

The Dialectics of Interculturality: Aleš Debeljak's Cosmopolitanism

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Abstract In the present, the concepts of *local* and *global* are being used in sundry circumstances, which is why they have acquired many meanings. They may mean much and, precisely because of that, very little at the same time. The question appears even more evidently when applied to culture, which can be neither limited to nor contained within national or state borders. In this article the author attempts, on the basis of the literary and essayistic work of the late Slovenian public intellectual Aleš Debeljak, to delineate a novel approach to this question, namely to reintroduce a concept of cosmopolitanism, for which Debeljak and others opted. Debeljak, a child of the former Yugoslavia, developed as a poet in its last plentiful and relatively happy decade, the 1980s, and in addition to Slovenia, adopted the broader country as his own. When he moved to the USA to earn a doctorate in social thought, the USA became his third home base. With his opening towards the world, Debeljak also connected his idea of belonging, that is, the concept of identity. This article discusses the juxtaposition of the concept of identity with the positions of local, global and in-between.

Key words Local; global; Aleš Debeljak; cosmopolitanism; identity

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To my dear friend Aleš Debeljak (1961-2016)

Introduction

When thinking about the concepts of *local* and *global*, we usually consider them in opposition to one another. They have anchored themselves in our consciousness as representing rather contrary perceptions: the local as turned inwardly, self-absorbed, and exclusive; the global as outwardly, open, and inclusive. In a parallel way we also perceive their values: local pertains to something small, limited and domestic, and consequently, also less important, whereas global resonates as spreading, far-reaching, worldly and significant. While such comprehension seems plausible in terms of, for instance, politics and economy (we can credibly claim the existence of global economy, trade and travel), it is much more difficult to unequivocally maintain the same for culture. The opposite stance, if one looks deeply enough, can be found already in the Bible: “The Spirit is like the wind that blows wherever it wants to. You can hear the wind, but you don’t know where it comes from or where it is going” (John 3:8). Needless to say, any effort to limit and fence in the culture should raise doubts.

It is precisely in the nature of culture that it is both or, better yet, everything at the same time: local in its nature, yet global in its presence; faithful to idiom, yet eager to take on new conversations. Culture, despite what has been claimed since the Romantic period, appears to be rooted in human activities much more locally than nationally. Yet the question of why we cling to concepts that segregate culture, such as nation and nationality, remains (disregarding their linguistic differences) basically unanswered. The distinction, it appears, between local and global cultures rests on their quantity, intensity and distribution, not on their respective quality. It is therefore possible and even necessary to imagine structurally different concepts of understanding and living a culture, those in which there is no isolation or separation but only integration. The elucidation of one of the examples of this integration is the topic of this article.

The case in point is the work of the late Slovenian poet and essayist Aleš Debeljak, which energetically defends a different understanding of merging of and mingling among cultures, that of interculturalism. Even though the present-day popularity of the concept gives everybody the right to take a stance on the subject, it is only those individuals who have truly experienced multiculturalism, a theory based on the presumption of utter equality among cultures, who may voice an informed opinion about it. Debeljak's is a perfect example of a lived interculturalism: he was born in Slovenia (which was still part of Yugoslavia at the time), began publishing all over Yugoslavia, and went on to the USA to earn a doctorate in social thought. Along his way through the three *topoi*, he was exposed to and absorbed various cultural influences; after having come to terms with them, he developed a simultaneous existence in all three. Instead of separating them, he created bridges among them, which again proved the superiority of cultural inclusiveness over its opposites. Obviously, only such an attitude could enable the formation of Debeljak's rich cultural (intellectual and artistic) identity. He called this attitude *cosmopolitanism*.

Nevertheless, exactly at the time when Debeljak was engaged in his *cultural masonry*, in other words, in establishing his cosmopolitan identity, the catastrophic disintegration of Yugoslavia occurred, and with that, his main identity pillars crumbled. As a consequence, the tragic sinking of a once-multicultural country drove home Debeljak's desperate understanding as a cultural orphan, somebody without a foundation on which to base his identity. In Debeljak's distraught mind, this devolution dredged up a telling analogy: that of Yugoslav Atlantis (cf. *Tihotapci* 171), with its former mythical splendor and its consequent disappearance. Many inhabitants of the former Yugoslavia would agree that its foremost qualities were its peoples and their respective cultures. For Debeljak, this was an extremely painful realization that even if the human spirit may hover over geographic and temporal distances, it is nevertheless that one place from which one's roots really grow. With that also comes its curse: the impossibility for some of seeing their own source as equal, consequently leading to numerous national(istic) conflicts. Here, Debeljak realized, even cosmopolitanism cannot be of help because, first, one has to believe in cosmopolitanism, and second, even cosmopolitanism cannot thrive without its roots intact. In the case of Yugoslavia, "The world is falling into crumbs like dry bread" (*Somrak idolov* 34). Bloody nationalistic conflicts unnecessarily took many lives. Many of those who remained alive by fleeing became completely uprooted involuntary refugees and found themselves caught between the Scylla of the local and the Charybdis of the global, viciously torn away from their realities, which instantly became memories that could never be relived again. Continuing to believe — despite the obvious

— in the humaneness of humanity and the primarily cultural interaction among people, Debeljak and others like him, émigrés without a homeland, became caught in the past of Yugoslavia that overnight turned into a Yu-ghost-lavia.

Culture as *Cosmos*

The *global culture* syntagm does not stand for cultural goods that belong to humankind as it has been portrayed by its proponents, but rather amounts to revealing the dominance of one cultural realm, of one global civilization over all others. In our concrete sense, globalization does not mean the simultaneous ubiquitousness of all world cultures — because this simply cannot happen — but rather the dominance of Western culture. Since globalization reveals qualities similar to the mathematical process of rounding different fractions to one common denominator, the largest numerator — which, today, is the contemporary American walk of life — essentially influences the outcome. Because of their sheer quantity, these examples do not even have to be enumerated. Since our concrete globalization is a monocultured endeavor, the question arises as to the true, ideally cultured *globalization*. Such concept, because of the inherent differences among cultures, can exist only as their parallel omnipresence, a vast cohabitation of cultures.

Our factual globalized reality, despite having created a pleasant and complacent feeling of the concurrent existence of assorted cultures, supports the competitive predominance of singular significant cultural traditions. It is interesting that the same, although to a much smaller degree, can be said for the lesser cultures because they seldom mingle. Therefore, the real question appears to be: how do cultures in fact co-exist?

Regardless of the answer, the only true position that can take advantage of more than one cultural tradition seems to be consequently the *in-between*: the position *inter* cultures or, put more plainly, the intercultural perspective, the one that, by sitting on the fence, enables a perfect perspective on both (or more) sides. It is not the familiarity with or immersion into one big *global* culture, but rather an equidistant placement outside of it, a position in-between that permits a more realistic, fair and comprehensive, even if distanced, perspective. Thus if the most convenient metaphor of one/national culture is an island, interculturalism could be best represented by a bridge, a structure connecting two equally important shores.

Even though in the contemporary world many, if not most, countries embrace more than one (dominant) culture, it is not unusual to claim that the relationships among cultures could have reached its highest points in the multi-ethnic countries — there were some even in the course of modern human history, such as Aus-

tro-Hungary, Yugoslavia, and Canada, whereas among the most recent attempts is the creation of the European Union. An almost rhetorical question is whether it will meet a similar fate to its predecessors. In the past, such national conglomerates were more numerous; yet, after Romanticism and its emphasis on the idea of nations, the successful continuation of these states became increasingly challenging. Needless to say, in more than one such case, states (empires) absorbed by national liberation movements disintegrated in pitiless conflicts. These multicultural political formations fell apart mostly because their multiculturalism never was truly practiced, and their singular national aspirations understandably took the upper hand since the “Siren’s songs” (a metaphor frequently used by Debeljak) of nationalism have always been simpler, easier to grasp and to follow, and therefore more easily intelligible to the general public.

However tenaciously such nationalisms keep reappearing, there has always been a steady trickle of individual voices raised against this collective *madness* and in favor of the *unity in diversity* (to use a Leibnizean slogan borrowed for the EU motto in 2000). The task of this idea that they, too, support is to make differences count and to make the cultures, as sources of those differences, rise to equal levels, in other words, to account for every cultural idiosyncrasy and acknowledge its intrinsic value. Since a greater part of the populace chooses the easier path, listening gleefully to and following national myths, a much more demanding task is left for those who manage to avoid the simplistic appeal of national appurtenance and instead choose the path of acceptance, tolerance and understanding of other cultures.

Among the very few people who sincerely believed in and truly lived such multiculturalism was the Slovenian poet and essayist Aleš Debeljak. Born in 1961 in Yugoslavia, he entered his twenties at a time of unbelievably open, politically relaxed social conditions, when it was truly possible to believe in the ideals of equality among the country’s peoples, and when civil society — at least in Slovenia — had an almost unbelievable influence on the twists and turns of the political life. All across Yugoslavia, Aleš Debeljak started making his name as both a sharp-minded essayist and an influential poet with a clear, decisive voice. From the outset, his works were published in all parts of the country, from Macedonia and Montenegro to Bosnia, Serbia and Croatia. By having taken part in the intensive creative wave of young intellectuals in the 1980s, Debeljak managed to weave a web of distinct connections and friendships that helped open the rational borders of his native Slovenia and seemingly suspended him, without destroying his roots, in the space above them. It is this hovering that changes the necessarily limited *frog’s* perspective and turns it into a profoundly liberating multicultural experience. Intrinsically

embracing other cultures usually proves, not cumbersome and arduous, but on the contrary, intellectually, artistically liberating and creatively invigorating. The term Debeljak used for such an open existence was not, as one would have expected, *multiculturalism*, but instead *cosmopolitanism*, as he overgrew the *Blut und Boden* approach to culture and substituted it with its predominantly urban understanding (as compared with Cicero's *civis totius mundi*). He found his artistic "godfathers" much less among Slovenian canonical writers, but in numerous intellectual figures from other parts of Yugoslavia, such as Miloš Crnjanski, Ivo Andrić, Meša Selimović, Danilo Kiš, David Albahari, and many others. One sole exception to this was the work of a Slovenian émigré to the US before the World War II, Louis Adamič, who for Debeljak admirably embodied cosmopolitanism (cf. 2005, 12 *et passim*). Debeljak's growth into the multiple cultures of Yugoslavia helped him develop his unique artistic voice, define his cosmopolitan creative self, and launch him into the orbit of Yugoslav intellectual life. Debeljak thus entered the proverbial Yugoslav Tower of Babel that numerous peoples inhabited. Having left the suffocating straitjacket of exclusive nationalism, something Slovenians in general were traditionally quite reluctant to do, he donned a colorfully creative robe of multicultural co-existence.

Assisting in his description of existence in that realm was Debeljak's seminal theory, which bolstered the development of his multicultural ways: his ideas of national and intellectual identity. In addition to various contemporary definitions of identity formation, including the mathematical notion of the union of two or more sets, Debeljak adopted a perception of identity that takes on the shape of waves rippling out in concentric circles. These "concentric circles of identity" (cf. *Tihotapci* 146, 237), as he frequently called them, take their source from the individual's self and follow the ceaseless spreading of his intellectual, artistic, and creative involvement. His innermost self belonged to the Slovenian background, which he, as it will become obvious, did not renounce. Yet, with his intellectual potential he adopted other cultures with which he managed to form and maintain a delicate equilibrium. Hence, in line with his *elective affinities*, he became, following his writerly influence D. Kiš, a true cultural inhabitant of Yugoslavia, as he had already been a legal inhabitant.

For Debeljak, his determined existence *in-between* meant nothing less than residing on top of the bridge arch spanning between two locally rooted cultures. This did not *per se* mean the abandoning of his native culture and uncritical acceptance of globalization, which *nota bene* also tempted him. Rather, by wholly accepting both the culture from which he had grown and the new cultures with which he had come in contact, he became an ardent apologist of cosmopolitanism. Debeljak,

though stemming from a small, not to mention fringe, culture, intellectually became a citizen of the world.

Local: Slovenia

Debeljak entered the local cultural realm by publishing both poetry and literary essays. From the outset these writings were given different roles, which he maintained for the remainder of his life. In his essays, Debeljak's infatuation with the *big world* and its influences regularly came into relief, while his poetry — even with its numerous worldly influences — remained emotionally conditioned, even lyrical. Debeljak published eight books of poetry, all but one of which were translated into several languages.

For Debeljak, understanding poetry was less than sacrosanct. This was not in the sense that he had not believed in its power and its capacity to influence anyone who would come into contact with it, but rather that it was meant for everyone and was everywhere. Poetry belonged to all places through all times. Through this understanding, he equipped his intensely reflexive yet delicate poems with an abundance of chronotopic *paraphernalia* such as “seemingly unimportant information, data, dedications, dates, locations, etc.” (Kušar). This “poetic or lyrical archeology” (Kušar)¹ also lends itself perfectly to application to Debeljak's theory of identity circles. Throughout his literary career, his poetry remained mainly associated with his primary locus, Slovenia or, even more precisely, his hometown of Ljubljana.

In the era of Postmodernism, with its deviation from firmer values and absolute concepts, Debeljak's earlier books of poetry, *Zamenjave, zamenjave* [*Exchanges, Exchanges*], *Imena smrti* [*The Names of Death*], *Slovar tišine* [*Dictionary of Silence*], and *Minute strahu* [*Anxious Moments*], turned to the emotionally charged rendition of both the world and the self in it. Three of his first four books of poetry, carrying in their titles such weighty concepts as death, silence and fear, exude a sentiment of anxiety, a trembling mood of insecurity, and a gently melancholic sensitivity. It was only in the collection *The City and the Child* (1996), following the birth of his first child, a daughter, that stronger, more affirmative sentiments entered his creativity. Though it ostensibly figured in his title, the city was not specifically identified. The sole geographical defining element in the entire collection was the Karawanks (a range of Slovenian limestone Alps) while other localities – for instance, the names

1 See *In memoriam: Aleš Debeljak. Vse, kar je napisano, je naše*. Kušar, Meta, editor, 30. 1. 2016, <www.ludliteratura.si/esej-kolumna/in-memoriam-ales-debeljak-vse-kar-je-napisano-je-nase/>

of cities such as Sarajevo, Ljubljana, Belgrade, or simply “at home and abroad” (*The City and the Child* 22), were added only to the poems’ dedications.

The city’s local topography became a more dominant presence in his poetry at the turn of the millennium. After having conquered the world — he was broadly published both in Europe and in the USA — he obviously felt the need to return to the oldest part of his cosmopolitan bridge and the innermost circle of his identity: his hometown of Ljubljana. In *Nedokončane hvalnice* [*Unfinished Hymns*], Debeljak predominantly reveals his emotional states, and sentimental ruminations permeate the subject’s memories, dreams and literary and broader cultural associations. Nevertheless, he manages to smuggle in a few specific pieces of information that help locate the geographical points of reference. One poem bears a note that it was written in Piran, a coastal city in Slovenia (*Nedokončane hvalnice* 13). Three others bear witness to romantic Ljubljana locations such as Tromostovje (*Nedokončane hvalnice* 17), the Dragon bridge (*Nedokončane hvalnice* 21) and the Stari trg street (*Nedokončane hvalnice* 63).¹ Despite the focus of this collection on inner reflections, the few *external* stipulations refer to the nooks and crannies of his home city. This fact reveals that Debeljak’s deepest emotions and poetic self-definition, as expressed in his poetry, sprang from his innermost identity circle, the first that every individual, according to Debeljak’s own theory, acquires and which remains his most defining one. It is neither the country at large, nor even his compatriots, but rather, the urban tissue with which he feels most connected and to which he relates with the deepest understanding.

Debeljak’s later poetry books, such as *Pod gladino* (2004) and *Tihotapci* (2009), also feature geographically chiseled poems. The first, which could be translated as *Under the Surface*, devotes a poem to Debeljak’s native Ljubljana with its romantic corners (9-10), Mestni trg street (30) and other locations familiar to him. Meanwhile, in the latter, translated into English as *Smugglers* and published in 2015 by BOA Editions in Rochester, the city as both the source and the locus of the author’s poetic imagination rises again. This book offers a perfect insight into the poet’s topically emotional renditions of the proximate world. He himself called it “the mapping of the time” (Kušar)², even though every second or third poem is preceded by a location descriptor such as, to name just a few, “Tesarska street, Ljubljana” (*Tihotapci* 11), or “Yildiz han, Karlovška street, Ljubljana” (*Tihotapci* 25), or “The Railway Station, Ljubljana” (*Tihotapci* 97). It bears no importance for Debeljak

1 See *Nedokončane hvalnice* (Ljubljana: Mladinska knjiga, 2000).

2 *In memoriam: Aleš Debeljak. Vse, kar je napisano, je naše*. Kušar, Meta, editor, 30. 1. 2016, <www.ludliteratura.si/esej-kolumna/in-memoriam-ales-debeljak-vse-kar-je-napisano-je-nase/>

whether these places are secretly romantic or evidently mundane, since they render his created personal, experiential map of the city visible. They function as simulacra of the real geographical space, with its historical and social connotations, on the one hand, and on the other, as an imaginative *house of curved mirrors* opening itself to the poet's wanderings and musings. Hence, even though the existential components of the city remain recognizable, it is with surprise that the reader follows Debeljak through the meanderings of its instantaneous life. In this last book, however, this de- and re-familiarization process has been given a rather provocative twist: the poem *The Insomniac Society* is set on Slavko Grum Street, named after a seminal Slovenian playwright in the period before World War II whose texts were predominantly in the decadent vein, but this street does not exist in reality. With even so logical a name, the location tears open a completely unknown space, one that plays on the reader's gullibility, only to pry open another realm for imagination to wander in. The seeming reality initiates the imaginative undulation only to impose itself onto the real one.

Debeljak's last published book, *How to Become a Human* — its working title was *Abeceda otroštva* [*The Alphabet of Childhood*] — contains lengthier single paragraphs in which he traces the entangled meanderings of his childhood memories. With it, Debeljak once again returns to the closest *well of memory* in order to expose his locally individual history and elevate it into his cosmopolitan realm, comparing the local and the cosmopolitan with the rest of his global existence. Debeljak returns to his home in order to start constructing the bridge to the world at large and perpetuate his hermeneutic circle of identity.

Regardless of whether space definitions in 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. It is therefore not difficult to fathom Debeljak's innermost circle of identity: he was doubtlessly an *urban animal*. In *Non-lieux: introduction à une anthropologie de la surmodernité*, Marc Augé exquisitely describes the idiosyncratic character of contemporary cities, where *no-places*, modern-era shopping malls with their atomized, anesthetized and almost spellbound masses, stand in utter opposition to the *human city*. From its ancient beginnings, the city meant something completely different: it stood for an assemblage of different people, for their tolerant coexistence, and for the exchange of their patchwork individual cultures. What the city has always symbolized are connection instead of disconnection, tolerance instead of narrowmindedness, sophistication instead of vulgarity. It is arguably the most abundant gathering of different individuals and, traditionally, the most bountiful nexus of their cultural habits, their ways of life and

arts of existence, best described by the eternal, albeit unfortunate, metaphor of the Tower of Babel. Despite man's encroachment upon the Creator's rights, the Tower of Babel belongs to the most human of all our creations.

It is no wonder, then, that Debeljak perforce chose such a conglomerate for his intellectual cradle, the crux of his existence as a human being, a poet and a thinker. There could be no other way for Debeljak's self-comprehension than the very turf of the riches of the urban rhizome, whereas the self-absorbed fanfares of nationalism remained as strange and distant to him as ever. Debeljak did not identify with *one and only* perception of the world; he, most of all, did not need the seemingly firm foundation of a collective mentality in which the individual is subjected to the ideals of the (national) group. Even though he acknowledged more distant *identity circles* such as those of a nation, these were less influential. In his essays, Debeljak frequently discussed the load of the national inheritance, which necessarily leaves its marks on each and every one of us and, through that, unavoidably defines us. He did not repudiate, let alone negate, this fact and yet, in his opinion, this was (and should be) possible only to a degree. He defined this in the introduction to his collection of three essays geared towards understanding the individual through national culture, *The Individualism and Literary Metaphors of a Nation* (1998). In these essays, he tried to "surpass the provincial narrowness of the national cultural tradition while simultaneously resisting the seductive sirens of illusions about a kind of 'freely hovering' internationalism" (*Individualism* 9). Even more explicitly, he stated the connection of the two in a subchapter of the aforementioned essay: "The national culture as the source of cosmopolitanism" (*Individualism* 41). For Debeljak, culture, both individual and national, was tantamount to the bridge, as well as the fundament on which it stood. His bridges, obviously, necessarily permitted bidirectional traffic. Without going away, there would be no coming back, and without coming back, one could never leave again. Yet, the movement was the most important thing. Without this to-and-fro progression, one would become numb, paralyzed and self-contained. Debeljak's existential modus scintillated through his poetry and permeated his essayistic texts. Rarely, if at all, in present times has Slovenia had such an intellectually and artistically compelling thinker as was Aleš Debeljak.

In-Between: Yugoslavia

As we have seen above, Debeljak returned to his national geography later in his creative life. In the 1980s, however, when he tried to reach for the firmament, his focus was the *distant shores*. Hence, the ripples of his cosmopolitan identity spread only incrementally. The closest shores to which he could build bridges were the cultures

of his country at the time, Yugoslavia. The local appeared to be too limiting and served him only as his springboard in his quest for true cosmopolitanism, while the global at that point did not yet seem close enough. This process of rippling circles is easy to spot in his incipient collections of essays such as *Melanholične figure*¹ [*Melancholic Figures*] and *Postmoderna sfinga: kontinuiteta modernosti in postmodernosti* [*The Postmodern Sphinx: The Continuity of Modernity and Postmodernity*].

His homeland, the former Federal Republic of Yugoslavia, encouraged him to make his early steps into the world of poetry, and assisted in creating his engaged, intellectual public presence. In his later texts, he frequently returned to those formative years and admitted to having been forever influenced by the lived experience of multiculturalism.

Debeljak is one of the few thinkers who not only have experienced, but also lived, the immanently contradictory contingency of local and global, domestic and foreign — in other words, their synchronous combination. In particular, he was not able to follow the blindly automatic response to (nationally) familiar as well as (internationally) foreign and ascribe positive and negative values, respectively, to them. For him, Slovenian nationality and its language did not *per se* already present a sufficient foundation for affirmative collective identification; contrarily, he did not understand numerous examples of the cultures in Yugoslavia as intrinsically foreign and therefore negative. The only trigger of his judgment was the cultural heritage of those nations, with which they notably abounded. Whether the former Osmanli architecture of either Sarajevo or Skopje, or Austro-Hungarian vestiges in Croatian and Slovenian cities, the profoundly sorrowful tunes of Bosnian *sevdah*, the Serbian folk melodies performed on one-strings or the Dalmatian bands' upbeat fishermen songs, Debeljak developed a profound sympathy for them and adopted them as very much his.

It seems true that in multinational states, one can develop a feeling of the phenomenon in which something may appear foreign and familiar at the same time. A similar phenomenon occurs when, for instance, citizens of the same country meet in an utterly unexpected place: a feeling of appurtenance or even closeness to a completely unknown person occurs. Debeljak, too, described his meetings with total strangers who carried the same passports and were nevertheless more or less familiar with the others' provenience and culture at large. In Yugoslavia, we used to be strangely familiar with each other without really having any closer notion or idea of each other. Although this may sound unusual, there was a liberating sensation in this feeling. We felt as if foreign people, places, books and songs belonged to us, and as

1 See *Melanholične figure* (Ljubljana: Univerzitetna konferenca ZSMS, 1988).

if we belonged to them, even if they stemmed from quite different cultural codes. This belonging together made us richer, opened up barriers among us and relegated individual existential fears to the background. For Debeljak, who built his allegiances on a higher level or broader scope — on those of culture — it is at this point that the conventional terms of *local* and *global*, by losing their static positions, lost their traditional meanings. In his understanding they were uprooted and could switch positions, with the local becoming global and vice versa. At the same time, his theory of the concentric circles of identity may be perceived differently, not from the traditional perspective: the closest circle does not contain one's national definition but, rather, one's most important cultural stimuli. It can consist of other factors such as good novels, exquisite poems, or exciting dramas, which in fact all prove that what appears distant may sometimes be closer to one's mind and soul than what sits next door and speaks the same language.

Thus, in his indirect response and in opposition to Peter Handke, an Austrian Slovenian writer, whose *Eine winterliche Reise zu den Flüssen Donau, Save, Morawa und Drina oder Gerechtigkeit für Serbien* [1996; *A Journey to the Rivers: Justice for Serbia*]¹ used the imagery of Macedonian long-haul truck drivers as a symbol of the peculiar connection among the people of the former Yugoslavia but took the side of the main culprit in its devolution, Debeljak brought into relief precisely the astonishing realization that even what is totally foreign to one's own upbringing and lived experience may indisputably belong to the closer circles of one's identity: "Even if we differed from one another in clothes, language, faith and the music we liked we had one trait in common: we were each other's unknown acquaintances" (*Somrak idolov* 21). Admittedly, there is an exceptionally liberating feeling in this notion.

Debeljak, raised in the 1980s in the slowly dimming but still phenomenally open cultural conditions of Yugoslavia, managed to ontologically grasp, internalize and bring into life this aforementioned contradiction. He had to realize — albeit not without grief — its reverse stance as well: "therefore what is familiar appears the most foreign" (*Somrak idolov* 24), as he later wrote in his embittered collection of essays, *Balkanska brv* (*The Balkan Footbridge*).

Global: USA

In the 1980s, the gruesome outcome of Yugoslavia's internal strife was not to be predicted. At the same time he entered the Yugoslav literary scene, Debeljak's en-

1 See Handke.

ergetic and curious intellect had set a new goal. Following other Slovenian authors, Debeljak set his goals more broadly: he, too, was mesmerized by the USA. He thus made a decision to enter academia and earn his doctorate from an American university. Even though he later returned to the United States as a Senior Fulbright Scholar at the University of California at Berkeley, the Roberta Buffet Professor of International Studies at Northwestern University and on numerous poetry tours, it was this period that appears to have been the most influential for him. In addition to his scholarly endeavors such as his PhD in Social Thought from Syracuse University, Debeljak took advantage of these years in order to both broaden his experience and position himself as a poet there. Thus, he established the largest concentric circle of his identity: the global. In both realms, he performed exceptionally well. In fact, he was so successful that, for various reasons, both professional and personal, he ended up calling this new circle his "second homeland" (*Na dnu predala* 133).

He began his bridge-building efforts as soon as he arrived in his new environment. In addition to numerous poetry publications, following in the footsteps of his fellow Slovenian poet Tomaž Šalamun and thus bringing his Slovenian/Yugoslav pedigree to the fore, his efforts were directed to linking both cultural *shores*. Even before he finished his education in the United States, Debeljak put his efforts into introducing American culture to Slovenians from his very personal, even poetic point of view. The result of this effort were two collections of essays: *Temno nebo Amerike* [*The Dark Skies of America*] and *Pisma iz tujine* [*Letters from Abroad*] published in 1991 and 1992, respectively.

The Dark Skies of America was his continuation of a tradition started in the early 1970s by the Slovenian essayist and playwright Primož Kozak. After having spent a semester at the University of Iowa's creative writing programme, Kozak wrote the essay *Peter Klepec in America*,¹ which developed a novel perspective on Slovenia through American eyes. Debeljak's attention, in contrast to Kozak's restrained ruminations, was devoted to different snippets of American life: from the historically unwavering institution of the academic campus to the vim and vigor of American intellectuals, from diverse forms of intellectual life to serious questions about the mass media, from the intriguing appeal of television evangelists to the growing notion of a new religious consciousness. Debeljak finished *Dark Skies* by juxtaposing both cultures: grandiose, cathartically dynamic and liberatingly uprooted America and self-absorbed, incessantly anxious and overpoweringly immobile Slovenia. Yet, regardless of the differences between both of these cultural milieux, and the consequent seducingly persuasive dominance of the former, Debeljak could

1 Primož Kozak. *Peter Klepec v Ameriki* (Marlbo: Obzorja, 1971).

not bring himself to renounce the latter. He remained loyal to both of them, thus creating conditions for his true cosmopolitanism.

The second collection, *Letters from Abroad*, continued the first volume's comparison of America and Slovenia. Debeljak seemed not to have come to terms with all the incentives the new continent provided. He broadened his interests to include world politics and sociology, literature and music, art and creativity as such, masterfully interweaving them so that none existed on its own but unavoidably branched into others. Hence, music assumes social connotations (Bruce Springsteen), momentous literariness (Bob Dylan, long before the Nobel Prize announcement) or almost religious prophesying (Lou Reed); while literature (Jay McInerney) turns into ruthless, naked reality, and poetry collections (Christopher Merrill's *The Forgotten Language*) become historic renditions of long-lost languages. In the form of letters, Debeljak chooses an even freer mode of expression with even fewer constraints on his fascinatingly restless imagination. In one of those letters, "The Meaning of Artistic Cosmopolitanism," Debeljak touches upon what became the *fil rouge* of his creative instinct, the question of intellectual belonging. Even though both books were primarily devoted to the culture of the USA, one can, unfailingly, realize his choice: it is through the experience of the other that one can really assess one's own culture. Only through the comparison between oneself and the others obtained through self-imposed "voluntary exile" (*Pisma iz tujine* 140) may one correct one's necessarily myopic nationalistic perception. It is precisely the "experience of searching and existential risk" (*Pisma iz tujine* 142) that develops the individual self in all his/her aspirations. These essays quite clearly set the tone for Debeljak's subsequent writing: in these works, he interweaves his succinct, brainy and intellectually astute observations with the expressions of his emotional reactions, thus creating an intricate combination of piercing thoughts and warm-hearted emotions.

Even if in his first two collections on America, Debeljak appears to have squared accounts with this incomprehensibly vast and continuously astonishing country, any presumption that finishing his doctorate, which he received in 1993, and moving back to Slovenia would diminish his fascination with America could not be more mistaken. Once he had opened up his identity to include the USA, he embraced the basic trait of a cosmopolitan: to turn back and start introducing his "new" country and its culture to the Slovenian public. His third book on the USA appeared in Ljubljana in 1998 and was entitled *Atlantski most* [*The Atlantic Bridge*]. In contrast to the first two collections, Debeljak now devoted his attention to the idiosyncrasies of American literary metafiction. In his introductory chapter, *The Road across the Atlantic Bridge*, Debeljak explains the meaning he bestowed on this the-

oretical composite: "Cultural tradition namely 'covers' a broader space from what civic identification or ethnic origin may comprise" (*Atlantski most* 7). Enchanted by his great new country, he sees the Atlantic during the period after World War II "not only as an ocean of separation but that its waters and worlds, which they wash, in an increasingly unavoidable way take part in the rites of invigorating rapprochement and customs of mutual fertilization" (*Atlantski most* 9). The United States of America, for Debeljak, was not only an economic, political and military, but also a cultural powerhouse. Understandably, overcome by the intensity of his experience, Debeljak followed the popular vision of Europe and its contemporary culture as the stale, sterile, limited and self-absorbed expressions of an "elderly lady" while the United States spurted its youthful creative energy with few limits. Hence, Debeljak writes, "the bridge arches across the Atlantic and the Channel, invisible, yet ever so real bridge across which from one end to the other pour innovative energy and aptitude for social ascent, literary bestsellers and smart stylistic expressions, attention for the complex human destiny and enthusiasm for attractive labyrinths of the genre discipline" (*Atlantski most* 8-9).

Regardless of countless impulses, the most profound traces were left by the literary endeavors of Henry James, John Ashbery, Paul Bowles, Bret Easton Ellis, and Raymond Carver on the one hand and Ivan S. Turgenyev, Anton P. Chekhov, Albert Camus, and Tomaž Šalamun on the other. It is quite logical that *The Atlantic Bridge* was dedicated to the aforementioned American authors, since most of them had recently reached the zenith of their fame. This was also the time when Postmodernism was becoming influential in academia. Debeljak, too, became one of its most ardent adepts, as seen in his very popular book *Postmoderna sfinga*¹, which was one of the earliest and most spirited presentations of the new literary current in Slovenia. Each rendering of the artistic jewels of one culture into another means adding a brick into this bridge and with each elucidation, increases comprehension of its achievements, strengthened with additional mortar. When this process rests on the individual conception buttressed with artistic taste, it opens up, not a path, but a road between peoples, cultures, and civilizations.

Despite Debeljak's infatuation with American literature, it must be stated that he never went off balance to completely embrace only one side. Even though he concedes that the Atlantic bridge provides Europe with "jets of restorative juice, vitalistic enthusiasm and revelation in excesses of body and soul" (*Atlantski most* 9), he does not leave his national and cultural wellspring behind. In this book he eru-

1 See his *Postmoderna sfinga: kontinuiteta modernosti in postmodernosti* (Salzburg: Wieser, 1989).

ditely acknowledges the qualities that the continent, despite its occasional slips into (self-) destruction, always managed to bring up: refined twists of cognition, breathtaking pinnacles of intellectual endeavors, enviable breadth in the grasp of tradition, together with its irreplaceable, soft and mellow irony. It is also those qualities that the representatives of the American “Lost Generation” between the two World Wars managed to perceive and take advantage of. What Debeljak sees as the most fruitful in this “traffic” between or among cultures is precisely the meeting and/or crossing of two or more of them: as he states elsewhere, it is the tension between the local and the foreign cultures that yields the most abundant crops. For him, this was the way in which true cosmopolitanism was created: belonging to no particular place means belonging to all places simultaneously. This elusive existence does not convey narcissistic superficiality and selfish gratification. It does not stand for an escapist existence that only runs away with the automatic feeling of cerebral and cognitive superiority. On the contrary, stepping on Debeljak’s bridge establishes merciless expectations, requiring hard intellectual work and painfully honest self-critique: only then can one improve and make progress in one’s endeavors: “The Atlantic bridge makes thus the open two-way road of creative and spiritual exchange possible” (*Atlantski most* 10).

Culture of Chaos

After this extensive description of the realization of his cosmopolitan identity based on the Goethean cultural *elective affinities*, it is probably easier to understand Debeljak’s despair during the 1990s, in which the country he idealized fell apart before his eyes. For Debeljak, the devolution of Yugoslavia, by destroying the spaces he identified with, likewise annihilated hopes for the culture as a credible basis for identity. It proved all of his conjectures, even his identity premises, wrong. If previously, Debeljak understood Yugoslavia as a given, with most of the interesting authors living in every corner of the country, this country was now devastated and turned into a multicultural wasteland. What was once Yugoslavia was now Yu-ghost-lavia.

It was at this point that Debeljak truly became aware of the importance of the mixture of peoples and their cultures that influenced him so. His pain took literary form in his most open and hurting essay on the devastation of his ideal, *Somrak idolov*, which was immediately translated into English and published in the United States as *Twilight of the Idols: Recollections of a Lost Yugoslavia*¹ in 1994. It was received with wide acclaim at home, in Europe and overseas.

¹ See his *Twilight of the Idols: Recollections of a Lost Yugoslavia* (Fredonia, NY: White Pine P, 1994).

Later still, towards the end of his life, Debeljak returned to this topic, showing that it remained a source of anguish. He published *Balkanska brv* [*Balkan Footbridge*] in 2010 and devoted it largely to the displaced people or, rather, his numerous friends who had lost their homeland overnight and sought refuge in the countries that benevolently accepted such orphaned existences. Debeljak planned another book, which he never completed.

There is no doubt that the *Twilight of the Idols* was Debeljak's most sorrowful text about the new conditions of his world. It was originally published in 1994, when the bloody armed conflicts in the former republics of Yugoslavia, together with the unfathomable and cruel siege of Sarajevo under the auspices of such uber-nationalistic politicians as Slobodan Milošević and F. Tuđman were in full swing, only ending in February 1996 after 44 months. Debeljak's book was among the very few voices in the former Yugoslavia that voiced the mourning of its disintegration. Unlike many writers and intellectuals from the southern parts of Yugoslavia who had to flee their brutally ravaged country, Debeljak was fortunate enough to remain in Slovenia, only to witness the disintegration of literally everything he stood for, reminiscent of Odysseus helplessly listening to "the Sirens of the inherited mythological archetypes, the Sirens of tribal tradition" (*Somrak idolov* 10), the poisonously sweet nationalistic tunes others were fiercely dancing to. The curse of those spellbinding songs is that they must be sung in unison, thus cutting off disparate, diverging, perhaps even opposing voices: "Where the collective memory [...] takes over, everybody thinks the same. Where everybody is thinking the same, nobody is thinking at all" (*Somrak idolov* 17). Consequently, "the experience of living in the draught of cultures" (*Somrak idolov* 19) is mercilessly suppressed. Arguably even more painfully, the rationale behind enlightened, cosmopolitan existence is destroyed. This is hurtful particularly to those who venture out and manage the courage to think (and create) independently from any mainstream ideology. It is those individuals who truly lift their personal engagement to the heights of art.

In this text, which in fact crystallizes his views on identity, cosmopolitanism, and the value of culture, Debeljak rendered an account of his most important intellectual inspirations. Hence, in addition to Marcel Proust, Sigmund Freud, André Gide, and Rainer Maria Rilke, he also mentions I. Andrić, Josef Brodsky, and Czesław Miłosz, together with many other authors who were the epitomes of independent imagination.

Roughly a decade and a half later, Debeljak published *The Balkan Footbridge*, in which he once again returned to his favorite topics: Yugoslavia, its peoples and literatures, and the authors displaced by the ravaging of their country. Even though

Debeljak had previously written about his main literary inspirations, here he bows to those who placed the literatures of the Western Balkans on the map. In addition to the already mentioned Bosnian/Yugoslav writer and Nobel Prize winner I. Andrić, Debeljak also acknowledges the influences of Andrić's compatriot M. Selimović, and devotes his full attention to two Serbian authors, M. Crnjanski and D. Kiš.

Crnjanski, a long-time émigré, figures as a precursor of the forcefully displaced people of the present day. In his youth, Debeljak viewed Crnjanski's writing from the perspective of emigration, which at the time functioned in a strangely liberating fashion since it offered the "unbearable lightness" of foreignness, of belonging nowhere, and of not-being-forced-to-fit-in state of mind on the one hand, and an unavoidably solitary existence with one's roots undercut on the other. Debeljak later came around to this view.

Kiš, on the other hand, was considered one of the best Yugoslav novelists. In his writing, he unfolded the polyvalent and multi-centered experience to which he and his family had been subjected. For Debeljak, Kiš's advantage was in his "creating at the crossroads of the Habsburg, Byzantine and Ottoman legacy" (*Balkanska brv*, 144-45), which necessarily meant insights that transcended the national. In addition to that, Kiš's writing reflects elements of Ahasverus, the Wandering Jew, and the perspective of an émigré, as he too was Jewish and had moved from Belgrade to Paris. As Debeljak admits, Kiš, especially his *A Tomb for Boris Davidović* or *Garden, Ashes*, in fact opened for him the prospect of intellectual appurtenance, the possibility of becoming a citizen of the Republic of Letters and thus choosing spiritual citizenship over the national. In Debeljak's words, he "found support for the belief that it was possible to remain loyal to the primary landscapes of personal geography and history, and simultaneously cultivate links with global cultural movements" (*ibid.*, 145). Here, Debeljak made his first steps towards understanding cosmopolitanism: here were laid its foundations after he had become aware that the "concentric circles of identities [did] not spring from the community after all, but from the individual's self, rippling through the layers of local, national and regional cultures" (*ibid.* 146).

Yet, when Debeljak initially correctly identified a steady stream of (literary) émigrés, beginning with Ovid and ending with D. Kiš and others, he did not realize that his generation would be among the most heavily-hit. In the 1980s, emigration—as in Crnjanski's case—appeared full of "promises of fresh perspectives and adventures, precious experiences and realizations about the sense of existence" (*ibid.*, 175), while the 1990s became the Yugoslav *Apocalypse Now*. A decade later, all Debeljak could do was collect distressed individual existences scattered around the

globe, like tumbleweed across the desert, in what became a state of permanent exile, such as those of David Albahari, Aleksander Hemon, and Igor Štiks, all remarkable (formerly) Yugoslav writers. All three of them chose North America as their safe haven, and some traded their native languages for English while others, such as Albahari, did not. It is in their cases, too, that Debeljak reassured himself anew of his experientially broad and intellectually profound cosmopolitan stance, which after the Yugoslav tragedy acquired a new dimension. In this case it is a question of the disappearance of a country's symbolic realms, in which all three writers used to live. This existence ended abruptly with no prospect of reemerging. Suddenly their lives, too, violently collapsed and took with them the gist of what they represented, a part of their identities. Debeljak shares Albahari's realization that there is no escape from history and that it is ingrained in our selves. What happens if history is brutally ripped away from us and our own identity becomes void? Is it possible to maintain a cosmopolitan existence without a foundation to recline against?

Debeljak's answers to these questions are established in all of his arguments, spread through his numerous books of poetry and essays. He holds the firm belief that the answer lies in individual creation: in art. It is through art that the human being reaches her/his highest potential by opening her/himself to the world.

In a peaceful world — if there is such a thing — a world with no violent outbursts nor cruel consequences, among the more difficult paths to self-realization is that which transcends one's national preconditions and spreads its wings to the four corners of the world. In this situation, there usually are no external reasons for emigration, and exiles reflecting personal choices may be predominantly self-imposed. The period after World War II abounds with such examples, including Brodsky, Kundera, and Miłosz. In any case, the possibility of returning to the departure point generally exists. The ideal identity that Debeljak exemplifies is precisely of this kind. The possibility of going to and fro between local and global, and the ability to stop at any point along this route, creates the conditions for a person to build and develop her/his individuality and enrich her/his identity. This is the process that enables us to experience true cosmopolitanism, which reveals itself as the identity of no single place and all places at the same time, as a constant movement from one source to the other.

Yet the true tragedy occurs when this open world comes to an end. One can, following Debeljak, ask the survivors the identity question: if their history and their past have been ferociously torn away and the wells of culture they drank from disappeared, what happens when one survives the destruction of the past? What may the orphans of history do? Where is refuge for those who do not want to return to

the local shouting of nationalistic chants, who cannot switch to the global by uprooting their selves?

True cosmopolitanism may exist only if all the arches of its bridges stand firmly on the ground. In other words, it is nigh-on impossible to live a truly cosmopolitan life without sapping juices from the various singular cultures simultaneously. When one of the legs is undercut and suspended, the individual's perception becomes disabled and her/his agonies abound.

According to Debeljak, "He who does not know what he lost, did not lose anything" (*Somrak idolov* 31). Needless to say, in the destruction of his Tower of Babel, he experienced the devolution of all of his ideals, of the sense of life he thought had been the only one worth living. He realized with despair that regardless of the height that the human spirit attains, there are always instinctive reactions that overpower and drag the human race down. The febleness and unsteadiness of the human spirit was probably his biggest disappointment. Yet, in his words, "hope in human life is not a luxury but a necessity" (*Balkanska brv* 252). Following his legacy, one should, regardless of circumstances, rise to the task and construct new bridges, new connections among cultures. One should concern oneself with the acceptance of otherness, with tolerance of separateness, since this is the only existence truly worth living.

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