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objavljeno v:

Darja Pavlič (ur.): *Slovenska poezija. Obdobja 40*. Ljubljana: Znanstvena založba Filozofske fakultete, 2021.

<https://centerslo.si/simpozij-obdobja/zborniki/obdobja-40/>

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Obdobja (e-ISSN 2784-7152)



THE POETRY OF PLACE IN IZTOK OSOJNIK AND ALEŠ DEBELJAK

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DOI:10.4312/Obdobja.40.137-145

Prispevek raziskuje prostor v poeziji in poetiki Iztoka Osojnika in Aleša Debeljaka ter trdi, da Debeljak prostor umešča v območje med pesmijo in bralcem, Osojnik pa ga prek jezika pesmi umešča v samega sebe. Rezultat tega je končna teleologija za Debeljaka in začasna za Osojnika. Debeljakove pesmi si prizadevajo obnoviti preteklost, Osojnikove pa odkriti prihodnost.

Aleš Debeljak, Iztok Osojnik, prostor, kraj, jaz, jezik

This paper is an exploration of place in the poetry and poetics of Iztok Osojnik and Aleš Debeljak, arguing that while Debeljak situates place in the space between poem and reader, Osojnik situates place within the self through the poem's language. The result is a finite teleology for Debeljak and a provisional one for Osojnik. Debeljak's poems look to recover a past and Osojnik's to discover a future.

Aleš Debeljak, Iztok Osojnik, space, place, self, language

It was Wordsworth who first expanded on the ideas of John Locke, who had implied a distinction between space and place in his *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, suggesting throughout that place is a modification of space, what we might call a site. Place, in other words is individualistic, based on emotional relationship. For example, Wordsworth writes in *Tintern Abbey*:

I have learned
To look on nature, not as in the hour
Of thoughtless youth; but hearing oftentimes
The still sad music of humanity
[...] And I have felt
A presence that disturbs me with the joy
Of elevated thoughts; a sense sublime
Of something far more deeply interfused,
Whose dwelling is the light of setting suns,
And the round ocean and the living air,
And the blue sky, and in the mind of man.
(Wordsworth 1971: 1964)

The particular Welsh ruins quickly become a touchstone for his boyhood memories, his present feelings and, as he addresses his sister, her future shared memory. And this

experience is one that extends the particular place into a larger vision of space and time, outward to suns, oceans and air, and inward into »the mind of man.« Wordsworth's extension is to be distinguished from the modern version of space and time as an abstract and detached notion. In *Place and Experience*, Jeff Malpas (2018) argues that place and humanity are intimately interconnected and that it is both an objective and subjective phenomenon, and so ontologically fundamental to human experience. Or as Edward Casey (1998: 3) writes: »Places are not so much the direct objects of sight or thought or recollections as what we feel *with* and *around*, *under* and *above*, *before* and *behind* our lived bodies.« For Casey, place is »eventmental.« Though it exists in time, space and time are only dimensions of place, a kind of Heideggerian »gathering.« In this view the body itself becomes a place, something we see in the poetry of Iztok Osojnik, while for Debeljak place is experienced by the body: though similar, the two poets emphasize the dimensions of place from different perspectives. Both poets, in differing way, adhere to the ancient notion, to be is to be in place.

Though I will focus first on Debeljak's *Smugglers*, it should be noted that earlier poems such as *Christmas in America* (Debeljak 2015: 97), describe place in terms of the experiences of others, often using a second person *you* that refers to the detached otherness of the self as a way to universalize the experience as an ontological event. Others are more directly third person events as in *The Émigré Writer on the Dragon Bridge* (Debeljak 2011: 73). The poem begins

An open suitcase, they used to say,
hides destinies unknown out here:
from hotel to the central station and farther,
through the many years of wind, the passengers
touch Orion above, looking for comfort
in rituals down here, in sleepy countryside....

While the structure here resembles the passage I quoted from Wordsworth it is obviously an experience of the generalized emigrant and place itself, the Dragon Bridge becomes defined by all the possible emigre experiences that are beyond it. The bridge itself becomes defined as one between the emigrant's homeland and Debeljak's Ljubljana at a specific time, 1994. In Casey's view, this would amount to a more space-oriented, abstract sense of place. In *Anxious Moments* (Debeljak 2011: 37) he describes a man looking at a woman asleep. After carefully describing the perspective through which he views a woman, he wonders if she is tired, but then questions the role of place in the experience: »He thought: why here? So many other places, and yet here, why here?« (Debeljak 2011: 37). Here the emphasis is on the inner experience of the speaker as his vision crosses the room: place becomes almost an afterthought as he muses »indifferently,« the whole prose poem taking an opposite tack as the Dragon Bridge poem.

In *Smugglers* the perspective changes radically: here space is more personal, more »embodied« in the speaker's consciousness. These poems include geographical and personal indicators like some earlier poems but also include direct addresses

to specific people. The specificity is crucial: like James Wright's poems *Lying in a Hammock at William Duffy's Farm in Pine Island, Minnesota*, *A Blessing* («Just off the highway to Rochester, Minnesota,») and *Outside Fargo, North Dakota*, place becomes intimately involved with how the self is defined, but where Wright creates a place from an absence and emptiness, Debeljak redefines and re-experiences a place. The lens through which he redefines place is distinctly literary. He says in an essay »I make use of books to find for myself a dwelling place, if only a temporary one, within the pastiche of narratives and experiences, facts and fantasies. [...] the geography of towns, harbors, streets, and squares overlaps with literary topography« (Debeljak 2009). For Debeljak, every place has a history, in this case the remnants of the Balkan wars provide the ghosts that occupy many of the poems. In a sense there is a place behind any place, a larger space and time: »To be at home in a place where the sky meets the earth is to make the experience real!« (Debeljak 2013).

In *Graceful Arch* which is set in Trnovo, he begins: »The new bridge is like the new owners: location means everything / to them, time half as much, maybe, on some other occasion« (Debeljak 2015: 37). Moreover, while he notices a football match, he pays more attention to a miller measuring the stream while »straddling a wooden wheel,« a feat that surpasses the game and which »one must love sincerely.« While the river mist tends to obscure his view, nevertheless

Time is short, I don't give up space,
I urgently need the graceful arch. I was there: if you want,
call it a place of private memory, if you want, the end of the road.

For Debeljak place is always closed – at »the end of the road« – in the sense that the poems round themselves off so that they can glance back towards the beginning through memory in an attempt to capture what is lost.

»How often you try to look back through the half-open window« he writes in *James Joyce Slept Here*, addressed to Joyce and set in the Ljubljana railway station. Citing a few incidents that link his own life and Joyce's. There is a sense of regret and nostalgia here for choices not made, places not visited. He writes:

Now I know a cuckoo doesn't build
a nest, it visits foreign cities: it marries one of the natives,
immediately banishes the others to the Hebrides.
I am not coming back like you, I am staying here, I deserve it,
though it was outside the plane. I lost my sense of direction when
I didn't see you again. You got off on another track. The green island
is your new home now, and you sentenced me to visions.

Obviously from a fictional character's perspective, the poem suggests how, regardless the way in which he defines place, Debeljak's »poetry belonged to the real or unreal sphere, there is no question as to the nature of those places: the vast majority belong to the metropolitan sphere« (Kozak 2017).

That fictional, we should say, visionary mode, becomes ever more apparent in *The Woman Who Isn't There* (Debeljak 2015: 55) where the image of a fire that continues

to smolder represent lost intimacy, for now the other can only »inhale smoke and exhale darkness.« And in *Arrest Warrant* (Debeljak 2015: 25) he imagines »they are looking for me« for he has given refuge to fugitives. The speaker seems lost and home at once:

I don't know if time offers
smoldering hope, elsewhere maybe, but they are looking
for me in my home town: I'm telling the truth.

The insistence on truth brings the very notion of truth into question in the context of imagination. Place, then, takes on a new dimension: »Freedom and mystery, mysterious freedom in the writer's imaginative efforts to capture reality, is the driving force in my understanding of the negotiated space between the text and the reader« (Jackson 2018: 186).

Place, then becomes partly the domain of the reader which explains why each section of *Smugglers* is dedicated to a *you*. Place is the realm of the imagination: one of his last poems (*The Insomniac Society*) is set on Slavko Grum Street, named after a Slovene playwright, but the street does not in fact exist. The idea is that the reader must enter the place, just as one would enter a real street or the Dragon Bridge referred to earlier. In other words, the real and unreal spheres begin to merge, just as past and present, as well as here and there, as we have seen, begin to merge. More important than the physical reality, despite the careful naming of places, is what Yu-Fu Tuan and Edward Casey call the experience and hopes of a people's moral and aesthetic existence (Malpas 2018). On this larger level, *Smugglers* constitutes a vision aimed at restoring a world lost during the Balkan wars, and in an even broader sense, the loss of what he called a »cosmopolitan« view that united cultures. It is the observation of the poet that emplaces the place for the reader: like Foucault, Debeljak has created a »surface of perpetual simultaneity« on the page under his »gaze« (Foucault 1973: 6).

While Debeljak's vision embraces memory and a linear structured poetic in the space between reader and poet, Iztok Osojnik's poetic embraces a non-linear, open-ended and self-conscious vision filled with leaps and non sequiturs. Osojnik's Whitmanesque and provisional statements are in direct contrast to Debeljak's polished poems, yet both deal with the experience of place. While Debeljak is interested in the space between poet and reader, Osojnik, in his recent poems, sees place emerging from the self. Debeljak's vision is one where place »has been disclosed by that being-in-the-world« which is constitutive of Dasein (Heidegger 1962: 146). It lies in the »disclosedness of the world for essential spatial Being-in« (ibid.: 231).

For Iztok Osojnik, place is located in the body itself, specifically the body of the poet. His poems seem to align with Whitehead's notion that »on being aware of our bodily experience, we must thereby be aware of aspects of the whole spatio-temporal world as mirrored within the bodily life... [this] involves the entire abandonment of the notion that simple location is the primary way in which things are involved in space time« (Whitehead 2021: 91). As Osojnik writes in *Poems of Nothing*, »Man lives from his interior / the stainless buttresses of his bones« (Osojnik 2011: 11) In other words,

my/ »Your perception takes place where you are, and is entirely dependent on how your body is functioning« (Whitehead 2021: 192). Or as Merleau Ponty writes: »The lived body is our general medium for having a world.« As such, place is always what is about to be. »My body is where there is something to be done« (Ponty 1962: 182).

Place, then is more problematic for Osojnik. In *Elsewhere is Here* (Osojnik 2011: 40) he begins with an »irksome« fly and then tells the reader »you are just a visitor,« immediately negating the »to you« invitations of Debeljak's *Smugglers*. He then proceeds to »travel« poetically to a bar, the countryside, the lawn, and the Europe of Admiral Nelson. Alone the way he deconstructs any notion of a specific place: »Obviously I live on the moon.« While place shifts, his identity remains the same as a central focus: »I will never be anybody else« he ends the poem. The poem itself exists as the poet speaks, as we will see later, and like the self is »an open, unmirrored, / empty darkness / listening without man« (Osojnik 2010: 56). In *The Oblivious One* he deconstructs place as a limit:

The edge of the world? It depends. As if I
stepped over the blue line that is the keeper
of the known. With my full lungs empty I
stare at the absence, knocking by a periodical
nonsense on the walls of existence. Silence
does not reflect the absence. There are so
many ways of being absent. Why measure
them with triangles?

The absence must be filled constantly with words that are always »knocking at the threshold.« This is why the later poems move in a near stream of conscious manner, constantly associating one thing with another as in »proverbs« (Osojnik 2010: 98 ff) where he seems to begin on a street but then traverses a discordant landscape that only the steady voice of the speaker unifies. Even when he addresses the reader, it is to define the self and the questions themselves are meant to be unanswerable, merely to distract the reader from trying to unite the events under one place.

Osojnik, then, relies on the »emplacing power of the body,« the self (Whitehead 2021: 214). And yet, the poet himself »speaks from a place where silence speaks« (Osojnik 2011: 19) since there is no stable physical place that centers the poem outside of his voice. In fact, that voice speaks as if from »a little house / in a little house, in which there is another little house / and one more,« and so on and even then »sings like the songs of Strniša,« another poet. Even the voice, then becomes amorphous. This is why »emptiness stares back« (Osojnik 2011: 23) and the »mountain we are climbing is hollow« (ibid.: 29). If the poet sometimes appears to negate his own self he does so in language, thus ironically affirming the self *as* the place of language. In *Spin* he writes:

Sometimes I'm touched by something just out of reach
and all words are given the same spin
like iron atoms in a magnet.
(Osojnik 2011: 55)

It is not so much the meanings of words as their attempt to articulate the presence of the narrator. We see these notions summarized in *White Monkey* (Osojnik 2011: 51):

I've come a long way
to reach the top of a small hill.
There is a great multitude of birds
pecking the stars.
This mathematics
has swallowed seven of my cat's lives.
Shattered pieces on a small hilltop.
Stuttering sure as a cracked pot, the universe above my head
a mobile phone in my pocket
so I can share the sky.
I eat nothing. I drink nothing.
What a cheerful soul I am. All I'm left with
is crystal nothing in a hall of mirrors
a nothing of language splayed open
on the cross of nothing and curiosity.

The place gives way to nothingness, as at the end of Shelley's *Mont Blanc*. It is only language that remains and the language of nothingness is silence. However, as Ana Jelnicar notes, »Silence is mentioned over and over in his poems, hinting at all its layers of meaning...[but] central to his work is a concern with ...his own identity as a man and a poet« (Osojnik 2011: 109). In other words, »Man lives from his interior between / the stainless buttresses of his bones« (Osojnik 2011: 11).

In *Wagner*, this volatility of self as place becomes even more extreme as the poems take on a spontaneous movement with irregular punctuation, grammar, lineation, and leaps of logic and digressions. Even when he ostensibly sets a poem in Ljubljana, he quickly focuses not on the place whose attributes are skimmed over, but rather how he tries »to defeat my insomnia« (Osojnik 2013: 91) based on his »nostalgic dreams« of hope and love. When he switches to the Butcher's Bridge he does so not to describe the bridge but to »listen to the chattering noise.« The poem ends with a catalogue of feelings and sense he possesses:

my town the universe above
my supernova bazaar of spices, odors, smells, scents, fragrances, stenchs,
aromas, perfumes,
stinks, vinegar in barrels, and
large black widows, meaning business
(Osojnik 2016: 92)

The volatility of this possession is underscored by the »black widows« that are both people and spiders, or people like spiders, or spiders like people.

In a poem set ostensibly referring to the Grand Canyon he further deconstructs simple meaning:

so me back
 back where back here
 I have been away 2 minutes and 73 nanoseconds
 A text producer without any
 surplus value, or even more excitingly
 no value at all. I have two feet, yes,
 both *topoi* of rheumatism

The self here becomes a grammatical object, not a subject as the definition of place slips in an out of temporality as the text keeps getting produced almost by language itself. He then defines *topoi* as

*how space and knowledge were
 formed and transformed
 in ancient love affairs*
 (Osojnik 2016: 92)

thereby underscoring the role of time and indeed the rest of the poem through a couple of centuries and continents, the »gravitational abyss« of Einstein, a couple of languages as he proceeds by »associability and discursivity.« In many ways Osojnik's »meaning« lies in the rhythm and music of the syllables themselves. In another poem he laments a lost love of the surface of the text but after a page and a half admits »I have spent a lot of words and said nothing.« Later he admits »why waste words about the unsayable, let's rather / spell out syllables, one after another« (Osojnik 2016: 93). The unsayable is the mystery of the self, a place no name can stay attached to as the self evolves as he continues to speak »a pigeon language of winds« (ibid.: 98).

In a manuscript of some recent poems (Osojnik 2019) this trend continues and intensifies. Here, he further eschews linear logical connections, grammar, syntax, resorting to the lower case *i* and ever more private associations and references. The poems are written in English with no later revisions exactly as they come to him. Here is #54:

at one o clock i hev to be there
 and now it is 11:32 and i am here
 between here and there is 32 kilometers of driving a car according to traffic regulations
 though I would prefer ~~to~~ writing ~~it~~ according to garp. You remember, the novel about
 viena and a
 guy by the name or irving something. We go to visit the birthhouse of France Presern,
 good. I will have some coffee left in my Monticello cup
 a gift from anu. Yes i understood her reaction,
 well nothing could be done to avoid the situation,
 days come and days go
 i knoe it all too well.
 Let it be the cherry on yor cake,
 I added
 no answers i needed
 just like that

The lack of a single principle here suggests the role of chance, as if the computer itself were writing, or better, as if language as it appears in the speaker's mind, dictates the flow of the poem. Place gets redefined as time, or rather the passage of time, then a remembered incident that itself condense to the image of a cherry on a cake which is not a thing but a saying, a bit of language locution. Osojnik emplaces us squarely in the movement of his language, his self.

While Debeljak is concerned with what Casey (1998: 3) calls the »modification of space« towards specific poetic places, Osojnik deconstructs place itself, revealing its »dwelling« as Heidegger would say, in the self. Debeljak defines place by its history, personal or cultural, a universal »cosmopolitan« (Kozak 2017) view, as he calls, it in an attempt to bring the past forward into the reader's present experience. Osojnik defines place as residing in the self as it continuously evolves towards a future. Debeljak's sense of a definable teleology is opposed to but complements Osojnik's provisional teleology. Osojnik's return to the lived body as the most primordial place (Casey 1998: 5) complements Debeljak's space between body and other, self and reader. Together they comprise what Hannah Arendt calls a »two fold flight from earth to the universe and from the world into the self« (Casey 1998: 6). Both poets, in their differing ways, »unveil« their respective »dwelling places,« to borrow from Heidegger.

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