

Sonnet in the 21st Century: George Szirtes's Sonnet Sequences*

21.yy'da Sone: George Szirtes'in Soneleri

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Abstract

The sonnet, a highly established poetic form, has lost little from its popularity in English literature. Blended with modern poetic tendencies like image-centered diction, visually powerful expression, use of local colours, and idiosyncrasy, the sonnet seems to be a powerful way of self-expression and individuality especially after the second half of the twentieth century. Among the many sonnets written in English at the end of the millennium George Szirtes's 'versions' are significant in terms of the new predispositions the sonnet has experienced within contemporary British poetry. Combining traditional sonnet qualities like rhyme and meter with a straightforward diction and poetic precision, Szirtes is one of those few poets who manage to bring a fresh look to the sonnet. Adding his interest in innovative technicalities to his ability to bring together varied subject matters from his childhood as a refugee in England to his Hungarian connections, Szirtes stands out as one of the noteworthy sonneteers of our time. This study intends to analyse George Szirtes's sonnet sequences in his poetry collections *Reel* and *the Budapest File* with reference to contemporary developments concerning sonnet writing. The study will basically focus on a stylistic and thematic analysis of a number of sonnets and will deal with Szirtes's poetic, structural, contextual preferences along with his ideas on sonnet's place in contemporary British poetry.

Keywords: George Szirtes, sonnet, individuality, poetic image, poetic structure, contemporary British poetry.

* Formerly entitled "How to Bring Woody Allen and Lord Byron Together: George Szirtes and the New Face of Sonnet Writing," the work was presented at the ESSE 2012 Conference in Istanbul (4-8 September 2012).

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Öz

Hayli köklü bir şiir yazım türü olan sone, İngiliz edebiyatındaki popülaritesinden fazla bir şey kaybetmemiştir. İmge merkezli anlatım tarzı, görsel olarak güçlü ifadeler, yerel renklerin kullanımı ve bireysellik gibi modern şiirin eğilimleriyle harmanlanan sone özellikle yirmibirinci yüzyılın ikinci yarısından itibaren kendini ifade etmenin ve bireyselliğin önemli bir yolu haline gelmiş görünmektedir. Binyılın sonunda doğru İngiliz dilinde yazılmış bir çok sone içinde George Szirtes'in "versiyonları" günümüz İngiliz şiiri içinde sone türünün tecrübe ettiği yeni eğilimler açısından önemlidir. Kafiye ve uyak gibi geleneksel öğeleri açık sözlü bir üslup ve şiirsel duyarlılıkla birleştiren Szirtes, soneye yeni bir bakış getirebilen nadir şairlerdendir. Yaratıcı tekniklere olan ilgisini İngiltere'de mülteci olarak geçirdiği çocukluğundan Macar köklerine kadar farklı konular ile bağdaştırarak, Szirtes zamanının önde gelen sone yazarlarından birisi olarak göze çarpmaktadır. Bu çalışma, günümüz sone yazınındaki gelişmelere göndermeler yaparak, George Szirtes'in *Reel* ve *the Budapest File* başlıklı şiir derlemelerindeki soneleri incelemeyi amaçlamaktadır. Çalışma daha çok çeşitli sonelerin biçimbilimsel ve tematik incelemesine yoğunlaşarak, Szirtes'in şiirsel, yapısal ve içerik bakımından tercihleriyle, yine şairin günümüz İngiliz şiirinde sonenin yerine dair fikirlerine değinecektir.

Anahtar Sözcükler: George Szirtes, sone, bireysellik, şiirsel imge, şiirsel yapı, günümüz İngiliz şiiri

Introduction

Approaching his seventies, George Szirtes lives in Wymondham, a small town about a twenty-minute bus ride away from Norwich. A fellow of the Royal Society of Literature, he teaches creative writing and poetry classes at the University of East Anglia. He is married to the artist Clarissa Upchurch with whom he ran a small publishing house for a time. However, if it is Szirtes's poetry we are dealing with, we need to have a closer look at his past rather than his present particularly because Szirtes, a poet of *recollections*, is uniquely preoccupied with reminiscences, "European history, the Holocaust and the struggles of small nations with larger neighbours" (O'Brien, 2009). Born in Budapest and having arrived in England as a refugee at the age of eight, Szirtes is usually regarded as "a Hungarian-born British poet" who never lost contact with his childhood memories in Hungary.

The study at hand is an attempt to study George Szirtes's sonnet sequences in two of his poetry collections: *The Budapest File* (2000) and *Reel* (2004), the latter of which is the winner of the T.S. Eliot Prize in 2004. To do this, I will be referring to Szirtes's structural and contextual concerns as well as his understanding of sonnet writing, an old poetic exercise with well-defined borders, within the poetic modes of contemporary British poetry. Through a study scope, prosody, subject matter, and style, I would like to conclude that Szirtes, with his expressive, precise, and individualistic way of sonnet writing, has a noteworthy place among the British poets of our time.

Sonnet writing, the roots of which can be traced back as far as the thirteenth-century Italy, has allured generations of poets writing in English. It is clear from the number of

sonnets written in the twentieth and the twenty-first centuries that little has changed with regards to the interest in sonnet writing. Celebrating this age-old poetic tradition, Levin states that sonnet has served almost every generation of poets and it is still dominant in the contemporary English poetry by “living the double life” it has always led through either private confessions or as a way of self expression (2001, p.xxxix). George Szirtes is one of those poets who employ the sonnet as a form of self-expression within modern modes of poetry such as idiosyncrasy, precision of the image, and twentieth-century manifestations of what is local, unique, or personal. With particular focus on the structural qualities of this poetic form along well with an emphasis on imagery, his sonnets may be regarded as a representative of the present-day sonnet writing in English. Parallel to Levin’s observation about the state of contemporary writing as a means to articulate individuality, Szirtes himself believes that the sonnet, with its quality to concentrate on discrete existence of the individual or the image, is able to convey messages and/or images with emphasis on the message’s and/or image’s existence (2012a; 2012b). Explaining his views about the debate of the so-called death of novel, Szirtes further asserts that the sonnet, concentrating on “presence” rather than narration, is immune to dying out as a literary form (2012a)¹. In D.G. Rossetti’s words, in his “Sonnet on the Sonnet,” a literary attempt to define the sonnet, “the sonnet [therefore] is a moment’s monument... [representing] the Soul’s eternity” (2003, p.127, lines 1-2). Indeed, as it going to be exemplified in the following sections, Szirtes’s sonnets are usually based on the significance of the moment like flashes that move in time, articulating almost an imagist sense of presence and sheer existence. Therefore, studying Szirtes’s sonnet sequences in *Reel* and *The Budapest File*, not to mention individual sonnets and sonnet sequences in his other collections like *An English Apocalypse* (2001) and *Portrait of My Father in an English Landscape* (1998), tells us a lot about Szirtes’s apprehension of sonnet writing and that that there is still a lot that can be done with the sonnet.

Szirtes’s answer to why the sonnet is still favoured among poets, including himself, focuses on the sonnet’s versatile qualities. Indeed, especially in terms of structural concerns, the sonnet has always been considered “one of the most flexible forms in all modern western literatures” (Highet, 1960, p.191). To this end, especially from the late twentieth-century onwards, poets have manipulated the form of the sonnet. Along with “a great many variations of rhyme-patterns... and of line-length” such as 8, 16, and 21 lines, there are even highly minimalistic and image-centered sonnet forms such as word sonnets, fourteen words, each representing a single line (Hollander, 2001, p.18). Yet the adaptability of the sonnet is not only structural but also contextual. In other words, sonnets are not only lyric pieces usually with fourteen lines, or seven couplets that usually rhyme. Although fourteen lines provide a perfect space for poets to express themselves,

¹ It should be kept in mind that Szirtes refutes the idea of “the death of the novel” and does not put poetry over novel in any way; rather, he argues that they use different media to communicate and relate experiences. In his words, “There is no sense in arguing for the supremacy of the poem or the story: both are equally important. The poet and the storyteller co-exist in human beings, though not to the same degree in individuals” (Szirtes, 2012a).

to relate a memory, to bring forth and illustrate an image or an emotion in words, it goes without saying that sonnets are not meant to discuss lengthy socio-political matters or to provide long narratives (Szirtes, 2012a). At this point, therefore, it may be safe to say that the sonnet, as a way of poetic expression, is not a form to create ur-texts or grand narratives. Instead, the sonnet offers the poet a small space to concentrate on ideas, personal experiences, or images.

Although there are numerous sonnets written in more traditional ways such as the sonnets written in blank verse or with rhymed couplets as in Rupert Brooke's sonnets, for instance, British poetry in the twentieth and the twenty-first centuries has become highly experimental. Especially after the introduction of free verse as the new vogue of composing poetry, the sonnet has become open to changes on formal and ideational levels. But, as opposed to the general tendency to understand modern poetry as literature away from structural concerns, this does not mean that free verse is formless. In one way or another, the sonnet, like other poetic forms, follows some formal structures (Wolosky, 2001, p.55). Just as an architect needs to put doors, colons, and walls into his drawings and sketches – no matter how futuristic his structural plans may be – poetry requires patterns. So, the reason of the sonnet's survival among many other long-forgotten and/or less favoured forms like canzone, cinquain, or limerick may be the result of the fact that it contains the necessary literary proportions to appeal to every generation of poets.

Structural Concerns

It is probably sonnet's adaptability to formal experimentation that has influenced Szirtes's preferences. For him, a sonnet "...provides just enough space for a thought to become an emotion, or vice versa" (Szirtes, 2012b). He likens the structure of the sonnet to a room, and writing sonnets to walking around in a room:

Each form is a set of possibilities. A kind of *space*... Learning to write sonnets is like getting to know a space. After a while you don't have to think *about* the space so much - you can find your way around the room in the dark - you can think and feel *in* it...The only given is that it is a room of certain proportions... The important idea then is that of the sonnet as a particularly adaptable form of space, a kind of room, or arrangement of rooms, with views out. You need to have views out (Szirtes, 2012b)².

The room Szirtes mentions is obviously not a very spacious room but the possibilities to furnish this space are endless. To understand how he walks about in this room and how

² Szirtes also adds that The sonnet is particularly useful for reasons I have tried to explain: the multivalent core, and the freedom of movement it offers within its room-like shape (we continue to inhabit rooms, they form a lasting comprehensible environment). And maybe there is something about a lyric poem that tends to find itself within 10-16 lines, that is to say in loose sonnet territory (Szirtes, 2012b).

he shapes it, studying four representative sonnet sequences, “Turquoise” and “Black Sea Sonnets” from his *Reel*, and “The Looking-Glass Dictionary³” and “Portrait of My Father in an English Landscape⁴” from *The Budapest File*, may give us an idea how Szirtes “decorates” his sonnets.

Szirtes’s fondness for technical aspects of writing and “loving engagement with poetic forms...” is well-known (O’Brien, 2009). In a 2006 essay, arguing against those who consider formal *restrictions* limiting poet’s inventiveness, he argues for structural concerns by stating that “...verse is not decoration: it is structural. It is a forming principle and works at depth” (Szirtes, 2006). For a poet like Szirtes, therefore, it is inevitable to turn a blind eye on design. Similarly, Szirtes replies the question “In what way would you relate your sonnets to the ‘so-called’ conventional sonnets? Or would you?” by reminding that his interest in structural side of writing surfaced in the mid 1970s when he wanted to compose a poem to the memory of his mother, whom he had recently lost. He adds “...by this time I am - and am generally regarded as - a poet with strong formal instincts, but not a writer of sonnets. That comes later” (Szirtes, 2012b).

Studying the sonnets that eventually “came later,” the first thing that draws readers’ attention is probably repetitive rhyming and rhythmical patterns. As a matter of fact, many of his sonnets bring traditional English rhyme scheme to mind:

Screeching or singing till its meaning *stales*,
the cold grey light has drawn you from your bed,
the words go scuttling homeward, their bright *tails*
between their legs and shelter in your head.

...

a line that anchors, *warms*,
and lets you enter its own world of *forms*.

(Szirtes, 2005a, lines 1-4, 13-14 in Sonnet 2)⁵

The traditional Shakespearean “abab/cdcd/efef/gg” structure is recurrent in the sequences; indeed, a great number of Szirtes’s sonnets are either rhymed, half rhymed or eye rhymed. In terms of meter, however, he leaves the conventional poetic traditions often to turn to modern metrical patterns of free verse. Yet as the “free verse” tradition itself goes, he is never totally casual or careless. In “Portrait,” for instance, a dominant pentametric foot appeals to the reader’s sense of hearing: “Surfeit of snow, the core remains unknown. /A winter park. He drags us forward, up...” (Szirtes, 2005a, lines 1-2 in Sonnet 10). Such metrical perfection is frequent especially when Szirtes tries to constitute a certain sense of

³ Referred to as Looking-Glass henceforth.

⁴ Referred to as Portrait henceforth.

⁵ Emphasis added.

rhythm related to the image or memory he presents. In the fourteenth sonnet in “Portrait” sequence, he argues with his father: “...We argue for the sake of it as always” (Szirtes, 2005a, line 2). The iambic structure, when read aloud, creates a natural music that of a traditional English pentametric sonnet that in turn gives a sense of a quarrel with all ups and downs; the following line further creates a unified feeling when he relents: “because it is *natural* to argue” (Szirtes, 2005a, line 3)⁶.

Free verse is only free as far as freedom leads to a better composition, if not to perfection. Szirtes thinks of free verse “as a mixture of freedom and constraint... Free verse - that essential early twentieth-century innovation - is no more free than any other verse” (Szirtes, 2012b). Here, I would like to concentrate on one of the key features of sonnets written in free verse: enjambment; a substantial quality of Szirtes’s poetry. Enjambment, more commonly known as “run-on lines” in contemporary poetic context, is not new, nor is it special to any other poetic tradition. The key point of run-on lines is their advantage to bring mobility and pliability to the image, emotion or idea at hand. While creating perpetual images that lead to certain emotions, Szirtes keeps the lines going. He merges them into one another while also feeding the general image with flashes of, usually, noun clauses as in:

Screeching or singing till its meaning stales,
the cold grey light has drawn you from your bed
...
The Airport. Night. December. Rough and grey,
a blanket covers you...
(Szirtes, 2005a, lines 1-2, 5-6 in Sonnet 2)⁷

Or as in the seventh sonnet of “Portrait,” where he depicts the Soviet army marching across the Balkans into central Europe:

Chain of command crack bones. The blood spilt
underwrites him...
...What hurts
is the truth of every story, things being just
as they are, true without consequence, bit parts
in a ridiculous epic of cinematic dust.
*Escape on the March Back. The First Sight
of the chaotic Russian Army as they Spin
across Half Europe, mad Flight, sane Flight,
the Toiling masses, Rape, Rapine and Repin.*

⁶ Emphasis added.

⁷ Emphasis added.

Malenky robot. Three soldiers in a bed,
the woman beneath them crippled, maybe dead.”
(Szirtes, 2005a, lines 1-2, 5-14 in Sonnet 7)⁸

In these lines, enjambment reaches to such a point that the lines, most of which are made of nouns or noun adjuncts, almost form an image of their own without any verbs, a similar effect that is aimed in word sonnets.

There is yet another interesting point in the sequences concerning enjambment. In “Looking-Glass” and “Portrait,” the two collections of sonnets with fifteen sonnets in each, every single sonnet, except for the fifteenth sonnet in each of the sequences, begins with the keywords or phrases from the last line of the previous sonnet. This technique brings sonnet corona to mind. In the sonnet corona, or commonly known as the crown of sonnets, the last line of each sonnet is used as the first line of the next sonnet in a sequence of usually seven sonnets while the last line of the sonnet of the final sonnet echoes or is exactly the same with the first line of the first sonnet in the sequence (Cuddon, 2000, p. 198). Szirtes interprets the sonnet corona by combining the snapshots in each sonnet to let readers concentrate on the following image in the next poem and the big picture in the final sonnet. The eighth sonnet of “Portrait” ends with an image of a ghost and a photograph, the ninth uses the same context to initiate a different picture: “I tell it wrong like he does. It’s wrong to laugh / in the presence of a ghost or photograph” (Szirtes, 2005a, lines 13-14 in Sonnet 8); “The presences - not ghosts, nor photographs- / are symbols through which we walk together” (Szirtes, 2005a, lines 1-2 in Sonnet 9). A similar outline is also found in “Looking-Glass;” the desire and sense of loss at the end of the fourth sonnet, for instance, reoccurs at the beginning of the next: “Like all words that apply and predicate / desire and loss, it brooked of no debate” (Szirtes, 2005b, lines 13-14 in Sonnet 4); “Desire and loss do not permit debate. / Where do the inner journeys go?” (Szirtes, 2005b, lines 1-2 in Sonnet 5). The sonnet-wise enjambment is further carried out in the final sonnets of Szirtes’s interpretation of the sonnet corona. The last sonnets, the fifteenth in each of the sequences, are formulated through a set of combinations, variations or syntactic anagrams from the first lines of other sonnets in that particular sequence; thus, fourteen lines from fourteen sonnets make up another sonnet:

Words withheld. Words loosed in angry swarms,
screeching or singing till their meaning stales
have let you enter their strange world of forms
like faint vibrations down deserted rails.
Desire and loss do not permit debate:
articulate you know how pain is drowned.
(Szirtes, 2005b, lines 1-6 in Sonnet 15)

⁸ Emphasis added.

The six lines above, for instance, are from the first lines of the first six sonnets in the sequence: “Words withheld. Words loosed in angry swarms” (line 1 in 1); “Screeching or singing till its meaning stales” (line 1 in 2); “They let you enter their strange world of forms” (line 1 in 3); “Faint vibrations of trains along the rails” (line 1 in 4) and so on. The fifteenth sonnets, which still share conventional rhyme schemes, are a short account of the images created throughout the sequence. In the end, thus, the whole sequence becomes a big body of run-on lines where enjambment is itself involved in the making of yet another sonnet.

Similar to “Looking-Glass” and “Portrait” sonnets, “Delta,” the fourth of the “Black Sea Sonnets” sequence is a good example that illustrates many of Szirtes’s structural concerns such as run-on lines, rising and falling diction, subtly designed rhyming patterns.

Hour after hour, cruising through high reeds
in the Delta. Phalaropes, egrets, delicate
yellowish necks. Fishermen, cabins, then nothing.
More nothing. More reeds. The odd pocket
of humanity, then floating. Each channel breeds
an identical silence in regulation clothing.
Good to die here perhaps, or simply to dream
in the continuous sun that blisters our skin,
to move into an entropic state, to survive in
our own decay. Idyllic too: the stream
lapping at the boat with its tonnage of words,
the endless black coffee. We are part of the river,
drifting among spirits of pale waterbirds.
One should stay here, if possible, for ever.
(Szirtes, 2005c, lines 1-14 in “Delta”)

Until the fifth line, which introduces the first of the three syntactically and grammatically complete sentences in the sonnet, there are only clauses, series of nouns that bring forth a sequence of images: “high reeds... / ...Phalaropes, egrets, delicate / yellowish necks. Fishermen, cabins, then nothing. / More nothing. More reeds...” (lines 1-14 in “Delta”). While the snapshots of the trip “in the Delta” dominates the first half of the poem, immediately after the first complete sentence, the diction shifts to become more verbal, though again without complete sentences, excluding the last three lines. Thus the once stable mental picture at the beginning is mobilised:

... Each channel *breeds*
 an identical silence in regulation clothing.
 Good *to die* here perhaps, or simply *to dream*
 in the continuous sun that *blisters* our skin,
to move into an entropic state, *to survive* in
 our own decay. Idyllic too: the stream
lapping at the boat with its tonnage of words,
 the endless black coffee. We *are* part of the river,
drifting among spirits of pale waterbirds.
 One should *stay* here, if possible, for ever.
 (Szirtes, 2005c, lines 5-14 in “Delta”)⁹

The panorama of the delta is now in action with four infinitives (“to die,” “to dream,” “to move,” and “to survive”), two gerunds (“lapping” and “drifting”), and three verbs of action (“breeds,” “blisters,” and “stay”). The sense of motion is further sustained through words like “river,” “endless,” “stream,” and “continuous,” all of which contrast with the immobility and “noun” effect in the opening lines. Such verbal lexis renders the sonnet a poem of ups and downs, of stability and mobility. The shift from motionlessness to action is therefore one of the poetic qualities Szirtes makes use of in many of his sonnets.

Internal rhyme in some of Szirtes’s sonnets also requires attention. Many of Szirtes’s works show examples of visual rhyme or eye rhyme, as in many traditional sonnet examples. The conventional rhyming patterns, however, are further strengthened by patterns of internal rhyme- rhyme that create a highly audial effect when read aloud. So run-on lines are all rhymed on the page; yet when they are articulated, one also discovers a surprising rhythm and a complex web of rhyming patterns: “...Something in the mask / parodies us, part sassy and part naff, / making uneasiness easy...” (Szirtes, 2005d, lines 7-9). The rhyming “sassy” and “easy,” along with the alliterating “s” and “z” sounds here are really engaging; it is like finding another gift box in your birthday present. Again, in “Speech,” the third of “Black Sea Sonnets,” and a sonnet with a self-revealing title, sound games are equally pleasing to the ear:

...The Black Sea purses its lips
 at the facing villas and draws us in to her
 like a dull secret. Shall we walk in and stir
 the waves a little? Pick a few cowries? Reward
 ourselves for our exhaustion? Feed the dogs

⁹ Emphasis added.

that scamper about our feet?...

(Szirtes, 2005c, lines 5-10)

“Secret,” “feet,” “and “feed” triplet together with the repetitive vowels in “draw[s],” “reward,” and “exhaustion” form a musical pattern. The alliterating “s,” articulated seventeen times, create the sound of waves while “l,” articulated nine times, develops the harmony similar to that of a lullaby.

Thematic Concerns

Such sense of action, however, should not lead to an idea that Szirtes always employs verbal diction. Although stylistically energetic with shifts from verbal diction to more noun-based utterances and vice versa, there is not much physical action taking place in Szirtes’s sonnets. At this point, the aforementioned idea of “presence” can be revisited. Comparing poetry with novel in terms of story telling, Szirtes once stated that “poetry is where the presence burns more than the narrative” (Szirtes, 2012a). For him, poetry is a predominantly different form of telling ‘something,’ and not as urgent as novel, the “specific... form of story telling” (Szirtes, 2012a)¹⁰. To this end, Szirtes would probably agree with Spiegelman who tries to differentiate *description*, “the hardest measure of art’s seriousness,” from scientific objectivity and observation (2005, p.5).

The third sonnet of the “Portrait” sequence, for instance, presents a series of flickering, flaring memories that never rise big enough to become a fire:

...Grandad got run down by a tram
and yet survived to claim the insurance. One
uncle opened a music shop. It closed like a clam
about him. The second grandfather died,
cancerous, still telling stories...

(Szirtes, 2005a, lines 2-6 in Sonnet 3)

None of the flashbacks come up with proper conclusions; neither the granddad’s accident, nor the enterprising uncle, or the “stories” the other grandfather tells lead anywhere. A similar example where Szirtes puts presence and images over stories and action is the fourth sonnet of “Portrait” sequence. Just as the previous one, and in accordance with the title of the series, “Portrait,” which symbolises a frozen image as in the word ‘portrait’ itself, this poem, too, focuses on a chain of still images. A snowy winter night is at the background until images of his father surface:

¹⁰ He further explains that “...the novel being a highly specific, on the whole stable, form of storytelling, assumes a great deal about the reader’s relation to the world and language, and it is quite possible that such a relationship will demand – may already be demanding – a different psychological form of storytelling. Just as it might demand of poets a different construction of poem” (Szirtes, 2012a).

...Dante's paradise
glows in bright rings around the moon. There is a rank
and order in their passage. Or so they say.
Ghost stories, gothic tales. A hostile tank
rumbles across the city and levels the way
to disjunction. My father in the office.
My father in the factory. In the road
with a lavatory pan on his head.
(Szirtes, 2005a, lines 4-11)

Recalling the story of his flight from Hungary to England with his family at night during the Hungarian uprising, Szirtes mentions that the only thing he had in his possession was a box full of photographs (Sweeten, 2011). These photographs still in his possession may be the origin of many images and snapshots in his poetry and the reason for his inclination to portray non-fluctuating, frozen moments from the past. Referring to the instances fixed in photographs, Szirtes states:

The moment has, by definition, gone. The record of the moment anticipates and includes the moment of going... The great photographs are those where the image is not merely record but symbol. Everything is precisely where it had to be in order to generate a meaning beyond itself. Record and symbol are endlessly fascinating... (Sweeten, 2011).

The meaning-generating moment caught in a photograph, the instances squeezed in flashes of memory, and the sense of presence created through photographs establish an important part of Szirtes's contextual interests.

At times, Szirtes's poetry retains conventional subject matters of sonnets like love, passion, and melancholy. Nevertheless, contemplation on childhood memories culminated with an inclination to a mixture of his own past and the twentieth-century European history forms the core of his subject matter. His interest in the political and social developments in central Europe, particularly in the second half of the last century, however, does not make him an overtly political poet; Szirtes is more like an observer who is simply attentive to such developments as a poet through first hand experience. Involved in a discussion with the British poet Ken Smith¹¹ on the nature of public poetry, Szirtes asserts that poetry should be "the unfocused, undirected emotion of the poet in response to some matter of public anxiety" (Kennedy, 1996, p.234-235)¹².

¹¹ The debate began after the publication of *Klaonica: Poems for Bosnia*, a collection of poetry concerned with the developments in Bosnia in 1990s. The co-editor of the collection, Ken Smith, and Szirtes engaged in one of the noteworthy discussions of the 1990s British poetry on the idea of poetry as media and the role of the poet (Kennedy, 1996, p.234).

¹² In his interview with Paul Sweeten, Szirtes states that he is not a public poet although it is inevitable to accept the fact that the idea of being *public* or *publicised* is not under the control of the poet:

This interest in repercussions of childhood memories and history is best reflected in his intermediate state of being a Hungarian and an English poet. For him, he is not a Hungarian poet and has never been one; but “to English people,” he is “an English poet who happens to be Hungarian” (Szirtes, 2012c). Having experienced such a socio-cultural repositioning at early ages, not to mention the language shift he had to go through, the concentration on such an in-between attitude is rather justifiable. Dedicated to Irish poet and writer, Gabriel Fitzmaurice, “Looking-Glass” illustrates such emotions of alienation and otherness, represented with a mirror, a well-liked otherness symbol in modern literature: “Words withheld. Words loosed in angry swarms. / An otherness. The Whole universe was / other, a sum of indeterminate forms / in motion” (Szirtes, 2005b, lines 1-4 in Sonnet 1). On the whole, the sequence concentrates on the experience of writing, nature of language, and words, the bricks of the linguistic structure. Yet the intermediate state of being the *linguistic other* reflects a disparate image of someone who is trying to fit in. In the twelfth sonnet of the sequence, intermediateness dominates the whole poem where the persona is “lost in a multicoloured chatter” (Szirtes, 2005b, line 7 in Sonnet 12):

This tiny world, part Hungary, part England,
is the macaronic my parents speak -
my dad especially...
...
I see this and am lost in multicoloured chatter
that seems to spread and deepen: spit and phlegm
and croak and fricative whose sounds mean me
and everything that can be concentrated
into the me. I vaguely sense, that free -
standing monument, marble and gold-plated,

sole owner of my lexical demesne
of spotless glass where words may sit and preen.
(Szirtes, 2005b, lines 1-3, 7-14 in Sonnet 12).

The language shift Szirtes experienced in his adolescence years, as it is dramatically presented above, is a significant part of his interest as a poet. For him therefore,

I don't think I am a very public poet, but am aware modern technology has opened new channels of communication that, especially in the case of younger poets, has led to a new kind of consciousness. This may be more a matter of amplitude rather than of a radical change of kind. In any case, it has changed the old notion of being “public”: a whisper can very quickly become public material. I know I live in that world; that it swirls around me. I try to add the odd well formed sentence to it because doing that helps me think and has in some way modified the way I write poetry too. That is part of ploughing on (2011).

Language, at its most sensitive, is not a machine, or, if it is, it is one that deals with shifting, arbitrary signs; it is, therefore, a machine that shares some characteristics with an organic being that is bound to be much like ourselves since it is we who have brought it into being. *Writing is an act of intense inward listening to this being* (Szigetes, 2012b)

In the poem above, readers are probably given the moment when the poet comes to the realisation that, after some struggling, he is about to lose his native tongue, that “marble and gold-plated” monument and the dominating power of his “lexical demesne” to a totally new set of signs and sounds (Szigetes, 2005b, lines 12-13 in Sonnet 12). At the end, the encounter becomes so challenging and burdensome that neither his native land nor his “adopted home” becomes a safe space (O’Brien, 2009). This complicated vagueness is reflected in the closing sonnet of the sequence more strikingly when he says “Hungary, England are verbal shadowlands” (Szigetes, 2005b, line 12 in Sonnet 15). Today, while talking about his acquaintance with the English tongue, Szigetes seems to have accepted and adopted this intermediateness. Favouring Auden’s poetry over T.S. Eliot’s in a 2009 essay, Szigetes asserts that Auden’s musicality appeals to him more since Auden “...was of vast importance in allowing my semi-European ear to hear the burnished notes of English song via the intellect and by way of the auditory imagination” (Szigetes, 2009).

Conclusion

Often described as a lyric poet, like many poets of our age (O’Brien, 2009), Szigetes has produced over fifty sonnets and sonnet sequences, which is itself an evidence of the popularity of the tradition among contemporary British poets. What wins Szigetes’s sonnets special attention from readers and poets alike in contemporary poetry canon, however, is his ability to commingle memory, half-imagination, snapshots, and childhood images altogether with emphasis on the significance of presence and a loyalty to formal concerns of poetry (Szigetes, 2012c). Relying on his Hungarian roots and strengthening his Middle European concerns and background with new experiences in English language and culture, Szigetes is a poet that requires particular attention within the contemporary English poetry. Contextually, Szigetes’s sonnets are full of images looking back on reminiscences, personal experiences, and family history. It is through such visually powerful diction and a focus on the contemporary human person that Szigetes achieves a universality reaffirming the general state of betweenness in modern societies. As far as poetic structure is concerned, combining traditional formal qualities like rhyme and meter with twentieth-century formal qualities like free verse and verbal energy along with his own technical inventions like sonnet-wise enjambment, Szigetes secures his place in many of the contemporary British poetry anthologies. Therefore, looking back to today from a hundred years from now, Szigetes is very likely to be a subject of focal interest in future studies covering early twenty-first-century English poetry with his playful poetic diction, carefully designed formal qualities, and structurally attentive, rich thematic background.

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