

Ennobling Interchanges

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This paper draws on the poetic concept of the oneness of the self and the world, as elaborated through Coleridge's reading of German romantic philosophers by the poet William Wordsworth. In his poem "Prelude" he rejects simple materialism and simple spiritualism, just as Schelling rejected the extreme views that the spiritual self creates the world or that the material world is created by the self. Wordsworth claims that things are half created and half perceived, and that there are ennobling interchanges between the world and the self. The notion of oneness, of the merging of inner and outer, perceived and the perceiver, has been influential on numerous and diverse poets. In the paper, I compare various modes of vision that attempt to reveal this oneness in Slovenian poets such as Prešeren, Kosovel, Detela and Osojnik on the one hand, and Wright, Oliver, Murray, Stevens and Strand among American writers. The question of influence is at least ambiguous, but what I am suggesting is some likenesses that seem to emerge from the act searching the world through writing.

Keywords: Slovenian poetry / American poetry / interchange / self and the world / oneness / Wordsworth, William

In "Book 14" of Wordsworth's 1850 *Prelude* the poet climbs Mt. Snowdon in Wales to see the sun rise. He fails at that but, as is often the case, discovers something more important when he breaks through the cloud cover and seems to be looking over a vast sea illuminated by the moon with a kind of visionary light. Beneath the clouds is a vast array of sounds: "[T]he roar of waters, torrents, streams / innumerable, roaring with one voice" (Wordsworth, *The Prelude* 14: 59–60), which are subsumed under the clouds. As he looks he realizes:

There I beheld the emblem of a mind
That feeds upon infinity, that broods
Over the dark abyss... a mind sustained
By recognition of transcendent power. (71–76)

Literally in those lines the mind both encompasses and is encompassed by the abyss of infinity and participates in a "mutual domination" and an "interchangeable supremacy" (51, 54). He has, after a life journey recorded in the whole poem, arrived at

A balance, an ennobling interchange
Of action from without and from within...,
Both of the object seen and the eye that sees. (12: 376–379)

Earlier he had experienced the mind as it submitted to “outward sense” or as the outward world was an “obedient servant” of the mind (222). Earlier too, he had realized, in preparation for this moment, that “we multiply distinctions” (2: 217).

This notion of *Oneness* is something Wordsworth arrives at through Coleridge’s reading of Schelling, Kant and Hegel: for Wordsworth the point is to avoid both a simple materialism and a simple spiritualism, and he struggles with this throughout the *Prelude*. Schelling in his identity theory similarly rejects the extremes of a spiritual self that creates the world and a material world that creates the self. Wordsworth sees a situation where things are “half created, half perceived” (*Poetical* 163). Like Schelling he moves away from mere correspondences to a poetic version of identity in the concept of the *Oneness* or ennobling interchange. Schelling, for instance, writes that one knows the world’s “true essence only in the link by which it eternally posits its unity as the multiplicity of things and again posits its multiplicity as its unity” (cit. from Bowie). This is precisely what Wordsworth experiences in the *Oneness* of the roaring waters and voices united in the simultaneous mind of the self and the clouds, the Other. As Schelling writes: “If it is to be as One then it must reveal itself in itself; but it does not reveal itself in itself if it is not an other in itself, and as *in* this other the One for itself” (*Ibid.*).

Over a century after Wordsworth, American poet James Wright, at the end of his collected poems, arrives at a similar vision. Earlier in the book—and his life—there were occasional moments, that occurred mostly in retrospect. In “A Snail at Assisi” he observes not the snail but its shell, and as the day progresses he imagines what became of it, and for a few brief moments, as he projects its life as his own, “My shadow and the shadow of the snail are one and the same” (279). But it is with the last poem, “Winter Daybreak Above Venice,” that he achieves a vision that echoes Wordsworth’s. As he looks from a mountainside the night covers his sight of what is below, much as Wordsworth’s clouds, and he too hears a myriad of sounds as he imagines a goatherder’s house and his sleeping goats, and the city awakening, and then

In turn, and somehow
Impossibly hovering in the air over everything

The Mediterranean, nearer to the moon
 Than the mountain is,
 Shines. (376)

Suddenly, the moon and stars flicker out and “the whole mountain / Appears, pale as a shell.” That sudden shift creates for him a new world that extends Wordsworth’s vision so that he is in the midst of a world where everything is interchanged:

Look, the sea has not fallen and broken
 Our heads. How can I feel so warm
 Here in the dead center of January? I can
 Scarcely believe it, and yet I have to, this is
 The only life I have. I get up from the stone.
 My body mumbles something unseemly
 And follows me. Now we are all sitting here strangely
 On top of the sunlight.

All—everything—he and his friend in the poem, Galway Kinnell, the reader, the people and things in the town, the mountain, moon and invisible stars, are all part of the unifying vision.

We should note here a distinction. When Walt Whitman celebrates himself it is as a participant in a “knit of identity” (Folsom, sect. 3) that seems beyond time in an ongoing “now,” and yet separate. His identity, or as he calls himself in section 24, a “Kosmos,” is achieved not by some vision of transcendence and unity but as what Ed Folsom calls “descendence,” a move where the soul descends and “energizes” both itself and the body (Folsom 21). While from the beginning he wants to *include* the reader as Other (“for every atom belonging to me as good belongs to you,” sect. 1) both self and other are distinct with their own “belongings.” It is in this sense that he “contains multitudes” (sect. 51). And at the end, while he becomes the blade of grass under the reader’s boots, he is also distinct and, after death, “will stop somewhere waiting for you” (sect. 52). Rather than a sense of *Oneness* Whitman opts for an expansion of the self that includes all his readers as part of himself.

On the other hand, from the perspective of Wordsworth, Prešeren or at least my own reading of Prešeren in translation, often expresses a similar desire to achieve a kind of *Oneness* with the world around him. As Žižek suggests, Prešeren’s poems “can only momentarily embrace a *Oneness* with the world” (120). In his great epic of the *Baptism at the Savica*, the hero, after the battle, looks out over Lake Bohinj which

seems, like Wordsworth's vision sea of clouds on Snowdon, calm on the surface, or Wright's sea of sky but also contains "armies" and various "denizens" beneath that surface. This doubleness of surface and depth is what unites it with the hero's own mind:

Does not, o Črtomir, this selfsame lake
Resemble you, as on its shore you stand? (Prešeren 119)

And the fact that the narrator, Prešeren, asks this personal question, just as he inserts himself at other points in the narrative, suggest also a *Oeness* of narrator, character and lake, of self and other in a way that is as complex as Wordsworth's vision. Indeed, Prešeren's intimate connection to Vrba, as we see in the "Sonnets of Unhappiness," which I take as his masterpiece, and which also underscores this desire for *Oeness*, if yearned for more than achieved.

Even later in the epic, as Črtomir visits the Savica falls, a similar scene occurs but here the vision takes the world around him and gathers it skyward into one whirlwind, just as his own mind turns heavenly as he is to be converted:

Our hero listens to the thundering falls
Next morning, thinking as the banks below
Are shaken by the water as it brawls
And roars, while undermining in its flow
The trees and cliffs and towering mountain walls
And in its wrath its foamclouds skywards blow! (129)

This is a crucial point in the narrative and reflects the tension, especially apparent in Wordsworth and Prešeren, between pantheism and Christianity, or between a material and a spiritual vision. In fact, the priest in the epic suggests that *Oeness* will finally be achieved between man and God, but in death (137). In the end, as Žižek suggests, Prešeren's hero is left not with a unity that embraces the world, but one that embraces its emptiness in himself, from his converted point of view, so for the narrator the poem creates an "undecided intermediate state" of momentary flashes (Wordsworth's term) of unity (Žižek 120).

Of course there are other moments in Prešeren such as in "The Minstrel" where the birdsong imitates man imitating the birdsong so that they feel as one (Prešeren 41). While these kinds of scenes are not as sustained, they appear occasionally as Wordsworth's "spots of time," that conflate space and time in the mind. This is a crucial point, I should add, for to have these moments of *Oeness* ever present would

be to lose the self: instead, these poets have momentary experiences, possibilities always deferred to the next moment once achieved. This creates one of the major tensions in both their poetries that work to avoid a simple religious point of view and establish a *Oneness* that is cosmic and secular, one that is focused on the mind and its “ennobling interchanges” with the world around it.

This search for *Oneness*, then, is an unending one, and requires the poet’s intense attention, as Mary Oliver explains:

I see something and look at it. I see myself going closer and closer
 Just to see it better, as though to see its meaning out of its physical form.
 And then I take something emblematic from it, and then it transcends the actual.
 (Cit. from McClatchy 409)

Once she feels that transcending reality she is able to imaginatively become part of it. It is a piecemeal process. Her poem, “Sleeping in the Forest” (403), begins with her worrying that the earth does not “remember me” but as she sleeps her “thoughts ... floated / light as moths among the branches / of perfect trees.” She seems then to rise and fall with her thoughts which she, in a sense, becomes so that in the end she has “vanished at least a dozen times / into something better.” And in “At Backwater Pond” she drinks and hears the world around her “deep inside me, whispering” (393). In “Whelks” [scallops], she looks for the edges of the world in the edges of the shells that “have snapped and crumbled,” a boundary that has broken down and “vanished” so that she herself attempts “to be / that wild darkness, / that long, blue body of light” (277). That is, to be both inside and outside, light and darkness thus achieving a *Oneness* that straddles the now invisible border.

But it is perhaps in “Pink Moon: The Pond” (419–420) that she expresses her process best. As she approaches the pond, an outsider, the sound of the frogs stills for a moment until

little by little the silence lifts
 until song is everywhere
 and your soul rises from your bones,
 and strides out over the water.

The soul itself keeps traveling, “unfolding / like a pair of wings.” The body that then follows the soul into the water as the music of the frogs moves

upward through your own throat,
not even noticing
you are something else
and that's when it happens –
you see everything
through their eyes

At that point body and soul, self and world become one for, as she writes, “everything is everything else.” Thus the poem ends with a kind of transfiguration of herself:

the darkness coming down
called water,
called spring,
called the green leaf, called
a woman's body
as it turns into mud and leaves,
as it beats into a cage of water,
as it turns like a lonely spindle
in the moonlight, as it says
yes.

The self here is both “vanishing” as she remarks earlier in the poem, for she becomes a woman's body of mud and leaves, becomes part of the pond, part of everything—but also she is a contained self. That is why the poem is written in second person: the you is herself, the character in the poem, and as the experience of the poem goes, the reader who is at least partially addressed. Using second person allows her to begin out of herself, already starting to become part of that “everything [in] everything else.”

Like Oliver, Joan Murray writes that “the third dimensional forms and life you build within yourself” is part of “the root that is all about you” (132). In “The Builder” she writes how going down to the seas she wants “to pack it up to my arms / and let the blue globe of all that water fill my mouth / Rise up my head, my chest, bursts out of the sullen seed of my loin.” For her, the process is to be, as Wordsworth says, creator and created at once:

Like a wind passing slowly along the valley
That which passes by is narrow and is the woman
Is the autumn leaf leaped between one tree
And long looming of one bird to scan
One tree one land one river in no hour (14)

What she creates is an “inlocked” world where everything becomes one thing. Though she died at an early age, like Srećko Kosovel, she left behind an amazing array of poems and journals as she strove to achieve a “consciousness in the never-ending, the great wideness that one must blend withal” (142).

“It is autumn quiet inside me / and outside. Beautiful / wherever I turn my thoughts” (26), Kosovel himself writes in “Autumn Quiet.” It seems unlikely as in his later political and graphological poems that he would be striving after some sort of *Oeness*. Later in that poem he describes his life as something he must “imprint / with my sign.” The signs, his words and their shape on the page, are arranged to create a tactile quality and are precisely the way he achieves his own version of *Oeness*. I am reminded of Wordsworth’s note to “The Thorn” where he says “the mind attaches to words, not only as symbols of the passion, but as things, active and efficient, which are of themselves part of the passion” (*Poetical* 701). Taking the words into the self takes in also the world, allowing the poem to become one with it. “Everything is within me,” Kosovel writes in “The Whole World is Like” (141). And in “Open” he writes “My heart is open to eternity” (141).

Ultimately what he is after is what he calls “the unwritten, unthinkable, / never sensed Word” (108). Note that “Word” is capitalized, drawing attention to its status as graphic object and just as, in a more obvious manner, the vertically written “INTO THE MARSHES” in “Spherical Mirror” (50) suggests something beyond the simple referential quality of the words. It is as if one must touch the poem as one would a sculpture. With its two lines of words leading out from the column in the shape of a reversed letter “K” that suggest a reflection from a mirror, the graphic visualization is, as he says in the poem, a “mirror / to know yourself” (50). That is, the letters themselves reflect back the self that looks towards them—a version of the “ennobling interchange.”

Where Kosovel distinguishes himself is that the *Oeness* is often achieved in death, or in the kind of poetic madness that Shelley, Plato and Wordsworth describe. In “Above The Madhouse,” for example, a “Shadow-man” walks in a “moonstruck” garden, but also in a kaleidoscope of past financial dealings. That does not sound much like a striving to *Oeness*, in fact just the opposite. But the ending turns to suggest that the place is one of liberation for the man, the poet and the reader as Kosovel turns to address us:

This is freedom,
the horrible freedom
you have stepped behind the invisible walls
of expanded human consciousness,
which unfolds in a terrible
immensity. (43)

Here the wall that separates self and world, mind and cosmos, is breached as we move away, as Wordsworth did, from superficial, everyday things towards a larger vision of unity.

I have argued elsewhere (Jackson 164–182) for the way Jure Detela's concern for the ecological welfare of the world is akin to American poet W. S. Merwin, and I would assert here that he has much in common with Mary Oliver in their desire for *Oneness*. As with Kosovel there is a sense in which death brings some answers. In "Mama, How Do Dead People Feel?", the self is literally enclosed by the refrain:

I have always known
the dry leaf
on springtime branch
suffers for itself.
And during the days
when I have been
far away from it
I've known nevertheless
that the dry leaf
on springtime branch
suffers for itself. (Detela 71)

Detela's placement here seems to put himself in the folds of the dry, curling leaf however distant physically he seems to be. It should be noted that this is not a subjective self but one that has given up distinct selfhood for a unity with the Other, here specifically the dead leaf. In "Harts" (the pun in English on "hearts" emphasizing the unity between animal and human), as with Prešeren, a unity develops only with the death of the deer which creates a "translucent" vision where their "bodies unite [the earth] with the sky" (47). In some of his shorter poems we find the kind of flash vision such as those in Wordsworth spots of time and in James Wright. Take, for example, the following quatrain:

In quiet music a sleeping head
leans into me and awakens

herds of stars that spray like droplets
as a horse runs across the stream. (Detela 49)

Here the language itself, the metaphors as opposed to Kosovel's graphics and typology, creates an ennobling interchange among the speaker, the earth, the sky, the horse and the unnamed Other. The language itself suggests a never-ending extension of associations that could potentially gather around the scene.

In Detela's poem, "Ion," the speaker notes how our material history "sees / only the planes which separate the / spaces which limit living expansion" (73). But it is language of freedom, he says, countering the imprisoning language of history, a language from "every cell" of his body that "reveals a premonition of infinite / distances. Without leaving my body" (73). In "Antigone's Poem" the speaker realizes that her perspective, her life that has "flown together as one / image" is a pattern that suggests that "I have been forever dead / and my body is a pattern of the whole earth." That pattern is also based on her brother's corpse which is "buried everywhere, / wherever I am." The world here, through her imagery, her language is an extension of herself, is one with it.

Now it is true, as Miklavž Komelj says, that Detela cherished "the importance of understanding different creatures, not trying to identify with them, and acknowledging the infinite distance between us and them" (cit. from Detela 123). And it is clear in Detela's own "A Poem For Jure Detela" that his "search for / the meanings of the world in voices" also reveals "the solitude of // horror before another's suffering" (95). Still, without attempting a deconstruction, I have argued here that, like Wordsworth, there is a struggle in which one must maintain the self and yet be aware of the other as Other. Similar to Kosovel he finds a point of unity, while maintaining the distance we saw in "Ion" and the leaf poem, through the medium of language. Like Wordsworth, and frankly with all visions of *Oeness*, the experience is never sustained yet always striven for.

Wallace Stevens in his "The Idea of Order at Key West" listens for much of the poem as he tries to establish the connections among an unnamed "she" who sings, the voice of the sea she sings beside and seems to imitate or even create, and the "Spirit" that seems to hover over the scene. He soon realizes that it is "her voice that made / The sky acutest at its vanishing." Then he realizes she has created the world he experiences and is now a part of:

She was the single artificer of the world
In which she sang. And when she sang, the sea
Whatever self it had, became the self
That was her song, for she was the maker. (106)

The result is that, in the end, even the observers, us and the poet, experience “more than that, / more even than her voice, and ours” among the sounds of sea, wind, voice and song.

The maker’s rage to order words of the sea.
Words of the fragrant portals, dimly starred,
And of ourselves and of our origins,
In ghostlier demarcations, keener sounds. (106)

As with some of his other poems such as “The Man with the Blue Guitar” and “The House Was Quiet and the World Was Calm,” language, song, poetry itself, becomes here a reality that unites self and world.

A radically different approach, yet still in the tradition of Kosovel, is displayed in the recent poems of Iztok Osojnik. Many of these are written as a kind of automatic writing to make use of language per se as he strives for the

creative freedom of words that do not care
and do not care for blissfulness of
standard English of Slovenian of any language that I use (Osojnik, “Sheaf”)

for it is any word, any sound, that gives him access to something larger. Rather than trying to get at a Wordsworthian *Oneness*, an “unsayable,” he opts to “spell out syllables, one after another, losing control” as the language itself takes over. In fact, he creates his own “language” based on what he calls “poetic incontinence”—“and my spell checker is gone words they roll in fashions that / are not to be predicted or even taken serious”(Osojnik, “Sheaf”). Yet the issue for him is similar to what Wordsworth faces with his “distinctions” and “boundaries.” In his recent book, *Wagner*, Osojnik writes:

why should one compose the shards together again
why not to keep living like that
on oceans, continents, seven seas
here today, tomorrow in some foreign land
trying to regain one’s composure (86).

To regain that composure is to use the “pigeon language of winds” he says in another poem (98).

The kind of *Oneness* he seems to be after is a Whitmanesque embrace of all he sees, reads, feels and thinks into one unique pigeon language. For example, in a selection from “Silvestro” in 2011, he starts in Ljubljana on the Butcher’s bridge listening to the “chattering noise of fishermen’s amulets” and then, in a Whitmanesque gesture, includes

my town the universe above
 my supernova bazaar of spices, odes, smells, scents, fragrances, stench
 aromas perfumes
 stinks, vinegar in barrels, and
 large black windows, meaning business (91)

The poem moves with its voracious appetite to suggest it could include the cosmos if time allowed. Like Wordsworth and Wright at the end of their poems, earth and sky exchange places, and each is defined by the other as the sense impressions become their own supernovas. As he says in a recent manuscript poem:

There was my
 Whitmanian ode to Hudson river, I leaned against the railings there, somehow
 feeling strongly
 the immense force of the river, the coldness of the waters
 its indescribable cosmic stream

The movement here, from railing to cosmos through the force of nature is Osojnik’s own version of the Wordsworthian and Whitmanesque striving for *Oneness*.

I have been demonstrating here that these poets offer various versions of an “ennobling interchange” during their versions of elusive “spots of time.” A poet like Wordsworth experiences it directly while a poet like Kosovel experiences it through language. Mark Strand, in “The Idea,” writes:

For us, too, there was a wish to possess
 Something beyond the world we knew, beyond ourselves,
 Beyond our power to imagine, something nevertheless
 In which we might see ourselves. (269)

And yet this too, as with the other poets here, comes not consistently but “always in passing, in a waning light,” for some sort of separation always asserts itself – “it was ours by not being ours,” he goes on to say. This is similar to what he writes in “the Story of Our Lives,” where a couple is reading the story of their lives which is taking place

precisely as they read the words, the book and the life, language and reality become an inescapable one. “[T]here was no more to our lives / than the story of our lives,” the couple understands. As he notes in an interview about another work: “I started writing *The Monument* and it became less and less about the translator of a particular text, and more about translation of a self, and the text as self, the self as book” (Graziano 63). What all these poets work with, of course, are words that can barely express, and most often in flashes, a sense of *Oneness* that forges a place and link with the world around them. In the end, what all these poets are striving for in their own individual ways is what Wordsworth calls a

Visionary power [that]....
Attends the motion of the viewless winds,
Embodied in the mystery of words. (5 554–560)

The notion of *Oneness*, then, of the merging of inner and outer, perceived and the perceiver, has been influential on numerous and diverse poets. One can speculate that today it has had an important impact on the number of poets involved in the ecological movement. Philosophically, one can see the effects of such thinking on poets such as Uroš Zupan in Slovenia through the Romantic influence of Hölderlin, and Linda Hogan in the USA, though the latter is also influenced by Native American Mythology (the relation between Wordsworth’s ideology and Native American beliefs would be a whole other paper, as would be the strand of Romanticism in nineteenth century Germany). Other poets influenced by the notion of *Oneness* include Robert Frost among the poets of the last century as well James Wright and Richard Hugo later in the century. It is a commonplace that poets often arrive at theoretical stances before scientists and philosophers, and perhaps this continued influence and concern will help the conversation about our relationship to the world and its environment. To understand the world through this notion of *Oneness* is to understand the self, and to understand both of them is to help create a better world and a fuller self.

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Oplajajoče izmenjave

Ključne besede: slovenska poezija / ameriška poezija / medsebojno oplajanje / jaz in svet / enost / Wordsworth, William

Prispevek izhaja iz poetičnega koncepta enosti jaza in sveta, kot ga je skozi Coleridgeevo branje nemških romantičnih filozofov izoblikoval pesnik William Wordsworth. Ta v svoji pesnitvi »Preludij« zavrača preprosti materializem in preprosti spiritualizem, podobno kot je Schelling zavrnil skrajni stališči, da poduhovljeni jaz ustvari svet ali da materialni svet ustvari jaz. Wordsworth trdi, da so stvari pol ustvarjene in pol zaznane, med svetom in jazom pa prihaja do oplajajočih izmenjav. Ideja o enosti, o zlijanju notranjosti in zunanosti, zaznanega in zaznavajočega, je vplivala na številne različne pesnike. V članku

primerjam različne načine videnja, ki skušajo razkriti omenjeno enost, in sicer pri slovenskih pesnikih, kot so Prešeren, Kosovel, Detela in Osojnik na eni strani, ter pri Jamesu Wrightu, Mary Oliver, Joan Murray, Wallacu Stevensu in Marku Strandu med ameriškimi pisatelji. Vprašanje vpliva je vsaj dvoumno, toda kar nakazujem, je določena podobnost, za katero se zdi, da izhaja iz dejanja, ki svet raziskuje skozi pisanje.

1.04 Strokovni članek / Professional article

UDK 821.163.6.09-1Kušar M.

821.111(73).09-1Valentine J.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.3986/pkn.v42.i3.07>