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Local Identity, Transnational Identification: *The City and the Child*
as Evidence of Worldwide Identification

Among the Poetic Elite

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A thesis submitted to the faculty of
Brigham Young University
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts

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While poetry has historically been connected with rhetoric, few rhetoricians have studied contemporary poetry. Jeffery Walker suggests that this is because contemporary poetry, unlike classical poetry, no longer addresses all socio-economic levels of society but has become insular and self-referential (329). He criticizes that poetry no longer cuts vertically across one culture's hierarchy. I agree that poetry no longer addresses all segments of society, but I argue that this doesn't mean poetry is no longer rhetorical. Contemporary poetry now operates horizontally to unite the cultural elite of many national and ethnic groups by appealing to their identity as poetry readers. Using the identification theories of Kenneth Burke and Naomi Marin, the rhetoric in contemporary poetry becomes more apparent. As an example of how contemporary poetry creates identification among the literary elite, I examine the work of Aleš Debeljak—a former Yugoslavian Slovene poet who must define his national identity while appealing to a transnational community of poetry readers. Debeljak's poetry demonstrates the sophisticated work poetry does to create identify and identification.

Keywords: Rhetoric, contemporary poetry, Kenneth Burke, Naomi Marin, identification, Jeffery

Walker, Aleš Debeljak

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LOCAL IDENTITY, TRANSNATIONAL IDENTIFICATION:
THE CITY AND THE CHILD AS EVIDENCE OF WORLDWIDE IDENTIFICATION AMONG
 THE POETIC ELITE

Introduction

In the summer 2008 issue of *Poetry* magazine, poet David Orr inspired a series of impassioned letters to the editor with an article suggesting that although contemporary poets are “unsure of their relationship with society [,] the modern lyric still wants to address *someone*” (414; Orr’s emphasis). Orr may feel that something about his poetry demands an external audience, but he also acknowledges that it is difficult to define whom, exactly, he is addressing: “a poet is always engaged in battle, though the opponents may be unclear, the stakes unknowable, and the victories and defeats felt far away, in different domains, by people other than himself” (418). Orr has a hunch that poetry has some communicative power, but he is still ambiguous about the purpose and audience of that power. What Orr may be wondering is this: Does poetry written today successfully “address someone”? In other words, does it perform a rhetorical function in society?

Rhetoricians have been skeptical of studying contemporary literary poetry¹ for several decades. Perhaps Jeffrey Walker, author of the incredibly influential *Rhetoric and Poetics in Antiquity*, best articulated why modern rhetoricians don’t like to analyze the poetry being written today. Bear in mind that in *Rhetoric and Poetics in Antiquity* Walker heartily defends the poetic tradition of blending rhetoric and literature, but he finds contemporary poetry lacking in the very things that made classical poetry so rhetorically effective. For Walker, poetry served an important, even vital, rhetorical function in ancient societies, defining the epideictic boundaries

of a culture's values and expectations. Even though ancient poets weren't directly addressing someone, they were, in fact, addressing the entire society on a battlefield of praise, blame, and societal judgment. Societal judgment in ancient poetry manifests itself as a "shap[ing of] the fundamental grounds, the 'deep' commitments and presuppositions" of the poet's community (9). For Walker, this judgment is equally apparent in the traditionally labeled "epideictic" speeches of Gorgias and Isocrates as well as in the aesthetic poetry of Sappho and Solon (11). Ancient poetry defined its society; does contemporary poetry perform the same function? According to Walker, no. He claims that while poetry fulfilled an important societal function in antiquity, contemporary poetry doesn't ever demand legitimate judgment or response from the community at large. He describes the elite audience for modern "high cultural *literary poetry*" as exclusively "school-trained" with "conceptions and expectations [...] formed by the grammatical tradition," and with such an audience, modern poetry only "reflect[s] back its audience's favored philosophical postulates in charmingly figured forms" (329; Walker's emphasis). When the only readers of poetry come from the same narrow cross-section of society as the poets themselves, there can be no epideictic work relevant to defining the values of the full community: poets are only talking to themselves. Walker might tell Orr and other contemporary poets that poetry can be rhetorical, just not when they are the ones writing it.

Walker's criticism of contemporary poetry comes largely from his particular definition of what is "rhetorical." His study of classical rhetoric proceeds from two classical assumptions of rhetoric.

The first assumption Walker makes is to classically define what rhetoric is. Walker's rhetoric derives from a neo-Aristotelian base tempered with the modern understanding that people can be persuaded to "commitments and presuppositions," as he says (9). I don't believe

this frame is sufficient for interpreting more recent literature. For contemporary poetry to be “rhetorical,” we have to further modernize our understanding of rhetoric. In 1990, John Bender and David E. Wellbery suggested that rhetoric has ceased to be “a specialized technique of instrumental communication, but [has become] rather [...] a general condition of human experience” (38). This expanded definition of rhetoric owes much to Kenneth Burke’s early-twentieth-century work. Burke suggested that our understanding of rhetoric might embrace not just the consciously persuasive but also the “semi-conscious, unconscious, class-conscious and auto suggestive”—for this purpose, he recommended the use of “some such term as ‘identification’ rather than ‘persuasion’” (“Untitled”). By expanding our definition of rhetoric to include not only persuasive but also identificatory² texts, naturally more texts can be described as “rhetorical.”

Walker’s second assumption is that a poet must engage with his or her immediate society. That is, Athenian poets address other Athenians, Roman poets address other Romans, Canadian poets address other Canadians, etc. This assumption is obviously no longer the case. Even Bender and Wellbery, well before the international pervasion of Twitter, YouTube, and satellite TV and radio, describe a collapse of national culture without imagining how improved transportation and communication could redefine cultural boundaries that are no longer synonymous with political borders (24). In other words, Walker’s assumption no longer applies; a global community lets poets write for a global audience.

Today’s poets increasingly address a transnational community. I argue that these poets labor under two obligations: they must define themselves according to some national identity, but they must do so while appealing to a transnational audience. National identity was once almost invisible for poets, who wrote for their own countrymen under assumptions of a shared

cultural and historical background. Cultural assumptions that were once as invisible as water is to a fish become more apparent as the poet seeks to address a transnational audience.

If all of this seems quite complicated, I'm pleased; it *is* complicated! The rhetorical tasks that contemporary poets must navigate are complex and can further inform our current rhetorical theories. Modern rhetoricians should actively examine how poets who are engaged in creating a national identity also create transnational identification with a worldwide elite readership of poetry. Here, I'll first describe some of the resistance that contemporary rhetoricians such as Walker have had to approaching poetry as a form that can expand our knowledge of rhetorical theory. I'll describe how the situation wasn't always this way and how many of our best rhetorical theories come from the study of poetry and other literature. Because of this skepticism about the rhetorical value of poetry, I'll then justify the study of contemporary poetry through the theoretical work of Kenneth Burke and, more briefly, of Noami Marin. With Burke's general theory of identification and Marin's complication of that theory, rhetoricians may see how contemporary poets establish both a local identity based on national or ethnic criteria and a transnational identification with self-selecting literary audiences. That they are able to perform this complex rhetorical juggling is impressive enough, but sometimes they are able to accomplish both national identity-making and transnational identification simultaneously with a single literary form or reference. And on top of all this rhetorical work, poetry still manages to sound poetic. In the third section of this paper I'll introduce Aleš Debeljak, Slovenian poet and intellectual, who exemplified these complex rhetorical moves in his 1999 volume *The City and the Child*. Debeljak's poetry shows how useful contemporary poetry can be in expanding our current theoretical understanding. What interests me about Debeljak's poetry is how he tries to define himself both nationally and transnationally through his poems. So, for this project, I'll be

looking at the poems themselves³ to identify the strategies Debeljak uses to create a Slovenian identity and to connect with an international audience. Through discussing Walker's objections, then Burke's and Marin's theories, and finally Debeljak's poetry, I'll demonstrate that both Walker and Orr are mistaken: contemporary poetry is neither irrelevantly insular nor vaguely persuasive. The poetry of our age fulfills a necessary rhetorical purpose for an elite, transnational audience.

Rhetoricians' Skepticism about Contemporary Poetry

Before discussing in detail the theories behind my identificatory interpretation of transnational poetry, I ought to point out that rhetoric and poetry have always had a shaky relationship: is poetry always purely aesthetic? Is rhetoric only persuasive, or does it, too, include aesthetic qualities? The rhetoricians of the early twentieth century saw the persuasive qualities of literature as inspiration for developing their theories. More than perhaps anyone, Kenneth Burke, poet and rhetorician, found himself constantly reconciling literature and rhetoric in such volumes as *Counter-Statement* and *The Philosophy of Literary Form*. Few rhetoricians in the early twentieth century questioned the validity of studying literature—rhetoricians took for granted that literature was rhetorical. The rhetoricians of more recent times, however, largely seem to have divorced themselves from studying poetics in general and poetry specifically.

A History of Poetic Anxiety in Rhetoric

While more and more rhetoricians devote themselves to rhetorical analysis of street signs and public parks, video games and lawn ornaments, the idea that *literature* may have rhetorical value has largely fallen out of vogue. During the high age of theory, from the 1960s up to the late

1990s, an examination of major rhetorical journals reveals that essentially no articles were published that rhetorically analyzed literature or explicitly described the theoretical relationship between poetics and rhetoric. The notable exceptions, of course, include Wayne Booth's *Rhetoric of Fiction* (1983) and *The Company We Keep: An Ethics of Fiction* (1988) as well as and Edward P. J. Corbett's work on the topic. Aside from these heavy hitters, though, there were few other rhetoricians willing to approach the link between rhetoric and literature.

This attitude may be changing. There appears to be renewed interest in literature's rhetorical efficacy in the past ten years or so. Recent publications include Jennifer Richards' books *Rhetoric and Courtliness in Early Modern Literature* (2003) and *Rhetoric* (2008) as well Peter Mack's work on how rhetoric could impact even romances during Renaissance (2002), Carroll C. Arnold on oral rhetoric and rhetoric and literature (2007), Roger Zuber on classical literature and rhetoric (2007), and Jeffrey Walker's admirable *Rhetoric and Poetics in Antiquity* (2000). These pieces, and other works, seem to indicate a return to studying literature as rhetoric. Despite this apparent attitude change, most of this scholarship is centered on classical and Renaissance literature, when the rhetorical tradition loomed large in the minds of authors. Rhetorical consideration of contemporary literature is far less prominent; in fact, it appears to be almost entirely neglected by contemporary rhetoricians. It looks like we study the poetry of other ages and ignore our own.

This is a puzzle: why don't we study contemporary poetry? Most rhetoricians refrain from writing discourses on why they choose not to study a topic, but Jeffrey Walker's book, because of its extensive scope, gives us a tentative hint. I don't believe that every rhetorician who eschews a study of contemporary poetry does so for the exact reasons that Walker

articulates, but his fiery objections are worth looking at to understand both how we see poetry and how we define rhetoric.

Walker's Study of Poetics in Antiquity *and* How Contemporary Poets Don't Measure Up

Walker has most thoroughly explored the important social work that poetry has been able to accomplish in classical ages. Walker suggests that poets were able to make judges of their audiences and encourage them to form opinions and “revise their existing attitudes” (9). More importantly, poetry was the means by which “the individual members of a community identif[ied] themselves,” causing them to “[shape] the fundamental grounds” by which all future rhetoric—including the pragmatic forensic and deliberative forms—would proceed (9). These epideictic poetic forms were vital for a sort of cultural backdrop of values against which specific cases could be judged.⁴

Walker describes how important poetry was for the entire society in which it was performed. He points out that “even classical Greek culture” was

fundamentally, profoundly oral, and continued to conduct its civic business and to disseminate important epideictic discourse primarily through face-to-face, speaker-audience transactions. The written text was, for that society, a script to be performed aloud. (21)

In this context, Walker introduces his term “lyric enthymeme” to describe the way in which the poet provides the specific situation for the audience to fill in with their context and background to complete the judgment of the poetic figures. The entire society, whether pre-Hellenistic Greek or Second Sophistic, benefited from the epideictic work poetry performed. Poetry worked in what we might describe as a vertical motion, using public judgment to connect kings and peons

in a unified sense of what it was to *be* “Athenian,” “Theban” or “Roman.” Walker insists that poets performing such epideictic work had to “distinguish themselves not only by the aesthetic or formal excellence of their verse but also by virtue of saying something both admirable and distinctive” (158). They were performing “ethical positions and value-schemes, and [...] their persuasiveness in doing so is one of their chief reasons for their being preserved in the subsequent tradition” (159). But now that we’ve arrived in the “subsequent tradition,” how well do our contemporary poets fulfill this unifying and defining function?

Not very well, Walker tells us. After describing the role of literature as rhetoric through the ages—from before the coinage of the word “rhetoric,” through Hermagoras and Cicero, across Aristotle and Augustine—Walker’s argument finds itself up against the modern state of poetry. There the rhetoric halts. Walker claims that modern poetry has ceased to be rhetorical in the sense that he has defined it—as “rhetorical poetics,” defining poetry as “epideictic argument that calls its audience to acts of judgment and response” (viii). Now that literary poets write for an elite readership,⁵ our poetry is in a state of talking to itself, and in such a state, rhetoric loses its sausive charms and deliberative strength. Poetry has ceased being a wolf that presented challenging ideas rhetorically and has become a simpering lapdog of smug intellectuals. In Walker’s penultimate paragraph, he rather scathingly remarks that modern poetry has lost the “capacity for speaking across boundaries *persuasively* or for mounting a culturally significant epideictic eloquence that does more than simply reconfirm the group’s existing pieties and hierarchies of value” (330; Walker’s emphasis). If poetry and rhetoric were entwined anciently, Walker claims, the elitism of modern poetry has effectively cut the cord.

When he criticizes poetry, Walker is definitely right about one thing: contemporary poetry is read by a very small, elite portion of the population. In fact, it’s possible that in no other

art form are there so few consumers of the art who are not also producers themselves. It's possible that both the theorist Walker and the poet Orr are frustrated at the lack of vertical influence in contemporary poetry. No longer do poets address the whole of a single society. While popular music lyricists may have the ability to create significant cultural identification, literary poets confine their influence to those readers of expensive, skinny books in the back of the bookshop. Contemporary poets may try schemes as various as billboards and bus advertisements, but it is unlikely that literary poetry will ever again see the societal pervasiveness it once enjoyed in the periods Walker eulogizes. Even New York's Poetry in Motion campaign, charged with placing short poems on public transport, has recently been replaced with the more general Train of Thought program, moving away from poetry to include quotes, philosophy and science (Sternbergh). Even on the bus, poetry is fighting a losing battle to influence a cross-section of society.

In recent times, fewer people within each society may be reading poetry, but another phenomenon of equal importance has quietly revolutionized literary writing: the increased availability of literature through print as well as digital sources, accompanied by the revolutions of transportation and communication, has led to a "smaller" literary world that includes any writer able to publish in a transnational language (typically English) and gain a readership. The integration of contemporary writers into a transnational community is evident in surveying the list of Nobel laureates in literature: at the beginning of the century, Western European and American authors dominated the award, but since the late 60s, non-Western writers have increasingly been awarded the prize ("All Laureates"). It's possible that the judges consciously wished to honor a greater diversity of authors, but the hope remains that at least the Nobel judges are reading these non-Western writers. In cases such as Derek Walcott and Wislawa

Szyborska, winning the Nobel Prize has led to even more international recognition and, perhaps, an even keener awareness that their audience has widened. Instead of writing for all segments of their individual nation-states, more authors are writing for an elite international community.

Walker is absolutely right that only the educationally elite of America participate in producing and consuming contemporary poetry, but poetry is no longer just about the single nation-state in which its writers reside. You might imagine the difference between these two types of interactions (the intra-societal and the transnational) in terms of two lines: we might describe Walker's model as a vertical line connecting all cross-sections of a single community. The line reaches from the upper class to the lower class, from the rich and powerful to the poor and obscure, to epideictically connect all members of that society. Contemporary authors, on the other hand, seek to connect elite readers of a very narrow social stratum in each of their transnational communities—like a thin horizontal line connecting the educationally elite of South Africa and of South Korea, of the United States and of the United Arab Emirates. Instead of defining what it is to be Athenian or Roman, this epideictic poetry seeks to define what it is to be the sort of person who reads poetry. If poetry seems more or less inaccessible, it's supposed to be: that's how poets put out a signal to which their poetry-reading audience will respond, creating boundaries that are less political than cultural. Through this "horizontal" model of epideictic discourse, elitist poetry readers of all cities, regions, and nations self-identify as elitist poetry readers.

Though poetry readers may begin to identify with a wider group upon picking up a piece of high literary modern poetry, they still constitute an extremely small minority of the population. Orr suggests that poets are so uncertain of their relationship to society, perhaps by

virtue of their unpopularity, that they can't actually influence the social and political dynamic of a community. What good is war poetry like our pending example, Debeljak's *The City and the Child*, if only a slight handful of rather eggheadish people bother to read it? Wouldn't an advertising campaign or a more populist form of literature be more rhetorically effective than some poetry that only serves to create identification among a certain group of readers? Ah, but don't underestimate the little book of poetry, Burke intones: "The rarest work may have more influence upon the shaping of society than a work read by millions" (*Counter-Statement* 90). The self-selecting group of people who choose to be "readers of poetry" is still capable of being persuaded of some things (although, as Walker has pointed out, not of all things). More importantly, though, they can identify in a sense that Burke has defined and explicated.

The Theories that Justify the Study of Poetry: Burke and Marin on Identification

While the relationship between literature and rhetoric was more unquestioningly accepted in the first half of the twentieth century, there were enough aesthetes that Burke felt he had to (and frequently did) weigh in with his support of the rhetoricality of literature. In *Counter-Statement*, he writes, "Art needs nothing by way of 'sanctification' but the neutralization of its detractors. It needs no 'dignity' beyond the mere zero of not being glibly vilified" (91). Burke's overall perspective on poetics was not that it enjoyed a privileged position of expression over other forms of communication, only that it should be spared the indignity of thoughtless dismissal by its critics. Burke felt poetry could be fair game for rhetorical analysis. So how might he respond to Walker's criticism of contemporary poetry?

Walker's greatest objection to viewing modern literary poetry as rhetorical is that poetry has long ceased to be a popular art and, by losing its status in the public sphere, has lost its

capacity to create meaningful epideictic “judgment and response” among more than a self-congratulatory few. Burke might accept that modern poetry is far less of a forum for public judgment formation than was ancient poetry, but its exclusivity forms part of its rhetorical sway. Those who choose to read poetry may come from a certain stratum of educated types, but they form only a limited sample of all educated readers. By approaching poetry, readers of poetry begin to identify themselves as “readers of poetry.” As readers begin Burkean identification of themselves as “readers of poetry,” they associate themselves with a series of other attributes connected with “readers of poetry”: educated, literary, perhaps more progressive, etc. When readers choose to read the “high literary poetry” that Walker finds so intellectually incestuous, they characterize themselves as a certain type through that act. The epideictic “judgment and response” begins before the first word is read—through the very act of picking up a book of modern literary poetry.

Burke has suggested that there is a sociological purpose for literature, very closely tying a traditional understanding of epideictic with identificatory rhetoric. He suggests that a sociological perspective on literature “would consider works of art [...] as strategies for selecting enemies and allies, for socializing losses, for warding off [the] evil eye, for purification, propitiation, and desanctification, consolation and vengeance, admonition and exhortation, implicit commands or instructions of one sort or another” (“Equipment for Living” 304). Although poets certainly don’t hold the deliberative reins of democracy in our society, Burke would argue that they still employ a sociologically important rhetoric. Though Orr may think the poets are “unsure of their relationship with society,” Burke would be a little surer about the purposes poets serve within a society.

While Burke admits that we “cannot advocate art as a cure for [a] toothache,” (*Counter-Statement* 90) as a poet and friend of poets Burke is keenly aware of the rhetorical power of literature. This description of a purpose for literature focuses on the way that rhetoric operates to connect or alienate across a spectrum of audience.

In periods during and immediately surrounding war, the sociological influence of poets may be even more significant. Burke, who himself had taken an interest in art’s role in depicting war, would have, I think, been fascinated by poets such as Debeljak as well as those aesthetic poets whom Debeljak derides as rhetorically ignorant. What Debeljak calls a “self-sufficient glass-bead game” lines up with what Burke describes as pure poetics: “concerned with ‘symbolic action’ in and for itself” while “rhetoric [is] concerned with ‘symbolic action’ in persuasion and identification” (“Rhetoric, Poetics and Philosophy” 16). Burke, unlike Debeljak, believes in the existence of non-rhetorical poetry. However, in war poetry—as in most cases of poetry generally—the poet’s responsibility is more identificatory than persuasive. Burke suggests that artists who find a way for “war [to] be put forward *as a cultural way of life, as one channel of effort in which people can be profoundly human*” can “induce in the reader the fullest possible response to war, precisely such a response as might best lead one to appreciate the preferable ways of peace” (“War, Response, and Contradiction” 240–241; Burke’s emphasis). But even Burke’s tools of identification may be imprecise for describing what contemporary poets are doing—after all, the globalization of poetry was still in its early stages at the time Burke was writing. Perhaps Burke couldn’t have anticipated the way that identity has become fractured for those living during the nationalist revolutions of the last part of the twentieth century.

Naomi Marin finds Burke's theories useful for analyzing the situation of essayist Slavenka Drakulić, a Yugoslav who found herself a Croat national after the war and was shocked to discover that she was now a foreigner in areas that were once part of her homeland. But Marin wonders how Drakulić's many shifts of political identity and eventual self-described "exile" from identity complicate a reading of identification. As Marin reads him, Burke's distinction between "identity" and "identification" is not always clear, possibly because "identity" was to be included in Burke's uncompleted *Symbolic of Motives* (143). Working from Burke's vague description of identity as a "titular or ancestral term," Marin suggests two Burkean dilemmas inherent in Drakulić's loss of identity: (1) How does the rhetor integrate multiple cultural and national identities that struggle against and coexist with each other into some unified identity, and (2) how would a rhetor in that position be able to find any points of identification with an audience? (143) For answers to these posed questions, Marin is less than explicit, only suggesting that her subject "appears to develop a consistent voice of the Outsider" (142). While I appreciate her developing these two very important questions, I feel that Marin has not addressed a third important question that may settle some of the complications of the first two: how does a rhetor choose an identity and choose an audience through medium, subject material and language? Through choosing an audience, Drakulić and other authors with a displaced identity can create "homeland" among like-minded readers. Even Drakulić's supposed "exile" from national identity can be a term that connects her with a chosen audience.

One of the finest things that poetry can do is provide a displaced author with an identity among a small group of quasi-public intellectuals who self-identify as readers and consumers of poetry. Such is the case certainly in Debeljak's poetry, as well as in that of similar poets.⁶ Debeljak's poetry is an especially good case of a horizontally directed identification. While

Walker's poets may have connected all segments of a single nation-state, Debeljak identifies with a single, elite segment across national, ethnic and linguistic boundaries. With Burke's theory of identification and Marin's observation that fractious politics can challenge identity, reading Debeljak's poetry provides rhetoricians with a fascinating case of how contemporary poets establish a national/ethnic identity while they also identify with a larger, transnational poetic identity.

Aleš Debeljak and Transnational Poetic Identity

Like Drakulić, Debeljak found himself de- and re-nationalized during the Balkan revolutions. Debeljak is from Slovenia, the most autonomous Yugoslavian republic and the first to achieve its sovereignty through the relatively untraumatic Ten-Day War. Today Slovenia is a member of both NATO and the European Union and enjoys the economic prosperity and strong democracy that other Balkan countries sometimes lack. Despite this relative national stability, Debeljak suffers from many of the same dislocation anxieties that Marin describes in Drakulić.

In addition to sorting out his "home identity" as a Slovene (and no longer a Yugoslavian) while in Slovenia, Debeljak also had to present his Slovenian identity to an international audience, first as a doctoral candidate at Syracuse, then as a Fulbright Scholar at Berkeley, and currently as a prolific writer and poet whose works have been published in over fifteen languages ("Debeljak"). Most of his poetry has been translated into English, both by himself and with the aid of his long-term translator Christopher Merrill; this translation into English not only implies an Anglo-American audience for his work but also includes all Anglophones, regardless of whether English is their native language. Debeljak has to explain his country to a broad spectrum of political and national perspectives. Sometimes he explicitly addresses questions of Slovenian

culture in essays such as “The Political Meaning of the Slovene Neo-Avant-Garde,” “Cosmopolitanism and National Tradition: the Case of Slovenia” and “My Private Balkan,” but he also addresses his national identity every time he publishes for the globalized literary elite. In these transnational settings, Debeljak must present himself not just as a poet, but also as a *Slovenian* poet, an identity that itself is fraught with complications of nationalism and ethnicity. The political and social implications of his nascent identity of “Slovene” are especially important to Debeljak in light of his stated poetic objectives and belief in the politico-rhetorical power of poetry.

Debeljak feels as though his work must be rhetorically motivated and suggests that contemporary poets have a responsibility to write about politics in a rhetorically effective manner. For him, art for art’s sake alone, without rhetorical engagement with the world, “seems a pale substitute for a responsible [...] search for new answers to new challenges” (“Avant-Garde” 45). Debeljak, as both a scholar and a poet, puts a premium on poetry’s capacity for political persuasion and identification.

Debeljak, more than Walker or Orr, sees rhetoric everywhere and sees himself as writing for political as well as poetic purposes. Debeljak’s analysis of the Slovene neo-avant-garde movement suggests not only that poets can use their medium as a means of political persuasion but also that even when poets vehemently deny political involvement, they’re positing a rhetorical argument on a political position—that of isolated non-involvement (45). Debeljak grimly describes how, since the fall of communism, “the idea that writers should have nothing to do with the political and moral aspects of the collective condition [...] has become the motto of the day in independent Slovenia” (43). He fears that all of the good that artists were able to do under oppression has lost its cultural currency, that “yesterday’s dissident critique advocating

personal dignity and risks in the name of freedom are [sic] not highly thought of today” (“Bridge” 636). He cynically asks his compatriots, “What sort of meaning can there be in a self-sufficient glass-bead game? [...] Such artworks respond with voluntary silence to their age, refusing to vibrate on the wavelength of shifting historical, national, and social movements” (“Avant-Garde” 45). Debeljak’s voice is especially relevant to a discussion of contemporary poets’ political rhetoricality because he himself is a poet, a poet of politically influenced poetry, and a poet whose book *The City and the Child* provides the best case for modern poetry that exhibits the “capacity for speaking across boundaries persuasively,” the loss of which capacity Walker so lamented.

Debeljak is an engaging advocate of poetry that fulfills a civic need, and he is an interesting case to study in terms of balancing a shifting national identity with a transnational self-identification, but what of his poetic work? While many of his pieces more or less obviously treat his own political and cultural upheaval, *The City and the Child* is a particularly telling rhetorical artifact for analyzing how his anxieties and alliances of identity and identification interplay.

In the introduction to *The City and the Child*, translator Christopher Merrill explains that the inspiration for the volume came from the synchronous events of the violent Yugoslavian wars and the birth of Debeljak’s daughter to his American wife (9). One event leading to the writing of this volume involves if not the creation then certainly the accentuation of ethnic and political identities into distinct, mutually exclusive “titular or ancestral terms,” while the other event collapses national identities in the personage of an infant who is at once both Slovenian and American.

Debeljak exemplifies two of Burke's three major variations of general identification in "The Rhetorical Situation": identification with, identification against and misidentification by inaccuracy (268–69). Debeljak utilizes identification with and identification against as he tries to determine his identity in a time and place of shifting national boundaries while he simultaneously seeks to create a stronger identification with his transnational elite readership. The volume itself represents these two identificatory impulses; it is at once a statement on what it is to be Slovenian and which camps a Slovene should identify *with* and *against*, while it also is very aware that each poem must perform in a transnational context, appealing to the self-identification of poetry readers beyond the Balkans. I will treat each of these complex aspects below.

Slovenian Identity

It's not entirely true that no one ever asked Debeljak if he wanted to be a Slovene. A series of national referendums among Slovenes led to an overwhelming majority vote for national independence from Yugoslavia in the early 1990s; however, as Marin points out in her studies of Croatian essayist Drakulić, destabilization in the Balkans made each former and future citizen live multiple "lives on the margin" (117). Debeljak's identity, whether as a Balkan or a Yugoslavian or a Slovene, is largely an accident of birth, and his loss of national identity is mostly a case of being caught in political crossfire. Unlike Drakulić, who seeks to reject all forms of epithets in the face of nationalistic shift, Debeljak uses his writing as a medium to explore and define his identity through both identification *with* and identification *against* the various recently nationalized ethnic identities of the former Yugoslavia.

One way for Debeljak to demonstrate his range of sympathy is to lend his poetic voice to others who may be "mute Debeljaks" the same way that Burke describes the "mute Byrons":

those who have had a “pattern of experience” similar to the author’s in terms of both environment and response to that environment (*Counter-Statement* 154). In “Grand Hotel Europa” Debeljak expresses his urge to give poetic utterance to others when he writes, “I’ll lend them my throat to intercept / the barking of dogs” and “I can’t even see myself / anymore, yet I must sing for them,” meaning those whom he can’t reach (12–13, 13–14). In a lament similar to Orr’s, Debeljak wants to “share [the pain] with someone. But with whom?” as he surveys the “[n]o man’s land” that “beckons” him (7, 1–2). In this state Debeljak identifies two extremes of utterance, neither of which performs the rhetorical function he wishes for. Either he will “whisper it alone into the night” and no one will ever hear it, or else “we all speak” and the utterance “vanishes like a copper engraving in a blast furnace” (8-9). Though he may not have thought about it while penning these words, Debeljak articulated one of Burke’s many paradoxes of identification: while identification keeps us from being alone in the night, we cannot all speak in unison because identification involves communication on the one side and “excommunication” on the other. As Burke says, there must always be rejection and acceptance, and “‘rejection’ is but a by-product of ‘acceptance’” (*Attitudes on History* 21). In other words, someone has to be left out.

Throughout *The City and the Child*, Debeljak sets up the distinction between those for whom he will “lend his throat” and those against whom he will speak. In carving out an identity as a Slovene, he chooses “enemies and allies” through his war literature. In the case of dedications of his poems, Debeljak identifies clearly those to whom he has literally given his words. Of forty-two poems, seven are directly inscribed to someone. Two are dedicated to members of his family, Erica and Francis Debeljak, but the remaining dedications are to other Balkans. Almost always, he writes the inscription with a name and then a location of the

inscriptee. Most often, the person to whom Debeljak inscribes the poem is not another Slovene but someone in another part of the former Yugoslavia. Sometimes the inscription includes a nod to the transitions of exile: “Sarajevo-Ljubljana,” “Sarajevo-Zagreb,” “at home or abroad” or even “wherever you are.” While these people share with Debeljak the dilemma Marin describes of managing multiple and sometimes conflicting identities, he has appropriated them into his circle of allies. He will lend them his poetic voice, but in exchange, their stories, their political struggles, become his. Dedicating his “Bosnian Elegy” to “Miljenko Jergović, Sarajevo-Zagreb” allows him, as a Slovene, to incorporate the Bosnian experience into his own identity (*The City and the Child* 30). These allies, although claiming a different ethnicity and nationality, experienced a similar “pattern of experience” of all of the breakaway republics from the former Yugoslavia. But by selecting allies for his national identity, Debeljak must also excommunicate enemies. In *The City and the Child*, the natural enemy to the breakaway republics is the Serb-dominated Yugoslav government and military. Under the aphoristic understanding that one’s friends’ enemy is one’s own enemy, in 1999 Debeljak feels solidarity for any of his former countrymen engaged in a struggle against Serbian efforts to prevent national determinism. As a Slovene, he chooses other Balkan ethnicities as allies and as enemies.

Though they are rare, Debeljak does pepper his volume with scattered allusions to specific icons of Balkan culture. These allusions range from locations like the Dineric Alps (“Manufacturing Dust”) or the Pannonian plains (“Bosnian Elegy”) to cultural symbols like Islamic minarets or the Slavic offering of salt and bread (“Testament of Defeat”). Without cultural understanding to the referents of these allusions, outsiders are left out of the full meaning of the poems. Not that this damages the poems’ identificatory power. Though outsiders may feel lost in the occasional allusion, they may find pleasure in the exoticness of allusion, while Balkan

readers will enjoy the allusions for the exact opposite reason—the allusion is to something common. Language itself, divisive in Balkan politics, is abstracted through the roundabout poetic description; Serbian, the only former Yugoslavian language written in Cyrillic letters, is described as “the language of the two / prophets [Cyril and Methodius] who came to the Slavs” (“Migrations” 4–5). Burke describes this artistic appeal as “compensatory gains” that cause pleasure to non-Balkan readers by “the reader’s failure to duplicate the experience intended by the author” (*Counter-Statement* 175). These allusions may delight foreign readers, but for Balkan readers, they are allusions to important markers of national identity.

But these references are only allusions. Far more often, Debeljak leaves his descriptions of the Yugoslavian wars universalized and displaced. “[E]very exile invents his own language,” Debeljak’s poem “To the Poets Exiled in Amsterdam” declares (11). This resistance to a single clear identity evokes Marin’s assertion that post-Yugoslav intellectuals find themselves in a space of transition against “historical, political and cultural context and [their own] displaced identity” (141). Debeljak’s universalized poetic accounts of Balkan conflict let the images themselves become exiles—and in crafting such ambiguous allusions, Debeljak allows an international audience to claim for themselves the generalized images of a particular atrocity.

Transnational Identification

In the very first poem of the volume, “Faces in Front of the Wall,” Debeljak sets up the asyndetic connection of the things that “happen to you, to me, to the whole world” (2). In fact, this poem works nicely as the thesis statement of the entire book: it sets up the Balkan wars as one example of what “happen[s] to you, to me, to the whole world” and, while never diminishing the violence and horror of the wars, the phrase universalizes the language of the conflicts to the

point where it's understandable to transnational audiences. In some ways, Debeljak here provides a clear model of Burkean identification: the other, myself, the "Upward Way" that Burke describes in "Rhetoric—Old and New." Debeljak's poem demonstrates the generalization that unites the particular. And who is the "you"? In a very literal sense, it is "the whole world," as Debeljak's publication in English turns the specific incident of the disintegration of Yugoslavia into a universalized disaster. All readers of poetry, no matter their nationality, are included in the fatalistic, generalized violence. "Each of us," he writes, "is already doomed," and when he uses the simile "*like* a stunned witness in a country when it was still a country," the political condition of a Yugoslavian state becomes a metaphor for the condition of any fated soul (7, 8; emphasis added). An international audience of readers of poetry is generalized into the Yugoslavian experience through the "Upward Way" because the conflicts in one specific region become indicative of conflicts in general and become more relatable to a wider audience (64). As "less than a footnote," Debeljak and his compatriots must make themselves visible to wider audiences, and through his identification with a transnational (and more politically powerful in the case of Anglo-American readers) readership, the tragedies of the Yugoslavian wars become immediate to a broader audience (14).

Just as Debeljak uses allusions to create a national sense of identity, he uses allusions to Western cultural history to invite a transnational audience to identify with him. These allusions perform the Burkean functions of both communication and excommunication—Debeljak taps into a common cultural literacy while excluding those who are unfamiliar with the allusions. The strongest cultural touchstones in Western literature come from Jerusalem and Rome—the biblical and the classical.

Debeljak's poems are riddled with biblical allusion. When Debeljak uses a reference to the Bible, he isn't just appealing to faith in general. He's also appealing to the conventions of Western cultural literacy. Whether or not his readers believe in the scriptural stories he references, Debeljak's allusions reflect the tradition of biblical literacy that influenced Western literature for millennia. As biblical literacy becomes less prevalent in the general population, biblical allusions enter the province of the literary elite.⁷ These biblical allusions provide intense touchstones of identification as readers who are culturally literate in the significance of these images and stories draw connections between their own biblical understanding and the foreign Balkan wars. Each reader familiar with the allusions connects with the Balkan poet through their mutual understanding of biblical passages. Like a secret club's handshake, these allusions exclude those who don't understand but hold identificatory sway for those who catch the references—for those who are the literary elite.

When Debeljak describes "an olive tree at the foot of the hill" in "The Last Cigarette," he isn't just making an allusion to Christianity—he's providing a codeword for the biblically elite to enter his poems as participants in a common cultural history. Educationally elite readers know the Bible. When Debeljak titles a poem "Prayer from Pontius," he may consciously intend for the allusion to Pontius Pilate to color the meaning of the poem, but by simply including the allusion, he is including and excluding groups based on their understanding of the Bible. While many of Debeljak's allusions are Christian, he also draws on the Abrahamic tradition more generally. He invokes the Garden of Eden when he describes "the allure of fruit we don't dare pick" in "Grapes of Mercy" (16). He references Lot's wife in "Manufacturing Dust" when he uses the phrase "the pillar of salt" (2). He makes allusions to the geography of Israel when he writes about the Promised Land ("Second Baptism" 10) and the Jordan River ("Before the Storm" 9). These

terms belong not only to Jerusalem but to America, England, Brazil, France, Korea, Slovenia and anywhere else that has been influenced by biblical cultures.

The use of biblical allusion has a long literary tradition in poetry, and this tradition becomes a way for Debeljak to connect his transnational audience to his writing. Another traditional set of allusions in poetry focuses on the classical. Classical literature and philosophy formed the basis of Western thought, and this tradition is reflected in thousands of years of classical allusions in Western poetry. As with biblical allusion, over time classical allusion has become specialized to the poetic elite. Very few people are expected to know who Ovid is or that he wrote the *Metamorphoses*. In making allusions to classical culture, Debeljak taps into both a literary history that unites much of the Western world and the literal history of the Balkans as an erstwhile Greek and Roman province with many longtime holdouts of “Greco-Roman civic culture” (Mazower 42). Classical allusions are definitively a part of Balkan identity, but they also powerfully serve to connect with all other cultures influenced by the classical tradition. Debeljak makes classical allusions that call on the literary and philosophical artifacts from Homer or Ovid that were once cultural currency of the Western world.

With writers’ interests in other writers, it’s not surprising that many of Debeljak’s references are literary. In “Pastoral,” Debeljak says that one contemporary Balkan family’s grief is like “a private *Iliad*” (4); the conspicuous absence of a son in the war “inspir[es] black epics” (6). Alluding to the *Iliad* provides the readers with more information about the situation as they wonder how else this family’s situation may mirror the epic poem, and it provides an entry point of identification for those educated enough to know about the legends described in the *Iliad*. In a later poem, Debeljak is less explicit, claiming that he is “kin to the blind prophet” in the middle of the beautiful tragedy of fighter jets and distant allies (13). This obtuse allusion to Tiresias will

remind readers that while they may not know the situation to which the allusion is compared, they do know the Oedipus cycle and the feelings it has stirred in them. The allusion connects the poet and the audience through the common reference. Debeljak again makes use of classical literature when he describes his poem “Metamorphosis of Grass” as being “(on a theme by Ovid)” in the epigraph. The readers may have had an inkling that the word “metamorphosis” was tied to the famous compilation of myths, but Debeljak makes that relationship slightly more explicit. More people can then search the poem for a link to what might be a connection between something they know (that Ovid wrote the *Metamorphoses*, about the stories included in the *Metamorphoses*) and something that is utterly foreign to them (the experience of war-torn Balkan states). By including these references to classical literature in his poetry, Debeljak incorporates a powerful set of signs that can create identification among the literary elite who read his poetry.

Debeljak also includes more recent worldwide literary references coming from the Anglophone tradition. In “Metamorphosis of Grass” he gives a response to T. S. Eliot’s *The Wasteland* when he writes, “Through the cruelest months / I wade along. Not just April: eternity separates me from my brother” (12–13). Eliot’s writing may not be as old as the classical literary references that Debeljak provides his readers, but the phrase “April is the cruelest month” may be just as well known among those who identify themselves as readers of poetry. Similarly, when he titles one of his poems “Grapes of Mercy,” Debeljak may be referring to the phrase “grapes of wrath” in Julia Ward Howe’s “Battle Hymn of the Republic” or to John Steinbeck’s novel, which itself alludes to Howe’s march, or to both simultaneously, but any way, he’s found a way to engage a transnational audience in his locally situated poem.

Through all of these allusions, biblical, classical and Anglophone, Debeljak accesses a cultural tradition in which the literary elite engage. His use of allusion connects his readers and further argues about what “happen[s] to you, to me, to the whole world.” Allusions create identification among the readers of poetry. While these allusions may exclude most segments of society composed of people who often aren’t as well versed in these particular traditions, they unite members of that literary elite who do understand them. Unlike Walker’s classical common cultural experiences, the elite cultural experiences of contemporary poetry serve to unite a thin, transnational segment of society. The readers can connect with Debeljak’s poetry because of the references to sources they are familiar with, and understanding these references establishes them as part of this literary elite.

Debeljak writes *The City and the Child* as a series of irregular sonnets. For Slovenes, the sonnet also enjoys a position of national pride. According to Debeljak’s translator, the poet France Prešeren cemented Slovenian national identity in the mid-nineteenth century with a “wreath of sonnets [...] that laid the foundation for the literary tradition of a people then on the verge of acquiring national consciousness” and later provided the lyrics to the Slovenian national anthem after the country gained independence in 1991 (Merrill 10).

That’s plenty of heavy cultural import, but while Slovenes associate an especially nationalist characteristic with the sonnet, the form holds an important privileged position in many nations familiar with the Western tradition. Both Italian and English sonnets have been used consistently by such influential poets of different eras as Wordsworth, Tennyson, Keats, Auden and Mark Jarman (“Sonnet”). The sonnet carries an air of cultural authority in the Anglo-American tradition, and perhaps more poems are written about the sonnet than about any other form of poetry.

Anglo-Americans may be very aware of the form, but the sonnet is employed by contemporary poets through the world. One website devoted to the form lists sonnets (translated into English, of course) from countries as diverse as Brazil, Russia, South Africa, Holland, Spain, and New Zealand (Sonnet Central). The sonnet may have special meaning for Slovenes, but it's a form that readers of poetry from across the world can identify, and identify as an especially "poetic" form of poetry. In his quintessential volume *The Sonnet*, John Fuller goes so far as to say that "fascination with the idea of the sonnet" outstrips even production of "legitimate" sonnets (1). The sonnet, even in *The City and the Child's* altered form, maintains high cultural currency for both Slovenes and Anglophone readers, and translator Merrill states his concern for maintaining Debeljak's sonnet form because of its cultural importance (10). He has reason to protect its form as much as possible—the ability for Debeljak's readers (Slovene and Anglophone) to identify his poem cycle as a series of sonnets creates an identificatory framework of both defining Slovenian cultural heritage and tying into a larger Western tradition. The form of the sonnet combines Debeljak's two objectives; he can both become more distinctively Slovene through using a form tied to his national identity and also appeal to a transnational, especially Western, audience culturally familiar with the sonnet.

Conclusion

Aleš Debeljak's poems aren't just prettily figured philosophical postulates of his audience being parroted back at them; rather, what he's doing is actually far more sophisticated. He must cobble together some meaning of his national identity, which, at the time of the publication of *The City and the Child* was less than a decade old. As Burke theorizes poetry

might do, Debeljak is creating a national identity by choosing allies and enemies for his interpretation of what it means to be Slovene. He recreates the “patterns of experience” for victims of war-time Serbian aggression. But more than that, he expands the “patterns of experience” to create identification with a transnational literary audience that reads his poems in English and finds their own allusions in his work. This two-pronged attempt of carving out an identification allows Debeljak to both form and define his national identity and also to present his local identity to a transnational elite.

The City and the Child is a fine book of poetry. Debeljak is a thoughtful commentator and skilled wordsmith. But while his volume may be representative of what contemporary transnational poets are doing by creating distinct identities and international elite identification, he is not an exceptional case. Contemporary poetry can be a topic rife with rhetorical insights of negotiated identities. Debeljak and the search for Balkan identity is just one example, but rhetoricians may find it equally worthwhile to see how transnational poets from other regions negotiate the difficulty of defining their identity as representative of a national or ethnic group. For example, those poets who, unlike Debeljak, don't come from a Western tradition may have even further difficulties in appealing to this “horizontal” international readership and may employ different strategies to create an international identification. Looking at such a population may yield even further complications of Burke's original theory. Wherever else further investigation of transnational poets may lead, I hope I have demonstrated that even a small, elite group such as this can employ sophisticated rhetorical practices that expand our understanding of literature and of our own rhetorical theories. It may be that our understanding of rhetoric needs to change in order to understand how contemporary poetry functions, but that's an opportunity for

rhetoricians to seek to understand. When Orr says that poets are “unsure of their relationship with society,” Burke might answer, “Aren’t we all? And isn’t that the burden of language?”

Notes

¹ And let me clarify what I mean by poetry: when I say “contemporary literary poetry,” I mean literary poetry, the sort published in *Poetry* and other literary journals. I’m not discussing music lyrics, raps, or performance poetry, although these genres provide excellent fodder for other research.

² I apologize for this awkward term that I’ll be using. The term appears in neither Burke’s own work nor in that of his many commentators. I find “identificatory,” awkward as its seven syllables are, more convenient than explicating its intended meaning: “having qualities that are likely to create identification.” I wish there were another way, but for the purposes of this article, at least, we’ll define “identificatory” as the adjectival form of *identification* and as a linguistic parallel and theoretical counterpart to “persuasive.”

³ I understand that this project is somewhat limited by focusing only on Debeljak’s *intent*, but here is evidence that Debeljak’s efforts have been successful. The most telling proofs of this are his Slovenian National Book Award and his Miriam Lindberg Israel Poetry for Peace Prize (Tel Aviv). The former shows how important Debeljak has been for national Slovene identity, while the latter demonstrates that an international audience finds his work remarkable. For this article, I’ll be focusing on what Burke might call “motive” in Debeljak’s poetry—that he intends his poems to operate in a certain way. In Burke’s understanding of identification, motive matters.

⁴ It’s worthwhile, I think, to note that not only do poetic forms influence the cultural assumptions of “pragmatic rhetoric,” but they also hold stylistic sway. Walker points out that Hellenistic rhetoric became more stylistically extravagant because of the poetic training of would-be rhetors and “the advancing literacy of the sociopolitical elite in the Hellenistic period” as literary culture became disseminated, and soon “audiences expected and responded to” the more flowery style (58–59).

⁵ And they are a *readership*: those who are involved in contemporary poetry generally encounter it silently rather than aloud, alone rather than within a community, and read rather than performed. This is distinct from the period of poetry that Walker analyzed wherein poetry was aural, communal, and dramatic.

⁶ Now, it’s entirely possible that the same elite identification occurs with certain other “literary school” genres, including Drakulić’s essays. Just as other regions may engender their occupants with the same identity-related anxieties as the Balkans, other genres of writing may foster small, international communities of readers and producers. But just as the Balkans provide a particularly striking case of nationalistic confusion, poetry is, as Walker points out, especially insular and elitist. In this paper, I purposefully seek out the most apparent examples and save the shades of distinction for later work.

⁷ The empirical evidence of Western biblical ignorance could be more extensive, but Stephen Prothero’s informative and entertaining book *Religious Literacy: What Every American Needs to Know—And Doesn’t* (2007) is a good introduction to the situation. Regardless of how closely people are paying attention when they read the Bible, the 2007 Pew Forum’s Religious

Landscape Survey reports that fewer people are reading the Bible now than in previous generations (“Religion Among”).

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