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### TIME AND SPACE IN SIGBJØRN OBSTFELDER'S PROSE POETRY

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The article dwells upon the time and space in Sigbjørn Obstfelder's prose poetry. The genre of prose poetry came to Scandinavia at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, on the peak of the French symbolism popularity. The strong influence of the French symbolist Charles Baudelaire is obvious in Obstfelder's works. The most significant feature that defines the chronotope of Obstfelder's poems is opposition between man and nature. By a person the author means not a lyrical hero but other people, the whole society, the essence of which can be described as "the abode of many people". "Other people" are synonymous with the concept of "city", and this chronotope is clearly seen in many of his poems. The poet describes both nature and city in details and the chaos of the city extremely contrasts with the rich and harmonious life of nature. The opposition of harmony and chaos, sincerity and alienation is emphasized by the contrast between the sounds of nature and the city: between weeping, sobbing, screaming, roaring and the sound of drops, the rustling of leaves and the singing of birds. Despite the beauty and harmony of nature the lyrical hero still cannot exist outside the city for a long time. Perhaps he can exist only in a borderline state — between people and nature, harmony and chaos, trying to combine, unite in the mind both worlds, but staying alone in both of them. The common feature of all his prose poems is transition and border crossing and it can explain the originality of Obstfelder's prose poems.

**Keywords:** Sigbjørn Obstfelder, Scandinavian modernism, prose poetry, time and space, chronotope.

This article proposes one of the possible ways to analyze prose poems written by the Norwegian modernist poet Sigbjørn Obstfelder

(1866–1900). This genre came to Scandinavia at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, on the peak of the French symbolism popularity. Prose poetry of both French and Danish poets was published in the Danish magazine *The Tower* (*Taarnet*), which popularized a new direction in poetry. The most prominent was Charles Baudelaire; translations of his works into Danish were printed in the journal *New Earth* (*Ny Jord*) as early as 1889.

Speaking about Norway, the first collection of prose poems “Night” (*Nat. Digte i prosa*) by Vilhelm Krag was published in 1892. By this time the young poet was already known as “decadent” in the country. His most famous poem “Fandango” (*Fandango*, 1890), published in the journal *Samtiden*, marked the birth of new trends in Norwegian literature. However, the poet whose name in Norway is primarily associated with the development of the prose poetry (*prosadikt* in Norwegian) is Sigbjørn Obstfelder.

He is considered to be one of the first modernist poets in Norway. His first poems were published in the same magazine, *Samtiden*, in 1890, and his debut collection, “Poems” (*Digte*) came out in 1893. Obstfelder’s poetry is evidently derived from the European fin-de-siècle. Free verse, characterized by changeable rhythm and musicality, the desire to escape depicting the real world and great wish to convey the invisible and inexpressible, the theme of loneliness of a person in the crowd characterizes these poems, which became something completely new in Norwegian literature. Some contemporaries mocked Obstfelder, declaring him crazy, while others unconditionally recognized the poet as a genius.

Baudelaire’s translations published in the magazine *New Earth* (*Ny jord*) had influenced the poet greatly. Totally Obstfelder wrote about 30 prose poems and only a third of them were published during his lifetime. For a researcher studying his prose poems, it is important to take into account that these texts were not published as a separate collection, actually they were not conceived as a cycle united by a common idea.

The plots and images in these poems are very diverse. All artistic means are primarily subordinated to the depiction of one or another emotional state (fear and loneliness in the “City” (*Byen*), peace in the “Rosehip” (*Tornerose*), frustration and jealousy in the “Abandoned” (*Den forladte*), lust for life and love in the “Spouse” (*Hustru*) and so on). Despite this diversity in these works, however, they have something in common. In order to find a single organizing principle in all texts, it is

necessary to analyze the image of time and space in Obstfelder's prose poetry.

As T. Sokolova notes in the article "To the Problem of Researching of Artistic Space and Time in Literary Work": *"The study of artistic space and time, associated primarily with the consideration of the text poetics, also makes it possible to identify the essential features in the author's worldview, fixed in the artistic model of the world. It turns out that it is possible to consider space and time relations as an expression of the modality of a poetic statement"* [Sokolova, 2006, p. 134].

There is a wide scope of literature that deals with the problems of time and space in a narrative. The concept of chronotope as *"the intrinsic connectedness of temporal and spatial relationships that are artistically expressed in literature"* [Bakhtin, 2000, p. 9] was introduced into literary criticism by M. Bakhtin. Other researchers have developed this definition. Thus, at the end of the twentieth century the discussion on the inclusion of the concept of "subject" in the structure of the chronotope was relevant. R. I. Enukidze stated: *"The study of the problem of the chronotope will not be adequate if the analysis of time and space in a narrative is carried out outside the subject around which these spatio-temporal relations are realized in the text"* [Enukidze, 1984, p. 30]. L. Kazantseva goes even further, proposing the following model: chronotope = subject + time + space + action algorithm. She points out that such a core of the chronotope *"is able to act as a genre indicator of the work."* *"Thus, the dominant component of 'space' is typical for 'landscape lyrics', 'landscape prose; and subject — for 'I-lyrics'..."* [Kazantseva, 1984, p. 6]

The last statement is absolutely relevant for Obstfelder's lyrical prose. Regardless of whether the action takes place in a particular city or in the poet's fantasy, whether the narration is led from the point of view of a lyrical hero or from the point of view of another character, the border between reality and imagination is unclear and almost imperceptible, and the subject comes to the foreground.

The most significant feature that defines the chronotope of Obstfelder's prose poems is the opposition between nature and man. It should be clarified that "man" does not mean a poet (a lyrical hero), but other people, society. Quite often "other people" are synonymous with the concept of "the city", and this chronotope, the essence of which can be described as "the abode of many people", stands out in many of his prose poems.

One of the most famous texts of Obstfelder, “The City” (*Byen*) is namely based on this opposition. The lyrical hero, living alone in the mountains, begins to pine for the company of his own kind. He goes to the big city “*bak den borteste blåne, søndenfor de brede sletter, der hvor hjerter slår, der hvor tusender hjerter slår i kor*” [Obstfelder, 1943, p. 80]. But finding himself on the streets of a big city, he feels only horror: “*De farer afsted, som var de piskede, og ud fra de små huse hører jeg gråt og hulken, bag mig gråter det, gråter, gråter... Og omsider går det op for mig, omsider ser jeg det: de er vanvittige, de piskes af sin egen skygge. Og jeg ser mig om, jeg ser på deres øine, deres miner, deres ilen og løben: ”Ja, de er vanvittige, de er vanvittige”* [Obstfelder, 1943, p. 81]. It is clear that the chronotope of the city is characterized by its fast and chaotic rhythm of existence. More often, time acceleration in the city is conveyed by verbs and verbal nouns expressing movement, such as “fare, løpe, ile, lyne”, and so on.

The crazy rhythm of existence and the gloomy mystery of the city are also depicted in such poems as “The Stranger” (*Den ubekjendte*), “Black-clad” (*Den sortklædte*) and “Abandoned” (*Den forladte*). The city is not just an abode of people, it is an abode of *unhappy* people who sometimes do not understand the depth of their unhappiness. The chaos of the city sharply contrasts with the rich and harmonious life of nature. Thus the fear of death among people contrasts with the dying of autumn nature in the poem “Autumn” (*Høst*): “*jeg tror at naturen har sit deiligste liv, når den blegner. Intet dør så vakkert, som blade. I de varmeste, vakreste farver, jorden eier, klær de sig. De tar imod døden, de længes mod at føle det skjære der skal foregå i dem*” [Obstfelder, 1943, p. 102].

Only in one prose poem does the urban environment correlate with a real-life city. In the poem “The Stranger” (*Den ubekjendte*), the action takes place in Paris, partly in the Luxembourg Gardens. In other poems, we are talking about the collective image of a big city, which, however, is depicted as objectively as possible. The city is described in the prose poems as a place consisting of stone-paved streets, houses, stairs, lanes, ladies and gentlemen from high society, carriages and horse-drawn carriages, dances and holidays, electric lights and shop windows.

Quite often the author puts a number of words from the semantic field “the city” side by side, emphasizing the heap of all objects and buildings, the “crazy” rhythm of life among people: “*Alle disse gaderne som havde været lige allesammen, og disse husvæggene som stod og*

*svetted, og disse folkene som for og myldred og pusted, som om der var noget påfærde, — det var ikke fuldt så vanvittigt længer*” [Obstfelder, 1943, p. 90]. Such enumerations may be accompanied by alliteration or rhyme: “*Vi kommer ind mellem tømmer og tønder og skrammel, vi stiger opad trapper, vi træder ind under et tagvindue*” (“Black-clad”).

Nature is described no less substantively. Features of the relief, weather phenomena, plants, animals, all this creates a diverse and picturesque world. It is interesting to note that in twelve analyzed prose poems, in addition to such hypernyms as “grass”, “trees”, “leaves”, there were ten specific names of flowers and plants: snowdrops, heather, roses, ivy, red currant, so on. No less specific are the names of the relief features: a river, a glacier, a meadow, a plateau, an abyss, a plain and other (totally 18 different lexical units).

Nature is described by the author as the naturalness and beauty of life, the sincerity of feelings that die or are distorted in human society. In the poem “The Snordrop” (*Sneklokker*) delicate spring flowers become the personification of the lyrical hero’s love. When the girl he loves rejects him, the hero destroys the bouquet: “*De stakkels tendre blomster! Jeg trær dem ihjæl. De var jo bare nogen sarte, blege spirer, som kanskje — kanskje — ved hendes bryst kunde ha blit til roser*” [Obstfelder, 1943, p. 75].

In the prose poems “The Spouse” (*Hustru*) and “The Wasp” (*Hvepsen*), the chronotope “the city” is replaced by the chronotope “the room”, which partially has the same function — a place for people to live and a symbol of society that kills the naturalness of feelings — however, a chaotic, feverish movement that characterizes the life of the city, is replaced here by static character and isolation. The plot of the two poems is almost similar. In “The Wasp”, a man working at a desk notices a wasp that has flown into the room. The wasp does its best to reach another already dead wasp on the windowsill and dies next to it. This almost insignificant episode touches the hero, he begins to think about love and fidelity, and feelings for his wife, to whom he has grown cold many years ago, awaken again in his soul. In “The Spouse” (*Hustru. Fire born*), a woman, overwhelmed by her social role, says goodbye to the feeling of being young. But the yellow butterfly that flew in through the window reminds her that she is still beautiful and desirable, and a thirst for life and love is born in her again, which, it would seem, is not appropriate to the venerable mother of the family.

In both pieces, natural beings help the main characters revive their feelings and transcend their social roles. So the opposition of nature and human society (“city”, “room”) is the opposition of harmony and chaos, sincerity and alienation. It is even more emphasized by the contrast between the sounds of nature and the city.

Music in Obstfelder’s works is a specific topic that has attracted many researchers of his heritage. You can talk a lot about musicality and rhythm in his poetry. But even in the depiction of the life of the city and nature, special attention is paid to the sounds. The city is characterized by weeping and sobbing, screaming and roaring, the beating of hearts, the rustle of silk slippers and the clinking of forks. As for the nature, it is full of sounds of drops, the whisper of heather, the rustle of leaves and the singing of birds. In the poem “City” the chronotopes of the city and nature have precise contrast in the sound range: “*Næste aften står jeg på den stenlagte gade. Der er ingen skog længer, men huse og huse og vinduer, ingen sus gennem blade, men surren av vogne, larm af utallige fødder*” [Obstfelder, 1943, p. 80]. The silence in the mountains, where the loudest sound was the loon call, is replaced by screams, weeping, loud sermons and the scuffling noises. It is this wild noise that horrifies the lyrical hero.

It is worth to note that despite the beauty, harmony and euphony of nature, the lyrical hero still cannot exist outside the city for a long time. It can be explained by the lack of movement in the chronotope of nature. Here we are talking not about the course of time — there is a transition from day to night and a change of seasons and variability of the weather, however, static or cyclic movement prevails here. Heather, plateau, sea and stars, all this is motionless. Day follows night, bad weather is followed by clear weather, “*og når dagen gryr, kommer der en fugl ind fra øst, flyver gennem vor stue, flyver ud mod vest*” [Obstfelder, 1943, p. 82]. Perhaps that’s why representatives of the animal world are so rarely mentioned in the poems. They appear mainly when nature is trying to tell people something, and they become her messengers: a wasp, a butterfly or a dog.

One more opposition can be distinguished from the foregoing: the subject and the external world. It manifests itself especially clearly in a number of works, such as “The City”, “The Forest House”, “The Stranger”, “Autumn” and some others. The subject is the creator of his own universe, containing both people and nature. The act of creation

is described in the poem “I” (Jeg): “Jeg tegnede vandets brede, rolige linie. Små og store seil, dampere med lange røgstrimer krydser og buer sig på det, skyer og lanterner speiler seg i det, holmer dukker op som drømme fra dets bund” [Obstfelder, 1943, p. 82]. The subject, as the creator of his own universe, also appears in the poem “The Forest House”, where the lyrical hero, sitting in the garden, is listening to himself: “Sommetider drypper en tung dråbe fra et grønt blad deroppe i træet ned på mit hvide. Og jeg lytter til mit indre — om der er slotte derinde, fulde af musik. Jeg lukker øinene og ser og spejder, om der er stjerner og det store hav. Det er så stille. Jeg kan høre menneskene tale, græde og favnes i mit bryst” [Obstfelder, 1943, p. 82].

The indication that the subject is in the garden is not accidental. This chronotope occupies an intermediate position between the opposition nature — city, uniting and reconciling these two worlds. People and nature are harmoniously coexisting here side by side. The garden is the embodiment of the poet’s consciousness where both worlds exist. This is more explicitly stated in the poem “The Stranger”: “Jeg syntes at Luxembourg mer end nogen anden have og meget mer end naturen er som et menneskesind, der veksler humør. (...) Sommetider er det, som var det ikke andet end smil og roser og deilige lyse statyer og funklende vanddråber og lekende småbørn og fine pigevrister til i Paris. Og så er der andre tider, at man ikke engang ser de lyse statyer, at de er svøbt ind i en tung luft, og at det ligesom klager sagte rundt om i haven” [Obstfelder, 1943, p. 94].

While the lyrical hero is in the garden of his soul, the world around him — regardless of the hero’s changeable mood — feels intact and full of meaning. Time does not stand still as in the chronotope of nature and does not rush feverishly as in the chronotope of the city, but moves at a calm, pacifying pace. However, plunging into his inner world, the subject does not feel complete harmony. Still he experiences loneliness, because he needs like-minded people who could feel like him and understand him.

This idea is clearly expressed in the poem “I”: the lyrical hero, who created harbors, mountains, laughing and loving people with the power of poetic imagination, starts to feel burdened by their society: “Jeg går ene blandt dem. Det er min glæde at høre deres tanker, kjende deres sorg og jubel. Og dog — jeg ved ikke — det er mig ikke nok. Jeg blir rastløs. (...) Der vågner hos mig en dunkel attrå. Der skulde komme en. Han



*skulde komme og lytte sig frem til der, hvor isbræven sukker og lyngen dør. Han skulde komme og si: Jeg så sjøen, og himmelen, og farvenes dis, og menneskenes under. Og jeg blev mer og mer ene. Ti jeg fik en længsel efter at lære den at kjende, hvis fantasi digted sjø og skyer, hvis tanke bygged menneskets øre*” [Obstfelder, 1943, p. 83].

In the prose poem “The Stranger” it seems to the poet that he has met such a person. The poem begins with the words: “*Jeg sad på en bank. Hun kom gående ud fra det grønne*” [Obstfelder, 1943, p. 88]. Looking at the stranger, the lyrical hero wonders which path she will choose, if she will go out into the city or continue her walk in the garden. When he sees her walking under the trees along the lawn (that is, remaining inside his subjective space), he decides that this is exactly that person whom he have been looking for. The mere thought that there is a person in the city who feels like him makes the life of the hero in the city less unbearable. Although he sees her several times and has the opportunity to approach her, however, something prevents him from doing so. In the final scene, he sees her sleeping on the same bench he sat on when he first saw her. “*Jeg kom til at strejfe hende. Hendes øielåg bevæged sig. Jeg holdt pusten. Havde jeg vækket hende? Nei, hun sov fremdeles. Jeg gik*” [Obstfelder, 1943, p. 96].

Why does the lyrical hero refuse the possibility of happiness, finding harmony with a kindred soul? It is hardly possible to find definite answer to this question. But perhaps he cannot exist otherwise but only in a borderline between people and nature, harmony and chaos, trying to combine, unite both in consciousness, and the other, and remaining alone in both worlds. Such a hero is often found in the works of writers of the late 19<sup>th</sup> — early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, as for the Scandinavian literature it's worth to note the works of K. Hamsun, A. Strindberg and J. Söderberg.

To summarize, the situation of transition, change, crossing the border (sometimes internal) is common to all Obstfelder's prose poems: from one state of mind to another, from nature to the city, from day to night, from summer to winter, from fantasy to reality and from life to death. It can be assumed that such transitions form the originality of Obstfelder's prose poetry and his difference from many other poets, whose works sometimes can be described as sketches of a frozen nature.



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### **ВРЕМЯ И ПРОСТРАНСТВО В СТИХОТВОРЕНИЯХ В ПРОЗЕ СИГБЬЁРНА ОБСТФЕЛЛЕРА**

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Рассматривается возможный способ прочтения стихотворений в прозе норвежского поэта Сигбьёрна Обстфеллера. Сам жанр стихотворения в прозе пришел в Скандинавию в конце XIX в., на волне популярности французского символизма. В творчестве С. Обстфеллера отчетливо прослеживается влияние французского символиста Ш. Бодлера. Самой значимой чертой, определяющей хронотоп стихотворений Обстфеллера, является оппозиция «природа — человек». В творчестве писателя под «человеком» подразумевается не лирический герой, а другие люди, целое общество, сущность которого можно описать как «обиталище множества людей». «Другие люди» зачастую синонимичны понятию «город», и этот хронотоп выделяется во многих стихотворениях. Поэт детально описывает и природу, и город, но хаос города резко контрастирует с насыщенной и гармоничной жизнью природы. Противопоставление гармонии и хаоса, искренности и отчуждения усиливается контрастом между звуками природы и города: между плачем, всхлипами, криками, грохотом и звоном капель, шелестом листвы, пением птиц. Но, несмотря на красоту и гармонию природы, лирический герой не может долго существовать вне города. Возможно, он вообще не может существовать иначе, как в пограничном состоянии — между людьми и природой, гармонией и хаосом, пытаюсь объединить в сознании эти два мира, но так и оставаясь одиноким в обоих из них. Именно в состоянии перехода, пересечения границы и кроется своеобразие стихотворений в прозе С. Обстфеллера.

**Ключевые слова:** Сигбьёрн Обстфеллер, стихотворения в прозе, время и пространство, хронотоп, скандинавский модернизм.

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