

## **Reading Silences in the Short Stories of Pema Tseden**

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**Abstract:** This short article, a tribute and memory of Pema Tseden, is a reflection not only on the translation process of his short stories but more significantly on how to read his literary fiction. It is suggested that deeply embedded in his writing style is an invitation to imagination, to personally enter into the worlds he creates. As a way of conceptualizing this imaginative process, the article turns to the philosophical work of Paul Ricoeur and Gaston Bachelard.

**Keywords:** Pema Tseden, contemporary Tibetan literature, imagination, Ricoeur, Bachelard

If I tell you my dream, you might forget it. If I act upon my dream, perhaps you will remember it. But if I involve you, it becomes your dream too. (Tibetan proverb used at the opening of Pema Tseden's film *Jinpa*)

The experience of reading presents oscillating levels of depiction. When we read quickly, even if it's a novel with very concrete elements, we don't take the time to develop images. The images we have are only light supports of our thoughts, and then the schematic images are not expanded.

They are merely nascent and fading illustrations of the new facts, the new events, the new relationships between things.  
(Ricoeur 241)

Pema Tseden's films are marked by silences. After the protagonist Tharlo, in the film of the same name, returns from town to his sheep herd, we have about eleven minutes where the only words are from songs but even those are sparse indications of whatever Tharlo could be thinking or feeling. At the end of the film, there are almost five minutes with no dialogue, mostly just Tharlo riding his motorbike into the mountains. What is going on inside of him? Both sets of scenes could be described in a few sentences in a short story where they could be read through in a matter of seconds.

In 2018, Patricia Schiaffini-Vedani and myself (with translation contributions from Françoise Robin and Carl Robertson) curated and published a selection of short stories by Pema Tseden. The book *Enticement: Stories of Tibet* unfortunately garnered few reviews and not much attention. Anecdotally, I received comments such as, "I don't really understand what is going on in the stories" and "I like his films better." Surely, there are ambiguities in the stories. The writing does not provide verbose descriptions of either external situations or internal emotions. Even though I am an exceedingly slow translator and spent much time with the stories, since their publication I have increasingly come to view that rather than being simple, the stories are precisely crafted to invite us into imagination.

In Pema Tseden's own words from his, characteristically, terse author's Preface in *Enticement*:

Sometimes I don't know what kind of person I am—how who I was and who I am are related or different, or who my future self will end up being. Often, in both my life and my creative work, I find myself in a bewildered and helpless state, to the point of not finding a sense of direction or an exit point. But when I enter an exceptionally creative writing mood, I seem to be able to break away from perplexity and passiveness. My body and mind slowly relax to follow that wonderful rhythm that allows me to enter my inner world, into the inner worlds of the characters of my stories. In these moments I feel completely at ease.

This is also the time I can see more clearly into myself—can see some of my inner passion, sincerity, fragility, pettiness. Many times I write fiction for no other reason than to enter this state in which I can see and know myself more deeply.

All the words you want to say can be found in the texts you write. (1)

Pema Tseden writes of entering the inner worlds of his characters. Note the choice of words here—he does not say that he is ‘describing’ or ‘depicting,’ rather, he is ‘relaxing’ into a state where he can follow the rhythm into the worlds of his characters. Pema was an overgenerous man. He was absolutely indefatigable in his mentoring and assistance for young Tibetan writers and filmmakers. Many times, when with him I observed this dedication. I see this generosity in his artistic creations; in both his stories and in his movies, Pema created

worlds into which we could imagine. He didn't preach, he didn't try to push his view of a story or a scene upon his readership or audience. When translating the stories, we sought to preserve a very deliberate and considered ambiguity that reflected the complexities of being human. We, as readers, do not have to lose ourselves to enter the world of his works; instead, he invites us into an imaginal space where we can wonder together. This view is expressed in the Tibetan proverb which opens the film *Jinpa*: "If I tell you my dream, you might forget it. If I act upon my dream, perhaps you will remember it. But if I involve you, it becomes your dream too."

In reading his short stories, I suggest we read silence into them. In cinematic terms, we must take a long shot between sentences.<sup>31</sup> But this is not a passive silence; it can be, as he wrote in the author's Preface, an entry mood, i.e., an entry into imagination. Body and mind relax into an ease that perhaps enables, by entering into the worlds of the characters of his stories, a way we can see more deeply into ourselves.

What is the nature of this way in? In my daily work as a psychoanalyst, I have increasingly come to recognize the efficacy of imagination as a way to see into all the facets of ourselves, the passions, sincerity, fragility, and pettiness that he writes about in the author's Preface. In this regard, I have delved into the work of whom I will call the 'French Imaginalists'—among others, Paul Ricoeur and

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<sup>31</sup> Lauran R. Hartley in her insightful blurb for *Enticement* used the phrase "literary long shots" to describe Pema Tseden's short story writing style.

Gaston Bachelard.<sup>32</sup> All these imaginalists were investigators of the way of imagination; and here in this essay, as a little philosophical detour in these reflections, I look at some of their writings as possible suggestions into how to read Pema Tseden, or how to become involved in his dreams so that they become ours also.

The quotation from Ricoeur's newly published *Lectures on Imagination* noted at the beginning of this essay is, in the context of his thought on imagination, more than an injunction to read slowly. The purpose is to expand, through imagination, what Ricoeur calls the schematic images and let them develop into the 'new relationship between things.' I will circle back to the nature of this 'new relationship' as expressive of an ontological dimension of 'inner worlds' as Pema Tseden references in his reflection on the act of writing in the Author's Preface.

The publication in 2024 of Ricoeur's *Lectures on Imagination*, delivered in 1975 at the University of Chicago, gives us a clearer picture into the role that imagination plays throughout the entirety of his works. In the lectures, Ricoeur first examines the history of philosophical thinking on imagination, dialectically working through,

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<sup>32</sup> I also include Gilbert Durand and Henri Corbin in this grouping but for issues of space and a desire to focus on Pema Tseden and not on philosophy I will only suggest references to their works. While little of Durand's work has been translated into English, one of his main works *The Anthropological Structures of the Imaginary* is available along with a more succinct summary of his views in his article "Exploration of the Imaginal" in Sells, ed. 2022. Many of Corbin's books are available in English translation. For a brief explication of his concepts see "*Mundus Imaginalis*, or the Imaginary and the Imaginal" also in Sells, ed. 2022. While none of these authors are contemporary, it was a new publication of Ricoeur's *Lectures on Imagination* and his use of Bachelard, that prompted these reflections on reading Pema.

among others, the thinking of Aristotle, Kant, Wittgenstein, Husserl, and Sartre on the subject. In his engagement with previous philosophers' concepts, Ricoeur describes two types of imagination—reproductive and productive. Simply put, a reproductive image is generated from a referent that already exists. Imagination is relegated to reproducing an image, making a mental copy of it. Ricoeur turns to fiction to demonstrate the nature of productive imagination which, in contrast to the reproductive, proceeds without an existing referent. Indeed, “fiction builds its own referent and therefore opens new ontological possibilities that were blocked by the already existing, by the previous existence of the reference in the case of absence” (Ricoeur 218).<sup>33</sup>

There are two key points for our reading of Pema Tseden's stories here: fiction as building or creating its own referents, and that there is an ontological dimension to these referents that we imagine in reading fiction.

In the lectures focusing on fiction, Ricoeur turns initially to Bachelard and his description of how in the act of reading a poem (for Bachelard) or fiction (Ricoeur), an image creates through reverberation its own existence within us, and in so doing, comes into being:

Through this reverberation, by going immediately beyond all psychology or psychoanalysis, we feel a poetic power rising naively within us. After the original reverberation, we are able to experience resonances, sentimental

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<sup>33</sup> The “reference in the case of absence” is in critique of Sartre's phenomenology of absence.

repercussions, reminders of our past. But the image has touched the depths before it stirs the surface. And this is also true of a simple experience of reading. The image offered us by reading the poem now becomes really our own. It takes root in us. It has been given us by another, but we begin to have the impression that we could have created it, that we should have created it. It becomes a new being in our language, expressing us by making us what it expresses; in other words, it is at once a becoming of expression, and a becoming of our being. Here expression creates being. (Bachelard xxiii)

The act of reading then becomes a space of letting the images, the situations, and the twists and turns of a narrative reverberate in us, generating new possibilities of being. Ricoeur goes as far as saying new realities—“As I keep saying, fiction does not reproduce previous reality as does the picture; it opens new reality” (Ricoeur 276). If we can read slowly, letting the reverberations of the narrative work in and on us, then perhaps we can be more fully involved in the ‘dream’ as is proposed by the Tibetan proverb in *Jinpa*.

The shock and sadness of Pema Tseden’s unexpected passing still reverberates in me. I had thought there would still be plenty of time, for movies, for more translations of stories, for discussions about reading and writing. He was not a man of many words in conversations! But I would have so welcomed the opportunity to ask him more about that inner state that he found in writing, that inner state of creating and exploring his inner worlds. I do know that in our translation work with his stories he strongly emphasized preserving

ambiguity. The last line of the story “Men and Dog” reads, “One cannot say whether the expressions on their faces were of satisfaction or sorrow” (Pema Tseden 48). We discussed the translation, and he was firm in not leaning toward either satisfaction or sorrow, of not prescribing the reader’s feeling. Likewise, in the story “Orgyan’s Teeth,” we are not explicitly told just how the main character really feels toward his reincarnate lama playmate. We have to involve ourselves in the story; we have to feel our way into the story and let the resonances within us arise.

How to read his stories? I would like to suggest that we read them like they were one of his films. That is, slowly, with long stretches of silence. Lauren Hartley in her prepublication praise for *Enticement* wrote, “In literary long shots, the author transforms grasslands, snowy expanses, and county seats into mindscapes...”<sup>34</sup> Can we read with ‘literary long shots?’ For example, imagine at the beginning of the story “Gang” actually being the shepherd, having the dream, walking out in the snow and moonlight, and finding the small child. Instead of reading through this passage in a minute or two, could we literally take a few minutes and imagine ourselves, involve ourselves in the story, take advantage of the open spaces of imagination given to us by the author, and let the characters and the scene come alive in us, make a new reality in ourselves?

Pema Tseden was indeed an overgenerous person, but I think his generosity most expressively is manifested in his stories. In their

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<sup>34</sup> Quoted from the first page before the title page of *Enticement*.



often relatively simple narratives, in the ambiguity, and in the sparse description of internal states, I believe we are most generously given the opportunity to journey along with him into the worlds of the stories. While we have lost the chance for more stories from him, the stories and films we do have can continually give us his thoughtfully crafted explorations of the many dimensions of our human life.

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Michael Monhart (left, Pema Tseden (center) and Patricia Schiaffini-Vedani,  
New York, September 25, 2016, photo ©Michael Monhart