Images of Migration and Change in the German-language Poetry of Galsan Tschinag

Richard Hacken

Galsan Tschinag, shaman-poet of Turkic-language-speaking Tuvan nomads in Mongolia, was educated in East Germany during the Soviet era and now writes in German. Complementing objective recollections of migration in his prose—diary notations and narratives—are shamanistic, animistic images in his poetry. In this poetic vision, the landmass is expanding; stones, grasses, and humans are transmigrating; and mutations endemic to nature become writing instruments that inscribe volumes within the library of life.

Migration in the works of Galsan Tschinag could be discussed on a number of levels. The first is an actual geographic migration documented in the published diaries of Tschinag. In 1995, at the head of a giant caravan, he moved many of his nomadic people 2,000 kilometers, restoring them to ancestral grazing lands in the Altai Mountains, an area from which they had been forcibly resettled in Stalinist years. The next level of migration could be a linguistic migration of ideas and words from Tschinag's native Tuvan language, which has no written script, sometimes to Mongolian, but most often to German. Today, there will be a further migration to my English translations. The main focus today, however, is on the diverse images of migration in his German-language poetry, often illustrating transmigration of spirits between various animistic elements of Mother Earth and Father Sky.

Galsan Tschinag considers himself to be first and foremost a shaman and secondly a poet. Birth timing and family position made him a shamanic leader of the Tuvan minority group in Mongolia when born sixty years ago with the Tuvan name of Irgit Shynyk-bioglu Juru-Kuvá. Tuvan is an oral Turkic language with just a few thousand native speakers. Tschinag learned to write in Mongolian and took a Mongolian name. Raised during the Soviet era, he felt the clash between socialist literary demands for the prosaically political and his own naturalistic vision. In his poetically formative years, the 1960s, one predecessor to Tschinag's shamanistic vision wrote in lyrically soaring terms about migratory birds grieving as they left the Mongolian steppe, at the same time as a less lyrical writer used socialist phrases such as "manly sons of the heroic fatherland."[1] It was Tschinag's status as a shaman and leader of the Tuvan minority that allowed him to express himself in the traditional ways, and it was that same status that made possible his education in the far-off German Democratic Republic.

A great cultural shock awaited him when he moved to Leipzig to attend the university there. Even now, decades later, it is evident that the cultural divide

between Occident and Orient, between the technological and the mythical, continues to disturb him. In a poem entitled "November in Hamburg," this ever-nomadic poet, native to the piece of land situated furthest on earth from any ocean, recoils from the North Sea and from urban alienation. To him, the Inner Alster surges like a curse; blank apartment walls shut people with their potential love away from each other; and freeways dissect and dehumanize the city even further, possessed as they are by thundering tin-ghost vehicles.[2]

By contrast, the poems that center on his native land paint upon an incredibly broad and unbroken canvas in all directions, a land not only without enclosures, but one that is still expanding. Poetically, at least, the land itself migrates outward:

> The grasses stand still
> Surrounded by solitude
> And listen
>
> The horizons stretch
> Totter and escape
> The talons of linearity
>
> The steppe flows out
> Pushing the mountains
> Toward all the winds
>
> Which wander afar[3]

When horizons stretch, steppes flow, mountains push or winds wander, taking on subjective and active lives they are more than just metaphors. They echo the ancestral belief voiced by Tschinag during his 1999 address at the Poetry International Festival in Rotterdam for the annual series "In Defense of Poetry":

> Since my early childhood my Self has been shaped by shamanism. My first verses were shamanic chants, praises and pleas to the spirits of the rocks and trees and water that surrounded me… This is a simple image: man is part of a complete whole fully pervaded by life, and as such he is kindred with all creatures; that is why he is equal in status with the smallest as well as the greatest before Father Sky and Mother Earth.[4]

As George Gilmore, a scholar of shamanism and animism, has said: "If man, stones, trees, plants, animals… are all in the same scale of existence, why should they not exchange forms, undergo metamorphosis?"[5] It takes a skilled shaman, in this view, to look beyond the physical form in nature.[6] For Galsan Tschinag, the process of looking beyond leads from the shamanic to the poetic, from vision to voice:

> Which are the elements that surround the shaman poet? They are the water, they are the wind, they are the fire, they are the earth. He is at

> their mercy, they blow… right through him… nature and the shamanic poet are interwoven with each other. And in this fusion… lies the birthplace of poetry.[7]

On the metaphysical level, a cycle of fusion, migratory diffusion, and reintegration of nature and the poet is often repeated:

> … I the common task
> Of Father Sky and Mother Earth
> Have made a home for three horse lives
> At the restless nomadic fireside
>
> And will at some far hour
> Migrate across to the
> Stones, grasses and cranes
> To swim upon the great circular river
> Crossing back over
> To the waiting watching threshold
> Of my greater and lesser yurts[8]

The "lesser yurt" is the poet's own circular tent-home; the "greater yurt" is the steppe itself, under whose circular tent-home sky he transports his lesser yurt from one spot to another. Seen in the constellation of his poetic work, this image figuratively for us, but literally for the shaman, expands the concept of home from the visibly immediate circle of wall supports to the grand circle of the steppe, sensed even when unseen. Thus, the poet can announce that a loved one has returned home when she sets foot on the steppe, no matter how distant.

Just as Central Asia seems limitless to the nomad, a stylistic lack of boundaries in Tschinag's poetry enables and reinforces the imagery of unbounded migratory movement. The reader of his poetry sees no periods or other punctuation to indicate stoppage: sentence boundaries are intimated by line placement or by syntax rather than by direct delineation. The punctuation tools that Tschinag does use are an occasional comma or dash, both of which allow the flow to continue.

Within this boundlessness, Tschinag crafts word images describing the consequences of natural phenomena, turbulence from flapping wings of geese that flew over hours before, or warmth from the smoke of a distant fire, in order to imbue them with poetic permanence. They become part of a shamanic spell because, as Tschinag explains: "One has to address the cult objects with a refined, clear and powerful poetic language in order to be heard." From his youth, he heard the Tuvan epics, handed down by oral tradition, "which are considered sacred and powerful, so powerful that they can only be recited when the time of the thunderstorms is past."[9]

This power of the word to make changes is reminiscent of the claim made by the German Romantic poet Novalis that a dormant song dwells in everything: all we need to do to make the world sing is to find the proper magical word.[10] Nor does Tschinag shy away from using the powers of incantation as a tool of his own will. He explains:

> Shamans and poets are not particularly unassuming beings. They do not want to accept moderation, nor do they want to be tamed. Both suffer from megalomania, they compare themselves to great things, to the mountain, the lake, the sky, its thunder and lightning. They get dangerously close to madness when they start working.[11]

Symptomatic of transformative power are certain poetic phrases meant to hold onto love and the beloved. Perhaps influenced by European lyrical tradition, Tschinag, in his early poetry, allowed the object of affection to exert metaphorical effects that seemed almost free of shamanistic undertones. One example follows:

> … As long as you are there
> The shrub with its
> Swarming sparrows will continue to blossom
> And morning after morning
> The avian childhood
> Like a hundred red splinters of sunlight
> Will twitter towards me
> When I step from my yurt[12]

In later poetry on topics of love, particularly after the literal migration of 1995, a more Eastern, animistic imagery comes to the fore, such as this view of his own petrification upon losing the beloved:

> When you leave me
> I will turn to stone
> On the north face of life's mountain
>
> Exposed to the dust of time
> I will hide myself
> By burrowing into the soil
>
> Dreams from past ages
> Iridescent lichen
> Will grow across me[13]

To the Western sensibilities, this can seem to fit along the spectrum of begging, emotional manipulation, or fatalism. Tschinag insists:

> When the poet wants to make known his love… he does not need to plead, he does not need to use polite words. Just as the wind brings the rain without asking the steppe if it might pour down upon it, so a poet is no supplicant, either. He himself is the wind who can grow into a thunderhead, a blazing fire, or a snowstorm.[14]

Wind is emblematic of the power of the unseen, and Tschinag explicitly believes that all winds on earth find their source in the tops of the Altai Mountains.[15]

Again and again in Tschinag's poetic work, the narrative subject undergoes wind-aided development that culminates in a first-person meteorological extreme:

> At the hour of my fervor
> I was
> Flung out as a breeze
> Into the wide world
> Now full-blown
> I've grown to a wind
> From height to higher height
> For a long time I've been aiming
> At the pinnacle
> From which I
> Shall rise up
> As a storm[16]

The shaman-poet ascribes an animating soul to the breeze, the wind, and the storm no less than he does to more tangible objects. In various poems, the poetic protagonist, in variations or countervariations on what the psychoanalyst Otto Rank has called the "mythical hero's birth"[17] becomes a wick burning down with the fire of life, becomes hearth smoke wafting across the steppe, becomes an incubator of stars, a needle stitching patches of fog together, a deep chasm, or a rocky line of rubble caught beneath an avalanche.

In Walther Hessig's monumental, two-volume, thousand-page German-language history of nineteenth-century Mongolian literature, he discusses only two poets from the Altai region. One of them, Buyan, succeeded in putting to paper a traditional local epic in which the hero is descended from stone ancestors.[18] If this is Tschinag's home territory geographically, it is also his iconographic home, as suggested by the title of his most recent anthology, The Stone Man at Ak-Hem.[19] Stone, sand, and grasses are among the most common images in his poetry. In some sense, these natural features, as common to the steppes of the Altai as they are to Tschinag's poetry, are meant to be autobiographical: "Which mountain's stone am I, which well's water, which steppe's grass? The sooner and more definitively I find an answer to that, the clearer will be the poetry that flows from inside me."[20]

Perhaps because I am a librarian, my favorite Galsan Tschinag poem is a recent one from 2002 entitled "The Library at Tuva," from which I will quote the last three stanzas. In them, the migrations and mutations endemic to nature are seen to be writing instruments and the volumes they inscribe form the browsing library of life:

> … Like a kindly father, the sky takes pigtail grasp to pull up
> Transient shapes poking through the pores of planet earth
> So that Ur-elements can overwhelm and etch them
> Cell by cell their tracks spread
> To cracks and ridges, welts and fissures
> Crisscrossing with heaviness of earth
> Until they flow out as lines of commentary

On stories undeniable
All opened to the same chronological page

The writing of wind and sun and water
Feeds on beauty recumbent in the ages
Wisdom and wit emanate from the collected works of time
Whether by hand of man, beak of eagle, or crown of tree
Each one a book cross-sectioned with annual rings
Embossed ever deeper the more the wind blows across them

A tip of the hat to the Bible, the Koran, the Kanjur
A tip of the hat to any book stored in shelved compartments
As for me, I live in a weather niche free from the superfluous
And recognize in my earth and my sky that library of antiquity
Visible to every eye, palpable to every nerve ending[21]

The lifelong migratory process in the life of Galsan Tschinag between political systems, languages, and cultures is outlined in his own words:

> From the European point of view I have in me a bit of Asian, a hint of nomadism and shamanism, a shadow of ancient times, and also a scrap of Europe, a trace of civilization and a fluff of the present day, seen from the other, from our point of view. As much as I was born and sent out by the archaic East, the modern Western world formed me and sent me back. I became a bridge between worlds and times, so to speak. Besides, I was granted the privilege to witness radical historical changes: I was born into primeval times, into a primitive society, I grew up in socialism and now I stand face to face with capitalism. Each system has formed me, I profited from all of them. I was "fortunate," therefore, in Goethe's sense of the word. Something united me and this man [Goethe]. Now I know what it is: the shamanic aspect in his work.[22]

Across a divide of two hundred years, Galsan and Goethe both sat in Auerbach's Cellar in Leipzig thinking Oriental-Occidental thoughts involving transformation and change. But to compare shamanism in the poetry of Galsan Tschinag with that found in the works of Goethe, to see how both poets relate to common images of an *East-West Divan*, is a topic for another day.

Notes

1. Ludmilla K. Gerasimovich, History of Modern Mongolian Literature, 1921–1964 (Bloomington, Ind.: The Mongolia Society, 1970), 165. The poets are D. Pürevdorj and Ts. Tsedenjav.
2. Galsan Tschinag, Wolkenhunde: Gedichte (Frauenfeld, Switzerland: Waldgut Verlag, 1998), 24.
3. Ibid., 10. All translations of Tschinag's poetry are my own. See online versions at http://webpub.byu.net/rdh7/tschinag/.
4. Tschinag, "Defense of the Stone against Plaster," trans. Kathrin Lang. Available online at http://www.poetryinternational.org/cwolk/view/18458. A more accurate translation

of the original German title might be "In Defense of Stone versus Concrete."

5. George W. Gilmore. *Animism or Thought Currents of Primitive Peoples* (Boston: Marshall Jones, 1919), 119.
6. Ibid., 62.
7. Tschinag, "Defense of the Stone against Plaster."
8. ———, *Wolkenhunde*, 7.
9. ———, "Defense of the Stone against Plaster."
10. Joseph von Eichendorff, "Wünschelruthe," in Sämtliche Werke (Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 1993), I/1, 121: Schläft ein Lied in allen Dingen, Die da träumen fort und fort, Und die Welt hebt an zu singen,Triffst du nur das Zauberwort.
11. Tschinag, "Defense of the Stone against Plaster."
12. ———, *Alle Pfade um deine Jurte: Gedichte* (Frauenfeld, Switzerland: Waldgut Verlag, 1995), 26.
13. ———, *Wolkenhunde*, 16.
14. ———, "Defense of the Stone against Plaster."
15. Tschinag at a reading in Rot, Germany, Nov. 2, 1997, paraphrased in Cornelia Schrudde, *Galsan Tschinag: Der tuwinische Nomade in der deutschsprachigen Literatur* (Frankfurt an Main: Peter Lang, 2000), 255.
16. Tschinag, *Wolkenhunde*, 15.
17. Jörg Drews, "Die guten Geister: Wortlust und Wortmut des Galsan Tschinag," *Neue deutsche Literatur* 50, no. 2 (2002): 140.
18. Walther Hessig, *Geschichte der Mongolischen Literatur* (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 1972), I, 369.
19. Tschinag, *Der Steinmensch zu Ak-Hem: Gedichte* (Frauenfeld, Switzerland: Waldgut Verlag, 2002).
20. ———, "Defense of the Stone against Plaster."
21. ———, *Der Steinmensch zu Ak-Hem*, 46–47.
22. ———, "Defense of the Stone against Plaster."