

# SREČKO KOSOVEL AND THE HYBRIDITY OF MODERNISM

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Marko Juvan

The Institute of Slovenian Literature and Literary Sciences,  
Scientific Research Centre of the SASA, Ljubljana, Slovenia

## **The Distribution of Texts and the Aporias of Kosovel's Reception**

The revolutionary idea that history is a narrative construct, an interpretation, has in the last thirty years become all but a truism, appearing even a little worn-out in the *vulgata* of the human sciences, and resting comfortably in the “common sense” of literary historians. In essence, they are nowadays well aware of the importance of the forms, practices and institutions of distributing literary works for the interpretation and histori”al contextualisation of literature (cf. Dolinar - Juvan, eds., 2003). In other words, the cognitive sensibility for the mechanisms of representation of the past, for the channels and media through which it is observed and judged, is today a part of Kuhn’s “normal science”. The systemic approach also fits the general epistemological framework – with its perspective which captures texts amidst their literary life, attached to the social and cultural circumstances of their production, distribution, reception and discursive processing through media, criticism, science or education (cf. Dovič 2004). If we recognize these principles of literary history, a different aspect of the Srečko Kosovel paradox opens up:<sup>1</sup> the incredible diversity of his poetic texts, condensed into a very short period of time, has been baffling the narratives of literary history and consistently outwitting any and all tools of periodisation.

If we apply constructivist or systemic epistemology to the actual example of Srečko Kosovel, we might better explain the conflicting classifications of his poetry within literary history, the aporias of his reception and canonisation, and the difficulties in shaping the poet’s cultural icon – the not so negligible reasons for this are precisely those anomalies in the historical processes of publishing and distribution of his work. Briefly, in his short life Kosovel published relatively modestly and mainly in marginal newspapers (he never succeeded in publishing a number of the works that are today considered his greatest masterpieces); all of his books of poetry were published posthumously and none were edited according to his ideas, but rather according to strategies by which various editors built the foundations of Kosovel’s canon (cf. Dovič in this publication). It was only in

1967, 41 year after his death, that his more radical poetic texts, which up to that point had only been known in a very limited scope, received recognition in the form of a book and a preface. They turned out to be a crucial part of Kosovel's body of work, despite creating the impression of an astounding discord with the perceptions that the public and the literary profession alike held about the poet from the Karst.

When in July of 1925 Kosovel defined his position in the world as a "paradox" (*Collected Works 3/1*: 399–401), he probably could not have imagined quite how much controversy the reception and periodisation of his work and the construction of his canonical image would generate. How is it possible that despite his eruptive creativity – to which an unbounded legacy of hastily written pages bears witness – he published so little? Was it just because as a young man from the rural margins and without social capital he could not make his way into the established national journals? Because the editors were unable to grasp his artistic importance (he was seen as a belated heir to, or even an epigone of the Slovenian "Moderna")? Perhaps because he was still searching for his poetic outlet and wrote dozens of texts which will hardly ever appear anything more than beginner's attempts? Or because he was rather critical towards the discourse of the main Slovenian cultural magazines, which he found aesthetically and politically too dependent on prevailing bourgeois ideologies, and out of date and not radical enough in comparison to what was going on elsewhere in the world (cf. Zadavec 1986: 412)?

To my mind, another equally plausible reason would be that since 1922 Kosovel – encouraged by the example of Podbevšek's avant-garde performances and, later, his attempts at magazines (*Trije labodje* [The Three Swans] and *Rdeči pilot* [The Red Pilot]) – planned his own distribution strategy, different from those common in the Slovenian literary field:<sup>2</sup> for the publication of his texts, particularly the bolder efforts, he tried to establish an alternative media context, as was developed throughout Europe by mainly artistic and political avant-gardes. In comparison to the established literary institutions it should have been more congenial to his ethical sensibility towards modern life, as well as his anti-aesthetic perception of art and his utopian social engagement. In his manuscript *On the Mission of Art* (*O poslanstvu umetnosti*, 1924) he wrote that art was not meant for the conventional "delight in beauty", because it was "just as strong and life-governing a force as, for example, politics, economics; the only difference is that it is a religious and spiritual force, which is at the same time a pre-image of human unity and perfection" (*CW 3/1*: 86).

From the Jena Romanticism (and its *Athenäum*) to modernism and 20<sup>th</sup>-century avant-gardes, the fundamental social form of distributing and establishing modern aesthetic, ethical and ideological matrixes had been a literary and artistic circle, a group of people of the same generation with similar views. These circles were different ways of bringing together the intellectual elite which – on the fringes of established social norms, aesthetic conventions and dominant channels of public cultural communication – developed among its members a remarkably intense exchange of

potentially relevant information “from the outside”, but mainly of their own ideas, programmes and achievements. This gave the actions of each individual member a significance which recompensed for the possible lack of public recognition. Over and above the strengthened internal communication, feelings of solidarity and axiological, behavioural and discursive cohesion, such groups also sought diverse, sometimes mutually opposing support from the outside – either by drawing parallels to or trying to establish contacts with similar groups at home and abroad, from the past and the present, or by gaining praise from prominent critics, opinion-makers, and by new forms of patronage and collecting, which speculated on potential increase in value of the works of protégés, or by forming alliances with subversive political movements (cf. Levenson 1991: 6; Rainey 1991). Kosovel, too, followed some of these patterns.

In 1922 he launched an ambitious high-school paper *Lepa Vida* (Fair Vida). He gathered around him members of his own generation with similar views; he created a utopian atmosphere in which poetic and theoretical discourses were mutually enriched through debates and readings. The distinctly humanistic tone of the ideas of Kosovel’s circle was influenced by utopian socialism, expressionist and Tagorean humanism, Nietzsche, Marxism, social Christianity, Slovenian nationalism of resistance (oriented against Italian irredentism and Yugoslav unitarism); they profiled their aesthetics along anti-bourgeois, modern artistic lines, from the Slovenian “Moderna” and expressionism to futurism, zenitism, constructivism, dadaism and surrealism (cf. Zadavec 1986: 344–68). With his circle, which was established in 1925 and named after Ivan Cankar – as a gesture of tribute to the aesthetic and political tradition of the Slovenian “Moderna” – Kosovel organized lectures, artistic performances and readings.

In place of the bourgeois and metropolitan public, whose acceptance the group could not anyway gain, Kosovel – as an ethically sensitive and also more and more class-conscious “cultural worker” – intended to create a special new audience, mainly by performing for the proletarians in the provinces (Vrečko 1986: 186–212). In 1925, together with the Bauhaus-educated painter Avgust Černigoj, he was unsuccessfully preparing a constructivist magazine *Konstrukter* (Constructor), also a literary monthly *Volja* (The Will) with his leftist fellow writer Ivo Grahor, and making plans for a radical leftist publishing house, Strelci (Shooters), and a similarly oriented series of books called *Integrali* (Integrals). In 1925 he and his group nevertheless managed to take over the editorial board of *Mladina* (Youth magazine); in the issues he edited before his death he made it artistically and politically avant-garde in tone. He collaborated with young Marxists, members of the communist party and admirers of the Soviet Union. However, precisely because of the socially marginal channels and media, all his endeavours remained obscure for a long time. Due to his untimely death, Kosovel was unable to develop sufficiently forms of alternative literary distribution, to find and create a suitable public for his poetic production. Although he favoured avant-garde movements and devoted an important part of his work from 1924 to 1926 to avant-garde writing, he nonetheless never become

a sample avant-gardist, who would lead a group, have a programme and manifestoes, and provocatively proclaim a new “-ism”. The only manifesto he wrote (*To Mechanics* [Mehanikom], July 1925) remained in the form of a manuscript. It is debatable whether he would ever have become an avant-gardist, because in his last months – as clearly shown in his lecture *Art and the Proletarian* (Umetnost in proletarec, February 1926) – he took up writing and projects concerning “proletarian art”, and at the same time, until the end, continued to write expressionist, impressionist and modernist poetry that was foreign to radical avant-garde techniques (Gspan 1974: 102, 106–7; Zadavec 1986: 197–8; Vrečko 1986: 121–8).

Kosovel intended several collections of his own poetry, but none were published. Only the *Preface* to the edited collection *Zlati čoln* (The Golden Boat) remains, with a characteristic detachment from his lyric poetry, which he characterised – after his “revolt”, which led him to artistic and political “extremism” – as juvenile and sentimental, “velvety” and surpassed (*CW I*: 426–7). An outwardly critical attitude to such poetry can be seen in many of his auto-referential images: for example “a pianist with iron hands”, pounding on the Karst, that is, the chronotope of the poet’s “velvety poetry”.<sup>3</sup> Besides the occasional love poem, the “velvety poetry” probably included his typical “Karst poems”, in the genre of landscape and sentimental poetry, neo-romantic, impressionist and symbolist in style (cf. Ocvirk 1967: 53–3; Zadavec 1986: 13–42). Kosovel’s admiration for Slovenian impressionists and his “Karst poetry”, which was prevalent in the early posthumous editions (Gspan’s from 1927 and Ocvirk’s from 1931), created in the eyes of the public an image of him as heir to the Slovenian “Moderna”,<sup>4</sup> as a late impressionist and symbolist, a melancholic poet of loneliness, of existential distress, of the Karst homeland. However, the fact that in the last year of his life Kosovel had his monumental poem *The Ecstasy of Death* (Ekstaza smrti) published in the prestigious journal *Ljubljanski zvon* (1925), and even more so the fact that after his death a number of expressionist and “proletarian” poems were published (for example the sonnet cycle *The Red Atom* [Rdeči atom] in *Ljubljanski zvon* in 1931), were the two factors that even in the decade before WW2 added to the accepted image of the poet and made him into the exciting figure of an expressionist visionary, an engaged humanist and harbinger of the crisis of Western civilisation, seeker of the “new man”.

After WW2, when Slovenia was communist – and although it proclaimed dialectics as its doctrine, the state actually repressed the conflict of ideas in public discourse and replaced it with totalisations – the mechanisms of canonisation and ideological adaptation presented Kosovel very harmoniously for a very long time – as heir to the Slovenian “Moderna”, the poet of the Karst and at the same time as an expressionist herald of the end of bourgeois Europe and an engaged social realist. Until 1967, that is, when Anton Ocvirk, Kosovel’s literary executor, published *Integrali ‘26* (Integrals ‘26). As the editor of a number of books of Kosovel’s poetry (from *Izbrane pesmi* [Selected Poems, 1931] to the last volume of collected works [*Zbrano delo*, 1977]), Ocvirk moulded the poet’s public image for nearly half a

century. He had held back the publication of that part of Kosovel's late production (mainly from 1925) that was the most modern, until the rise of post-war neo-avant-gardes, when risky experiments in the more relaxed circumstances of the communist regime enabled some artistic and theoretical discourse susceptible to political and aesthetic transgression. When editing the *Collected Works* (1946) – possibly because of the ephemeral and chaotic appearance of the multitude of pages and tiny pieces of paper from the poet's legacy – Ocvirk still saw them as “fragmentary, incidental notes, full of current political and ideological issues” (Ocvirk 1946: 436).<sup>5</sup> These were Kosovel's collages, constructions or Cons poems and other modernist and avant-garde poems. Suddenly, in 1967 Ocvirk surprisingly and contrary to his previous openly stated opinions, put them at the top of the poet's opus of work. Paradoxically, the poet himself obviously had doubts about publishing these texts, because he was hiding them even from his closest friends.

After Ocvirk's belated and shocking publication of Cons poetry, Kosovel stirred the interest of literary science precisely as an avantgardist figure and this is the image that prevails in the public discourse to this day.<sup>6</sup> Literary historians more or less agreed that his creativity in the last years of his life was unusually heterogeneous: the author of poems which follow poetological models of late romanticism and modernity (particularly impressionism and symbolism) also wrote expressionist, Proletcult and avantgardist poetry.<sup>7</sup>

When the paradoxical diversity of Kosovel's creativity finally appeared in its entirety, it put the literary historiography in a quandary. This was made even worse by the fact that historians were used to narrative schemes of development and progress and saw literary trends and periods as internally homogeneous entities. Thus Ocvirk (1967: 17–18, 58 ff) claimed that Kosovel's poetics followed one another in a temporal sequence: in the middle of 1925 the poet was supposed to have made a decisive and final “revolt” and turned to “constructivism”. However, other authorities have since proven that the poet simultaneously practiced various literary trends, “traditional” as well as “modern”, right to the end (cf. M. Kos 1997: 164). In his introduction to *Integrals*, Ocvirk discovered the pattern for Kosovel's surprising switch to avant-garde writing in Russian constructivism. To my mind, however, the search for Kosovel's primordial and decisive avant-garde ideal – besides constructivism, literary historians have stated futurism, and partly dadaism and surrealism – will lead us nowhere. Not only because he took in avant-garde movements mainly through eclectic South-Slavic zenitism, but also because, particularly in Central Europe, the literary zone of “in-between peripherality” (Tötösy 1999), the avant-garde streams from Italy, Russia, France and Germany in general were creating “unusual mixtures”.<sup>8</sup> And in any case, despite their boastful manifestoes stressing their revolutionary innovations, the avant-gardes copied each other; even the radical dadaists borrowed from futurism and expressionism. On these grounds alone I prefer to speak generally of avant-garde texts as opposed to constructivist, zenitist, futurist or surrealist ones.

## The Heterogeneity of Periods and Kosovel's Hybrid Modernism

The attempts of literary historians to pinpoint the avant-garde trend that Kosovel belonged to, as well as – on a more general level – efforts to label his creative stages and arrange them in chronological order are guided by the underlying idea that every literary period or trend is internally coherent and grounded in the same “spirit of the time” or arises from a homogeneous artistic code, or stylistic convention. The idea in itself is problematic, because it overlooks the inherent sociolectal stratification and dialogic conflict within a culture. And it fails in particular with regard to the literature of the so-called “Moderna” period, from the turn of the 20th century and onwards (cf. Tamás 1991: 131–2; Matajč 2004), if not of romanticism, when normative poetics, with its principle of imitating model authors, lost its primacy and the conditions for a greater homogeneity of style and spirit of time dissipated. This is when – to paraphrase Barthes’ study – “classical writing” disintegrated and was gradually replaced by modern writing, preoccupied by issues of the non-transparency of language itself (Barthes 1953). Romanticism was – not only in the scale of world literature, but also within national traditions – very diversified; politically it ranged between revolutionary liberalism, nationalism, Biedermeier conformism and passionate Catholicism; modally, between tragic pathos and irony; and aesthetically, between folklorism, the restoration of historical styles, tendencies towards naturalness, authenticity and explicitly subjective, artificial imagination. Even more heterogeneous is the mixture of co-existing codes of literary trends within the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Literary historians, and Slovenians are no exception, resignedly labelled them as falling “between romanticism and realism”, or with some similar makeshift designation. The intertwining of diverse orientations comes through even more in modernism. So, for this period in particular it makes sense to let go of any kind of attempt at forced homogenisation of its concepts, and accept instead P. V. Zima’s notion that a period will establish itself precisely as a system of diversified, but dialogic discourses, each in its own way reacting to a set of problems emblematic of a certain time – in modernism, or rather, in the wider tradition of modernity from Baudelaire onwards, the ambivalence of the subject would be one such example (cf. Zima 2003). If we accept this view of the nature of periods in literary history, then we should not explain the diversity of Kosovel’s poetry of the twenties only through anomalies in the distribution and reception of his texts, that is, in terms of how the writer’s image was historically mediated to us (which was the theme of the previous chapter). We should see it as an eminent symptom of modernism, as a system of divergent sociolects which react to a common set of problems.

In many meta-poetic statements Kosovel suggests that he put his texts into direct contact with “life”, with contemporaneity; that he faced the materiality of the world and the paradoxical co-existence of truths: “A modern poet takes apart the form to get to the living, straightforward life.” (*CW*



3/1: 740); paradox to him is an energy source, undermining the “practical reason” of the bourgeoisie, and demonstrating “that there exist two truths instead of one” (*CW* 3/1: 399). Modernism is opening to immediate, crude and disorderly reality in its historical becoming. A contingent reality enters consciousness as something transitory and strictly simultaneous with the temporality of existence. This is how the experiencing consciousness (the speaking subject) takes its position in the multitude of ideologies and languages, which are in a constant historical flux (cf. de Man 1997; Škulj 1991, 1995). Therefore, if my judgement is correct, Kosovel’s insistence on creating simultaneously in several aesthetic codes should be read as a prime symptom of modernity – as a result of the experience that each of the codes covers a certain perspective, thematising one segment of reality, but can no longer symbolically capture a total picture of the world; only an open dialogue among sociolects can still represent it, although only through thousands of facets.

Such consciousness was at its peak in modernism, which Peter V. Zima in light of a wider concept of modernity – with its origins in the middle of the 19<sup>th</sup> century – synonymously calls late modernity (*die Spätmoderne*);<sup>9</sup> to him modernism is “a time of *crisis*, in which traditional metaphysics and ideologies prove doubtful; a time which instigates *criticism*” (e. g. of Hegelian systematic metaphysics) and feelings of contradictions, antinomies, doubt, epistemological and metalinguistic scepticism (Zima 2001: 130–1; from K. Jaspers, K. Rosenkranz and D. Fokkema). For late modernity or modernism the ambivalence of all values, criticism of the concept of reality, representational forms and the individual subject are crucial (ibid.: 132–3). Therefore it is understandable that modernism by spreading across national borders – encouraged by modern communication technologies, the voluntary and enforced exiles of artists, by migrations, and life in urban metropolises where cultural influences from all over the globe mingled – instituted the co-existence and pervasion of artistic idioms, a pluralism of poetic discourses. Modernism is “the art of an age of modern relativism, and of a time when frontiers were in vital and often dangerous flux” (Bradbury - McFarlane, eds., 1991: 13), it is characterised by “multi-cultural variety”, “enormous cross-fertilization” (14), “stylistic plurality” (21), urban “cultural chaos...a contingent and polyglot Tower of Babel” (98), “a frenzy of forms and artistic energies variously expressed and variously justified” (199), “plight of an exploded consciousness caught in a fragmented universe” (224–5). Modernism is a reaction to “the scenario of our chaos”; it is “the art consequent on the dis-establishment of communal reality” (27). A search for style in an age with no style in common, and no homogeneous representation of reality therefore becomes a highly self-reflexive endeavour (29).

Modernism, therefore, is a constellation of diverse, sometimes opposing poetics and ethics; and they – not only in individual literary currents, but also in individual authors or even individual poetic texts, like Eliot’s paradigmatic *The Waste Land* – combine into hybrid and ambivalent amalgamations (cf. Tamás 1991: 130–6). There is nothing exceptional in “double

loyalty” – the kind that may surprise someone in Kosovel, who jumps from the neo-romantic lyric sentiment to cynical newspaper quotes: many of the greatest modernist masterpieces, among them the novels of Thomas Mann, preserve traditional realistic representation and combine it with a modern x-raying of consciousness and language, so that in one work of art various conceptions of the world test each other. (Bell 1991: 12–3; Longenbach 1991: 125).

The axiological and political orientations of modernist writers oscillated between aristocratism and plebeianism, between hermetic aesthetic esotericism and the crudeness of popular culture, between restoring conservative religious beliefs, bohemian individualist immoralism, and political radicalisms, between nihilist depression, odes to modern technology and grotesque carnivalism, some flirted with fascism, others with communism, and many fell victim to one of the two totalitarianisms (cf. Blair: 1991: 157). The spectrum of modernist writing ranged from neo-classicism to the destruction of all traditional forms, from linguistic and literary self-referentiality (blended with symbolist allusionism and encoding through “de-humanized” abstraction), evocations of direct psycho-existential experience, fantasies, mythologisation and primitivism, to the fragmented recording of reality and radical criticism of society and ideology, sometimes combined with a declared political position (cf. Hough 1991: 315–20).

Kosovel was creative in the middle 1920's, when one can already speak of high modernism<sup>10</sup> in Europe and the USA, and when great artists like Picasso, Eliot, Rilke and Joyce had already confidently intertwined means of expression chosen from their “imaginary museum” of earlier trends and -isms; many important modernists did not stick to the proclaimed poetics of individual trends (cf. Bradbury - McFarlane, eds. 1991: 191, 205; Hough 1991: 316; Tamás 1991). From this aspect Kosovel, as young as he was – still a beginner looking for “his style” – comes across as an author of high modernism. It would seem that Kosovel understood perfectly the modernist plurality and simultaneity of diverse artistic voices. He persisted in this inter-space, *in between* various literary discourses from the 1920's: late impressionism and symbolism, expressionism, avant-gardism, Proletcult, *Neue Sachlichkeit* and existential modernism.

In his poetry grounded in neo-romanticism, impressionism and symbolism, Kosovel follows the tradition of aesthetic communication typical of lyric poetry from pre-romanticism to the *fin de siècle*. This pattern of poetry emphasises the exclusion of the poetic world from historical and social contexts. In relation to the relevant issues of public discourse, it puts it in a position of ontological and existential silence, or in a position of sensing the foundations of existence, which at the limits of civilisation is possible only through nature.<sup>11</sup> From the singular lyric subject, which appears in the text through psychologically plausible semiotic clues, comes a first person emotive speech, assuming an equally lonely, private reader and their emotional contemplation of the aesthetic image. The actual historical contexts of author and reader are separate; they are replaced by an ontology of the existential present. The disconnectedness of the lyric discourse from social



reality is not only linguistic; it is also denoted by objects of representation, which in Kosovel are typically themes of loneliness and anxiety, and images of the peaceful and empty Karst landscape, trees and birds.

Crucial for Kosovel's poems denoted by literary historians as expressionist (cf. Zadavec 1986: 80–135) is a different axis of poetic communication: the subject of the text suggests to the recipient that their referential worlds are historically correlated, that the author and his target audience share the same social context. Thus the lyric paradigm of individual aesthetic contemplation is taken apart. The aesthetic is overpowered by the ethical, and the ethics of poetic writing often focus on the politics of speech acts. Expressionism in general, as well as in Kosovel, is a hybrid poetics. It wavers between traditional expression and an avant-garde stance which attempts to go beyond the boundary of aesthetic literary conventions and into the reality of the modern world.

Kosovel's poems with a predominantly expressionist diction are therefore characterised by the hypertrophy of the speaking subject, which is the source of the theatrical, panoramic presentations of the chronotope, which for the most part is no longer rural, bucolic (Karstic), but unlimited, urban, global, even cosmic and mythologised (archetypes of chaos, the Flood). Kosovel's subject expresses a Nietzschean critique of the values of Christian-bourgeois civilisation and praises its "destruction". Thus he is already the "new man" of his utopian proclamations. On the other hand, the poetic "I" perceives itself as a "sub-ject" (in the sense of a subordinate) of the historical age in crisis, and experiences the distress of an uncertain metaphysical horizon. Nothingness in Kosovel appears through symbols and abstract words ("nothing", "nothingness", "nihil", "nihilo-melancholy") and sometimes appears as a concrete substance ("from silent emptiness grows Nothing. / The water from the drainpipe flows away").<sup>12</sup>

Kosovel's expressionist chronotope is defined by the deep axiological, ontological, epistemological, political and social crisis of the bourgeois society of the 1920's. With its national and international political mechanisms, with the established artistic and cultural institutions and leading ideologies and religious concepts, this society had proven incapable of coping with the fierce challenges of modern times. The thrusts that undermined traditional ways of self-substantiation came from different directions and affected different social subsystems: from economic stagnation through communist revolution and the rise of fascism to the advancement of technology and expansion of scientific findings, which relativised the old foundations of subject and truth. Kosovel makes his own historical contemporaneity the main referential field of poetic signs, and portrays it either in close-up and emphasised, or in the background and concealed, merely outlined. In both cases the context is evoked by tropes, for example, by an allegorical type, mythologisation or de-realisation. Such are for example the images of the fiery disarray overflowing "the golden towers of Western Europe" in *The Ecstasy of Death* (Ekstaza smrti), or mythological or folklore allusions to the Flood combined with grotesque irony in *Tragedy on the Ocean* (Tragedija na Oceanu).<sup>13</sup>

The subject in the expressionist poetry is becoming plural, merging into a community for which it feels ethically responsible, dialogically searching for a hidden God, or erasing the textual imprints of its personality. It identifies with objects or concepts. The first person subject sometimes appears only on the margins, among a number of voices which inhabit the structure of utterances. The foreign voices in Kosovel's poems (for example, in the cycle *The Karst Village* [Kraška vas]) are quotations from undefined speech acts.<sup>14</sup>

Kosovel's "workers' poems" (for example the sonnet sequence *The Red Atom* [Rdeči atom]) have a similar narrative scheme (the critical destruction of the old society and a utopian construction of the new), and also transform an intimate revelation to the individual reader into an oratory address to the collective. However, his "Proletcult" writing is sociologically and politically more concrete, clearly situated in an industrial environment. It approaches the poetics of the "new reality" (*neue Sachlichkeit*). The style of the "workers' poems" is rhetorical, but rather prosaic, simple, coloured with political expressions and revolutionary slogans. The poems reveal the position of a poet-intellectual identifying with the proletarian masses.

The poet takes us brilliantly into the centre of his radical modernism with his auto-thematic imagery: "The spirit collects impressions. / I search for moving images. ...I am like an electric spark / jumping. ...An active spirit collects images ...Facts drive art away."<sup>15</sup> The lyric subject is de-centred, it remains without a recognisable voice or a stable perspective, or the zone of his speech – which can be "traditionally" sentimental, lyrical – is limited, fragmentarily placed in a mosaic of impersonal strings of images, quoted statements, nameless pieces of information, or vague fragments of conversation. The structure of utterances in Kosovel's modernist texts is therefore already dialogised, ambivalent, polyphonic, and above all, intertextual: it combines humanistic eagerness, political demands and subjective lyricism, with irony, cynicism and grotesquery; it sums up and paraphrases the current cultural, political and scientific news from newspapers; it hints intermedially at avant-garde paintings (for example, by Franz Marc), and through allusions, relates to other avant-gardes or debates with them (for example, with dadaism and futurism).

The composition of the text belongs to Eco's model of an "open work": instead of a homogeneous motif and perspective, we have a montage of fragments, autonomous images, which in counterpoint nevertheless evoke and develop a common semantic field; we encounter film cuts, "zooming in" on details and boundless vistas, with a plural and limitless chronotope in which Kosovel's entirely private spaces simultaneously intertwine with planetary and cosmic spaces. The stylistic structure of the text is often hybrid. The style of the poem does not simply follow similar patterns from the past – the tradition of so-called poetic style; it is also open to contemporary discourses, including those which do not belong in the domain of traditional literary types: this accounts for the philosophical, theological, and psychological terms, mathematical symbols, the vocabulary of modern technology, physics, natural sciences, political slogans, journalistic lan-

guage and the mixture of elevated and prosaic registers in Kosovel's Cons pieces.

Kosovel had already begun to omit the traditional form of individualistic aesthetic communication in his expressionist and Proletcult poems. By its ethical stance, the subject of the poem suggests that it inhabits the same world of crisis as the recipient. While the expressionist representation of societality is mediated through poetic tropes, and therefore a homogeneous poetic language, Kosovel's radical modernism copes with the modern world by presenting it intertextually or through "collecting images", which are brought into the "active spirit" by a changing empirical reality. In a modernist text the subject descends to the level where the aesthetic sphere, which was traditionally autonomous, openly interacts with the discourses of science, politics, technology, philosophy and religion and also with works, imaginary and languages of other arts. Radical modernism turning into avant-gardism<sup>16</sup> therefore defines a major part of Kosovel's Cons pieces. However, such modernist structure in Kosovel often infiltrates the texts with seemingly prevailing impressionist or expressionist poetics, for example, through montage of composition, "zooming in" on certain details of the crumbled motif, the marginalisation of the subject in the structure of a text's utterances, the introduction of undetermined quotations of someone else's speech or the disorientation of the lyrical perspective and deterritorialisation of the subject.

The co-existence, intertwining and hybridity of diverse poetics that we have described make Kosovel utterly comparable to other modernists. In the mid-1920s, Picasso was developing simultaneously and without hesitation the different styles that he had successively devised, so that his cubist work meets his more traditional representational painting (see Mallen 2004). Guillaume Apollinaire, one of the earliest and most influential modernist poets (see Apollinaire 1992),<sup>17</sup> created fragmented, cubist, syntactically disintegrated urban poetry, associative surrealist fantasies and visual constellations alongside poetry which, at least seemingly, held to traditional, although at times ironic and profanely erotic, expression and classical rules of versification. He even combined them in a single text. However, the pluralism of modernism and hybridity of poetic speech were conceptualised and perhaps most consistently, vitally actualised by Fernando Pessoa in his schizo-poetics. Among his heteronyms, accompanied by mystifying biographies, he placed poetics reaching almost from the futuristically buoyant avant-garde to sublimated symbolism; yet their common ground is unmistakable – a melancholy turmoil, psychic dissociation, caught in the duplicated mirrors of the ultimate modernist self-reflection, but open to the elusiveness of being outside metaphysics (cf. Pessoa 1997).

Kosovel built his poetic identity less deliberately, but with equally as much drama. He moved from one poetic discourse to another, but above all, intertwined them into hybrids. Thus he became one of the first to imprint Slovenian literature with a distinctive seal of modernity.

Translated by Katarina Jerin

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Matevž Kos discussed these questions some years ago (1997: 152–65) in the chapter entitled “Kosovel’s Paradox.”

<sup>2</sup> At first Kosovel was enthusiastic about Anton Podevšek’s futurism and he wrote a couple of poems in his style, but he soon began to criticise the first Slovenian avant-gardist (he accused him of not being able to attract followers and that he was too bourgeois for such a task), not only in his correspondence, but very explicitly also in his poetry: in *Poem of the Green Salvation* (Pesem o zelenem odrešenju), written around 1924 in Podevšek’s style and form, he mentions that he “grew tired of Podevšek’s games” – this interesting palinode was published in *Ocvirk* 1967: 41–42. Kosovel, therefore, was critical of Podevšek’s avant-garde (*Ocvirk* 1967: 32–44; Zadavec 1986: 408–9; Vrečko 1986: 79) – just as he was critical of zenitism and dadaism – but nevertheless developed his own poetic identity and types of public performance in a dialogical relationship with it.

<sup>3</sup> *Nocturne* (Nokturno), *CW 1*, 213; *Rhymes* (Rime), *CW 2*, 9, *My Poem* (Moja pesem), *CW 1*, 229.

<sup>4</sup> In *Dom in svet*, an important journal influenced by Catholic aesthetic and intellectual modernism, in 1931 France Vodnik excluded Kosovel from “creators of our new poetic style” and pointed out his debt to Cankar, Župančič, Gradnik and Murn; and according to Božo Vodušek, Kosovel before his death was “ideologically and stylistically still an epigone; however, he did exhibit traces of revolt” (quoted from: M. Kos 1997: 157).

<sup>5</sup> As to the real reasons for *Ocvirk*’s views on Kosovel’s Cons poetry, everything is mainly speculation: he may have thought it was too fragmentary and chaotic for his taste, although he looked quite favourably upon European modernism; maybe he thought that the publication of these texts in the circumstances when Slovenia was governed by realistic aesthetic principles and rather academic tastes of the authorities would damage Kosovel’s reputation; maybe his editorial work was slowed down by his illness and his mistrust, which did not allow him to leave the editing of the legacy to anyone else.

<sup>6</sup> The truth be told, this was not so much due to literary history as to postmodern retro-gardism (Neue slowenische Kunst) and its satellites. After Slovenia had become independent, they managed through sophisticated theoretical marketing to establish their attitude of “state artists” – so provocative in communism – as a real, influential position within the cultural image of governing parties. Even on the level of aesthetical and political marketing, retro-gardism canonised the imaginary of the Slovenian historical avant-garde, including Kosovel.

<sup>7</sup> Here is a succinct and typical formulation: “The poetry of Srečko Kosovel is a very heterogeneous phenomenon. It was created within a space of a few years [...], yet it explosively contains more or less the whole of spiritual and stylistic experience of the 20th century poetry: from late impressionism and symbolism through expressionism and constructivism to the realist socio-programmatic poetry. All of it existing in a very narrow space, almost simultaneously and chaotically, without a classical progression of phases.” (Paternu 1989: 149–50.)

<sup>8</sup> After Jean Weisgerber and Evald Koren, Janez Vrečko (1986:12) makes the same point.

<sup>9</sup> Somehow different, but still unclear, is the understanding of the concept of *Spätmoderne* as suggested by Ernő Kulcsár-Szabó: when he argues for a method of literary history based in hermeneutics, deconstruction and reception, which takes into account the experience of the post-modern, promotes the trichotomy “classical modernity – late modernity – post modernity” instead of the periodisation of

binomial modernity – post modernity; in his view, late modernity includes the art of the late 1920's and 1930's, which contrary to the avant-garde dissemination and de-centralisation of subject and style, leans towards a historically new formation of literature on the basis of a dialogic, inter-subjective, linguistically-semiotic and self-reflexive conception of art (Kulcsár-Szabó 1999).

<sup>10</sup> Here Kulcsár-Szabó (1999) would use the term late modernity.

<sup>11</sup> This corresponds to the analysis of the remnants of the romantic syndrome of the “beautiful soul” in Kosovel’s poetry, not only in his impressionist, symbolist and expressionist poetry, but also – in limited positions and dissonant conjunctions – in avant-garde and modernist poems (M. Kos 1997: 141–52).

<sup>12</sup> *Autumn* (Jesen), *CW 2*, 160–1; *Nihilomelancholy* (Nihilomelanholiija), *CW 2*, 177; *An Evening before Winter* (Večer pred zimo), *CW 1*, 297.

<sup>13</sup> *The Ecstasy of Death*, *CW 1*, 304–5; *Tragedy on the Ocean*, *CW 1*, 403–12.

<sup>14</sup> *The Karst Village*, *CW 1*, 14–6.

<sup>15</sup> *Why Get Upset?* (Kaj se vznemirjate?), *CW 2*, 46–7.

<sup>16</sup> The difference between Kosovel’s radical modernism and avant-gardism can also be explained by the theory of speech acts. Kosovel’s avant-garde poetic texts represent speech acts adopted from a public discourse of avant-gardes, for example, from manifestoes. Kosovel’s avant-garde Cons poems therefore also act as appeals; they attempt to directly influence the readers’ ethical and political opinions, and therefore bind them to a certain “optimal projection” which goes beyond the sheer aesthetic and artistic field. Modernist texts written by Kosovel do not contain such appeals: they are open to reality, contemporaneity, the multilingualism of other discourses, but they use this interlocution mainly for the self-reflection of the subject and the poetic process.

<sup>17</sup> He was an influence on and point of reference for the dadaists and surrealists.

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■ **ABSTRACT**

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Key words: Slovene poetry / Kosovel, Srečko / literary reception / modernism / avant-garde / hybridity

The anomalies in the distribution and reception of Srečko Kosovel's poetry texts have engendered contradictory perceptions of the poet (as a belated heir of Slovenian Impressionism, an expressionist visionary, a radical avant-garde author), and literary history had to face the problem of the periodisation of Kosovel's heterogeneous oeuvre. Kosovel's poetics (impressionist and symbolist, expressionist, proletarian, avant-garde and modernist) do reveal perceptible changes in their mode of poetic communication, in which the author aims to transcend aesthetic autonomy and open up his text to various discourses, texts, messages, themes and images of the modern world. But Kosovel – throughout his entire life – forged his own poetic identity precisely through the hybrid coexistence of diverse poetics; thus his identity refuses to be contained within the narrow bounds of the traditional historical narrative of literary evolution and ruptures. This reveals not only a young man's search for his own "authentic expression", but constitutes an important symptom of modernism – modernist heteroglossia, relativism, ambivalence, presentism and perspectivism. Stylistic and poetic hybrids are trademarks of modernist art; it can also emerge within the oeuvre of an individual author.