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THRESHOLD MOMENTS IN THE POETRY OF TOMAŽ ŠALAMUN AND ARTHUR SZE

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Sodobna pesnika Tomaž Šalamun in Arthur Sze sta iz obdobja romantike, natančneje od Williama Wordswortha, podedovala zapuščino transcendentálnih mejnih trenutkov. Oba sodobna pesnika sta do iste točke v času prišla s pomočjo nadrealizma in tkanja pripovedi. Katalizator kinetične energije v belem prostoru pesmi je nujen za transformativno vizijo vzvišenega.

Tomaž Šalamun, Arthur Sze, William Wordsworth, mejni trenutek, vzvišeno

The contemporary poets Tomaž Šalamun and Arthur Sze have inherited from the Romantic Era, and specifically William Wordsworth, the legacy of transcendental threshold moments. Both of these contemporary poets come to this same juncture by way of surrealism and the use of woven narrative. The catalyst of kinetic energy within the white space of the poem is imperative to this transformative vision of the sublime.

Tomaž Šalamun, Arthur Sze, William Wordsworth, threshold, sublime.

Time can be seen as a continuum of memory, a consciousness of experiences, specific points of reference. The sense of time passing as well as suspension of that time, however momentarily, is essential to the poets being discussed here. Wordsworth is the ancestor: the genesis of Wordsworth's poetry is found in the »flash upon that inward eye« (Abrams 1975: 1427) suggesting his primary reliance on memory. Specific moments have left an impression upon the poet's mind, what he called »spots of time.« In Book XII of *The Prelude*, he states: »There are in our existence spots of time / That with distinct pre-eminence retain / A renovating virtue« (Abrams 1975: 1510). These recollected moments, referred to in this paper as »threshold moments,« are more than remembrances, however pleasant and beautiful. They are moments of transformation from the seemingly ordinary into the perceived sublime. As Wordsworth emphasized in *The Prelude*, »Visionary power [...] embodied in the mystery of words [...] objects recognized, / In flashes, and with glory not their own« (ibid.: 1799, 1805, 1850). »Lines Composed a Few Miles Above Tintern Abbey on Revisiting the Banks of the Wye River« is a superb example of a »spot of time« on the map of his life. These »spots of time« hold a sense of awe that is often disquieting: »A presence that disturbs me with joy / Of elevated thoughts; a sense sublime / Of something far more deeply interfused« (ibid.: 1375). This feeling moves the poet

from a specific time-placed memory into something larger than the river, the scene, or himself. As Samuel H. Monk (1935: 26) put it in his book entitled, *The Sublime: A Study of Critical Theories in XVIII-Century England*, it is »the astonishment that the sublime awakens, the expansion and elevation of the soul when brought face to face with grandeur of thought or grandeur of scenery, the analogy between the effect of the vast in nature and of the sublime in art«. This is what Wordsworth refers to as »flashes.« Like nature, personal, historic, and cultural experiences formed into individual, often surreal imagery, in addition to the natural world, bring innovative poets like Tomaž Šalamun and Arthur Sze to these same thresholds. These modern poets search for the infinite beyond linear time in these threshold moments, and this liminal space is found in both their content and form that displays a kinetic dynamic, a distinct movement, found within their poems that is decidedly contemporary.

Threshold moments are generated through often reoccurring and surreal images, and always create what Gaston Bachelard (1964: 210) called, »the dialectics of immensity«. A deft sculpting of line and stanza is essential too, not only to support but also to emphasize the white space encompassing them. This yearning for openness is a hallmark of Šalamun's writing. As Edward Hirsch says: »freedom is the first condition of Šalamun's poetry—the freedom of the anarchic single voice, of the idiosyncratic personal testimony« (Simic 2000: xii). His is a distinct voice that comes from the war-stained history and deep poetic culture of Slovenia. The reader witnesses him arguing with history while darting into the future, possibilities streaming from his head. He says in his poem, *History*: »Tomaž Šalamun is a sphere rushing through air« (Merrill 1997: 77) refusing to play by the rules and countering the ugly logic of despair with surreal images that search for the sublime. Once Šalamun said that »my poems always begin with the visual. I have to see it, then I write it.« (Merrill 1999: 41) Šalamun's poems are evidence that what he saw was visionary, playful, and serious. Both witty and humble, this poet can imagine himself a mouse: »I'm a she-mouse / who [...] with my tiny claws / scratched through the wall / into the rosy day.« (Šalamun 2018: 45) A threshold has been crossed and is perhaps no surprise that color figures prominently as he was an artist before becoming a poet. He states simply »my favorite color is yellow« (Simic 2000: 56) and uses contrasts to focus color and meaning: »And what is red? Red is only a part of white, right?« (Simic 1988: 59) This poem floats in white space whereas *Red Flowers* retracts by content (»colors evaporate«) (Merrill 1997: 55), white being the absence of color. Perhaps one no longer needs color in heaven. The reader is introduced to Šalamun's surreal world via the visual: a repeating set of colors and images including windows, dust, moss, flowers, boats, snow, and deer. They are all thresholds that take both poet and reader into an alternative, dreamlike realm. As Gaston Bachelard (1964: 183) explains, »the daydream transports the dreamer outside the immediate world to a world that bears the mark of infinity«. The reader, using the image markers, follows the path the poet has made. For example, dust sneaks into many of Šalamun's poems taking on a heightened evocative sense. The poem, *Tree* concludes, »I measured your dust,« (Šalamun 2006: 23) and in *The Midsummer*, »The

dust / spreads / outward— / whirling« (Šalamun 2018: 28). Image upon image swirl and pile up. In *Moss*, this poet amasses so many thresholds within a breathless clip of movement enhanced by his punctuation like »Evil. Spirit. Suspicion. A beam. / Points caught fire« (Simic 2000: 34) and his enjambment to highlight the white space: »into white / flour« (ibid.: 34) and »I open the window // scattered« (ibid.: 35). *Moss* has an impressive cairn of images: »boat,« »claws,« »snow,« »roof,« »smoke,« »grass,« »ash,« »flowers,« »windows,« and »thread.« (ibid.: 34) In *The Boat*, images are steppingstones to the immensity of the universe, and questions like »Are earthquakes and wars / the collapse of galaxies?« (Merrill 1997: 146) catapult the reader into an infinity of potential narratives while images pinging off each other like agitated atoms, expand into white space with amazing tension. In *The Deer*, the deer is »the godhead of my garden« the speaker declaring »You drink me, draining off the color of my soul« (ibid.: 214). Here, like in heaven, color is not needed since the speaker is in the sublime: »so that everything is one« (ibid.: 214). That is immensity.

This leaping moves from exterior to interior, where images take on an added depth: »Great images have both a history and a prehistory; they are always a blend of memory and legend [...] every great image has an unfathomable oneiric depth to which the personal past adds special color« (Bachelard 1964: 33). Moving further to the interior of the psyche, images of light and dark are wedged together more violently in Šalamun's poetry but can be subtle too: In *The Tree of Life*: a child breaches his first threshold into time and space »touching branches from the room's window« (Simic 1988: 47). The psyche moves outward as it simultaneously moves inward, in Sze's poems too where »we go beyond the barriers [...] then we really enter into the surrealistic action of pure image« (Bachelard 1964: 227). This is where Šalamun's greatness lies. In poems like *Go*, surrealism is as its concise best. »Go. / Grind up pure light and wipe it away. / Step into the pure light. / It's there, it flutters like a flag« (Simic 2000: 31). Only three stanzas, this poem uses white space and simple, declarative statements to carry surreal images toward the threshold into the sublime: »It's everywhere, in the humidity. / In the white gill of the silver thread.« (ibid.: 31) In *The Four Questions of Melancholy*, the images are dense, and moments of thresholds arrive in quick succession from »trampled flower« and »moss,« »dusty apples« to »pitch black« and then finally »light« (Merrill 1997: 215). This »light« opens out into the final white space beyond the poem and everyday existence. As the poet, Charles Simic (2015: 151) said, »Empty space makes us discover our inwardness [...] One has the feeling that time has stopped«. Simic uses similar images from everyday life that are often overlooked, like Šalamun, to bring about surprising leaps within the poem. Yet Simic's emphasis on things, like Šalamun's, is not so much »the thing being present in its Thinging« (Heidegger 2013: 178) as it is a vehicle for emotion, a springboard into that threshold moment. In Šalamun, Simic, and Sze, this quest drives the poem forward. It is the subtext lurking in the white space where there is a textural silence, a contemplative stillness which Heidegger defines as »in no way merely soundless;« it is instead »merely the other side of that which rests.« There

»is always more in motion than all motion and always more restlessly active than agitation« (ibid.: 204). And what in Šalamun's work is more active than questions? They demand action. For Šalamun, this searching is not easy: »I must hurt myself to write« (Merrill 1999: 41) so he demands much from language: »I want you to drop to your knees in love, even if / you knock your head a bit« (Šalamun 2006: 119). It is summoned and used (sound) and silence (rest) inevitably follows. It is a bold dance in which Šalamun excels: »I DWELL SILENTLY:« »It's all about the contest« (Šalamun 2006: 1992: 81) but between whom—the poet and God? The poet and himself? Wordsworth searched for his answers on long hikes addressing the River Wye directly in *Tintern Abbey*: »How oft, in spirit, have I turned to thee, / O sylvan Wye!« (Abrams 1975: 1374) »And I have felt / A presence [...] / Of elevated thoughts; a sense sublime« (ibid.: 1375). Šalamun also finds this sense of the sublime at certain times: »the atmosphere is crystal clear. / Flowers burst out into bloom and there was no dust. / The apples mirrored, / flashed in the sparkling water« (Šalamun 2018: 32). He chases the light. In *Central Europe* Šalamun defines God directly: »God / is snow« which suggests a sense of all-ness, a connectedness of all beings like Wordsworth and Sze. Šalamun placed his answer in »GOD,« here in its entirety: »I / stole / a piece / of / meat / from a // live / friend / and / doled / it / out. / Whatever he is, I am too« (Simic 2000: 26). Simic (1992: 72) agrees: »All things are interrelated [...]. We are fragments of an unutterable whole«.

It is this sense of connectedness that illuminates Arthur Sze's poetry. It is a multi-layered experience that opens out like a slow-motion blossoming where the end is only the beginning: one must shatter the teacup and then put it back together, a threshold itself. Sze's poem, *Kintsugi*, alludes to the story of a Zen tea master, who presented with a beautiful teacup, shatters it and accepts it only when the fragments are joined back together with gold; its flaws become its beauty. For Sze too each line is a fragment of life rejoined in the poem: »no gemsbok leaps across the road— // a singer tapped an eagle feather on his shoulders— // women washed indigo-dyed yarn in this river« (Sze 2019: 42). These declarative sentences, much like Šalamun's, hint at a multiplexity with dashes at the end of each line which must be connected by joining the fragments back into a whole, »assembling shards...to repair a grey bowl with gold lacquer« (ibid.: 42). Emphasis is on movement. Each line picks up a word from the previous line: between the fifth and sixth stanzas, the word, »waves« become »crests« and moving from the eighth and ninth stanzas with »air« (or »rising«) alluding to »suspended.« His lines are porous; colons and semicolons become miniscule passageways as in *First Snow*: »the world of being is like this gravel: // you think you own a car, a house« (ibid.: 33). Each fragment and image interlace to create a sort of disorientation, a fault line. Images extracted from science, nature, travel, and the New Mexico landscape where Sze lives, are juxtaposed to create tension within the poem's white space. In *The Cloud Chamber*, Sze juxtaposes medical terms, scientific references, and natural images: the idea of »chemotherapy« bounces off »a wasp nest« to find itself settled in »a pi meson in a cloud chamber« (Sze 1982: 43). That it »exists for a thousandth of

a second« is itself juxtaposed with immortality (ibid.: 43). This disorientation exists to open the mind to »a point of coincidence [...] resembling the tension between a denotation and its stretch / of definition« (Sze 1995: 3). Sze uses science like Šalamun uses history and childhood, as a treasure chest of »great simple images [that] reveal a psychic state« (Bachelard 1964: 72), and like Šalamun in *The Deer*, Sze pushes images to the edge through surrealism into a space brimming with kinetic energy: »... the pond, an empty bowl, brims, / shimmers with what is to come« and »Their minds brim« (Sze 2009: 64). He alludes here to both neural synapses and time asking, »Who can suspend time on a string make it / arch back and forth while the earth rotates around it?« (ibid.: 37) Sze's answer: by attending »...what coalesces in the body... / are glimpses of blossoming redbuds...« (ibid.: 36)

This attentiveness shows it is not an »I« but an »eye« bearing witness to time, space, and being. This ideal »I« is a state of connectedness in experience like Wordsworth, but more present tense. The poet, Jane Hirshfield says, »if it is the harvest of true concentration [...] And because it thinks by music and image, by story and passion and voice, poetry can do what other forms of thinking cannot [...] in which subjective and objective become one, in which conceptual mind and the inexpressible presence of things become one« (Hirshfield 1998: 31-32). Attentiveness is the first step to this concentrated being creating threshold moments. Sze uses »layers of overlapping« (Sze 2009: 26) to recreate this state. »Awareness of the fleeting leads to an understanding of interdependence and the continuity of being« (Hirshfield 1998: 102). As Sze says in *The Redshifting Web*, »I sit and am an absorbing form« (Sze 1998: 45). Recording the polyphony of objects and voices while carrying a sense of moment is paramount. Sze's conjoining of fragments, like the piling of images in Šalamun, creates subtle yet frequent threshold moments that surprise when »in synergy / of the moment,« »the mind is a tuning fork / that we strike« (Sze 2005: 20). In this state, time is non-linear revealing sudden fluctuations in tonal narrative. Thus, Sze »zigzagging along a path« (ibid.: 68), offers a world that is simultaneously minute and immense. »Onto a stucco wall / the shadows of upwardly zigzagging plum branches« (Sze 1995: 36). He sees zigzags everywhere like Šalamun saw smoke and snow. The path is purposefully jagged to surprise the traveler like the sudden understanding of a koan like Sze's: »between two points, we traverse an infinite set of paths« (Sze 2019: 19). The speaker moves back and forth (zigzagging) through time and history from the present, »glimpsing horses in a field,« to being catapulted into the infinite: »the infinite is here—« (ibid.: 54). These lines are sight lines that stretch into infinity where »parallel lines touch« referring to Projective Geometry's points at infinity, or a surrealist's dreamlike world like Šalamun's. »But what line of sight leads to revelation?« (ibid.: 14) Sze says: »each word, a talisman / leaves a track« (ibid.: 41). His poetic line is a path revealed, a raveled narrative that morphs into continuous time. Perhaps all Sze's lines are sight lines, often punctuated by dashes to control the pace while fostering awareness. The use of present tense punctuated with end dashes highlights a sense of simultaneity. The dramatic prose poem, *Lichen Song*, (Sze 2021: 450) ends and begins with an

em-dash, its only punctuation. These dashes in this soliloquy of the lichen connote the effect of being suspended in a heightened present tense. These em-dashes are small yet tensile threads that stitch words and images together like a connecting through line. Sze uses alliteration and repetition to the same effect. In the poem, *The Leaves of a Dream are the Leaves of an Onion*, (it could be a Šalamun title) the word, »heat« is repeated nine times in five stanzas and the »s« sound is embedded in each of the seventeen lines creating a tight weave of energy and movement (Sze 1987: 15). This combination of techniques, fragments, images, sounds, color and rhythms all create an impressive impasto effect, layer upon layer, rising from the surface.

Rising from the surface also connotes its opposite: depth. While the dashes move the reader into the white space, the technique of the strikethrough moves the reader into the depths of the mind. As Sze says in an interview in his book, *The Unfolding Center*, illustrated by painter Susan York, »I was thinking consciously of Susan's layering [...] how voices might have things that are below the surface.« (Sze 2013) Like manipulating perspective in painting, Sze communicates depth by overlapping images and events in combination with the strikethrough: in the *Unfolding Center*, the speaker corrects himself: »[...] ~~cutthroats~~ rainbow trout« and then moves deeper: »I'm shrinking inside this body. // ~~let me out~~, it's fucking paradise here« (Sze 2014: 58). Heidegger (2013: 72), writing about erasure in his essay, *Being*, said, »art as the setting-into-work of truth, is poetry«. It is the various meanings occurring simultaneously that shows how Sze finds truth in our complex world like the very act of being »brushed« over the threshold in *Water Calligraphy*: »I let the brush / ~~swerve~~ rest for a moment« (Sze 2019: 8). Yet this space is not a void but luminous and active where »...in motion there is stillness« (Sze 1998: 47) and energy. Like Šalamun whose »grass / It's been set ablaze by white chalk within« (Šalamun 2018: 61), Sze employs kinetic energy to breach the threshold: Sze said in a personal interview, »emotion is needed to break apart boundaries« (Cohen 2021). He insists on dissolving rather than leaping over thresholds like Šalamun: »in that regard, dissolving boundaries—rather than passing across a linear threshold« (Fogle 2013).

The liminal threshold moment is the integrating element for both Šalamun and Sze. Though Šalamun takes a running start and leaps through this liminal space he arrives at the same destination as Sze beyond to »the hush [...] where ink flows« (Sze 2021: 485). As Stanley Plumly said, »what Wordsworth really invented was a way of constructing out of the line [...] For Wordsworth there is always a reason for carrying one line to the next« (Jackson 1983: 3). That energy between lines is the link to Romantic poetics outlined by Wordsworth in his *Prelude* and *Preface* and the catalyst for this quest toward the sublime. Most often leading Šalamun and Sze into surrealism, this kinetic energy is essential to cross or dissolve thresholds and reveal those transcendental threshold moments. Šalamun describes it as »a new center / [...] [that] took root [...] and grew like a discovery« (Merrill 1997: 130). Here, time and space are conflated within the psyche. As Robert Bly (1975: 4) notes, »a poet who is 'leaping' makes a jump from an object soaked in unconscious substance to

an object soaked in conscious psychic substance« and the poem, »its center a long floating leap« (ibid.: 3) in which this kinetic energy manifests itself by »the mind associat[ing] faster« (ibid.: 28). This malleability of time in a »poetry of flying« (ibid.: 28) suspends the mundane and fosters these threshold moments that contain a sense of awe. Charles Simic (2015: 79) speaks for them all: »Awe is my religion, and mystery is my church«. In that liminal space of the threshold moment, everything co-exists within an »endless beginning, pure body, pure mind« (Sze 1995: 8). For both Šalamun and Sze the scale of thought moves from minute to immense in a flash, like Wordsworth's flashes of visionary power: »an afternoon thunderstorm [...] as we situate at the brink of this wide-eyed world—« (Sze 2021: 498). At this all important »brink,« the threshold moment, recognition of the infinite in immensity and awe is how these poets illuminate the sublime in everything, simultaneously. It is just as Tomaž Šalamun (2018: 32) reported: »The earth's lid vanished«.

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