

OCHIRBATYN DASHBALBAR AND THE POETRY OF LOVE
Simon Wickham-Smith

Ochirbatyn Dashbalbar was born in the Naran district of Sūkhbaatar aimag, in the east of Mongolia, in 1957¹. He completed high school in Sūkhbaatar and in 1984 graduated from the Gorky School of Literary Studies in Moscow. His relationship with the written word and with books was apparent from an early age, and it is said that he was interested in poetry even before he learnt properly to read. Indeed, friends report how he loved books and how he would always say that he would own a big library when he was grown up. As soon as he began to earn money, he would spend all his income on books.

His fascination with poetry drew him into writing and, throughout his school years, he would carry notebooks with him, jotting down ideas for poetry. He studied literature in Moscow and devoted all his time to examining and understanding poetry, and to composing his own work.

After the fall of the Soviet Union in 1990, the influence of the free market reforms in Mongolia resulted in a combination of social poverty and political corruption within the country. Dashbalbar seems, before this point, to have been disinterested in politics, but during the first years of post-Soviet rule, he became more and more dissatisfied with the behavior of politicians, whom he believed were misleading the electorate and acting primarily in their own interests, rather than in the interests of the people.

Having been elected to the Great State Khural in the first democratic elections, held in June 1992, as a representative of the Traditional United Conservative Party, Dashbalbar, already a popular literary figure, quickly became a popular politician. However, his popularity rendered him vulnerable to outside forces, in particular in the chaos surrounding the fall 1998 murder of the democratic leader Sanjaasuregiin Zorig, for which some people believed him directly responsible.

Indeed, throughout his time in politics, Dashbalbar was the subject of numerous accusations and insinuations, all of which proved groundless. There were subtle insinuations from certain political groups opposed to Dashbalbar that he might somehow have been involved in Zorig's murder, and one cynical journalist sought to accuse him of sexual harrasment, admitting only later that she had made this accusation so as to increase sales of her newspaper, which indeed was sold out and reprinted that same day. However, the vast popular support which his personal integrity, his lack of ostentation, and his stand against corruption gained him meant that he became gradually more and more vulnerable to such attacks.

According to his son Gangaabaatar, during the last few months of his life, Dashbalbar began complaining that he was being poisoned by state-sanctioned officials. On October 16th 1999, Dashbalbar was admitted to hospital, and eventually died later that night. The medical situation in Mongolia at that time made it impossible for a full post mortem to be carried out, and so the true cause of his death remains unknown. It seems that the public continues to believe that he had, like Zorig almost exactly a year before, been murdered, primarily because of his opposition to government corruption, but also, one might imagine, because of his national popularity.

His popularity was not engendered solely in his advocacy of the people, but

¹ The biographical information for this paper comes from email correspondence with Dashbalbar's son, D Gangaabaatar during October 2007.

also for the way in which he carried himself. In his essay “Dashbalbar Ochirbat and the Art of being Proud”², the poet and critic P Batkhuyag speaks about how Dashbalbar realised that his words were not pleasing to everyone, how he would joke, “My passionate spirit is tough on everyone. Starting from today, I shall have a pleasant spirit.” From what Batkhuyag says, it is clear that Dashbalbar realised that he was subject to attack from opposing forces and, moreover, that he was prepared and willing to stand up for his beliefs.

A full study of Dashbalbar’s political career still has to be written, and I have not had the time to read all the texts pertinent to such a study in preparation for this paper. For the benefit of this introductory paper, however, it is perhaps sufficient to encapsulate his political philosophy in this quotation, cited in an article written by the poet and scholar A Davaasambu, and spoken after he had left the Traditional United Conservative Party for the Mongolian Traditional Justice Party: “I have left my party, but I have not abandoned my motherland, my Mongolia. Mongolia needs its land. Without its land, it is no longer a nation. I will never align myself with those who betray their land and their nation.”

Before considering Dashbalbar’s work and, in particular, the poems collected in *The River Flows Gently*, I want to try to place him and his thought in the context of Mongolian letters during the second half of the twentieth century. Given that almost no literary theoretical material has been written in any language on this particular period³, a comparative study is at present impossible. Nevertheless, it behoves us to acknowledge some of the literary influences to which Dashbalbar would have been exposed, both as a student in Mongolia and subsequently in the Soviet Union.

The work of the previous generation of writers, such as B Yavuukhulan and M Tsedendorj, whose encouragement Dashbalbar explicitly acknowledges in the dedication of his poem “Allegro,” as well as that of senior but slightly younger writers such as D Uriankhai, can be characterised by an intensity of vision, a deep passion of the heart, and by a desire and need to question the nature of post-revolutionary Mongolia. Their work draws of course from even further back in Mongolian literature, from the nineteenth-century lyricism of Injinashi (1839-1892) and the radical spiritual nationalism of Danzanravjaa (1803-1856) and, even further back, from the epics and ancient lyrics such as the Secret History or the national chronicle of the Altan Tovch. Mongolian literature has always drawn heavily on tradition, in terms both of culture and of literature, and the influences which Dashbalbar would have received would undoubtedly have been manifestations of Mongolia’s independence, national pride and cultural benefits, as seen through the lens of the work of previous generations.

² The full text of my translation of this essay can be found online at www.ccalt.net/Texts/Mongolian/Essays/Batkhuyag/Dashbalbar_Ochirbat.pdf.

³ This situation, however, is beginning to change. There are critical essays being produced within Mongolia by such contemporary scholars, critics and writers as Kh Sülegmaa, P Batkhuyag, A Mönkh-Orgil and B Zolbayar; Dashbalbar himself was also a critic and scholar of literature. That being said, the approach to literary criticism in Mongolia is very different from that which pertains in the western academic community and so these texts are frequently not comparable to standard western criticism.

In purely political terms, the world in which Dashbalbar grew up was the hardline Mongolia of the 1960s, ruled from beyond the grave by Marshal Kh Choibalsan and by his successor Yu Tsedenbal. The country's increasingly closer ties with the Soviet Union during the late 1960s and through the 1970s allowed many students to receive education in Moscow or in Leningrad/St Petersburg. Dashbalbar was no exception, studying in Moscow in the early 1980s, during which time several of the poems in this book were written.

There are two notable references to Russian/Soviet culture in these poems, namely to the cosmonaut Yuri Gagarin and to the nineteenth-century writer Aleksandr Pushkin, generally considered to be the founder of modern Russian literature. That Dashbalbar celebrates these two men is worthy of some careful analysis, since parallels can be drawn between their achievements and Dashbalbar's.

If we look at the references to Gagarin in *The River Flows Gently*, we can form a picture of what Dashbalbar found so interesting about him. He says, I "have flown with Yuri Gagarin into the distant canopy of space" ("Spring's Braid"), and "I smiled Gagarin's smile among the distant stars" ("A Man"). In the significantly named "Freedom", he links Gagarin with the poet-monk Danzanravjaa:

And Gagarin, who flew to freedom in the realm of skies,
and Ravjaa, the great and wise man of letters, these
were the golden limbs, the distant parts of our lives!

This interest in the cosmos, in the exploration of space, included an interest in the science of rocketry, and Dashbalbar mentions, alongside Gagarin, the father of rocket science, Konstantin Tsiolkovski. Tsiolkovski, of course, was another visionary and theoretical explorer, which places him closer in some ways to Dashbalbar than was Gagarin: both Tsiolkovski and Dashbalbar carried out their exploration in their imagination, without the hindrance of that concrete experience which in the end, led perhaps to Gagarin's downfall.

"At first, the reason for my coming into this world was to herd the young calves," Dashbalbar wrote, "but then I loved to watch the Mongolian cosmonauts, I loved to speak with them, I loved everything!" This fascination with the world beyond Mongolia clearly sparked in Dashbalbar a link, not only with the natural world, with the stars and the sky, as is so constant a part of the Mongolian psyche, but with the stars as physical objects, as objects of scientific as well as mystical significance. Tsiolkovski and Gagarin journeyed into the science of space, which offered to an artist such as Dashbalbar an alternative approach to the understanding of the sky – and, for a Mongolian, whether a scientist or an artist, the stars and the sky are of vital and enormous cultural importance. In his "melodic fantasy", "Heaven"⁴, he writes, "Beneath the sky of a hundred nights, I gently dream. Explanations in this mysterious life, like ideas, are not under my control and, while I am not affected by the domination of heaven, which is for nothing and for no-one, still I am aware of the open space. Penetrating the deep

⁴ In Mongolian, the word *tenger* can mean "sky, Heaven, God, weather", which range of meaning indicates its somewhat more mystical associations. Clearly Dashbalbar wanted here to emphasise the ancient Mongolian relationship with the divine, rather than simply with the scientific and materialistic (for which the word *ogtorgui* would have been more suitable).

secret of heaven, moving outwards through the doors of the universe, and opening the endlessly lovely, undying, everlasting and peaceful world, the stars rushed in song through the rays of the open space, the entire world resounds as a single musical body.” The tone of this text, which significantly comes at the beginning of the present book, is one of discovery, of exploration, both of the inner and the outer cosmos: we can imagine how for Dashbalbar, the skies somehow represented the heartmind of human beings, a sphere open to endless investigation, through which investigation we might learn both about ourselves and about the universe in which we live. This idea recalls Tsiolkovski’s famous statement (of which Dashbalbar must also have been aware): “Earth is the cradle of humanity, but one cannot forever remain in the cradle” (translator unknown).

In comparison to Tsiolkovski and Gagarin, it is hard to gauge precisely the nature of Aleksandr Pushkin’s influence upon Dashbalbar. Obviously, as one who spoke and read Russian fluently, Dashbalbar was aware of Pushkin’s incomparable place in the history of Russian literature. But, if we read what he wrote about Pushkin in “Spring’s Braid”, we are left with a number of questions.

Consider the following: “Nowadays, Russia bows to Pushkin. On the plinth, where *he has stood, without moving, for a hundred years*, he is become a symbol of the majesty and wisdom of the Russian people. The Russian people would be inconceivable without Pushkin, it is inconceivable to imagine people and animals without Pushkin. We find ourselves transmitted through Pushkin, and Pushkin represents the ultimate in human talent, the beauty within humanity, he shows through himself the flame of the mind. In revering Pushkin, mankind reveres itself. This man Pushkin is able to represent his people, he is able to meld with his people’s elegance, their particular qualities and their faults. If you would embody the Russian people in a single person, the image which is able to express their fire, their talent, their characteristics reveals itself as Pushkin. Pushkin was already able to show the people, transmitted through himself, and thus it is obvious that he was also able to show humanity!” (Dashbalbar’s italics)

Are these the words of a Mongolian seeking to understand Russian/Soviet culture? Or is Dashbalbar simply himself, like Russia, in awe of Pushkin’s achievement? The constant switching here between Russia’s response and that of humanity is perplexing, especially when we realise how little understood and known Pushkin’s genius is, even today, outside the Russian-speaking world. Dashbalbar’s use of the Pushkin Memorial, and of Pushkin himself, is indicative, I would suggest, of a man struggling to understand the culture of a country which had had such an impact, for so many decades, on his own Mongolian people.

Moreover, of course, to equate the Russian people with humanity is to emphasise the idea which would be central to much of Dashbalbar’s subsequent writings and political work, namely the common humanity of all people. We shall see later how this plays out in poems such as “A Man” and the “Grass” trilogy, but for now we need only be aware that Pushkin’s influence on the Russian people, as much as his effect on Russian literature, was of great significance to Dashbalbar’s development, both as a writer and as a social campaigner.

The result of Dashbalbar’s sojourn in Moscow, then, was to open him to a number of influences *in situ*, rather than from the distant viewpoint of Mongolian society. He came to understand Russia and the Russian people and their language from within and grew to understand their influences and to observe how these influences played themselves out in his literary and social consciousness.

New constellations of experience were formed and allowed to develop, with the result that he returned to Ulaanbaatar in 1984 with a new perspective, as much upon the world within himself as upon the world beyond the confines of his own society.

A third influence on Dashbalbar's thinking must also be noted here. The man he calls "divine Bruno", the sixteenth-century Italian Dominican philosopher Giordano Bruno, was one who sought to understand human experience as it is perceived by the human mind. His works run through epistemology, semantic theory, cosmology, alchemy and ontology, and he is consumed with interest in the movement of the planets and in the infinite, isotropic universe. Dashbalbar, who, like most Mongolian intellectuals, was also influenced by Danzanravjaa, seems at times to link this maverick Buddhist scholar (killed by poisoning) with Bruno, the heretical Christian Platonist (burnt at the stake): in fact, Dashbalbar's choice of language is remarkable when he says, "Bruno burnt like a lotus flame, discovering the freedom of the mind, gazing coolly upon us from the depths of the stars." The lotus flame is a direct echo of the lotus, upon which the Buddha is iconographically shown, representing pure mind in bloom amid the mud of the unenlightened world. Thus, we are reminded also of Bruno's own statement: "I split the Heavens and soar to the infinite. What others see from afar, I leave far behind me."

The parallels between Bruno and the two Russian space explorers are not hard to grasp, but what seems important to me is that all three of these men of influence – indeed, all Dashbalbar's cultural influences as presented in the poems contained in this book – are pushing human experience and the investigation of human experience (that is, the interface of the human mind with the world perceived) beyond the limits previously established. Moreover, Bruno's influence as an alchemist of the mind (he was a friend and associate of John Dee, one of the most important and controversial scientists in Europe in the late 1500s) points not only to scientific investigation and discovery of the cosmos but equally to the philosophical investigation of the human mind, as exemplified by both Buddhist teaching and by psychological advances during the twentieth century. We can perhaps see the internal contradictions at work in these two pursuits in the stanza of Dashbalbar's poem "Allegro" which specifically deals with Bruno and his legacy:

Bruno comes at dusk from antiquity to open the door.
That which has burnt him no longer illuminates others.
Silently, he stands at the threshold, his mantle sags around him.
His eyes are thoughtful, like two stars falling and glimmering....

In addition to Dashbalbar's cultural and literary influences from previous generations, there remain the two contemporary poets with whom he was, and is still, closely associated, D Nyamsüren (1947-2002) and G Mend-Ooyo (b1952). This trio deserves a study to itself, but suffice it to say here that Dashbalbar's relationship with the other two writers obviously constituted an interweaving of ideas rather than a group of three individuals branching off at different angles. Dashbalbar seems to have stood at the center of their continuum, neither as romantic and wild as Nyamsüren (who spent little time in Ulaanbaatar, preferring to base himself in the small township of Ereentsov) nor as aloof and reticent as Mend-Ooyo.

Only Mend-Ooyo is mentioned in *The River Flows Gently*, and that only a couple of times. Significantly, he is mentioned in the first poem of the “Grass” trilogy, along with Injinashi, Yavuukhulan and another contemporary, J Saruulbuyan, as people “with grasses and/vegetation reaching to your soles...”. It is uncertain to me as to how this reference is to be read: given the largely serious nature of Dashbalbar’s oeuvre as a whole, it might seem unlikely that this was some veiled joke at Mend-Ooyo’s expense, but it does bring to mind an image of a highly traditional writer rooted in the land and in the landscape, seen through a lens colored both by respect and by an intimacy of friendship, which is certainly one way of understanding Mend-Ooyo’s personality and the depth of his relationship with Dashbalbar.

The work of all three of these writers, however, is characterised by a powerful sense of individuality, and they seem to me to have exercised very little direct influence on one another’s poetic style and affect. It remains to be seen how this trio of artists will be seen in terms of the development of Mongolian literature during the late twentieth century but, as their works are translated and published in the west, we will be able gradually to compare and analyse to what extent and in what ways they indeed did influence one another’s work⁵.

In 1980, Dashbalbar wrote what would become probably his most famous poem, “Love One Another, My People”. Although it is not included in *The River Flows Gently*, it is so central to an understanding of Dashbalbar’s poetic work that I shall quote it here in full:

LOVE ONE ANOTHER, MY PEOPLE

Love one another, my people, while you are alive.
Don’t keep from others whatever you find beautiful.
Don’t wound my heart with heedless barbs, and
don’t push anyone into a dark hole.

Don’t mock someone who’s gotten drunk,
think how it could even be your father.
And, if you manage to become famous,
open the door of happiness to others!
They should also not forget your kindness.
To someone who is lacking a single word of kindness,
You should search for it and speak it out.
Whether outside in the sun or at home when it’s cold,
don’t spend one moment at rest.

Don’t use harsh words to complain, you women,
about the kind young man you remember.

⁵ To date (October 2007) I have published a translation of Mend-Ooyo’s novel *Golden Hill* and a collection of his poetry, *Nomadic Lyrics* (both Ulaanbaatar, 2007, Mongolian Academy of Poetry and Culture; both forthcoming from Kegan Paul, London, 2008). The complete poetic works of Nyamsüren are scheduled from the same Mongolian publisher in 2009 and the publication of at least one further volume of Dashbalbar’s work is scheduled for publication in 2008.

Speak lovingly to those who loved you!
Let them remember you as a good lover.

Our lives are really similar,
our words constrict our throats the same way,
our tears drop onto our cheeks the same way –
things are much the same as we go along the road.
Wipe away a halt woman's tears without a word,
talk your lover up when she's tripped and fallen!

Today you're smiling, tomorrow you'll be crying.
Another day you're sad, and the next you'll be singing.
We all pass from the cradle to the grave -
if for no other reason, love one another!
People must not lack love on this wide earth!
I grasp happiness with the fire of my human mind,
the golden sun shines lovingly upon us all the same, and
so I think that loving others is the path of life,
I understand that to be loved by others is great joy.

It is perhaps tempting to see this single poem as the nexus of all that Dashbalbar wrote, but I would suggest rather that it be used as a multi-faceted prism, through which the essays and poems in the present collection may be viewed.

Dashbalbar's articulation of love ranges from the universal to the individual, but what is striking is the intimacy with which he describes his expression and understanding of love. In his essay "Spring's Braid, or the Lyrical Precipice", he meditates on the apprehension of Leonardo da Vinci's *Mona Lisa*: he says, "when we look at this picture, we forget everything, we forget that we are on the earth, we grasp the magic of the picture but we gaze at the picture, we are breathing with the picture." Neither the identity of Leonardo nor that of Mona Lisa are important here, rather what is important is the psychophysical experience of the image. It is more than seeing, more even than looking, it is an interbeing, where the observer and the observed meld together, in a kind of unity delineated by the fragility of time and space. We read such deep intimacy elsewhere in Dashbalbar's work and it becomes clear that somehow for him the expression of love is the expression of being human.

It is perhaps instructive to consider the poems in *The River Flows Gently* through the prism of "Love One Another, My People", not only because of the importance of the latter in Dashbalbar's output, but also because it was written in 1980, at about the same time as many of the poems in the current volume. The poem itself seems to me to exhibit a combination of rhetorical humanism and a profound and emotional intimacy – a perfect combination, one might say, for a poet-cum-politician.

Throughout Dashbalbar's work, the human condition, the human heart, is seen at once as a universal and as highly personal phenomenon. In "Love One Another, My People", however, the expression of openness and of a highly developed level of personal empathy in the words used indicates a feeling for the wider world, for a kind of family of man, which the poet trusts lies at the heart of our experience.

Let us compare this poem with two others in *The River Flows Gently* – “For You” and “A Man”. The titles alone should provoke some awareness, some perception of what Dashbalbar is seeking to convey here. The simplicity of these titles seems perhaps to indicate a simplicity of purpose, and in some ways that is precisely what we get.

“For You” is ostensibly a love poem, addressed to a woman who has once been, or is maybe still, Dashbalbar’s lover. But as we read through the text, we can be struck by the universal language used: the setting is the world, rather than a specific place, the love is expressed in terms of intimacy, but it appears to me that she who is addressed is more than an individual, that her presence is in some way a mirror or a representative of the world of which Dashbalbar is part.

In “A Man”, too, it is interesting how the language, though wide and extensive and open, is equally personal and intimate. Dashbalbar is able, by inserting into a text which is ostensibly about the nature of humanity the experiences of being an individual (“I travel on a distant road, singing and carrying my backpack./I am A MAN! I like to get wet in the snow, to stand out in the rain./I am A MAN! I like to read a brand new book, to kiss a woman’s lips”) and by adding these to the idea of the universal man (and here I am reminded of Dashbalbar’s hero Leonardo’s picture of the Vitruvian Man), to express the profundity of the human condition, of being neither fully an individual nor fully a manifestation of society as a whole.

To return to Dashbalbar’s comments on the Mona Lisa (which/whom he refers to as “La Gioconda”), it is as though the viewer is transfixed and transformed into an aspect of the world which s/he and the (subject matter of the) portrait inhabits, there is a feeling that the universal and the individual are two sides of the same coin. This is a very powerful way of looking at art, of course, for it emphasises the inter-relationship of artist and audience in a way that a more prosaic approach might fail to do. This technique makes it possible for Dashbalbar to express humanity and inter-relationship, to talk deeply of personal power and private intimacy, and to encourage others to look anew and afresh at their relationship with the world and with each other, while still ostensibly dealing with a personal relationship of love or else a deep relationship with the cosmos.

Both of these poems were written in the mid-1980s, some time before Dashbalbar became interested in running for political office. There is a great deal of research to be carried out regarding his political career and its relationship to his poetic work, but suffice it to say that we can see, all through the poems here collected, the ideas of equality and honesty and self-determination which informed his politics.

In “Spring’s Braid”, Dashbalbar speaks of the interaction between the writer and the reader, how the writer creates the context in which the reader can discover his or her own approach to, and understanding of, a work of art. “A work of art never explains itself to you and it is only by listening to its whisper that a person can make art. Talent is somewhat similar for the creator and the reader. The talent for reading is an artistic talent! In this way, the reader creates along with the creator. The capability to preserve through art what the creator intends for himself, and the talent of contemplation which comes from the art, are what creates the reader.” Reading this alongside “A Man” and “For You,” and with an awareness of what Dashbalbar would accomplish over the course of the following fifteen years, it becomes clear that the driving force behind his experience of being a poet, as much as of simply being a part of Mongolian society, of the

universe itself, is a combination of self-determination and awareness of the presence of others, on both a literal, physical level and at the level at which time and space collapses.

So, as we begin to investigate the poems of *The River Flows Gently*, we see how Dashbalbar's sensibility relates to the position of himself and others on many different levels throughout the universe. His language and subject matter – the powerful repetition of "I am A MAN", for instance, or the presence throughout the poems of particular historical figures such as Giordano Bruno and Homer (and, interestingly, Mongolians appear less frequently than Europeans, again pointing to the concept of the universal in Dashbalbar's thought) – indicate a kinship stretching beyond both the confines of Mongolia and the construct of time.

One of Dashbalbar's concerns as a politician was the importance of Mongolia's independence and nationhood: he was a passionate advocate of self-sufficiency and campaigned against the activity within the country of foreign business, as well as against the relationship between the Mongolian political and business communities and foreign governments, in particular the Chinese. It is instructive, then, to look at the way in which he emphasises self-reliance whilst emphasising also the unity of the world and the environment.

In the paper already quoted, Batkhuyag speaks of the first conversation he had with Dashbalbar. Dashbalbar's words provide another access point into his work: "An Indian ascetic said that, when we've finished cutting down all the trees and catching all the fish, we'll understand that we cannot eat gold. In just this way, when one aged eagle is left in the mountains and one dark wolf is left on the steppe, then people will understand the wisdom of being proud. These creatures were born from a divine lineage and it seems that they have more pride than we humans do. So that we might be proud, we can learn one small thing from the eagle and the wolf, which is to speak the truth. In our behavior, we should appear to be just like the eagle, just like the wolf rushing over the steppe." This statement fits into the long tradition of wilderness writing and of ecological advocacy, and in many ways it echoes landmark speeches such as Chief Seattle's 1854 address to the Commissioner of Indian Affairs for Washington Territory. The passion and directness with which Dashbalbar speaks of the natural world, and of the human position within it and response to it, suggests an understanding, both of the personal and the corporate toll which humanity exercises. It is interesting to see how, during the 1990s and, following Dashbalbar's death, into the twenty-first century, environmental and land-based politics – such as that concerned with mining - have developed in Mongolia, alongside the interventions of both domestic and foreign concerns.

These concerns are clearly articulated in Dashbalbar's poetry, albeit in a more intimate and less overtly political fashion. As we read these poems, however, we should remain aware that the majority were written some time before he became involved with politics, and we can perhaps view these (and the other ideas described in this paper) as some kind of proto-manifesto, outlining the concerns which he was to develop over the years prior to his death.

The interweaving of the natural world and the world of politics is made clear in the three "Grass" poems, written in 1983. The first few lines of the first poem in the sequence expresses Dashbalbar's vision, not only concerning the grasses but also, I would hazard, nature itself and the living organism of the universe as a whole:

Oh, grasses, my parents and my brothers and my children at a single time....
Oh, grasses, my dear body and my pure desire and my loving companions....
Sighing gently, I stroke the grasses.
My grasses, I take in your scent as an infant's soft curly hair.
My grasses, I stroke you as old men stroke their white beards.
My grasses, I kiss you as I kiss my passionate lover's hair, black as spades.
Oh, grasses, my coursing blood, my pigtailed....
Oh, my ancestors in times rubbed and wasted away,
oh, they blow in the wind, dissolve into grasses.

What is significant about these lines is the way in which they associate the grasses with the ancestors, at once dead and still very much living in the land and in the traditions of Mongolia. They are, "at a single time," Dashbalbar's family, another indication of the extent to which he felt himself directly connected to the natural world, and to the ancestors and to his own society. This of course is not uncommon in Mongolian literature: indeed, both Nyamsüren and Mend-Ooyo, both of whom were close friends of, and frequently linked to, Dashbalbar, speak at length of such thing in their own work; there is, moreover, a deep tradition in Mongolian poetry of honoring the land and the ancestors. Nonetheless, it seems to me important to notice the depth of physical, corporeal connection which Dashbalbar perceives here, in how truly unified a whole he appears to view the world. It is the language which is unusual here, rather than the ideas which it conveys. Dashbalbar's highly sensuous image of his caressing the grasses as his lover's black hair is picked up in the third poem in the sequence where he writes, "I am the carpet beneath a pair of lovers." It is almost as though he is imagining himself, as the grasses, as a kind of matchmaker: in fact, elsewhere in this poem, he writes,

In peaceful times, men and grasses make friends,
and they strive to support each other beneath the distant stars,
and they are great allies!

So here we have Dashbalbar not only envisioning himself directly in the form and psychic aspect of the grasses, but equally he is showing the deep and ancient relationship which exists between the human world and the world of grasses.

Again in these poems we are reminded of the political aspect of Dashbalbar's poetic voice. There is clearly a strong connection between the grass and the people, and this relates to his advocacy of humanity as part of, rather than acting against, the universe.

The second of these three poems illustrates why Dashbalbar feels such a connection with grasses. The entire text is concerned with the power and resolute nature of grass, how they "grow and completely cover the world", how, "like needles, their young bodies directly penetrate the road." They are even more like humans:

The grasses, with humans and animals, manage every calamity,
dying together, awakening together, through many eons,
falling, exactly like a man, struck down by the scythe of cruel war,
rising, exactly like a man, from the smoke of fires,

never abandoning the world!

In such a way, then, Dashbalbar is offering us a way of understanding the world, in which grasses are not merely metaphors for humans, they are specifically identified with humans, and humans thereby with grasses; they are perceived as existing in the same way, as being simply two species of equal and related worth, as having comparable feelings and desires and experiences. And it is this way of understanding the relationship between human beings and the grasses which cover the world upon which they dwell that informs his vision for how humans should be living. As if to compliment what he says in "Love One Another, My People", that "the golden sun shines lovingly upon us all the same", in this poem he says, "The grasses of the world, like anyone else, love freedom". Thus our common humanity is replaced by an even deeper idea, our common existence under the sun: we and the grasses and the world as a whole all desire and yearn for freedom, for the opportunity to live a complete and fulfilled life, to express ourselves and to grow and develop as we have been made to do. There is no more potent expression of Dashbalbar's faith in humanity, I would suggest, than these three poems about grass.

This faith in the human experience and in the relationship of humans with one another and with the natural world is perhaps the most potent and significant expression, both of Dashbalbar's love and of his encouragement of love in others. Again, in "Love One Another, My People", we read:

Our lives are really similar,
our words constrict our throats the same way,
our tears drop onto our cheeks the same way –
things are much the same as we go along the road.

While this is obviously a reference to the human world, we have already seen that he makes clear connections between the human world and the world as a whole, and it takes little imagination to make the connection between the sentiment expressed in these lines and those of the three "Grass" poems. The extrapolation from the "Grass" poems into the universe as a whole does not constitute a vast leap of understanding and it is in the depth of intimacy, the feeling of love between the poet and the universe, that we find the social and political import so vital, so gravid.

The existence of the natural world, of course, takes place within the confines of time and its inexorable movement. Dashbalbar speaks very little of the nature of time itself, and a great deal (implicitly and explicitly) about the interpenetration of time and existence. In the one poem in the present volume which deals directly with time, indeed its title is "Time", he explicitly states,

Amid the silence of the not quite empty, not quite empty space,
the world's sphere revolves, wearing itself away....
A single eye watches a leaf, me, floating on the river of time,
imagines it, unsevered from timelessness....

The constant repetition which is a feature of this poem seems to reveal just how Dashbalbar understands time as a characteristic of the universe. It is "darkness",

“beginningless”, “endless” and “inconceivable”, over and over and over, and the constancy and the variations upon this constancy from line to line are indicators of the subtle changes in the reality which constitutes the progress, the forward development of time.

But more interesting to Dashbalbar, I believe, is the place of humanity within time and, in particular, how the experience of humanity has been felt in similar ways throughout history. We have already seen how in “A Man”, Dashbalbar extends his personhood to encompass the experience of different people(s) in different places; the same is true in this poem for the experience of these people(s) over time.

The way in which Dashbalbar constructs time seems to be directly related to his understanding of the experience of humanity and its environment. We have already seen how he seeks to convey his personal experience as being somehow melded, whether psychophysically through the natural world or in a mystical way through a common sense of humanity: the time in which this melding takes place collapses into a single moment, expands to fill the universe, equally and absolutely.

This exposition of time is achieved through placing next to one another different timeframes, different references for time. For instance, in “Autumn and Time”, Dashbalbar compares the ruins of the temple at Manzushriin Khiid with a young tourist: “A foreign girl, in a red shirt and blue trousers, is standing over there, in the shadow of the temple, her shimmering beauty does not amaze [Manzushriin Khiid’s] own great majesty, which seems small amidst the mountains. They balance one the other.

“Looking up, it is as though a thousand years are in these traces, these cliffs above the ridges on the Heaven-touching mountains, and they are still and silent.” Through this descriptive comparison, he expresses not only the visual but also the historical: the temple’s antiquity and the girl’s youth parallel and contrast one another at the same time, meeting across the centuries however and interpenetrating at a deep level of experience.

The title of this essay is also worth considering. It is one of a series of essays and poems about autumn, which Dashbalbar tells us is “my favorite season”. The cycle of the seasons is of great importance to Mongolian literature: nomadic culture requires an awareness of the changing year and the transition periods between seasons, so that essential labor can be carried out and encampments moved and consolidated. But Dashbalbar’s preference for autumn seems to relate more to its place in the yearly cycle, the special emphasis which it makes upon the natural world and thereby upon the human inhabitants of that world. The expression of autumn is inexorably bound up with the passing of time and with the hidden potential for transcendence, and it is in this context which Dashbalbar chooses principally to use it.

In this series of poems based on the autumnal cycle, Dashbalbar runs through a day, from morning through daytime and evening and into night-time. Towards the middle of the day, amid the clarity of the skies and the water, amid the white ger and the women who are talking together as they work, he experiences a kind of vision:

The young girl laughs until the quartz clacks.
She appears there, standing in the rainbow of my thoughts.
In the haze of long ago, a rain of starry stories, and

the children of my age were horses in the meadow at the bottom of my heart.
I came to the horses, bringing a young girl,
came to bind a rainbow from the depths of skyblue stars....
The stars flow with song, laugh at the girl from deep skyblue Heaven,
and I discover magic on the back of a galloping steed!
Now the yellow shirt is too small for my son, now the little girl has grey hair,
and amid these wonderful thoughts, I seem to see a dance of happy dreams.

There are several observations to be made about this passage. The language is strange and visionary, but it also expresses the immanence of dreams and thus the way in which the poet perceives the interplay of time and space and the reality or otherwise of what he is seeing before his eyes. It should also be said that the progress of time, even within these few lines, is presented in an extremely clear fashion: it is the stars, flowing with song, and the poet, upon the galloping steed, which drive the years past in but a couple of lines, at the end of which movement the years have brought the transformation of age, mimicked by the transformation of autumn.

The endless flow of time is also a theme of these autumn poems. The final lines of "An Autumn Evening" encapsulate something of the feeling which Dashbalbar wants to express to his readers about the human apprehension of, and relationship to, the flow of time. He says,

Moreover, time and people flow forward,
they remain now, passing below Heaven, moving into the future.
But the past, the present and the future are our conceptions,
and don't they who deny the threefold flow of our one great time rush
onwards, down the runnels?

The interesting point here is the "threefold flow", a phrase which brings together the ideas of past/present/future and of continuous flow. This is a strangely comforting paradox, a paradox with which we are somehow quite familiar, but it nonetheless throws into relief both our (mis)conception of time as a series of separate parts and our perception of it as being a single entity, rushing down the runnels, passing into the future.

Dashbalbar regards time as a profound force and, in the shortest poem in this book, he manages to express both the poignant beauty of the autumn and the natural unflinching harshness of time:

As though paying out golden pieces,
a reward for love in the six months of spring and summer,
the fine, untamed poplar casts away its leaves.
The soft winds of autumn hold them,
like the sun's accountant, turning them in air.

The poplar tree is a stock image for a lover, and the falling of leaves in this context speaks for itself. The sun and the wind work together, holding them in brightness and in air, casting them about, we suppose, to settle upon the earth. In only five lines, the poet speaks of love and time, and of the death or transformation of the self.

The origin of Dashbalbar's own understanding of time would seem to be drawn from several sources. We have already seen that he was interested in cosmology and in the ideas of infinity proposed by Tsiolkovski and Bruno. Moreover, there are clear influences from Buddhism in his use of language and in the idea of the past, present and future as being merely ideations. But it strikes me that his approach to the passing of time, the way in which he configures it as a macrocosmic version of the autumn day, is of his own thinking, albeit drawing on a tradition found both in Mongolian literature, and in other world literatures with which he might or might not have been familiar, of the cycle of the seasons as being an analog for the human and the cosmic cycle of existence.

Such a view, of course, leads us to contemplate ourselves as an endlessly repeating cycle of birth and death: the Buddhist conception of life as a circle of regeneration, combined, and maybe contrasted, with the experiential cycle of life as seen in nature, not only provides us with an understanding of time as envisioned and expressed in Dashbalbar's poetry, but, as we see in the teaching of all the spiritual paths (such as the Vajrayana Buddhism as practised in Mongolia) which sprang originally from the Indic tradition, it also gives us a palpable reason for acting with compassion for, and with understanding of, other beings, both human and nonhuman.

With this in mind, then, we can return to "Love One Another, My People", and observe the way in which time, the flow of which we have already seen to be inevitable, the cyclic nature of which we have already apprehended, is used by Dashbalbar as an encouragement to develop love for others, from both a spiritual and a practical point of view.

At first glance, there seems to be nothing explicit about these ideas concerning compassion and the unstoppable passing of time, with which we have just been wrestling. What reveals itself gradually, however, are echoes of a particular aspect of Buddhist teaching and, moreover, the work of its best-known Mongolian exponent. For the poetic work of the nineteenth century monk Danzanravjaa, the fifth Noyon Khutugtu of the Gobi, are full of instructional texts and full of advice to his students. Dashbalbar's advice in this poem is very similar to much of Danzanravjaa's. For instance, when Dashbalbar writes,

Today you're smiling, tomorrow you'll be crying.
Another day you're sad, and the next you'll be singing.
We all pass from the cradle to the grave -
if for no other reason, love one another!

there are clear echoes of Danzanravjaa's many poems of encouragement, such as this one, written for one of his student supporters⁶:

FOR DASH ZAISAN

The lama, in his great love,
Scolds what is harmful.
But if, with a satisfied mind,
We remain present in our prayer, it's a fine thing.

⁶ This poem is on p90 of my translation of Danzanravjaa's poetic works, *Perfect Qualities: The Collected Poems of the 5th Noyon Khutagt Danzanravjaa (1803-1856)* (2006, Ulaanbaatar, Mongolian Academy of Poetry and Culture)

In this life, our friends
scold our devotion.
But, when you're through with laughing,
if you recognise their slander for the trickery it is, it's a fine thing.

Whatever is consolidated,
trickery scatters.
It's a fine thing, if everything is pleasure for
a mind which lacks desire for such frauds.

The body is born and dies -
and nothing has been added.
If you exert yourself in faith
to help all beings, it's a fine thing.

With a mind as graceful as silk
(since neither of us is a monk),
if we exert ourselves, without timidity,
in the activity of a thousand Buddhas, it's a fine thing.

Escaping from the mind
as from a spider's web,
may I vanish into Sukhavati
and meet with the protecting lama.

As I say, there is a myriad of similar texts in Danzanravjaa's output, each of them exhorting his followers to treat one another as well as they would treat themselves. What is explicit in his work, though, unlike in Dashbalbar's, is the idea that behavior which transgresses this compassionate attitude is behavior which is going to lead to misery in this world and the next. That there might be far more explicit expositions of this realisation elsewhere in Danzanravjaa's poetry is not an unreasonable expectation: after all, Danzanravjaa was writing from a time and place in Mongolian history where, unlike the Soviet-inspired revolutionary thought of the 1970s and 1980s during which Dashbalbar was writing, rebirth and the hell realms were accepted as totally real and subject to experience. For Dashbalbar, as a modern man, formed by an understanding of Mongolian tradition and culture framed within a scientific and materialist education, the nexus of time and compassion was not necessarily a good rebirth on a physical level; rather it manifested itself, both as the self-awareness of the virtuous person and as the person at peace with themselves as they approached the end of their lives. In other words, the aspect of Dashbalbar's writing in which love is encouraged as a human project is there both for the betterment of society and for the betterment of individuals.

All this having been said, there are still of course contradictions in Dashbalbar's approach to time, its direction and its universality. It is as though, whilst consistently acknowledging the irreversibility of time and the fact that an individual would prefer (presumably) to die in a state of happiness than of

sadness, there still remains the melancholy of the passing of time.

But, of course, we should always keep in mind that Dashbalbar wrote the poems in this book during his twenties, that he was still a very young man, a very young poet; indeed, he was only forty-two at the time of his death. In “All Things are Fulfilled in Time”, we find the following stanzas:

Today I am in love with this girl.
Tomorrow she will be more beautiful.
This night will not return to us,
and I shall kiss her, modestly.

The late flowers do not grow in the winter,
nor will the days return.
Everything which happens this very day
supports me with its poetry.

It touches the young man’s fine mind,
he is handsome beneath the moon.
But you, my dear girl,
will be an old woman, leaning on a stick.

But only now, I feel this wondrous beauty,
Only now, I love this bright form.
Unforsaken in the mists of days to come,
I stand amid today’s broad gleam.

Here we see the realisation of time’s passing together with the collapsing of time into a moment, a singularity in which the experience of youth is “unforsaken in the mist of days to come”. It seems that, somehow, the poet is here combining— as perhaps he does throughout his poetry – the expression of love (both eros and agape), of compassion, of the passing of time and of the unity which is an alternative realisation of the interface of time, space and love. This is a difficult admixture to keep a hold of, there is such slippage and such uncertainty that it might fall from one’s grasp at any moment: nonetheless, it seems to me that Dashbalbar’s intention is to express, in as clear and honest a way as he can, a single experience of the multifaceted, multidimensional universe in which we live, an experience which links backwards through Gagarin and Tsiolkovski, Danzanravjaa and Bruno, and forward into the vision of the young girl as an old woman, leaning on a stick. And as we are reminded of this, we hear the words, “If for no other reason, love one another!”

Having looked at Dashbalbar’s poetry through the prisms of human experience and of time, we turn now to the wider world, and to his relationship with Mongolian society. In particular, given his love for the natural world, we should give careful thought to his treatment of the nomadic culture from which the modern culture of Mongolia has grown.

It behoves me first to say that it is this aspect of his work which best illustrates his friendship with Nyamsüren and Mend-Ooyo, both of whose work celebrate the many faces of nature. Mend-Ooyo, the only one of the trio who is still alive, continues to celebrate his own nomadic heritage and his novel *Golden Hill* is an

extended meditation on the landscape and history and mythology of the area around the hill of the title, located in the south-west of the country, in Dariganga aimag. Neither Nyamsüren nor Mend-Ooyo have exhibited, either in their life or in their writing, the social and political thrust which marked Dashbalbar's final years, but all three express nomadism, and all that flows from it, with a profound appreciation.

Mongolian society, prior to the 1921 revolution, was founded and based upon nomadism, insofar as the majority of the population lived in gers, tended livestock and moved from site to site throughout the year, according to the seasons. This way of life has several consequences. First, of course, the idea of home is very different from that experienced in a non-nomadic, sedentary society. People herde and collect almost nothing which has neither practical nor family significance, meaning that they have fewer personal possessions. The family is extended, extended even to the animals and, in particular, to the horses, the horse having for many centuries held a special place in Mongolian society. Family entertainment is focussed around a few objects which are easily transported, and musical entertainment generally constitutes either one solo performer or a singer accompanied by one other instrument. Food is simple and based around that which is to hand, namely the livestock and whatever they produce, mediated by a few readily available vegetables and little else. Alcohol – some of which comes also from the livestock, such as mare's milk - is widely consumed. There is a deep connection to the earth and to the natural world, as I have already mentioned, and this extends to an association of one's country with the idea of mother/origin.

This latter theme is at the center of Dashbalbar's poem "Motherland". Indeed, the Mongolian title, "*Ekh Oron*," can mean either "motherland" or "land of origin", the word *ekh* meaning both "origin" and "mother" (though mother in terms of origin, rather than in terms of one's biological mother, for which the word *eej* is generally used). The entire poem is couched as a kind of prayer to the land of the poet's birth, to Mongolia perhaps rather than the specific place from which he comes (and for which the word *nutag* would be used).

To read the poem, we could at most point substitute the word "mother" for "motherland", suggesting that for Dashbalbar the country of his birth, of his mother and thus of his lineage, might somehow constitute a form of what we might in English refer to as "Mother Earth". Indeed, this discourse is closely related to pre-Buddhist shamanism, and parallels with Goddess worship lie not too far from the surface. Right from the opening two lines - "I make obeisance to You, my divine motherland./I believe that the truth dwells in the stones lying here and there" – we are before a godlike figure.

As the poem develops, there are echoes of other (quasi-)religious texts from other places and from other times. There are conceptual echoes of the Psalms, perhaps, and of ancient Babylonian and Egyptian texts, and there is also the idea that the Motherland will deliver the poet – and in fact, all of us – from impurity:

Oh, my motherland, I know the blazing, harsh fire to be You.
I live my life, relying on the gentle breath within!
Oh, my motherland, I know the pure bright air is Yours.
You penetrate me in the counting of my breaths!
Oh, my motherland! You come to us, changing into all things.
My way of life is Your deep joy.

I try to find You in the rocks,
You stand up out of the world's vegetation.
To be of benefit to all, You dwell in everything,
and You lead us from the path of wickedness.

The capitalisation of You is present in the original and, although I have not read any Mongolian translation of the Bible, my feeling is that Dashbalbar is, consciously or not, drawing from sources other than his own imagination as how best to express his feeling for his Motherland as a kind of salvatrix.

That this text is panentheist (“You dwell in everything”) points simply to the ancient approach to the earth, to the universe as a whole, which is found in Mongolian shamanic texts of a much earlier era. Dashbalbar, like his friends Nyamsüren and Mend-Ooyo, has in his heart an apprehension of the living universe, a realisation of the wild, gentle, radiant, violent, gentle, all-encompassing and all-embracing principle which is traditionally associated with the Mother. The panentheism expressed by Dashbalbar, however, is motivated by a peculiarly Buddhist intention, “to be of benefit to all”: this is at once a direct reference to one of the basic vows of Vajrayana Buddhism, as well as to the general theme which I have suggested for Dashbalbar’s work, and which we find in “Love One Another, My People”.

The place of nomadic society in Dashbalbar’s work is not as obvious as it is, for instance in Mend-Ooyo’s. Dashbalbar does not talk about conversations around the hearth, nor does he discuss the movement of livestock and the packing up of the ger and the family possessions before a move. For Dashbalbar, nomadism is held more as the expression of the landscape itself: the nomadic perception moves across the landscape, across the hills and through the skies, fixing upon ideas or physical objects for a while, before moving on once again.

The final piece in *The River Flows Gently*, “I am Slowly Living in the Perfect World”, is a sequence of poems and contemplative essays on landscape and emotion. Before I address the issues of nomadic society present in this work, I want briefly to touch upon the title, which is also the title of the sixth and final part of the sequence.

The atmosphere conveyed through the idea of “slowly living” might suggest a kind of Thoreau-like “back to nature” theme, where one lives life in contrast to an urban craziness, sensitive to and living with the rhythms of nature. In some ways, this is precisely what Dashbalbar appears to be addressing, but his intention I feel is also to preserve his own continual (re)connection with the natural history (and the historical nature) of Mongolia, the country of his lineage and of his people.

In Mongolian, the “perfect world” of the title is “*ülemjin orchlon*”, which for me carries a very strong echo of Danzanravjaa’s most famous poem, “Perfect Qualities”, “*ülemjin chanar*”. I find it hard to believe that Dashbalbar did not have this connection in mind: Danzanravjaa’s poem was addressed to his beloved wife and speaks of the emotional and spiritual effects which her “perfect qualities” engender in him. The same is true of this “perfect world” of which Dashbalbar writes: this, his book’s final meditation, presents us with ideas concerning hills and rivers and lakes and love and music before returning to the title and to a memory, a vision of a happy family at rest in this perfect world.

We can thus perhaps see the title as more than a summary of the text. In some ways, we might understand it as being for Dashbalbar the very statement which

gives rise to the text, a thought, a seed from which the words of exposition grow and develop over the pages which follow, in a manner then not unlike the grasses in the “Grass” triptych which we examined earlier.

If we turn to the text of the sequence itself, we can again see Dashbalbar intensely observing the natural world and its interplay with the human world. In each section, we are offered an example of how the landscape presents itself – or, perhaps more accurately, how it is perceived by the human eye – and we are thereby encouraged to enter into our own contemplation.

One very human theme runs throughout “I am Slowly Living in the Perfect World”, and that is the theme of a beautiful woman, presumably the reality or the memory of Dashbalbar’s own lover. For instance, in the third part – “Lakes” – he says: “The beauty of Lake Ganga by night is ravishing, like a woman. The lovely river is like a fine lover, it holds thought, it gives pleasure to the mind. The stars shine in the waters of the lake as though in the sky and the expression of their beautiful bodies was the sound of poetry, *as wondrous as the girls of my homeland*.”

“At night, amidst the breathing of my Ganga and the whispers of the young couple beneath the red willows on its bank, in this world of dreams I take my hat and walk away. The Ganga is really one of the beautiful waters of the world.”

Such highly sensuous and emotional thoughts flow right through this sequence of poems and essays, and while the feeling is of an intense and powerful sweetness, it is, strangely, in no wise overwhelming. We find this also – though in different ways and to different degrees - in the work of Nyamsüren and Mend-Ooyo. It would seem that the experience of the stretch of the landscape is, for Dashbalbar, not the crass experience of the physical body of a woman, but a metageography of the human body as much as of the body of the earth. In this way, it is possible to conceive of the poet’s relationship with the landscape, and his movement over the landscape, just as nomadic caravans move over the landscape – with care and respect and with an intimate, sensitive feeling.

So I would suggest that “I am Slowly Living in the Perfect World” is an exemplary text through which to understand Dashbalbar’s relationship to the nomadic experience. It seems to me in fact simply to be the experience of traversing the land with care and with love, of living with the landscape in a natural and intimate way. As Dashbalbar says in the first part of the text, “Mountains”, “I knew that, upon a thoroughbred horse, as it whinnied at the beautiful mountains, I visited the meadow of dreams, and I raised the pennant, splashing in the soft rain of memory. And so, during my life, I gave my heart to the mountains and the mountains’ peaceful nature was revealed to me.” This last sentence, in which he “gave my heart to the mountains”, holds the language of marriage, of commitment to something from which one cannot be parted.

In the closing paragraphs of the text, we read the following: “I am fully preoccupied with love for all that I know within myself, and that I celebrate in the shining sun. Though the sun rises every day, the perfect world beneath does not appear old to me!

“I am in a hurry slowly to watch the blueness of the sky, slowly to listen to the whispering of the rivers, and slowly to live among people, How can people, the sun, the birds, trees and waters be too lovely? It is a crime to live a few years amidst this perfection! This is not greed, rather it is an attempt to feel completely the loveliness of existence.” With the memory of what we have discussed before, I believe that we can again see here Dashbalbar’s feeling for the landscape of

Dariganga, for the family and for the people which he so loves and for the feeling of profound (inter)relationship with the cosmos which runs through the poems and essays of *The River Flows Gently*.

To conclude this section, I want to look at the way in which nomadism has been altered by the gradual urbanisation of the population of Mongolia. After all, more than half the population now (fall 2007) lives in Ulaanbaatar, which leaves only a minority as genuine nomads, and therefore perhaps redefines Mongolia as something approaching a sedentary society. In terms of the previous discussion about Dashbalbar's understanding of nomadism and its (and his) relationship to the Mongolian landscape, what issues does this raise in relation to his subsequent status as a popular leader and opposition politician?

That he was a popular politician is uncontested: thousands turned up to his funeral and his death was greeted by a kind of national mourning. It is also uncontested that he campaigned against international intervention into Mongolia and for the self-determination of the Mongolian people. This attitude of cultural and political self-sufficiency is an integral part of the Mongolian psyche, with its roots in the Chinggisid society of the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries. It is thus a part of a poetic heritage which has survived over the centuries, in gradually developing forms, into the present day. Dashbalbar's poetic work is rooted in these literary and cultural traditions, albeit in a highly personalised form, and this is found throughout the poems of *The River Flows Gently*, as throughout all his work.

What we do not hear in Dashbalbar's work – and what is curiously lacking from contemporary Mongolian literature as a whole – is a desire to return to a Golden Age, a dissatisfaction with the current situation and a romanticised view of perfect days of yore. Rather, what Dashbalbar shows us is the effect upon his psyche of the memories which the landscape holds for him. If we again look at the title of "I am Slowly Living in the Perfect World", we see that it indicates the perfection of the world in which the poet is living, that is to say, the continual present is perfect for him. What is this idea of perfection, then? What is it that he would be seeking office in order to change just a few years later? For me, the main thrust of Dashbalbar's writings, both before and after the political changes in Mongolia during the early 1990s, is that it is the surface elements of society which need to change, but not those deep elements which, like the hills and the rivers, have remained powerful and faithful for centuries, the homes of the ancestors and the source of comfort and wisdom in equal measure.

So this is the love which lies at the heart of *The River Flows Gently*. Dashbalbar intends, it seems to me, to expose to his readers the presence of the deep and truthful love which he himself feels himself receiving from the natural features of the landscape, from the ancestors who dwell in those natural features, from the Buddhas and local spirits who dwell in the air and in the trees and in the grasses, and from those creatures and people which are so close to him. By showing us his feelings and his response to these things, he wants I believe to take to heart the experience of this love, which he made manifest six years before the publication of this book, in the poem with which I began this exposition. Dashbalbar's son Gangaabaatar wrote me that his father once told him, "Poetry is godliness. True poets are gods within." Batkhuyag, too, writes that Dashbalbar said to him, "All things in the world are art. Not one thing on the earth is not art. If you do not sense this art, it is pointless to write poetry. Moreover, poetry is attitude. The person who expresses attitude in a poem is a

real poet.” In many ways, I think, Dashbalbar wanted to see all things as good, and all people as being good: it was only when he could see for himself that there were problems that he decided to take action and become involved with politics. But at this point in his life, in 1986, his political career was still some years in the future and he was still able to publish *The River Flows Gently*, with its visions, its vast skies, its profound emotions and its powerful, heartfelt love.

This being a translation, it is hard to convey the prosodic, lexical and phonemic nature of the original text. To hear the original would be of course to hear the poet himself, his ideas presented to us through the sonic and the visual aspects of the written word.

Nonetheless, I believe it would be useful to look briefly at Dashbalbar’s poems from the viewpoint of the visual and the sonic. Even if this be only descriptive, it will at least engage the reader in some kind of understanding of the poems which Dashbalbar actually wrote, the words which he deliberately placed in a specific order, rather than the translations which I have crafted, with a greater or a lesser level of accuracy and faithfulness, from his words.

I suggest we approach the poems along two separate, though connected, trajectories, the structural and the semantic. From the structural point of view, Mongolian poetry retains, on what I would suggest is a far more conscious level than does the poetry of the Indo-European western community, the mnemonic devices with which the oral (epic) poetry was composed during the pre- and semi-literate periods of the country’s history. That is to say, when a poet chooses to use a particular structure, it is quite clear what he or she is seeking through this choice to emphasise.

Simply on a visual level, there is the repetition of initial consonants, within a line or else in the first word of each line in a single verse. This latter is known as the *head (tolgoi)* and is frequently used alongside a word repeated at the end of every line, the *tail (süül)*. To look at much Mongolian poetry, right up into the present day, we see the head/tail technique frequently in evidence. Dashbalbar is no exception, although he, like many contemporary authors, tends to use the head with either no tail at all or else with a modified tail, in the form either of a grammatical ending or of something akin to an extended *abab* structure.

Of course, in the late twentieth century, Mongolia was a literate society, which no longer required the form of oral literature in order for the culture to call to mind its history and its traditions. Thus, just as with the iambic pentameter in English verse, the head/tail structure has become a kind of formula, whose contemporary usage is different from its usage in pre-modern eras.

Dashbalbar’s use of this device, combined with the alliteration which is also found in traditional verse, is frequently affected by its inclusion in lines of unusual length. Consider, for instance, the poem “An Autumn Evening”. The structure of the poem is such that the translation reads almost like a piece of poetic prose, rather than like a piece of verse. But in the original, there are passages where the initial letter is repeated over several lines, including one such passage where the initial G is repeated eight times in ten lines. That the lines are so long, though, sometimes around twenty syllables over several lines, means that the rhythm ordinarily set up by the repeated initial letter is sufficiently weakened so as to be almost lost.

Dashbalbar’s approach to this structural device is unusual. Because he so rarely employs the tail device, the verse is at once given a subtlety both through

the temporal gaps between line initials and through the meandering flow of the long lines. The final effect in these poems, with their long and many lines, is of a river of words, creating and linking together a series of ideas and moving slowly towards a conclusion.

The one poem in this collection where there is a significantly different structure is “A Man”, where the repetition of “I am a man” punctuates the text throughout. The words in the original show far stronger phonemic qualities (voiced stop and voiceless fricative) than in the translation (nasals), but, through repetition, the concept nevertheless retains its power.

“A Man” could be described, not simply as a poem, but as a kind of chant, where the repetition of line initials, of syntax, of alliteration and of conceptual material becomes a kind of mantra, a text pointing to the reality which Dashbalbar wishes to expose but somehow enclosing the reader in the complexity and holism of this reality’s manifestation.

Just as it is impossible of course consequently and successfully to discuss all the poetry in this book from the viewpoint of one, or even a few, individual poems, so Dashbalbar’s essays are also both similar to one another and yet examples of a single contemplative and analytical approach to the subject matter.

That Dashbalbar was first and foremost a poet can be heard in the way his prose sounds, his texts – particularly the shorter ones - are almost prosepoems. For instance, the sequence of five texts beginning with “A Bright Melody” is full of the flow and repetition which we have already seen is characteristic of his poetry. In particular, “Omens” and “When the Moon Rises...” use alliteration and internal rhyme and the oneiric patterning of the rising of the moon and the mystery and the sounds of the night to conjure in the mind of the listener, of the one experiencing through the poet’s words the poet’s apprehension of the world, the melancholy and the strange pleasure of this experience.

It often seems to me that these short meditative essays show to the fullest extent the ways in which Dashbalbar seeks in his use of phonemic and syntactical structure to lead the reader – the reader reading proactively and deliberately – into the comingled landscapes of dreams and visions and hills and heaven and the barking of dogs, and in this way also to reveal, in the sounds of the words chosen and in the images placed before our eyes, the universe in which he lives, with its common humanity, its sadness and its joys and its unseen topographies of the heart.

For Dashbalbar is a stylist simply in order to convey his message. He can in no way be seen as a postmodernist, nor as a poet working with the concrete wordness of words: rather, his project as I see it is to create a feeling, an atmosphere in which the reader can look deeper inside him- or herself and grow more aware of the relationship, in the particular case of this sequence of prosepoems, between the world without and the world within.

In the longer prose pieces, which are too long to be prosepoems and exhibit far more of an essay structure, the tone is still one of contemplation, of philosophical interrogation. “Spring’s Braid, or the Lyrical Precipice”, for instance, moves across vast swathes of human experience, historical and cultural and societal and political, but its simple message is found, finally, in the closing paragraph. Although Dashbalbar lived for another fifteen years following the completion of this essay, although he spent much of that time involved with the democracy movement in Mongolia and in creating a new society for his people, and although he found himself in a position both of authority and of great vulnerability, still I

believe that his legacy, his message and his philosophy of struggle and self-awareness can be summed up in the concluding paragraph of this text:

“So only when people come together do they come together, and in separation alone is their day of separation. Such things are not in fact compounded by every situation which has ever been created, but by the primacy of the sun beyond. When you do not believe in genuine love, you imagine it to be a story and, when you do not believe in true friendship, you laugh about it. But, at that moment, please turn away from yourself and consider how you have fallen from the human level into that of the animals. I used to be fond of shouting in front of people, but now I have grown to silent contemplation. Tomorrow I shall start on the road to become a genuine person.”