THE CENTRAL EUROPEAN LEGACY OF DISSONANCE IN THE POETRY OF TOMAŽ ŠALAMUN

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Abstract

The poet Tomaž Šalamun writes in a central European artistic tradition that values dissonance, ambivalence, and estrangement as aesthetic qualities. In the early twentieth century, Austrian composer Arnold Schoenberg “emancipated dissonance” in his music by blurring the distinction between subjective notions of consonance and dissonance. Schoenberg challenged traditional conceptions of harmony with tonal combinations and progressions that defied expectations for resolution. Other central European art, like the Expressionist painting of Oskar Kokoschka and the poetry of Paul Celan and Charles Simic, manifests an affinity for disjunction, interrogation of subjectivity, and resistance of collectivization. Šalamun has inherited this central European aesthetic legacy, and it expresses itself in his poetry like an artistic phenotype. He uses paratalcical incongruence to illustrate the tension and ambivalence of the social, psychological, and political atmosphere. A Slovenian poet, Šalamun grew up near Trieste, a site of intercultural exchange. His post-war poetry reflects the paradoxical nature of violence and the tension that exists in a region historically subordinated by stronger surrounding powers. Šalamun frequently depicts the violent and grotesque in his poems, employing an aesthetic of disharmony in images and in the language. Like Schoenberg, he rejects tradition and traditional radicalism, each of
which requires, to some degree, collectivization and the erasure of the individual. Yet, in his rejection of absolutes, Šalamun adheres to a central European tradition of paradox and dissonance in art.
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“I add to the story, because no doubt / there will be many theses on / who I am.”

—from Šalamun’s “Monstrum (Lat.) from the Verb Monstrare” (from There’s the Hand and There’s the Arid Chair)

INTRODUCTION

While the influence of surrealism is evident in Tomaž Šalamun’s work, it is Expressionism that most strongly influenced Central European art and literature in the early twentieth century. Around 1910, artists, composers, and writers reconfigured conceptions of harmony by exploring the possibilities of dissonance, and interrogated subjectivity by attempting to refine the function of the artist as a medium. During this period, empathy becomes an artistic device for a duel representation of both subject and observer. And as I will illustrate with the work of Celan and other central European poets, subjectivity and atrocity move to the fore as Šalamun the poet emerges in this war-torn region. Such dominant characteristics of central European art in the early twentieth century abound in Šalamun’s work, which carries on the tradition of these aesthetic values.

As a child in post-war central Europe in the fifties, Šalamun inherited an artistic sensibility carefully attuned to the ravages and dichotomies of war. The paradoxes of the modern world, rendered into art by Dadaists and later by Surrealists in the nineteenth century, figure prominently in Šalamun’s work.

In “History,” Šalamun declares: “Tomaž Šalamun is a monster,” self-mythologizing and betraying his own ambivalence regarding the tradition of discourse while trying to remain subversive. His poems destroy absolutes and insist on an
unsettling fragmentation. In his poetry, Šalamun frequently depicts the grotesque, and he does so with an aesthetic of incongruence that fuses dissonant images and linguistic constructions into a harmony of compelling artwork. Šalamun’s work derives from a distinctly central European tradition, in which dissonance and estrangement are the characteristics and the effects of art. His artistic antecedents include Arnold Schoenberg, Oskar Kokoschka, Georg Trakl, Paul Celan, and other luminaries whose art emerged from the tumult in central Europe during the twentieth century. In this thesis, I intend to show how the qualities of disharmony in Šalamun’s poetry represent an artistic phenotype unique to a central European artistic heritage in the twentieth century.
Chapter I: Dissonance as Rebellion

Ambivalent Monster

Tomaž Šalamun rebels in art and against art. His apparent ambivalence betrays a fundamental uncertainty that challenges the reader with verse lines that resist conventional hermeneutics, while retaining expressive and emotional immediacy. In his poem “History,” he writes, “Tomaž Šalamun is a monster. / Tomaž Šalamun is a sphere rushing through the air. / He lies down in twilight, he swims in twilight. / People and I, we both look at him amazed” (1-4). By mythologizing himself, he seeks to recreate history. Like the biblical Leviathan, but with a sense of humor, he is a spectacle to behold, provoking wonder. “Maybe he is punishment from the god / the boundary stone of the world. / …He might only be a hump, his head / should be taken off like a spider’s” (6-7, 11-12). His rhetoric shares the wonderment of the passage from Job describing the great beast:

He maketh the deep to boil like a pot: he maketh the sea like a pot of ointment. He maketh a path to shine after him; [one] would think the deep [to be] hoary. Upon earth there is not his like, who is made without fear. (Job 41: 31-33)

Šalamun’s poetic uniqueness makes the leviathan an apt analog to his self-mythology in “History,” but in this singularity he also considers himself a kind of liminal creature, violently resisting collectivization.

“Poetry makes a human more human,” Šalamun has said, “but it can also dehumanize, like a big passion, a horrible obsession driven by laws that are beyond
human” (Dobnik). Self-conscious and ambivalent about his vocation, it is no surprise
that Šalamun seems to find some kinship with diabolical antecedents like the leviathan.

“Poetry contains something very diabolical—that is, language that plunges into the
unknown, the abyss” (Dobnik). As a poet, he locates himself in a liminal space, as
though he were in, yet not of, this world.

Šalamun wrote “History” during a time when he must have felt particularly
alien, as he had recently left his homeland for the United States. “‘History’ was written
at Iowa, because Iowa in 1971 was an incredible place for me. ['History'] is a very
young poem, and it’s full of total joy and craziness, and it happened here, because I felt
like this here” (Iowa). As a young, Slovenian poet visiting the American Midwest in
1971, Šalamun is understandably given to a sense of wonderment considering the
condition of his homeland. His country has historically suffered under the oppressive
influence of its neighbors, including, at various times, the Franks, Hungarians, Teutons,
Bavarians, and the Austro-Hungarian Empire (Merrill 15). Oppression was ingrained in
Slovenian culture. “[I]f Slovenia has a national disease, it is melancholia—a legacy,
perhaps, of more than a thousand years of subjugation to the whims of stronger powers”
(Merrill 15). And yet, a national love of poetry persists, perhaps borne of the central
European inclination toward the Expressionist mood in which the artist imagines a
“vision of history as a nightmare” (Harrison 3). Phyllis Levin writes that Slovenia’s
national language is “the old language of a newly independent state that built its identity
on the spirit of poetry—a nation that features a sonnet by (Slovenian) France Preseren
(1800-1849) on the back of one of its banknotes, his face on the front” (Dobnik).
Šalamun comes from a country that honors a poetic heritage that persists through the many iterations of national identity. The aesthetic product of such a history understandably bears the influence of those surrounding nations that, at one time or another, held domain over the Slovenian people—an aesthetic marked by the resistance and struggle for and by the people of central Europe.

Ambivalence must pervade a culture so conflicted by the collectivization implied by any national identity, let alone an identity marked by the push and pull of stronger surrounding nations. Out of this history emerges Šalamun’s poetry: ambivalent, and possessed of a dissonance that is, perhaps with some irony, distinctly central European art.

*Rebelling Against Tradition*

In 1910, central Europe saw the aesthetic of dissonance seize the imaginations of artists like composer Arnold Schoenberg, painter Oskar Kokoschka, and the poet Georg Trakl. Of these major exponents of the Expressionist movement, none employed disjunction and disharmony as vigorously as Schoenberg, whose compositions represented an upheaval of the traditional harmonic structure in Western music. Traditional musical composition privileged a conception of harmony that worked toward a resolution of dissonant tones. Around 1910, Arnold Schoenberg challenged this conception by foregrounding dissonance, thereby reconstituting consonant tonal relationships. This aesthetic gesture marked a genuine rebellion against tradition as it concerned aesthetics and the role of the artist.
In Tomaž Šalamun’s career as a poet, we find a similar sense of rebellion and dissonance. When he was 22 years old, he wrote “Duma 1964,” a politically charged poem that begins, “Fucked by the Absolute / fed up with virgins and other dying sufferers,” and ends with visceral dissatisfaction:

- one hundred thirty-five constitutional bodies or how to keep
  a dead cat from stinking
- the revolutionary zeal of the masses or
  where is the sanatorium to cure our impotence
- I walked our land and got an ulcer
- land of Cimpermans and pimply groupies
- land of serfs myths and pedagogy
- of flinty Slovenians, object of history crippled by a cold (Iowa 17-24)

A Yugoslav minister whose name means “cat,” objected to the poem and had Šalamun imprisoned. “He took it very seriously and personally,” Šalamun said (Schwartz). The news of his incarceration spread to the United States, and so Šalamun found himself a cause célèbre, which sped up his release.

This early poem may not exhibit the poet’s inclination to revel in incongruous juxtapositions that have caused people to think of him as a surrealist poet; however, an artist’s interest in the surreal may extend beyond the category of art, to surrealism as a category of experience. In “Duma 1964,” Šalamun trains his attention on the absurdities of his country’s political climate. Demonstrating what would turn out to be typical ambivalence, Šalamun looks upon both citizens and government with some disdain. The
Slovenians are hard, “flinty” people as a result of their history, but Šalamun laments the loss of the individual in the “revolutionary zeal of the masses” who protest a putrefying government body.

Šalamun was a monster even at 22. His poetry provides a clear account of his conflicted emotions about nationality. In his poem “Eclipse,” also from his first collection of poems, he finds himself at odds with the collective, and disassociates in the first of three sections:

I grew tired of the image of my tribe
and moved out.
Out of long nails
I weld limbs for my new body.
Out of long rags, my entrails.
A coat of carrion
will be my coat of solitude.
I pluck my eye from the depth of the marsh.
Out of the devoured plates of disgust
I will build my hut.
My world will be a world of sharp edges.
Cruel and eternal. *(Four Questions)*

Here we find Šalamun resolving to self-mythologize, as he does in “History,” breaking with his people, yet still maintaining the look and smell of their putrefaction. He rebuilds himself from a motley assortment of materials: new limbs from metal, an eye
from fetid water, and a coat of rotting flesh. Incarceration must have been, in some way, validation of his work. Dissidence of Šalamun’s variety cannot, by definition, blend in with the dissenting “revolutionary zeal of the masses.”

This poet has a revolutionary zeal of his own, independent of the collective, and aesthetically subversive in a country with such a strong relationship to its own poetic tradition. “Despite enormous pressure, political and cultural, to abandon their identity, the Slovenians created a rich and melancholic poetic tradition, which for much of their history, united them as strongly as their Roman Catholic faith” (Merrill 16). However, in a tradition more central European than provincial, Šalamun finds himself at odds with his Slovenian heritage, as though adherence to a national tradition might imply a subjugation of the artist’s work to pre-established forms.

Šalamun’s poetry is necessarily original. He offers a terse and perfunctory origin story with the first line of “Eclipse,” explaining to us that he simply “grew tired of [his] tribe / and moved out” (1-2). The next line shifts to the present tense, marking the end of the origin story. In a way, he had to betray his people’s tradition in order to find a space for himself as a poet. As Christopher Merrill writes in his introduction to Šalamun’s The Four Questions of Melancholy, “Surely one sign of this people’s impending change of fortunes was the appearance, in 1964, of a poet determined to upend that tradition” (16). As many central European artists had done before him, Šalamun alienates himself from tradition, seeking dissonance over conventional harmony.
Schoenberg’s Defiant Redefinition of Harmony

Arnold Schoenberg faced a similar challenge of separating himself from both tradition and the popular rebellion. Like Šalamun, he had to create a unique mode of dissidence for himself. Around the turn of the twentieth century, the specter of Wagner’s innovative chromaticism still loomed, and Gustav Mahler and Richard Strauss seemed the likely torch bearers of Wagner’s style. But they failed to gain the approval of some critics, who sought a less obvious successor to Wagner. As Christopher Hailey writes in the introduction to *Constructive Dissonance*:

Mahler’s music was dismissed as crude, bloated, and pretentious.

Strauss, accused of theatrical vulgarity, was facile and perhaps too gifted, eager to shock the public with lavish surface effects. Mahler and Strauss seemed partly decadent and ultimately banal. Their faults derived from their striking surface accessibility; there seemed little that could not be connected back to Wagner. (5)

Schoenberg stood out among them as a unique and promising practitioner of chromatic innovation, pushing the limits of tonality by challenging conceptions of consonance and dissonance. People recognized that Schoenberg “stood for something that transcended the aesthetic debate about music in the 1890s surrounding Mahler and Strauss” (Hailey 5). It seemed as though music in central Europe demanded transgression of boundaries above all.

In a time of innovative stagnation, Schoenberg reestablished what it meant to be new and exciting. Like Šalamun, he had to be subversive and occasionally offensive in
order to upend the aesthetic paradigms of the old guard. “Schoenberg’s work was a welcome ally in a struggle against philistine audiences and critics who, in the name of cultured taste, resisted and denigrated the new” (Hailey 5). Schoenberg not only challenged listeners’ ears by foregrounding dissonance, he also challenged critics by demonstrating what artistic radicalism truly meant. Mahler and Strauss had represented the radical movement in music until Schoenberg made them sound benign by comparison (Hailey 5). And just as Šalamun broke from his tribe to revel in a revolutionary spirit of his own, Schoenberg broke from tradition as well as the traditional standard of innovation.

The conventional Western understanding of music privileged a specific set of intervals between a specific series of tones. Consonance, while clearly a subjective concept by definition, was marked by a resolution of tension. The resolution usually called for a chord made of a root note (which denotes the name of the chord), a third (determining whether the chord is major or minor by its interval from the root), and a fifth (commonly considered to be a stabilizing tone). These chordal components make up the traditional triad, which can be major or minor, depending on the third. To deviate from this triadic structure would introduce dissonance into the sound of the chord; and although deviation was a necessary component in producing tension and facilitating musical transition, composers had never found non-triadic chord structure to be a suitable end in itself as Schoenberg did.

Deviations from traditional triadic structure could be linguistically equivalent to abandoning conventional syntactical construction. In a short, untitled poem, Šalamun
illustrates how poetry can subvert traditional construction: “Not the murder, / silence
brings one back / to the scene of the crime” (*The Book for My Brother*). Šalamun
destabilizes the language by beginning with a negation, but he is unclear whether the
negation is in opposition to silence, or whether the negation functions adverbially, as
though silence brings one back *by virtue* of what it is not.

With this unstable syntax, Šalamun undermines the certainty suggested by the
declaration of these lines. Šalamun’s fragmentation explores possibilities of expression
beyond the limits of traditional linguistic construction. A poem ostensibly referring to
the psychology of a murderer pushes the analysis onto the reader, who must either
choose among possible readings, or settle for a multiplicity of readings, just as
Schoenberg’s compositions resist the tendency to locate a tonal center, and defy our
expectations for resolution. Šalamun’s poetry possesses a similar defiance, violating
the covenant between reader and poet by which the poet honors a readerly expectation
of legibility.

The difficulty of his poetry is consistent with the Expressionist aesthetic, where
“spirit and object, essence and appearance, and other metaphysical oppositions enter
into such irresolvable contradictions that they signal the need for a radical revision of
the understanding” (Harrison, 14). Šalamun works explicitly with contradiction in “His
Favorite Ride”: “why are you so mean / because we’re so sad / didn’t you once say you
were cheerful / and glad to be alive / I did say I was cheerful and glad to be alive / but
as it turns out I’m sad really” (13). The dialogue results in the recognition of
misunderstanding. The emotions of sadness and cheer contradict each other, and the
poem leaves us to wonder how one emotional condition could have been misinterpreted for the other, by either party in this dialogue.

Šalamun delivers on his promise to depart from tradition, including the “revolutionary zeal of the masses,” in his investigation of misinterpretation as an aesthetic component and as material for the poems themselves. Like Schoenberg, Šalamun refuses to give in to expectation, and he clearly values the subversion of expectation, as we see in “His Favorite Ride.” In Thomas Harrison’s 1910: The Emancipation of Dissonance, the author explains how central European art in the early twentieth century found in dissonance a new vehicle for expression. Artists like Schoenberg “liberated” dissonance from its historical understanding as something that merely facilitated an eventual transition to consonance.

The tritone, for example, is perhaps the most fundamental component of conventional dissonance. The tritone pairs two notes within a diminished fifth interval (or three whole tones), which, when sounded, creates an effect that, by comparison with any other musical dyad, is categorically dissonant. The tritone also serves as pivot from which those two notes, when proceeding in contrary motion by one half-tone in either a sharp or flat direction, can move to a dyad that is not only consonant by comparison; the new chord is a resolution of the tension created by the tritone interval. This useful interval serves as the tension-generating device in all dominant-seventh chords, which have, as a result of this tension, a corresponding chord of resolution.

The tension is designed to lead the audience in expectation of some form of resolution. Composers, like all artists, must strike a balance between indulging audience
expectations and maintaining a degree of unpredictability. Too much predictable resolution can make a composition sterile, but subverting expectation challenges the audience in a way that may try a listener’s patience. With Richard Wagner’s innovations in chromaticism, audiences in the twentieth century were, theoretically, primed for Schoenberg’s radicalism. And Schoenberg clearly possessed a theoretical sensibility that led him to challenge listeners as he did.

In his Schoenberg’s writings on music theory, the composer expands the definition of harmony beyond the traditional understanding. As Šalamun disrupts our point of reference in “Not the murder,” Schoenberg removes nearly all reference to the tonic center, or “home tone.” This tonic center, denoted by the key, e.g. E or B flat, is frequently found at the start and end of a piece of music—in the root of the chord. Schoenberg looked at this root note as a reference point that could either be stabilized or destabilized depending on the notes of the chord that is built from that root note. “Every tone which is added to a beginning tone makes the meaning of that tone doubtful…In this manner there is produced a state of unrest, of imbalance which grows throughout most of the piece, and is enforced further by similar functions of the rhythm” (123). One could imagine this statement as a kind of poetics, and fairly applied to Tomaž Šalamun’s poetry. The state of unrest could work without the promise of resolution. Schoenberg argues, “The chord building capacity of dissonances does not depend on possibilities of, or tendencies toward, resolution” (24). Dissonance can exist independent of expectations for resolution. To build a chord that contains a tritone does not imply a relationship between that chord and another, tension-resolving chord, such
as the tonic. A dominant seventh chord is thus liberated from its secondary or transitional role.

I would like to suggest that the political subjugation Šalamun resisted as a Slovenian citizen mirrors the traditional subjugation of dissonance. Tritones, as one of the smallest components of musical dissonance, are subordinated to transitional chords, like the diminished seventh or dominant seventh chord. Those chords are subordinated to the tonal center of the composition. Aesthetic concerns overlap with political concerns, just as surrealism can function as a category of art as well as a category of experience. The artistic response to long-standing subordination has a distinctly strange characteristic in central Europe in the twentieth century. (And I will illustrate this strangeness further by looking at other central European artists like George Trakl, Oscar Kokoshka, and Charles Simic.)

Schoenberg certainly experienced subjugation outside of his artistic pursuits. As Brand and Hailey discuss in Constructive Dissonance, “Wagner had succeeded in popularizing the idea that Jews were incapable of true creativity” (11). Anti-Semitism would mount in the twenties, but in the arts community around 1910, much anti-Semitic bias came from Jews themselves, who were seemingly convinced by Wagner’s anti-Semitism. Schoenberg described his experiences during that decade:

And from my own experience I can tell you that the number of my Aryan pupils and followers was very much larger than I could have expected…Indeed, I personally found myself more respected by Aryans than by Jews…The latter, deprived of their self-confidence, doubted a
Jew’s creative capacity more than the Aryans did. (Harrison 30)

Jewish artists had to fight prejudice from within their community. This struggle was in itself a kind of dissonance, as many Jews renounced their faith, and the conditions that led to Hitler’s ascent began to manifest. “To many Jews, especially in the higher social, intellectual, and artistic circles, conversion to Christianity marked the completion of their incorporation into the dominant culture, in the shaping of which they took part” (Brand 29). This kind of conversion represented acquiescence to collectivization through assimilation, and the erasure of the individual.

Schoenberg would channel the contradiction he experienced into his composition, as would other Expressionist artists in central Europe during this time. The artistic result in music, painting, and poetry bears the trace of oppression in art wrought with paradox, estrangement, and disharmony.

**Remembering the Audience, and the Expression of Expressionism**

Of course, theoretical “emancipation of dissonance” is an intriguing concept, but listeners primarily respond to music affectively. The experience of enjoying music might be said to differ significantly from the experience of enjoying, say, poetry, which often demands intellectual engagement on a level far beyond that of the music listener. So a discussion of the similarities between Šalamun and Schoenberg should include some mention of the effect of their work on their respective audiences.

Much of Tomaž Šalamun’s poetry challenges its readers, yet there is still expressive content in his work, and despite its resistance to interpretation, his verse still
resonates with readers. As Colm Tóibín wrote in *The Guardian*, some of Šalamun’s poems “read like haunting and half-heard remarks from some urgent and exciting conversation whose point you keep missing. Šalamun has no interest in keeping things simple.” And yet his poetry can be superficially beautiful. For example, in “The Deer,” from *There’s the Hand and There’s the Arid Chair*, Šalamun uses familiar prosody to create a hauntingly beautiful poem.

Awe-inspiring cliff, white desire.

Water springing forth from blood.

Let my form narrow, let it crush my body,

so that everything is one: slag and skeletons, fistful of earth.

The violent supplication of this first of four stanzas begins with an apostrophe (perhaps addressing the White Cliff of Dover?), as the speaker yearns for a fusion of nature and body. The assonance of “white desire” and the trochaic tetrameter of the second line recall Blake’s “Tyger.” The lyricism is seductive enough to aestheticize the violence in the poem.

And yet the poem is so strange, with lines like “draining off the color of my soul,” “You pulled your brow out from under me,” and “Golden roofs bend up under us.” The first line tells us that the speaker is awestruck, or at least in the presence of something known to inspire awe. To be in a state of awe is to be incapable of rational analysis or interpretation. Awe is pure, affective admiration, acknowledging something strange, perhaps beautiful, and certainly extraordinary. This poem creates the effect that it seems to describe, and parallels our desire to find a point of access into the poem.
“I’m in silken candies, / gentle and tenacious. I funnel fog into your / breath, and your breath into the godhead of my garden, the deer” (12-14). These lines could describe a dream, and they give credence to those claims that Šalamun is a surrealist; but these lines also describe an effacement of the body, with forms in continual transfiguration. Šalamun’s images seem to possess the mutability of Schoenberg’s chords, which are never anchored to a tonal center.

Schoenberg’s relationship to his audience is perhaps more relevant because of his medium; but he seems to have had little concern for the aesthetic open-mindedness of his listeners. However, the language we use—i.e., consonance and dissonance—to describe Schoenberg’s, or any music, implicitly involves the audience and their affective response to the composition. Harrison quotes Schoenberg’s _Theory of Harmony_, describing the composer’s acknowledgment of the affective response: “In Schoenberg’s own phrase, the music he composes in the years surrounding _The Theory of Harmony_, ‘emancipates dissonance from the rule of consonance. Consonance, a pleasing resolution of clashing tones, is like comfort’” (18). But consonance discourages movement, engendering a kind of lazy complacency. “It avoids movement; it ‘does not take up the search’” (19). Schoenberg presumes that the audience will join the composer in his pursuit through dissonance. “Aiming only to ‘make things clear to himself,’ the artist pursues clarity in open confusion. Here there is no intention of ‘provoking an audience with such dissonant compositions, as many might think. The artists simply ‘comes to terms with himself; and the public listens: for it concerns them’” (19).
Schoenberg was a relevant composer in the early twentieth century, so he had an audience ready for him whenever he wanted to unveil a new work of art.

However, this luxury might have created for Schoenberg’s music a positive prejudice, with some critics reacting simply to its theoretical innovativeness. “Schoenberg’s work was heralded and reviled during the first quarter of [the twentieth century] as the embodiment of radical modernism” (Brand 3, italics mine). Whether he meant to provoke audiences or not, he certainly had a polarizing effect on them. Schoenberg was able to anticipate the critical response.

He understood that his work challenged not only tradition, but the sensibilities of listeners who would not be prepared for the demanding innovations he incorporated into his compositions. Listeners, including critics, would have to adjust. “The ear is often slow-witted,” the composer says in Theory of Harmony, “but it must adapt itself” (325). However, he knew that he would encounter reticent aficionados, and he did not underestimate the difficulty in overcoming stubborn sensibilities. Schoenberg foresaw resistance:

Adaptation to the new is not generally easy; and it must be said that precisely those persons who have acquired some sophisticated notion of beauty are the very ones who, because they presume to know what they like, defend themselves most vigorously against the new, against something new that would be accepted as beautiful. (325-326)
Schoenberg knew his work was challenging and provocative, but he clearly had confidence in its aesthetic value, and possibly had resigned his legacy to posthumous celebration.

In his innovations in the field of composition and music theory, Schoenberg was brilliant, but his understanding of the critical provocation of his work suggests a self-consciousness that perhaps intruded on efforts toward true expression. Joseph Auner of Tufts University observes in Schoenberg a critical sensibility: “Anticipating the language of his later critics, Schoenberg wrote…to Kandinsky in 1911: ‘art belongs to the unconscious! One must express oneself! Express oneself directly! Not one’s taste, or one’s upbringing, or one’s intelligence, knowledge or skill’” (Brand 113). Schoenberg’s statement sounds like preemptive poetics, designed to preclude any critics from attacking his compositions for being overly technical or too dependent on design and organization. Schoenberg exults the qualities that his music would later be accused of lacking.

This critical self-awareness, and perhaps self-doubt, is not enough evidence to impugn the composer’s method; but it does support my suspicion that Schoenberg reveled in his theoretical ground-breaking. As Auner writes, “It is difficult to reconcile Schoenberg’s claims of unconscious, instinctive expression with the elaborate, organizational strategies in many of his atonal works” (113). While Schoenberg gives us a glimpse of his ideals, he also reveals an acute critical faculty. I believe Schoenberg struggled with a tendency to be predictably dissonant. In musical composition, a composer can abstract his work before he even creates it by thinking in terms of
notation and music theory—in an abstraction unavailable to a poet, like Tomaž Šalamun. “At the same time that he sought to make his vision of spontaneous, intuitive creation a reality, he found that composition was becoming increasingly problematic” (Brand 113). Ultimately, the problem of foregrounding dissonance in music lay not in the affective response of the audience, but rather in the creative authenticity of the composer.

Working in poetry, Šalamun’s inherited tendency toward dissonance can manifest itself genuinely, without premeditation. However, music afford composers a kind of compositional abstraction seductive for the mathematical elegance of certain musical construction—elegance that does not necessarily translate to sound. For example, the diminished seventh chord, one of Schoenberg’s most useful tools for its total dissonance, possesses a beautiful, radial symmetry that belies its aural effect. As Schoenberg describes the chord in his *Theory of Harmony*, “It consists of three intervals of the same size, which divide up the octave into four equal parts, minor thirds” (194). Schoenberg devotes ten pages of mostly text to this chord alone. He opens the section explaining the utility of the chord in facilitating movement into unconventional spaces: “The systematic introduction of nondiatonic chords into the key can be continued…by transplanting the diminished seventh chord as well to places where it does not naturally occur” (192). The chord can belong to any key; it can belong to no key at all. It possesses implicit mutability.

A *G diminished seventh* chord, for example, would be spelled thus: G, B flat, D flat, F flat—with a minor third interval between each note, including the interval
between F flat and G. Therefore, the name of the chord is only theoretically relevant. Any note in the chord could function as the root note. Abstracted from its aural musical function, and observed as a bit of music theory, the diminished seventh chord has a circular, symmetrical perfection.

The chord illustrates the allure of dissonance and its occasional tendency to draw an artist like Schoenberg away from his ideal of direct, immediate expression. Overemphasis on dissonance can become tiresome, and its elegant symbolization of the social and political strife in central Europe can distract audiences and overwhelm the fact of its suitability.

Šalamun seems to have successfully struck the balance that Schoenberg coveted: manifesting dissonance in art without manufacturing it, thus maintaining the effect of pure expression. As he writes in “The Deer”: “My head is smeared, I see how / mountains were made, how stars were born” (7-8). The experience of having one’s head smeared and yet attaining an enlightened perspective as a result certainly has a dissonant quality. Yet there is also a lilting, lyrical quality to the language and the cadence. Perhaps Šalamun is referring to a kind of intellectual self-effacement by having his head smeared. This might illustrate Schoenberg’s ideal model for creativity: suppression of critical and theoretical faculties to allow expressive impulses to operate without distraction or reflection.
Šalamun’s Aesthetic of Dissonance

Šalamun’s employment of dissonance in poetry often occurs with bizarre juxtaposition. Just as Schoenberg re-imagined the possibilities of tonal combinations within chords, Šalamun experiments with inter- and intralinear linguistic paraaxis. In his poem “Robi” from The Book for My Brother, Šalamun subverts readerly expectation with this strange simile: “Aldo can throw himself against the church door, can / lie there flat as a snowball” (53). One might expect a comparison to a board or a pancake instead, but to compare flatness to a snowball fractures our sense of continuity. The voice in the poem belongs to a boy feeling alone and alienated, and perhaps this fracture reflects his sense of alienation. Aldo can “throw himself,” so maybe the snowball comparison is applied to the wrong verb, and the result is a confusion in syntactical space.

Šalamun’s employment of a child’s voice in “Robi” suits the fractures in logic, language, and rational continuity. Although “Robi” differs in form from many of Šalamun’s other poems, considering its unusual length and extremely irregular enjambment, the fractures are representative of Šalamun’s poetic style and subversion of expectation.

In another line from “Robi,” Šalamun substitutes the word “stink” for the expected “sink.” “But now people bring the kitchen stink to / church” (53). This substitution has a curious aural similarity to the word we would expect, but the change is nevertheless dissonant. Although this choice suggests intentional subversion of the reader’s expectation, Šalamun claims that he had not considered using “sink” originally,
nor had he really noticed the playfulness of the word in that particular phrase. The aural effect is nevertheless surprising. And perhaps this lack of intention simply tells us that Šalamun has trained himself to allow the distortions of his subjectivity to translate directly to the page, unimpeded by a corrective compulsion.

This example of subverting expectation is analogous to Schoenberg’s compositional dissonance and the “the chromaticism of Richard Wagner, which no longer subordinated dissonance to modulations from one key to another, but made it an inherent structural component of the composition” (Harrison, 49). Šalamun not only subverts expectation, he also privileges adjacency in his word choice. Just as chromatic tones are immediately adjacent to each other, Šalamun’s word choice is aurally “adjacent” to the one that we expect. In Aldo’s snowball simile, the adjacency extends to the preceding phrase, “can throw himself against a church door,” which is logically better suited to the comparison.

Šalamun extends this kind of jarring parataxis to interlinear relationships. In “Sonnet of a Slovenian,” Šalamun jumps from one seemingly incidental detail to another. Each line seems to appropriate some aspect of sound, syntax, or subject matter from its preceding line, but the connections are otherwise unclear. The phrase that begins the first sentence of the poem ends the second sentence: “The one-legged man with no eyes and a hurdy-gurdy / is selling lottery tickets. What if I took / the tickets and burned them for the one-legged man / with no eyes and a hurdy-gurdy?” Šalamun begins with a darkly comedic image of a clearly unfortunate man selling hope for fortune in lottery tickets. And then, as if to test the point of critical mass for darkness in
comedy, he wonders—or he asks to wonder—how a gesture that is ambiguously symbolic or sadistic changes that image. Does burning the lottery ticket demonstrate respect for the humiliated man as an angry statement about the fixed wheel of fortune? This explanation would explain how the gesture works “for the one-legged man.” But the linguistic symmetry forms the strongest connection between the two lines.

The lines following proceed in a similarly incongruous fashion. Preceded by “Note:” at the end of the fourth line, the rest of the poem might read as a bizarre digression.

Proust’s grave was blown up. While I was lying in the grass with my girl and night was coming on. While I was chewing on a horsetail and far below in the village the first lights were lit. I haven’t seen an eagle for a long time.

For a long time we haven’t had a proper plague to sober us up.

Taken in pairs, these lines share similar language and syntactical structures, but the continuity is fractured. Šalamun denies us a traceable progression of thought. The associations he makes adhere to no particular rule.

We could read these lines as a series of musings that jump sporadically through space and time. First, he thinks of Proust, but that thought ends with a period. So the line following might qualify the desecration of Proust’s grave, and it clearly would if it were not a fragment, but the adverbial phrase is severed from the action, disrupting the
coherence of the thought. The grammar seems to suggest, or at least propose the possibility, that these two statements can exist independent of each other. And so the poem is fractured in time, space, and intellectual continuity.

A second adverbial phrase follows, and then another after that, but the grammatical structure has already been subverted, and so we cannot be sure whether “far below the village” modifies what comes before or what comes after it. Then Šalamun simultaneously brings us back to the present while also considering an indefinite amount of time in the speaker’s past. “I haven’t seen an eagle for a long time,” he says, in a complete shift of attention.

Although grammatically, the sentence is complete, it marks a continuation of the poetic disjunction in its intellectual disconnection. This variety of fracturing creates a syncopation in the verse. By making the subordinate clauses independent fragments, Šalamun gives them emphasis. The word “while” is stressed—unusual for a subordinating conjunction. By separating clauses, Šalamun creates this rhythmic effect without conventional poetic means of metrical stresses.

The entire poem has a syncopated effect to it. The “note” consumes most of the poem; rather than playing a subordinate role to the first few lines, the act of digression takes over the shifting focus of the poem. However, because of the poem’s continual fragmentation, we have no way of knowing where, or if, the digression ends. The final line seems like a possible point of return: “A hungry bush likes pricking the dead grass.” We are back in the present, but the tense is not identical to where we began. The first line is in the present progressive, while the poem ends in the simple present. The
final line has the construction and cryptic quality of a Chinese proverb. Ultimately, the poem seems lack any unity save for the continuity of the fragmentation itself. Yet the source of these disparate musings is the speaker’s mind, which we infer by the “note.” Rather than an artistic collage of images and memories, the sonnet reflects the morbid turns of this distracted mind.

As a representation of continuous thought, the poem need not return to any previous point. The poem has no tonal center to which it must resolve. Just as a Schoenberg chord change might not seem a logical transition from or to another, Šalamun foregrounds the disjunction so we experience these collisions as readers. Paraphrasing Schoenberg in Theory of Harmony, Harrison writes that “dissonance…was essentially a more distant form of consonance, a less obvious affinity between similarities” (223). We experience the effort of projecting the path of conscious thought in these lines, and in Šalamun’s effort to free this expression from syntactical restriction, the poet re-tunes our ear to hear consonance in a broader capacity.

Šalamun’s parataxis resembles Schoenberg’s innovations in tonality, in chords and in chord progressions. Schoenberg experimented with radical chord structures that permitted even more striking movements among chords. A normative chord progression in Western music worked toward resolution with a pattern of chordal relationships that one could trace backward from the tonal center—where most compositions begin and end.
A composition in the key of C probably ends on a C major chord, and thus will likely have G major as its penultimate chord. The G to C progression is also called a V to I progression, which is traditionally considered the strongest movement in music, like magnets with opposite polarities. Strengthening that relationship is the usual presence of a chromatic movement between the V (dominant) chord’s third (in this case, a B) and the I (tonic) chord’s root (a C), because the interval between those two notes is a half-step—the smallest interval in Western music—which is chromatic component of this progression. These two triads hook together like pieces of a puzzle. Of course, this V to I relationship can exist among other chord pairs in the key, like D major to G major; however, none is quite as strong as the dominant to tonic chord progression.

A composer can, of course, achieve variety by deviating from this pattern and by incorporating accidentals, or nondiatonic tones. Whereas composers traditionally viewed deviations as temporary departures from the larger arrangement pattern, Schoenberg found entirely new rationale for creating relationships among tones and chords outside of the key.

As Šalamun demonstrates in “Robi,” adjacencies can exist in non-normative relationships, such as aural similarities in “stink” and “sink.” And in “Sonnet of a Slovenian,” the relationships between phrases are often connected by similarities in language as a result of syntactic fracture, rather than being linked by a logical progression. These lines shift like Schoenberg’s chord changes, moving with an unconventional type of logic.
Schoenberg broke new ground with his chord progressions. As Harrison writes, Schoenberg “tries to make each composition enact its own inexorable logic, revealing formal possibilities that contemporary audiences hardly suspected that music had” (Harrison, 50). Traditionally, chords relationships were built on chromatic adjacencies and V-I relationships, but their unifying similarity was a relationship to the tonal center, or the key.

Schoenberg often worked without a key, and so his chord progressions were defined by some other type of relationship—a relation to his own will to expression. “Every chord I put down corresponds to a necessity, a necessity of my urge to expression,” Schoenberg said (Harrison 145). The prioritization of expression supplanted the tonal center as the function of dissonance expanded beyond a mere narrative complication to heighten the effect of resolution. “The voices of Schoenberg’s compositions move independently; musical syntax loses its binding power; paratactical collisions seem not to be means to an end, but ends in themselves” (49). We see similar collisions throughout Šalamun’s poetry, in the form of incongruous juxtapositions and syntactical fractures.

Schoenberg found connections among chords that facilitated and resulted in novel combinations of disparate elements. As Wright observes, Schoenberg found the old principles for determining chordal relationships obsolete:

Just as Schoenberg felt that it was no longer necessary to subordinate dissonances to consonances, he insisted that it was no longer necessary to subordinate chord tones to their harmonic root. That is, the habitual
and traditional reference to chord-roots and root-progressions need not be understood as a universal requirement of harmony and compositional technique. (25)

The work of both Šalamun and Schoenberg raises a question of whether unity can be found in such a fragmented condition. As I suggested with “Sonnet of the Slovenian,” perhaps the unifying characteristic of the poem is its continual disjunction. Schoenberg searched for a similar thread of continuity in his more radical work: “The question Schoenberg raises at this critical moment in his art is whether one can establish unity among elements of a work which do not seem to share any preestablished ‘sympathy’” (Harrison 49). Schoenberg’s question explores the possibility of a paradoxical understanding of cohesiveness. The fragmented artwork possesses stability in its continual resistance to traditional unity.

Ultimately, and ideally, the unity of the work derives from the fact that the work is the result of direct expression, to use Schoenberg’s language of the ideal. “I think I am approaching a new kind of expression. The sounds become an almost too animal and immediate expression of sensual and spiritual emotions,” Schoenberg wrote as he was composing the music for Pierrot (Shawn 155). Schoenberg’s confidence and awareness that he was on the cusp of significant innovation in the method of expression—he would develop his famous twelve-tone technique several years after the debut of Pierrot—illustrates his commitment to genuine expression through radical and subversive art forms. If the artist can stay true to such an ideal, he or she might ultimately escape the problem of demonstrating unity.
Schoenberg’s departure from tradition resulted in a radically distinct artform, recognizable not only by sound, but also by description of his aesthetic philosophy and innovation. When someone mentions twelve tone composition, or “emancipation of dissonance,” we immediately think of Arnold Schoenberg because of his singularity. Šalamun’s poetics can also be better understood when studied relation to central European poets who came before him, like the Polish Romantic poet Adam Mickiewicz (1798-1855). Mickiewicz composed a sonnet cycle describing journey to Crimea, and in one of those sonnets, “The Storm,” the poet recalls the tumultuous nautical voyage to Russia.

The rudder breaks, the sails are ripped, the roar
Of waters mingles with the ominous sound
Of pumps and panic voices; all around
Torn ropes. The sun sets red, we hope no more -
The tempest howls in triumph; from the shore
Where wet cliffs rising tier on tier surround
The ocean chaos, death advances, bound
To carry ramparts broken long before,
One man has swooned, one wrings his hands, one sinks
Upon his friends, embracing them. Some say
a prayer to death that it may pass them by.
One traveler sits apart and sadly thinks:

“Happy the man who faints or who can pray
Or has a friend to whom to say goodbye.”

The Italian sonnet form is immediately recognizable, and the personification of nature (“the tempest howls in triumph”) also reminds us that Mickiewicz is a romantic. If the “traveler who sits apart” represents the poet’s voice, and we can reasonably conclude that he does, then Mickiewicz views the poetic voice as somehow capable of cutting through all the commotion of the storm. The speaker voyages to a strange land, and perhaps the hostility he experiences along his journey reflects the trepidation he feels about entering the exotic land.

The fact that this represents a personal account of the poet’s journey to a foreign land is also typical of the romantic affinity for the travelogue. “[Travelogue authors] often supplemented descriptions of the places they visited with intimations of ‘internal landscapes,’ providing records of the traveler’s psychological experience against the background of the lands they crossed” (Kalinowska 647). Mickiewicz gives us just such an account, concluding with a turn inward. Travelogue writers were thus able to satisfy those readers who were interested in the tour-guide component of travel descriptions; at the same time, they kept up with the spirit of the times by providing insights into their own biographies and by intimating to the readers the feelings which accompanied them during their journey. (Kalinowska 647)
The chaos in the poem builds and then turns to the image of a single man, and then a group of friends, underscoring the loneliness felt in juxtaposition by the solitary man sitting apart from them. Mickiewicz’s poem clearly has its audience in mind—an audience fascinated with tales of the exotic lands visited by adventurous travelers encountering the wrath and savagery of nature and man. The poem also reminds us of the imperialist spirit of the day, in which discovery of a new land implied subjugation of the natives.

Šalamun writes from the other side of this journey. His people—although he might object to such a label—have endured for centuries the oppressive influence of other nations. Šalamun seem to write for any audience. His poems often resist close reading and turn off many avid readers of poetry simply because they find his work inaccessible. Mickiewicz writes not only in a familiar closed form, he also writes in a genre popular among romantic audiences.

Mickiewicz’s poem has much in common with British romantic poetry. Indeed, Mickiewicz accepted the influence of the English romantics, like Lord Byron, whose work he translated. “Byron came to occupy a singular place in Polish poet’s imagination, as he did for so many of his contemporaries on the Continent and in Russia” (Koropeckyj 44).

Šalamun’s poetry, on the other hand, draws heavily on the central European tradition that begins with Expressionism in the twentieth century. Šalamun’s poetry, like Schoenberg’s compositions, often move in a non-linear pattern. Šalamun’s lines
will jump about from image to disparate image, just as Schoenberg will move from one chord to another tonally unrelated chord.

In the poem “Who is Berkopec,” from Šalamun’s collection *There’s the Hand and There’s the Arid Chair*, the poet exhibits this break from linear thought, illustrating freedom to move in unexpected directions.

Berkopec is a man who, when I was almost fourteen years old and my father for the first time took me with him on the plane to watch the earth, passed by in the park in Sarajevo when my father slept on a bench and I watched and named him Berkopec.

Using a subordinate clause beginning with “when,” Šalamun moves into a temporal digression, during which the speaker seems to conflate two, or perhaps more, people’s histories. Unlike the straightforward accumulation of tension in Mickiewicz’s poem, Šalamun builds tension by leading us astray.

Between the phrases “a man who” and “passed by in the park,” the speaker takes us on a short voyage through his own personal history with his father. And within this memory, Šalamun provides several temporal markers. The boy is looking into the near future to when he will turn fourteen. Then he considers his entire history to that point, acknowledging that this trip with his father is occurring for the first time, and potentially will occur again. This nonlinear movement starkly contrasts the temporal stability of Mickiewicz’s “Storm.” Childlike wonder seems to influence the poem as the
speaker explains the purpose of his experience on the plane as a way “to watch the earth.”

So with this ethereal elevation, and the removal of conventional logic or causality in favor of the temporal instability of childhood nostalgia, the lines seem to lack stable equilibrium. While his “father slept on a bench,” whom, exactly, did the speaker watch and name? He could mean the man passing by, but the paratactic syntax also suggests the possibility that he is referring to his father.

We might also contrast this childhood wonder with the traveler’s imperialist fascination with the exotic, which runs through Mickiewicz’s Crimean Sonnets; although in the case of “The Storm,” this attitude is only present within the context of the collection. Šalamun’s teenage voyage and the memory of that voyage, have a disorienting effect, leaving in question the identity of the “him” to whom he refers in that penultimate line.

However, an imperialist parallel does exist in the speaker’s act of naming. In Sarajevo, which might have seemed exotic to the teenage Slovenian poet, the speaker gives a man the name Berkopec. The act of naming in an exotic space has imperialist history and connotation, as if the one naming is asserting dominion over the one being named.

Perhaps Šalamun has in mind the literary historian Oton Berkopec (1906-1988), “who spent most of his life in Prague where he compiled two anthologies of Slovene poetry in Czech, the first comprehensive presentations of Slovene literature in a foreign language,” according to an article in the European journal Transcript. A paternal
connection to Oton Berkopec seems reasonable considering the historian’s stewardship of Slovenian literature.

The poem reads like prose, and yet it has poetic lineation—technically, at least. The first and the penultimate lines extend to the margin, but the lack of indentation indicates a curious enjambment. The uncertain form, along with the linguistic and temporal disjunction, calls attention to the materiality of the poem. Discussion of the content cannot occur without reference to the poet’s manipulation of the materials he uses. And unlike is Polish predecessor Mickiewicz, Šalamun seems perfectly content working within a destabilized space. An offering of lucid insight into this speaker’s mind is anathema to a poet of Šalamun’s sensibility.
Chapter II: Poetics of Alienation

Fractured Selves

Dissonance in art and experience creates alienation. This cause and effect consumed the imaginations of many Expressionist artists in central Europe, including Schoenberg and his fellow Austrian painter Oskar Kokoschka. Tomaž Šalamun seems to have inherited an affinity for alienation, paradox, and contradiction—generally Expressionist characteristics. His poetry embraces contradiction and fragmentation as firmly as Schoenberg did in his atonal compositions. Similarly dissonant themes like decay, loss of self, empathy, and polarity result from an effort to express outwardly the subjective, inner self.

Šalamun works explicitly with contradiction in “His Favorite Ride,” from The Book for My Brother.

why are you so mean
because we’re so sad
didn’t you once say you were cheerful
and glad to be alive
I did say I was cheerful and glad to be alive
but as it turns out I’m sad really
what are you up to now
we’re going to have a revolution

The dialogue results in the recognition of misunderstanding, which in turn, is a form of understanding. Two voices in the poem come to acknowledge a fracture in the
communication. The emotions of sadness and cheer oppose each other, and the poem leaves us to wonder how one emotional condition could have been misinterpreted for the other, by either party in this dialogue.

One of the voices alternates from the first person plural to the first person singular. “We’re so sad,” he says. “I was cheerful…but…I’m sad really,” he explains, perhaps admitting to the influence of a group pushing an agenda similar to the “revolutionary zeal of the masses.” This section ends with the rather surprising revelation that the masses are planning a revolution. Given this reading, the poem seems to have a mocking tone, with simple questions leading the interview subject to make a fool of himself and reveal, unknowingly, his ambivalence. Earlier lines in the poem support this reading when the answering voice speaks of childish, benign acts of rebellion: “people don’t like us / how come they don’t like you / because Marko wrote ‘the prick’s head’ / and what did you write / ‘kitten fucks.’” This boyish graffiti vandalism results in irrational radicalization, which Šalamun ridicules with the revealing line of questioning.

The poem continues with a search for the individual: “when do you feel best / when I’m naked / why / because I feel free then / why do you feel free then / because I’m naked / Tomaž Šalamun is naked and a proletarian.” The interviewing voice solicits emotional information by framing his question temporally, prompting the respondent to locate specific emotion in time, and free of political rhetoric. The final line acknowledges this dual experience of being an individual with a singular experience
and also being a member of a political body. The poet announces himself in this last line, adding a third dimension to this ambivalence.

This vacillating expression of ambivalence has a precursor in the work of Georg Trakl, whom Harrison calls “the most ambivalent poet of the twentieth century” (40). In his poem “Night,” the speaker experiences alienation from himself. Trakl lived with severe mental illness, and the tension that it generated from within found a way into his poetry.

The blue of my eyes is extinguished in this night,

The red gold of my heart. And how still the light continued to burn.

Your blue coat embraced him.

Your red mouth sealed a friend’s madness. (Autumn Sonata)

The first-person voice shifts to second-person and third-person in the second half of the poem. The “I” of the poem is extinguished, with only the body remaining. And yet the kindness of the gestures described in the third and fourth lines suggest that the self-alienation results in a peaceful silence—a peaceful quiet, at least from the outside perspective.

The madness stays within, trapped now. “The self was experienced as fragmented,” writes Carolyn Forché in her introduction to Trakl’s collection Autumn Sonata, “and human subjectivity ruptured by the force of incommensurable inner and outer worlds” (15). Madness is a theme among Expressionist artists, with suicide, including Trakl’s, occurring at an alarming rate during the movement’s peak years (Harrison 2). The conditions that fostered this mental illness also seem connected to the
kind of fractured dialectic in “Night” and in Šalamun’s “His Favorite Ride.” Thomas Harrison notes, “Paradoxical as it may seem, suicide is never a personal act; it is the result of a series of tentacles in which the mind is caught, a reactive gesture or break in a system (a system…that is necessarily ambivalent and dyadic, entailing not only a dialectic of self and other but also two parts of a single person” (95). The dialectic within “His Favorite Ride” ends in circular explanation of the physical condition that creates the mental condition: “when do you feel best / when I’m naked / why / because I feel free then / why do you feel free then / because I’m naked.” This represents a kind of mad logic that can only end the dialogue between the two voices.

**Kokoschka’s Interrogation of Subjectivity**

Trakl’s poetry serves as a useful introduction to the interrogation of subjectivity performed by another Expressionist artist, Oskar Kokoschka, who experimented with forms of portraiture to explore the nature of the relationship between subject and observer. Kokoshka’s art also reflects the intrusiveness of society, to which Expressionists reacted “as though the outside world willfully encroached on the space of all interpreting subjects, storming humanity with illegible intent” (Harrison 14). In Kokoschka’s portraits, the artist projects his subjective impression of the subject onto the canvas, attending to those details of subjectivity that, perhaps, have a distorting effect on the representation of the subject.

Considerations of accuracy in representation extend only to the artist’s rendering of his or her imaginative expression. The Russian Expressionist artist Wassily
Kandinsky understood the irrelevance of “realism” in artistic representation. As Harrison explains,

The turning point in Kandinsky’s thinking…came when, standing in front of Monet’s painting *The Haystack*, he failed to see what subject it represented. At that moment he realized that this absence of recognizable content made no difference whatsoever in the painting’s effect. On the contrary, what suddenly became clear was the absolutely “unsuspected power of the pallet, previously concealed from me, which exceeded all my dreams.” (Harrison 53)

Oskar Kokoschka interpreted the act of expression more severely than many other Expressionists. Kokoschka sought to represent the “dramatic efforts of a subject to come to expression” (Harrison 168). A vision “is not simply a depiction of some ‘consciousness’ or knowledge; it is an appearance that motivates consciousness…” (168). Kokoschka draws a distinction between Expressionism and Impressionism that demonstrates a nuanced conception of subjectivity. “Imaginative apprehension…is neither an objective image nor the artist’s subjective impression, but a ‘stream’ of understanding in which subjects and objects first received their forms” (169).

Kokoschka makes the ontological assertion that the imagination creates form without filtering the subject through a process of subjective interpretation. “Consciousness of vision is not the form of an appearance, but *consciousness of the form*, or of the appearance itself, a type of self-perception that ‘nature, Gesicht, life’ without which things have no form at all” (Harrison 169). The imagination allows for the immediate
creation of form, and the artist must serve as a medium for projecting the form onto canvas. To act as a medium, one must be “vision-conscious” in order to execute the translation of the form.

The implications of Kokoschka’s subjective inquiry reveal the paradox of exploring alienation and empathy in the same work of art. Alienation abounds as a motif in Expressionist art, but the artist must also find some kind of union with the subject in order to project an image representative of both the artist and the subject. However, Kokoschka felt no empathy for his subjects. “If anything, what Kokoschka empathizes with is the dehumanization of his subjects” (Harrison 65). Kokoschka reassured those who might have ascribed an empathic sensibility to his art: “Whatever has been said about my being a humanist…I do not really love humanity; I see it as a phenomenon, like a flash of lightning from a clear sky, a serpent in the grass” (Harrison 65). His opinion of humanity seems to mirror Šalamun’s feelings about his tribe and their collective radicalism.

Nevertheless, in the Expressionist movement, a focus on empathy results from this investigation of the artist’s subjectivity. “Empathy,” Harrison says, “involves a procedure whereby one psyche feels itself into another” (65). Thus the procedure seems a requisite step in expressing an authentic representation of the artist’s internalization of the subject’s image.

In the opening poem in his collection The Book for My Brother, Šalamun illustrates an experience similar to the complicated artistic paradox that involves empathy and alienation. The speaker and the devil share experience in “To Have a
Friend.” “I have the sensation / he was crammed into the wall for a long time” (1). He identifies with the devil’s prolonged suffering, and this identification extends to empathy as his observation yields a physical sensation that reflects the devil’s pain. “I have the feeling that his hands ache, that he is tender / and absorbed in thoughts.” This feeling may be the result of a projection of the observer onto the subject. A sense of the devil’s consciousness likely reflects the observer’s sensitivity to his own consciousness. The speaker also acknowledges that the devil experiences a kind consciousness that is fundamentally human. He recognizes the humanity within the devil, and the poem continues with tension between indulging in empathy and maintaining separation. To empathize “is to project one’s own self-understanding onto the other, to go through the process of imagining how I might feel if I were in that person’s shoes” (Harrison 66). The subject could therefore take on attributes of the observer. The roles nearly reverse in the third stanza:

I have the feeling he is saying something to me
that he is watching me with regret
he knows I could never sleep with him
we are both humiliated

The empathy rises to a level nearing romantic affection. The poem complicates the observer-subject dynamic by explicitly acknowledging the sexual possibilities and implications of such an intensely engaging relationship. When the observer senses he is now being watched, the empathy reaches its critical mass. At this point, the sexual
energy becomes apparent to each, and they experience the same emotion: humiliation. This emotion creates a sense of absolute alienation, from the self and from others.

After this excruciating experience, the observer consigns his subject to external comparisons.

he reminds me of the English teacher
when he was pensioned of, and young secret-police recruits,
it seems his beatitude is failing
the souls squeal when he tortures them

Empathy gives way to disdain. The speaker uses cognitive instead of affective language to describe the subject, and there seems to be a turn from the subjective toward the objective.

The objectivism continues to fail in the fifth stanza, when the devil behaves in ways that contradict the speaker’s expectations. Yet the speaker still engages in the act of interpretation.

he doesn’t drink them, as I imagined
it seems he derives no benefit from them
I think he would like to have a friend
to share goods and pleasure

The devil behaves independent of the speaker’s imaginative apprehension of him. Šalamun’s poem applies Kokoschka’s interrogation of subjectivity with a temporal dimension. Šalamun’s subject exists and moves in time, whereas a portrait subject remains stationary. However, as the objective vision sets in, the speaker is still

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compelled to attempt an empathic relationship. The intuitive sense of empathy—or what Kokoschka might call vision consciousness—has faded, but the observer continues with an intellectual effort. He “thinks” now, but no longer feels, their empathic connection severed by the self-conscious experience of humiliation. The sexual potential fades, transitioning to platonic, with the shift in register occurring in these awkwardly formal lines: “I think he would like to have a friend / to share goods and pleasure.” The speaker takes the extra measure to qualify the purpose of the friendship.

Ultimately, the observer adopts the anti-humanist posture of Kokoschka, resolving to keep a distance from the subject: “I will leave him as he is, I will not talk to him.” The Austrian painter would have approved of this turn, considering his aversion to empathy. Of course, this resolution betrays a suppressed desire, supporting a reading of “To Have a Friend” as a homoerotic love poem.

“To Have A Friend” is remarkably consistent with Schoenberg’s description of “‘empathetic’ art as (1) a spiritual outburst, (2) a quest for understanding, (3) a moral battle, (4) an echo of the tensions out of which these first three arise” (Harrison 66). The observer’s alarmed expression in the first line resembles a spiritual outburst: “I see the devil’s head, people, I see his whole body.” The use of the word “people” in a vocative expression conveys a sense of alarm. He wants to bring us in to see what he sees. By observing and identifying with the devil, he bears witness to the devilish tendencies within us. His study of the devil and his decision not to engage him satisfy the second and third characteristics. The tension results from the shift in tone as speaker’s empathy fades.
The devil in the poem longs for some sense of salvation by community, as he attempts a crude self-baptism: “he steps in the river and wets his head in it / he doesn’t know how to speak with it.” The ritual has no meaning for devil because he does not possess the language of the ritual, and because the observer refuses to join him. Baptism initiates people into a community, and Šalamun seems to ridicule initiation rituals along with the communities themselves.

**Self-Alienation**

As illustrated in Šalamun’s “To Have a Friend,” empathy makes possible an exchange of attributes between observer and subject. While Kokoschka would deny that empathy causes this exchange, the phenomenon does exist in his work. In many of Kokoschka’s portraits, he exaggerates facial features in a way that reveals the projection of his own subjectivity. A tension exists between his imaginative consciousness of vision, and the interpretive faculties that he attempts to suppress in his effort toward a more direct, immediate expression. Harrison observes this effect in Kokoschka’s portraits of Adolph Loos and Herwarth Walden: In both portraits, “the left eyes are surrounded by rings of darker flesh suggesting either an external bruise or the emanation of some energy deep inside the body” (169). The mysterious similarity between these portraits suggests that Kokoschka incorporates aspects of himself into the representation. “As frequently occurs in Kokoschka, the eyes speak of great spiritual distance from this body, a vision-consciousness transcending the medium through
which it works” (169). This distancing effect estranges the body from its spirit, resulting in self-alienation.

The tension between the interpretive faculty and vision-consciousness produces a paradoxical combination of suppression and expression. Kokoschka resists his intellectual impulses in order to allow for unadulterated expression, but they show through in the portraits. Kokoschka imagined the role of the artist as having the function of an oil lamp. “Consciousness of vision…reproduces the functions of an oil lamp: the artist is a wick sucking up the oil provided by the aspects of others and then bursting into a flame of imagination” (Harrison 169). This metaphor shows how Kokoschka sees the imagination as an agent for image translation. In order for this translation occur, the artist must act as a medium and subordinate part of himself. The comparison also recalls Trakl’s poem “Night,” in which the speaker describes a light from within himself that continues burning while another internal light is extinguished.

In Kokoschka’s self-portraits, the artist confronts the problem of self-alienation directly. The personal, interpretative impulse should not be suppressed in total self-effacement; rather it must be overcome in training oneself to function as a purely artistic medium. “If the aim of Kokoschka’s art is to overcome self-alienation, the cure lies in taking the disease to its extreme” (Harrison 170). The artist turns in on himself, and yet the self-effacing exercise necessary for the vision-consciousness results in an act of violence against the self. “What Schoenberg called the inborn and distinctive dimensions of the I…can only lacerate the appearances they physically inherit”
(Harrison 169-170). Thus any portrait that attempts to express this inborn I will also represent an attack on the other conscious aspects of the self.

**Resisting Collectivization**

Self-alienation finds a thematic cause in Šalamun’s poetry, including “Eclipse,” in which he estranges himself from his people by resisting identification with the collective. In another poem, “Folk Song,” Šalamun describes his alienating function as a poet.

Every true poet is a monster
He destroys people and their speech
His singing elevates a technique that wipes out the earth so we are not eaten by worms.
The drunk sells his coat.
The thief sells his mother.
Only the poet sells his soul to separate it from the body he loves.

Šalamun again refers to himself as a monster. He must separate himself from his people and sing in defiance of their identity as “a people,” which implies the suppression of the individual. As Merrill writes in his introduction to *The Four Questions of Melancholy*, “By monster Šalamun means a force of nature, premonitory and divine, which unsettles expectations and beliefs, the cultural or tribal status quo, in order to restore to the individual a measure of worth” (18). Šalamun attacks manufactured rhetoric of the
tribe’s “speech” with his own original arrangements of language. However, we can also see that Šalamun refers to “people” in a specific sense, just as he refers to his “tribe” in his poem “Eclipse.” In separating from his people, he laments the appropriation of his tribe, which by definition, should represent some form of defiant individuality as a distinct group of people. But his tribe has succumbed to a larger influence.

Šalamun’s life in Slovenia informs this poetic message. The historical experience of his country reflects the continual collectivization and absorption of a people into a larger group. With that annexation come hegemonic pressure and eventual adoption of the stronger power’s values, which often conflict with those of the annexed people. As the Serbian-born poet Charles Simic said, “Sooner or later our tribe always comes to ask us to agree to murder” (Four Questions 18). To decline such a request is in itself a form of violence against one’s people. The perpetual conflict in the Balkan region could render any central European poet a traitor to his people.

By betraying his people, the poet betrays part of himself. The penultimate line recalls Kokoschka’s artistic self-sacrifice. Šalamun alienates himself from his people and from that part of himself that will always identify with those people. Šalamun insists, however, that the preservation of the individual is paramount, and so by sacrificing part of himself, he saves his individual self. As Simic writes, “The lyric poet is almost by definition a traitor to his own people. He is the stranger who speaks the harsh truth that only individual lives are unique and therefore sacred” (Four Questions 18). Šalamun remains conscious of the duality of poetic gestures, and perhaps he is haunted by their consequences. The “body that he loves” refers to that politicized tribe
from which he must sever his allegiance. His disembodied voice is all that remains of
him. Many of Šalamun’s poems describe a war against the body, and he seems
especially interested in the bodily decay, just as his Expressionist counterparts,
including Trakl. This decaying body physically represents the tension wrought by the
divided self.
Chapter III: Estrangement of the Ordinary in Poetry of Witness

The continuing strife in twentieth century central Europe fomented the social conditions that fostered the Expressionist aesthetics of disjunction and paradox. Poets like Paul Celan, Charles Simic, and Tomaž Šalamun emerge decades after the decline of the Expressionist movement with poetic testimonials to the devastation they witnessed during, and in the aftermath of, World War II and other military conflicts. Their poetry, loaded with paradox and parataxis, bears witness to atrocity and despair in central Europe.

These poets document the perils of collectivization and the endangerment of the individual with aesthetic influence from their Expressionist antecedents, along with even more complex, colliding juxtapositions and linguistic experimentation. Their poetry acts as a “trace” of the violence and suffering that occur within the poets’ field of vision (Forché 33). Where atrocity occurs daily, normative sensibilities become dulled and the ordinary becomes strange. As Carolyn Forché writes in her introduction to the anthology Against Forgetting: Twentieth Century Poetry of Witness, “The poetry of witness frequently resorts to paradox and difficult equivocation, to the invocation of what is not there as if it were, in order to bring for the real (40). Although Tomaž Šalamun is considered a post-war poet, his poems demonstrate that he has witnessed much suffering and brutality in the vestiges of war. So many of his poems reflect the political tension in his country; and in 1991 Šalamun even cosigned a letter of the editor of the Manchester Guardian Weekly entitled “Why Slovenia could be a viable nation-state,” which cites attacks by the Yugoslav army on the citizens of Slovenia.
Paul Celan’s poetry addresses the paradoxes inherent in his role as a poet. The Romanian-born Celan survived the Holocaust and, despite being Jewish, continued to write in German (Forché 380). The intense ambivalence he felt using this language manifests in his fractured poetry. In his poem “Oranienstrasse,” the speaker struggles with the act of remembering and representing atrocity.

Tin grew in my hand
I did not know how
what to do:
I had no wish to model,
it had no wish to read me —

Celan estranges the ordinary tin cup as the speaker experiences a form of exile from himself. He has no desire to act or to be acted on, nor does he want to elevate the tin with symbolic representation. The relics in this poem call in to question the lessons that we can learn from mere things, like Ossietzky’s bowl. The speaker would “let the tin / learn from it,” as if the tin could substitute for the bowl, which substitutes for the departed protester Carl von Ossietzky.

In the final stanza, Celan alludes to the pilgrimage to the shrine of Santiago de Compostela.

and the host of pilgrim
staves
would stone-wall, withstand the hour.
Pilgrims who use that stave on their way to the shrine endow it with a metonymic representation. But after the horror of the Holocaust, the speaker would prefer to divest things of their symbolic representation.

Celan estranges the speaker’s relationships to ordinary things as Kokoschka estranges his subjects and himself. Celan’s poetry describes a space of extremity in which the surreal becomes ordinary, and vice versa.

In the poetry of Charles Simic, incongruous juxtapositions also reflect surrealism as a category of experience. In his poem “Spoons with Realistic Dead Flies on Them,” Simic juxtaposes an immigrant woman’s history in a war-ravaged Yugoslavia with her present occupation in a joke store.

That was never in any of your legends, O saints!
The years she spent working in a novelty store:
Joy buzzers, false beards, and dead flies
To talk to between the infrequent customers.

The novelty toys, designed to generate laughter, only serve to amplify the woman’s loneliness. The objects in the store vaguely suggest an abstraction of the horror she may have witnessed in her homeland. Joy buzzers remind her of electrocution, false beards of deceivers and liars, and dead flies of the decaying corpses of murdered dissidents. Simic sardonically compares the surreal experiences of his mother with the lives of the saints. There exists no historical antecedent for what she has endured. And the lack of faith in God does not preclude a belief in Hell.
Like Šalamun, Simic also sees devils, despite being a non-believer. The poem continues with paratactic juxtapositions that emphasize the loneliness that can exist even when others are present.

A room rented from a minor demon.
An empty bird cage and a coffee mill for company.
A hand-operated one for her secret guardian angel
To take a turn grinding the slow hours.

The poem continues with these images of solitude and loneliness. The “coffee mill for company” only emphasizes her loneliness in juxtaposition to an empty bird cage. Things do not serve their intended purpose in this space. The ordinary is once again estranged.

In the final lines of the poem, Simic paints a desolate picture of the urban landscape, portraying a world bereft of spiritual reassurance: “[She] looks both ways crossing the street / At two gusts of nothing and nothing.” While looking before crossing seems a sensible act of self-preservation, Simic changes register in the line following to reflect an existential connection between survival and purpose when God does not exist.

Like Šalamun’s poetry, Simic’s is also fragmented, and his ordinary images press against each other creating an extraordinary effect. In “Classic Ballroom Dances,” Simic pairs quotidian scenes in duets that mimic the musical lyricism of the poem.

Grandmothers who wring the necks
Of chickens; old nuns
With names like Theresa, Marianne,
Who pull schoolboys by the ear;
The intricate steps of pickpockets
Working the crowd of the curious
At the scene of an accident, the slow shuffle
Of the evangelist with a sandwich board

The imagist style of the poem is apparent in the lack of coordinating conjunctions. The style suits the content, as the images work in unison like dancers paired in a waltz. The dactyls in words like “intricate,” “pickpockets,” “curious,” and “accident” also mimic the sound of the waltz with their trisyllabic rhythms.

The syntactical construction also mimics the waltz step. Most of the images are grouped in three parts: a noun, qualified by a subordinate clause, qualified by another subordinate clause. The scenes or images build with a widening frame, first focusing on the particular, and then expanding to a fuller view.

“Classic Ballroom Dances” demonstrates how a poet from central Europe can resemble Šalamun even without similarities in content. Simic foregrounds the manipulation of form and language in the poem, just as Šalamun does in poems like “Who is Berkopec?” and [not the murder]. And just as Simic does in the final line of “Spoons,” he again changes register at the close of “Dances.”

And the ancient lovers, cheek to cheek,
On the dance floor of the Union Hall,
Simic grounds us in a specific space and time, only to subvert that stability with the lyrical phrase “eternal November.”

The work of Simic, Celan, and Kokoschka revels in tension and irresolution. They estrange the ordinary just as Schoenberg destabilized Western music. His insistence on sustained tension calls attention to the constructs of harmony that Western audiences take for granted. Dissonance is merely a different kind of consonance; and the abundance of this discordant quality in the work on Tomaž Šalamun confirms the influence of his central European artistic heritage. His poetry reflects a tradition paradoxical in both its radicalism and its aesthetic of incongruence, alienating himself from his tribe to sing the inherently distressed song of the individual.
Bibliography


