

THE LYRIC SUBJECT AND SPACE. A COMPARISON OF TRADITIONAL AND MODERN LYRIC POETRY

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Working from the assumption that a lyric poem is a means of self-expression and self-constitution of the speaking person, the article observes that in romantic as well as modern poetry, geographical space through metaphoric representations co-establishes the identity of the lyric subject. Furthermore, modern lyric poetry is also characterised by the incoherence of space, which, in addition to having a thematic function, also affects the structure of the text.

Key words: lyric poetry / lyric subject / space metaphor / Romanticism / modern lyric poetry / language poetry

“It makes no difference whether I walk down Kärtner or Čopova Street. /.../ It is all becoming me.” (Peter Semolič)

The semantic scope of the concept of space depends strongly on the context in which it appears. In recent literary criticism it is often used as a metaphor for a literary work (one of the more famous is Barthes's identification of text and space, in which a variety of writings, none of them original, bland and clash); on the other hand, there has also been an increased interest in geographical space, which is – similarly to narrative time – an integral part of every narration, despite the fact that its role in the past was not researched in such detail as the role of time. The Middle Ages, as the famous Wheel of Virgil teaches us, associated narrative space not only with the style of the literary work, but also with the social status of the characters involved. The 19th century brought forward the connections between the environment and one's nature, whereas the contemporary point of view prefers to uncover connections between space and identity of the individual or group. Recently attention has also

focused on the relations between space and narrative structure, because researches of narrative writing have actualised Joseph Franck's thesis that the structure of contemporary literature can be understood in the manner of spatial form.¹ This article will discuss the role of geographical space in the area of literature termed as lyric poetry. In analogy with narrative writing we may assume that space co-creates the identity of the lyric subject and affects the organisation of the lyric text.

A lyric poem can be defined as a means of self-expression and self-constitution of the speaker; however, it is well known that traditional, romantic definitions of lyric poetry were not familiar with the concept of the lyric subject. Charles Batteux, who was the first to devise a system in his book on the fine arts (*Les Beaux-Arts réduits à un même principe*, 1746), which also included lyric poetry, defined it as an imitation of sentiments contrary to narrative writing and drama, which imitate action. F. Schlegel defined lyric poetry, narrative writing and drama from their relationship to the objective and subjective worlds; according to him the lyric form, contrary to narrative writing and drama, is purely subjective. A. W. Schlegel and Schelling adopted this definition, whereas Hegel developed the idea that the lyric poem conveys its author. In his *Aesthetics* he derived the philosophical and poetological definition of types of literature from the stipulated scheme of subject-object. To him, narrative writing is an objective type of literature concentrated on a totality of external events; lyric poetry is subjective and its focus is the inner world of sentiment; drama links the objective and subjective sides into a new whole. The central point of lyric poetry and its real topic is the concrete poetic subject, that is, the poet. When Hegel defines the subject matter of lyric poetry, he specifically calls attention to the presence of narrative elements within it. The subject matter of lyric poetry may be an event, which is epic in its essence and external manifestation (heroic poetry, romance poetry, ballads), or occasional (poems for specific occasions). In both cases it is essential that the basic tone remain lyric, meaning that it is not about an objective description of a real event, but rather about the subject's reflections and its moods. A true lyric poet does not necessarily work out of external circumstances; he is a closed world in himself, and can look for the material for the poems within himself and remain with the inner states, circumstances, events, with his own heart's and spirit's passions. However, even in this case the narrative element is not uncommon (Hegel states as an example the motif of a meeting in Anacreontics); or the poet will go beyond the limits of the inner world by presenting himself in a certain being, which is subjective as well as real. "[T]he poet both is and is not himself; he does his best to communicate not himself but something else; he is, as it were, an actor who plays an endless number of parts, lingering now here now there, retaining now one scenic arrangement for a moment, now another, and yet, whatever he may portray, there is always vividly interwoven with it his own artistic inner life, his feelings and experiences" (Hegel 1998, 1121-1122). An example of such role-taking is once again Anacreontics – in it the poet describes himself as a kind of a hero among flowers, beautiful girls and boys, by

wine and play, joy and pleasure ... Hegel's breakdown of lyric poetry into different possible forms indicates that he understood the role of the poet in a rather complex manner. His comparison of the poet and the actor is particularly interesting when seen in the light of later theories speculating that the speaker or "I" in lyric poetry can not be directly equated with the poet's self. It seems that Hegel's comparison might be supplemented by the assertion that even "I" in lyric poetry is no more than a role, played out by the poet. This brings us not far from the conclusion that the lyric subject is a more or less conscious construct of the author, his or her mask or persona.

In his essay *The Death of the Author*, Roland Barthes firmly stated that, "it is language which speaks, not the author," (Barthes 1992, 115) however, it seems that neither the past nor the modern lyric productions can entirely confirm his thesis on the impersonality of writing.² Due to their use of the traditional, self-revelatory model of writing, many contemporary poets should be called post-romantics anyway; on the other hand, we may say that the language that speaks itself is a paradox and a mental construct, because every statement, either inarticulate or made of quotes, may be understood as a form of a certain, albeit totally undifferentiated or hyperinflated consciousness. Ron Silliman, a representative of American "language poetry" – a movement, which in the early seventies stemmed from the post-structuralist criticism of the author and the subject³ – has recently raised doubts as to whether "Barthes's theory of text construction hasn't gone too far," (Perloff 1998, 3). According to him, the "self" in poetry is a "relation between writer and reader that is triggered by what Jakobson called contact, the power of presence" (ibid. 4). According to this theory, both the author and the reader collaborate in constructing the lyric subject. In her analysis of the "de-authored" poetry of the representatives of "language poetry", Marjorie Perloff has shown – despite some problems with identifying lyric subjects – that the poems are very personal and sometimes even autobiographical. According to her, gender, racial, social and other characteristics, which can be attributed to different speakers on the basis of their statements, are a kind of "birthmarks" or "signatures", by which individual authors may be identified. By doing so, it seems, she has once again attributed the leading role in forming the lyric subject to the author; however, this does not mean that "language poetry" can be viewed as self-revelatory, be it of the author or the lyric subject. According to Perloff, the meaning of the lyric subject of "language poetry" is radically different to that of post-romantic poetry, where its role is to observe the outside world and express its emotions by means of metaphors. In "language poetry", the difference between the inside and the outside is blurred; language constructs the "reality" we perceive; which means that the perspective is constantly shifting and that "the subject, far from being at the centre of the discourse [...] is located only at its interstices" (Perloff 1998, 16).

In the model of lyric poetry, as theoretically created by Hegel, geographical space is not explicitly mentioned, but nevertheless we may say that space in traditional, romantic lyric poetry is an element of the outside,

objective world. Hegel's analysis of lyric poetry demonstrated that most of the time poets speak indirectly of what is within them, of their reflections and moods, by describing events, conditions and external circumstances, which also include descriptions of nature and landscapes. Nature is a metaphor used by romantic poets to describe their moods. When he wrote that art uses nature to make the soul visible,⁴ Shelling attributed to the images of nature a function of catachresis. The projection of the subjective inside world to the objective outside world is the basic principle of lyric poetry in the traditional sense, therefore the descriptive poetry of nature in which the outside world does not mirror the inside world, according to Gottshall, the author of *Poetics* published in 1857, cannot be part of lyric poetry.

The correspondence between landscape and subject was discovered, as it is well known, by Rousseau in the 23rd letter of his novel *The New Heloise*. The concept of projecting emotions onto nature was so successful that it has not only survived to this day and age, but can still be discerned in the so-called modern lyric poetry. In his book *The Aesthetic Experience and Literary Hermeneutics*, H. R. Jauss claims that Baudelaire in his collection *Fleurs du mal* accomplished "the aesthetic revaluation of nature" and quotes as an example the poem *Andromaque, je pense à toi*, in which "any trace of a predestined harmony between man and nature, or a hidden analogy between sensible appearance and suprasensible meaning, is gone" (Jauss 1982, 83). However, the break with anthropocentric understanding of nature was probably not abrupt enough to be applicable as a criterion for judging the modernity of poetry. Symbolist and modernist poetics do not deny the concept of projecting what is within onto the outside world; and this is the reason that the term lyric poetry could be employed to denote the poetry of Baudelaire, Rimbaud, Mallarmé, Eliot and others. Mallarmé's definition of the symbol, as well as Eliot's description of the objective correlate, come from the unspoken assumption about the separation between the subject and the object. With both poets we can speak of de-authorized poetry, but not of its impersonality.⁵ Mallarmé's lyric subject, which appears together with the text, uses symbols to suggest the mood to the reader, whereas Eliot's, which also can not be regarded as the source of speech, describes emotion with objective correlates. The closest ties to the (pre)romantic concept of projecting emotions onto nature can be seen in expressionist poetry where images of landscapes and hideous animals become a metaphor for the mood of the lyric subject, with images of towns performing a similar function. By including images of ugliness, the expressionists considerably widened their motifs in comparison to the romantic poets; on the other hand, the function of the lyric subject remained unchanged because its role was still to describe the mood by means of the images of the outside world.

In romantic as well as modern lyric poetry the identity of the lyric subject is formed in a similar way; in both cases it is based in the idea of the separation between the subject and object. The images of the outside world – and therefore space – are the projections of inner moods, and they are the essence of the subject. This means that the space in romantic

and modern poetry is metaphorically connected to the identity of the lyric subject. As in modern lyric poetry, the lyric subject in "language poetry" is not the source of speech, but rather its product; however, the boundary between the outside and the inside in "language poetry" is essentially blurred and therefore the metaphoric role of space is cancelled out. If it is possible to claim that the cancellation of the boundary between the subject and the object in "language poetry" is a *fait accompli*, there still remains the question of whether the reader of such poetry is ready to give up the deeply rooted manner of metaphorical reading.

The second supposition argued in the introduction was that space affects the structure of the lyric text. Analyses of modern lyric poetry performed by various researches have shown that individual movements under the common term of modern lyric poetry introduced by H. Friedrich, exhibit differences in the way they link images, but that also many similarities exist among them. While in traditional poetry, images are primarily linked on a thematic level and cohesive elements include the lyric subject and temporal sequence, modern poetry is governed by fragmentary imagery. An important principle of structuring modern poetry is simultaneity – the images do not follow one another in a temporal sequence, but appear simultaneously. Rhythmic or sonic stringing of images is also common. In this context, H. Friedrich speaks of the linguistic magic of Baudelaire, Rimbaud, Mallarmé and other modern poets. Typical of the symbolists are "vast networks of images which are only connected in depth, at the level of the Ideas themselves, in other words, in the abstract" (Forestier 1984, 117). In surrealist "associative chains" or networks (Pastor 1972, 32), which form around an individual image, the principle of connection is subjective association. Futurists spoke of wireless imagination, due to their images being liberated of all logical or grammatical context. S. Vietta is convinced that the expressionists and all modern literature are characterized by "atomisation and isolation of individual images" (33). "The simultaneity of disparate and rapidly changing images" (*ibid.*) is connected to the mode of perception in modern metropolises and communicates the dissociation of the subject. In relation to the composition of modern poetry a phrase of collage technique is frequently used; less prevalent, but semantically related is Frank's term spatialisation, which presupposes the undermining of "the inherent consecutiveness of language, frustrating the reader's normal expectation of a sequence and forcing him to perceive the elements of the poem juxtaposed in space rather than unrolling in time" (quoted after: Škulj 1988, 45). Spatialisation in this sense does not mean that the quota or the meaning of the images that belong to the motif area of space increased in modern poetry. Similarly to other researchers, Frank stresses primarily the simultaneity of images in modern poetry, and it seems that the notion of space in the quote could also be understood as a metaphor for the poetic text or even its material support.

The conclusion that modern poetry is characterised by the simultaneity and disparity of imagery brings us somewhat closer to the answer to the question also whether space affects the organisation of the lyric text. In his article *The Code of Modernism*, D. W. Fokkema includes space

among the ten categories by which, he feels, it is possible to describe the differences between modernism and some other trends of that period.⁶ Here we will not go into his statement that spatial relations in modernism have a subordinate function in comparison to time, while visualized spatial relations are dominant in expressionism. What is important for the discussion about the role of space in the structure of a lyric text is the finding that the lyric subject in modernist poetry can "transcend the spatial restrictions that were considered prohibitive in earlier period codes." (Fokkema 1976, 684). As an example of transcending the spatial restrictions, Fokkema mentions the poetry of Eliot and Pound; another very illustrative example would be Appolinaire's poem *Zone*. In it the images of various spaces (streets of Paris, Mediterranean shores, a garden of a tavern near Prague etc.) appear simultaneously and therefore break the rule that a person can only be in one place at once. The association between space and the composition of Appolinaire's poem is obvious, although the relationship is not necessarily that of cause and effect: the space is not uniform and the text is fragmented. The spatial transgressions are in a similar relationship to the simultaneity of imagery than the two sides of a coin; in both cases it is about mutual dependence. In traditional lyric poetry, which follows not only the temporal sequence but also the restrictions of space, the structure of the text is different; the images of space assist in forming more closely knit poems in terms of motifs and themes.

The transcending of spatial restrictions in modern poetry does not affect only the structure of the text but also has a thematic function, since the disunity of space may be understood as a metaphor for the incoherence of the lyric subject. The images of various spaces, which are read as metaphors for the inner landscape of the lyric subject, indicate the fluidity, the plurality of self. By appropriating the various spaces, the lyric subject creates different identities for itself that may be experienced by it in various ways – either as a heroic act of self-constitution (an example would be Appolinaire's poem *Zone*) or as a regrettable loss of a firm foundation (which seems to be characteristic of expressionist poetry, for which S. Vietta has used the already mentioned term of dissociation of the subject). Besides the incoherent space, there is at least one more metaphor for the inconsistent or lost identity typical of modern poetry – the metaphor of departure. Modern poets use it as a variation of the old topos of life being a journey, because they use it to indicate the assertion that space cannot provide a consistent or firm identity to the lyric subject.

We may end this reflection on the role of space in lyric poetry by concluding that space in traditional lyric poetry is a metaphor for the inner world of the lyric subject, while in modern lyric poetry it is foremost a metaphor for an unstable or lost identity. The metaphoric function of space is an important criterion in determining the genre of a poem. Descriptive poetry is characterized by literal imagery, and is therefore, strictly speaking, not part of lyric poetry. In "language poetry" the boundary between outside and inside is blurred and the images of space have no metaphoric function, so once again we probably cannot speak of lyric poetry. Because space in "language poetry" isn't something that would

exist "out there", but is a construct of language, let us mention in the end as a curiosity how the unreality of space entered the thoughts and poems of a Slovenian poet Gregor Strniša (1930-1987) who is normally regarded as a classic of modern poetry. As Kant, he was convinced that there is no Euclidian space in physical reality. In his essay *Universe*, he reflects that the *a priori* forms of space and time originated with the development of thinking consciousness as a defence mechanism without which human beings in the early stages of the development of their consciousness would instantaneously go mad or die. He clearly illustrated the higher form of consciousness that he called universal consciousness, with an image of a four-dimensional spatial-temporal being, because of the "purely organic connection of all living things in all places and all times into a dialectically greater whole of the entire living world" (Strniša 1983, 10). The reader who knows Strniša's views has no problems in understanding his seemingly paradoxical verses about the willow tree, which was cut down, and yet still stands in the same spot.⁷ The function of the imagery, which describes space in Strniša's poetry is unique, because through it the lyric subject indicates its higher, universal consciousness. In the consciousness of the average contemporary person, however, space is still something one can see oneself in as in a mirror.

NOTES

¹ Jola Škulj wrote about this in Slovenia, in her articles: "The modern novel: the concept of spatialization (Frank) and the dialogic principle (Bakhtin)", *Space and Boundaries. Proceedings of the XIIIth Congress of the ICLA*. Munich, 1988; "Spacialna forma in dialoškost: vprašanje konceptualizacije modernističnega romana", *Primerjalna književnost* 12, 1989, 1.

² As an example of the death of the author and the "self" as the source of speech, Barthes states Mallarmé's poetry but overlooks the idea that the lyric subject is "born" together with the poem and does therefore not exist independently of it.

³ "One of the cardinal principles – perhaps the cardinal principle – of American Language poetics (as of the related current in England usually labelled 'linguistically innovative poetics') has been the dismissal of 'voice' as the foundational principle of lyric poetry" (Perloff 1998, 19).

⁴ *Über das Verhältnis der bildenden Künste zu der Natur*, 1807; Schellings Werke, 3. Supplemented tome, Munich 1959, p. 416.

⁵ The difference between de-authorization (the eradication of the author) and impersonality (the eradication of the one who is speaking) is often overlooked. The impersonality, described by Eliot in his essay *Tradition and the individual talent*, refers explicitly to the poet and not to the lyric subject, therefore it seems it would be more appropriate to speak of de-authorization.

⁶ According to Fokkema, modernism differs from symbolism, futurism, expressionism, surrealism, socialist and documentary realism, as well as post-modernism.

⁷ "There used to be a willow here, / someone will say and walk on. // But by the endless river – / darkening, rustling behind him, – / in its beautiful leafy cage, / the same willow is standing still" (Strniša 1989, 67).

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