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Ales Debeljak's *Anxious Moments* and Imre Oravecz's *When You Became She*

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Ales Debeljak. *Anxious Moments*. Translated by Christopher Merrill, White Pine Press, 1994. 78 pp. \$12.00
Imre Oravecz. *When You Became She*. Translated by Bruce Berlind, Xenos Books, 1994. 113 pp.

Given the state of world affairs during the past decade it would come as a surprise if the two recent collections of prose poems by Eastern European authors under consideration didn't reflect a profound sense of angst, loss, and melancholy. Though neither the Slovak poet Debeljak nor the Hungarian Oravecz writes directly about political concerns, instead choosing to employ, on the one hand an intricately symbolic imagery resulting in a kind of existential cosmology, and on the other a metaphorical diary of obsessive, consuming love, both books offer deep explorations into the nature of loss—whether loss of self, loss of memory, loss of love, country, or innocence.

At once enigmatic and lyrical, the forty untitled prose poems in Ales Debeljak's *Anxious Moments* are filled with haunting images and heightened awareness. These careful poems possess a strange power, for they have the uncanny ability to stop time in their various examinations of life. Composed of minute details, the poems capture and offer up a series of suspended "moments." More than snapshots or artistically arranged still-life compositions, these frozen "moments" create a space filled with complex emotional responses which resonate through the surrounding silence like thunderclaps.

While the poems refer often to journeys, exile and escape, again and again Debeljak suggests we are caught, like characters in a Sartrean drama, in a state of in-between-ness to or from which we can neither arrive nor depart. He writes in one poem: "...for the last time I gaze at the empty yard, cut off from the world, in darkness, no exit." That there is "no exit" leads to despair: "So I always return, he told himself. I never left. Thus he brought to an end his line of thought, metaphor, yearning, the whole world." Still another poem ends with questions followed by a colon with the effect of a mirror:

Are you coming? Going? Your hand's half-raised to greet or
wave goodbye, like this:

Many of the book's section titles re-enforce the sense of futility and alienation: "Late Evening Light"; "Ways of Saying Goodbye"; "Empty Rooms"; "Sketches for the Return." Even memory, the source of these poems, is constantly called into question: "I'm afraid the past, the people he lost, can't be translated into sentences with verbs, nor can I summon them back into living memory."

The near-complete humorlessness and self-reflective anguish so prevalent in *Anxious Moments* might be overbearing were it not for the poet's remarkable lyricism and his ability to transform loneliness and despair into universal concerns. "My loneliness is the same as yours," he tells us in one poem. "Do you recognize yourself in this poem?" he asks in another. Paradoxically, the very loneliness we feel is what we hold in common. It is the bread of the existential communion. The poem that opens the section entitled "Ways of Saying Goodbye" describes the approach of winter along a river that had earlier "flooded its banks, flooded the villages, drowning people and animals." Nature, of course, is impassive, and destruction and death are simply part of its cycle. "Now it flows calmly," he tells us, "As if nothing happened." A woman lying in grass above the river begins to acknowledge her pain, her loss:

Only when the wind gusts through the reeds and the cloud-packed sky does she recognize her fear—the way her heart beats only as hard as mine. Only.

Thus mortality and awareness of the fragility of life binds and fortifies us. We're in this together, Debeljak insists in another poem. Wandering through a world filled with "the fevered babbling of children exiled to distant camps," and the "hiss where there must be flowers about to bloom under a woman's eyelids," the poet wants nothing more than to know "the lyrics of your song, I want to sing with you."

In his introduction, translator Christopher Merrill tells us that he worked closely with the author (who has spent considerable time in this country and holds a Ph.D. from Syracuse University) on the English versions of the poems. It is readily apparent that Debeljak's subtle constructions are effectively rendered, for even the most enigmatic of these poems retains considerable power and the images are often hauntingly beautiful. These poems could not have

been easy to translate: they are tightly fashioned prose poems with few, if any, wasted words.

One particularly challenging poem obliquely employs a mixture of tenses and three different personal pronouns:

A gray cloud, I imagine, covering the shapeless sky, shrouds the city...The water trickling down the dusty windows reminds you of a map of unknown lands... He sits and listens calmly to the heavy rains changing the image of everything he knows. Soon, through the sound of spattering rain, he returns to his typewriter, pauses, then starts tapping the keys.

Though once more the subject is loneliness and alienation, Debeljak again strives, this time via technique, for a kind of communion. By blurring the distinction between himself, his subject, and the reader, the poet gracefully suggests both a problem and its solution.

Similar in theme, though less purely lyrical and more unified in concept, is Imre Oravecz's intriguing *When You Became She*, a series of ninety-five prose poems, catalogs and short narratives which collectively chronicle an obsessive relationship. Though Oravecz writes about a consuming and destructive love, the book is an exploration of—one might even say an essay on—the psychology of loss. First published in Hungary in 1988 under the title *September, 1972*, *When You Became She* sold out its first printing within hours of its release. No doubt the erotic and highly-charged subject of the book has contributed to its success and notoriety in the author's homeland. Nevertheless, it is a complex book, one which succeeds on a number of levels: like Debeljak, Oravecz knows how to move beyond the voyeuristic or confessional and how to endow even the most personal of memories and experiences with broad and universal appeal.

Over the course of the book Oravecz draws a detailed psychological portrait of a man tormented by memory and loss. His exploration ranges from remembered scenes of passionate eroticism and jealousy to emptiness and banality, from joy and humor to bitterness and despair. "At first it was easy to conjure you up from the past," he says in one poem, "all I needed was to recall one act of love, one of the nights spent in W., for example." But time has a way of undermining memory, eroding it "until

finally matters degenerated to the point that every handhold came to nothing, every road leading to you was impassable, you became totally abstract, like a sickly thought or an obsession, of which I've already had enough, but from which I can't free myself." In the end the lover's struggles to understand and master his emotions and his memory can be seen within a greater context—the hopelessly failed love also represents a lost innocence, while the process of reclaiming, sorting through, and coming to terms with the past is part of an engaged existence.

Composed of multiple sentences and units of thought spliced together with commas, Oravec's prose poems have a breathless urgency about them. Through a simple technique—the uninterrupted flow of language—the author instills a kind of "breath" in his narrator. Because the poems are breath-units that tumble out with apparent spontaneity, it's almost as though we can "hear" thoughts taking form. We become intimate witnesses and collaborators in a kind of shared internal logic. In one remarkable poem this logic mixes with the logic of dreams to produce a startling effect:

Last night I dreamt that you were making love to someone,
not the one I always believed you were making love to,
though by now you may have broken up, but to someone else,
someone who is unattainable for you, but for whom you are
attainable, it was an excruciating dream, so excruciating that
I burst out sobbing in my sleep, and woke up, and wide
awake I tried in vain to barricade the exit of the dream's
secret depths, while with open eyes I stared into the dark and
listened to the regular breathing of our boy sleeping in the
same room with me, the dream, like an insidious snake,
slithered forth, and when dawn broke, through the dawn
hours it crept over to me into the daytime, and it coiled up
around me, all day long it strangled my consciousness, and it
forced me to examine it, to explain it...I tried many possible
versions, until finally I chucked them all out, and another,
but absolutely, it will be over, because it's already
unbearably too much for you, what you cannot repay, and the
dream will then become reality, and will not allow me to
sleep, and reality will become a dream, and it will never
again visit me.

Throughout the book, language plays an essential, extraordinary role in conveying the subtleties of loss, the slow decay of memory. The lover's transformation from "you" to "she," for example, signals a completely new reality. The opening poem of the book begins with the Biblical phrase "In the beginning" which the author follows with "there was *you*." For the narrator, the word itself has a kind of magical significance, one allied to better times: "There was faith, there was hope, there was love, there was future." But one word can change everything: "Then the you became she" and "faith became doubt, hope became despair, love became hate, future became past, and the whole thing began all over again."

It's clear that both Oravec and Debeljak care deeply about language. Though both are superb craftsmen, neither seems content to rely on established patterns of expression. By taking risks with the prose poem form, these authors have contributed to its evolution and development. Most importantly, both have produced significant and satisfying books.

Greg Boyd