn't kept cool, taken it easy and / been completely arrogant, so I can with my own instrument / blot my / wings out."

Poetry is the path, not an easy one, yet so much Slovene and so much the path: "There has been too much honey and grace, that's / all. Too many blessings break a man apart" ("Kiss the Eyes of Peace" 257). The last poem of the book, the finishing words sound like a manifesto of the choice. The choice of the middle way, between opposites, between attractions and repulsions, where too much is not considered as a value. Or, at least, for the one who experienced the lows and the highs, who knows the work of passion, who knows the weight of intensity in all things, the middle way sounding like a project, like a goal. So Slovene, also, to never take for granted perfect happiness or eternal bliss. And this is probably where poetry differs from religion, the walking more

important than arriving, for more words to be said, for more verses to be written, for more discoveries to be made.

Metka Zupančič, University of Guelph

Alenka Šivic-Dular, ed. *Vatroslav Oblak, Mednarodni simpozij Obdobja*. Ljubljana, 12–13 December 1996. Ljubljana: Center za slovenščino kot drugi/tuj jezik pri Oddelku za slovanske jezike in književnosti Filozofke fakultete, 1998. [*Obdobja* 17]. 303 pp. (paper).

This collection of scholarly papers is dedicated to the memory of Vatroslav Oblak (1864–96), a Slovene Slavist and Slavic philologist, a student of Vatroslav Jagić at the University of Vienna, where he graduated in 1891, a docent for South Slavic philology at the University of Graz during the period 1893–96, and a nominee for associate professor (at the same university) in 1896, several months before his death. The volume is edited by Šivic-Dular, a member of the Department of Slavic Languages and Literatures, and includes twenty-seven papers presented at the seventeenth international symposium *Obdobja*.

As Šivic-Dular's introduction explains, the symposium program consisted of twenty-six contributions, sixteen by Slovene scholars and eleven from abroad: two each from Bohemia and Croatia and one each from Belarus, Bulgaria, Italy, Macedonia, Germany, Russia, and the U.S. According to the symposium organizers, the conference achieved its central purpose: a critical presentation of a series of questions (a) from the history of the Slovene language; (b) of Slovene, South Slavic, and Slavic dialectology; (c) about Oblak's philological treatment of the works of Church Slavonic literature; and (d) about his contributions to the history of Slavic philology, to South Slavic dialectology, and to the history of Slovene.

The individual Slavic scholars' contributions presented in Ljubljana deal with the following topics:

Mirek Čejka's (Masaryková universita, Brno) paper, "Prvky strukturního pojetí jazka u Vatroslava Oblaka" (1–12), deals with Oblak's early Neo-Grammarians structural orientation and with his later