

ANALOGIES BETWEEN S. KOSOVEL AND C. REBORA, OR: IS THERE SUCH A THING AS ITALIAN EXPRESSIONISM?

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Italian literary critics have little doubt that Italian expressionism, in fact, does exist. They discover explicit expressionist traits in the style and subject matter of the young writers who began publishing in the Florentine magazine 'La Voce' (1908–14, 1914–6) and are, accordingly, known as 'I vociani'. The critics Cesare Segre and Clelia Mortignoni even go so far as to argue that the "best 'vociani' represented the true literary avant-garde of the pre-war era".¹ This view – which, by referring to 'vociani' as 'the true literary avant-garde', indirectly casts doubt on the authenticity of other Italian avant-garde movements – does seem excessive and biased. On the other hand, one might wonder whether the claim by Lado Kralj that 'there are no texts in Italian literature which could be defined as expressionist'² is not also somewhat radical.

In my paper I attempt to give at least a partial answer to the question of whether the above-mentioned contentions about the existence of Italian expressionism are legitimate. In order to do so, I make a comparative analysis of Kosovel's work, and poems and letters by a Milanese poet, Clemente Rebora (1885–1957). The latter is believed to be "one of the most outstanding representatives of 'vocian' expressionism";³ however, in order to make a fair comparison of both authors and the period of expressionism, I only consider Rebora's letters and poems written up to 1926 and 1927 respectively.⁴ The aim of my comparative analysis, of course, was to look for common and related expressionist elements.

To begin with, unlike Kosovel, Rebora almost certainly was not familiar with German expressionism. In the 835 letters that he wrote up to 1926, he mentions all kinds of writers and poets, but no expressionists. Besides, the literary experience of 'Vociani' and the emergence of German expressionism occurred simultaneously, and – considering the Italian writers' poor knowledge of contemporary German literature – this makes it even less possible that German expressionism would have any kind of influence on either Rebora or any other 'Vociani'. Italian expressionism, therefore, would have had to be an autochthonous phenomenon arising from the same cultural and historical crisis of Western civilisation that was observed and subsequently articulated by German expressionists.

Kosovel not only conveyed the uneasiness of the then 'dead generation, which soaked up into its young organism the hunger and horrors of war and...feels chaos inside'⁵, but also explicitly, e.g. in his famous article *Crisis* (Križa)⁶, associated the birth of expressionism with the pre-war agonies of Europe. In the same vein, nineteen years older Rebora not only spoke of the 'rotteness' of the times⁷ and gave a dramatic description of the tragic pre-war generation, which was destined to either 'go mad or expand into a vast incandescence'⁸, but also dedicated his first collection of poems in 1913⁹ 'To the first decade of the 20th century'. Rebora's brother Pietro shed some light on the meaning of this dedication: 'To him (Rebora) the first years of the (20th) century were...a dark premonition of the devastation of 1914–8, which is the date of the downfall of a world... a terrifying hurricane, the beginning of our collective shipwreck.'¹⁰ Rebora, therefore, also associated the beginnings of his poetry with the perception of the crisis in pre-war Europe.

Similarly to German expressionists, the reaction to the perception of the decaying Western world in Kosovel and Rebora was twofold – it consisted of polemics against modern civilisation, and, complementarily, of the feeling of being alienated from this civilisation, and therefore of loneliness and isolation, existential meaninglessness, inner disharmony and division – of dissociation of the subject.

In expressionism, polemics against the modern Western world came across mainly as criticism of urbanisation, technology and industrialisation with mechanisation.¹¹ This is where Kosovel and Rebora probably have the least in common. In his expressionist poems, or rather poems with expressionist elements (Cons poetry), Kosovel appears very critical particularly of technology and mechanisation and of contemporary production relations, which cause the dehumanisation of people and human relations. This attitude is manifest in his proclamation *To Mechanics!* (Mehanikom!), which declares death to all mechanisms and to the 'Man-automaton',¹² and one could argue that a considerable part of Kosovel's later poetry originated from similar polemic tendencies. His poem *Cons* (Kons) is also very indicative of this; its conclusion is that 'Man is not an automaton' and it is therefore necessary to destroy 'Taylor factories'¹³. Similarly, the poem *Cons: to the New Age* (Kons: novi dobi) again declares death 'to technological problems' and 'Taylor's system', because 'The new age is coming/ when every worker is man/ when every man is a worker.'¹⁴ There is no trace of anything like this in Rebora's poetry. Judging from Rebora's essay on Leopardi (1910), the Milanese poet apparently saw mechanisation mainly in the light of a rigid classification of reality and a conformist equating of ideas with behaviours, which destroyed the affluence and freedom of human creativity and was typical of modern civilisation.¹⁵ However, the negative view of the modern world in Rebora's poems is expressed predominantly in his keen criticism of urbanisation, and dismal, corrupt, decaying cities, which the author often describes with stylistic tools of deformation and grotesquery – typical features of expressionism. The motif of a demonic metropolis, a hellish swamp, with its madhouses, hospitals,

brothels, prisons, barracks and factories, is a constricting symbol of death and doom, and is typical of German expressionism, found mainly in Heym, but also Werfel, Trakl, Lichtenstein, Sack, van Hoddiss and others.¹⁶ Let me quote just two examples. In poem XIV (*Le poesie* 1913–1957, op. cit., p. 27), the rainy city, where life is ‘a caged beast’, is a symbol of the poet being torn between sensuality and spirituality, between ‘flesh and heart’, as well as of the conflict between the ‘rotteness’ of the times and a certain brighter future, when the downfall and destruction of the poet’s generation will create an ‘assorted knowledge’ and ‘immortal beauty’.¹⁷ The city is quite often also a site of tragic loneliness, where the poet, absorbed in his own papers and with ‘a gloomy face’, ponders in vain ‘the truth of life’, while he discerns in the distant street-noise the unattainable joy of ‘a passionate poem’ and laughter of ‘men and women/ who build up their desires during work’ (ibid, LV, p. 93–4).¹⁸ One should also mention that the poet’s urban sites are very often denoted by or associated with typically expressionist attributes of rotteness, decay and collapse. Typical of Rebora’s Milan and its inhabitants are ‘rotteness’, ‘cloacae’, ‘mud’, ‘ruins’, ‘filth’, ‘scab’, ‘dirt’, ‘garbage’, ‘swill’¹⁹, and in his letters, the air in Milan ‘seems stuffy and unclean as a patient’s bad breath’, whereas the city is depicted as an ‘enormous’ and ‘stinking belly’.²⁰

In Kosovel’s poetry the expressionist *topos* of the city is much more casual and indirect; he writes mainly of certain urban elements, like streets, coffee houses, black walls, houses, factories, towers (which normally carry the symbolic valence of a metropolis), or urban characters like clubmen from the poem of the same title, a banker from *Tragedy on the Ocean* (*Tragedija na oceanu*), hairdressers, sociologists, analysts, critics of society etc., who normally stand for a dehumanised man, set against a new, true Man of the future. If Kosovel’s letters describe Ljubljana primarily as a town killing ‘With its fog and morality’²¹, his poems often depict its coffee houses as places of loneliness and absence of communication (*Vis-à-vis in a Coffee House* (*Vis-à-vis v kavarni*); *Two People in a Coffee House* (*Dva človeka v kavarni*)). Its empty streets are symbols of meaninglessness (*The Evening before Winter* (*Večer pred zimo*)); its loud streets, full of rushing people, stir feelings of alienation and the need for a liberating solitude (*A Cry for Solitude* (*Krik po samoti*)); and factories and most of all the gigantic wheels of their machinery symbolise a mechanised man-automaton (*By a Giant Wheel* (*Ob orjaškem kolesu*); *Against Man* (*Proti človeku*)) or, inversely, represent the building of a new world (*The Alarm* (*Alarm*)). The metropolis, with its swaying houses and towers, is often a symbol of a dying modern civilisation which will experience an unavoidable cathartic catastrophe, and then a new world (*Ljubljana is Asleep* (*Ljubljana spi*), *Men with Crosses* (*Ljudje s križi*), *O, Sing the Vigils* (*O pojte vigilije*), *Blue Horses* (*Modri konji*), *From the Poles* (*Iz tečajev*), *The Ecstasy of Death* (*Ekstaza smrti*)): ‘The foundations were weak, my dear/ let the buildings fall!’ , says Kosovel in *I Wish to Portray* (*Rad bi upodobil*).²²

As mentioned before, the polemic and negative attitude towards the modern world typical of expressionists was inseparable from feelings

of loneliness, alienation, inner disharmony and division, and existential meaninglessness. Kosovel and Rebora express similar sentiments in a great number of poems and letters, and one cannot help but be overwhelmed in selecting the materials. I will therefore narrow the motif of tragic solitude to the image of a tree, which is a true *topos* in expressionism.²³ Thus, in one of his poems, Kosovel compares himself to a tree, which stands 'in the middle of the fields', amidst the rampage of the storm and streaks of lightning; just as lonely is the poet, who 'stands amidst the world alone/ and no-one knows his heart, his soul',²⁴ and in the poem *Give Me Grief* (*Daj mi bolest*) Kosovel compares himself to 'a black tree, which has burnt out' and is therefore sentenced to total isolation and marginalisation, because in its 'demise' it can no longer rustle 'with the evening winds'.²⁵ A similar motif is used by Rebora in a letter written in April 1910, where the author confides in a friend about his pain and loneliness: 'I have suffered and I still suffer immeasurably'; 'I feel like a tree with no branches, which has become barren just as the spring is surging all around with its thousand taunts and calls for a rebirth.'²⁶

With solitude comes a strong sense of alienation. Rebora portrayed it perhaps most clearly in his later poetic series *Curriculum vitae* (1955), where he describes – as the title suggests – his life up to 1929, when he decided to become a priest. In the ninth poem or rather fragment of the series the poet complains of a 'hidden error' which he suffered since the pre-war years, of a feeling that he had 'missed the planet!', that is, the world he was destined to live in was totally and hopelessly foreign to him.²⁷ The poet and critic Franco Fortini has described alienation, which is one of the main themes of Rebora's first collection, as a result of 'evading reality':²⁸ the poet's alienation is caused by reality itself, absurdly evading him and withdrawing from him, as is clearly shown e.g. in the following lines: 'Oh, the changing of things that I see/ and wish for!/ Oh, the changing of life that I feel/ and wish for!/ ... but what tempts me from afar/ then shuns me:/ and as I pass by, I am left with nothing.'²⁹ A similar description of such evading of reality and its consequences is also found in Kosovel, in a lyrical poem with the suggestive title *Alone* (*Sam*): 'The world has shifted oddly far away/ you roam, you stray as if adrift/ all is washed away, but to where you do not know./ Oh, I would make my cry resound/ but then I am afraid I would be left alone/ and empty a thousand times.'³⁰ As these lines demonstrate, the motif of loneliness and alienation in Kosovel was frequently linked to the fear of silence or, even worse, to the conventional and dishonest words that the poet considered the worst negation of any genuine human contact: when 'everyone for himself/ hides the failures of his searching' (*Gathered* (*Zbrani*)),³¹ when 'we speak enveloped/ hidden', when 'we are not open' (*The Tears of Masks* (*Solze mask*)),³² or when even 'we do not hear/ our words' (*Poem from Chaos* (*Pesem iz kaosa*)),³³ we are strangers to each other, which means we have missed the first and foremost objective of Man.

There is but a small step to total aimlessness. In proclaiming existential meaninglessness both poets are radical and cruelly explicit: 'nothing, a dreadful nothing/ a chopped off stump'³⁴ (*A L.*), says Rebora, who once

again uses the expressionist metaphor of a dead tree; and his idea is echoed by Kosovel: 'Searching, striving/ in vain' (*A Pitiful life, I* (Bedno življenje, I)). 'From the silent emptiness grows Nothing' (*Evening before Winter* (Večer pred zimo)).³⁵

But what is of the essence in expressionism is the feeling of an inner divide springing from the insoluble disharmony between the poet and the world. The subject matter of a divi and disharmony is crucial, because this conflict is the main source of expressionist art. With regard to this I will quote only two examples from Kosovel: the well-known beginning of *My Poem* (Moja pesem), which reads like a programmatic manifesto for expressionist poetry: 'My poem is an explosion./ Disharmony. Wild corrosion'; and the equally indicative statement, 'Conflict is the essence of the work of art' (*I Think* (Mislim)).³⁶ In Rebora's case, too, there is no shortage of statements, expressions and analyses of the poet's inner contradictions, which are once again the main theme of his poetry, and at the same time the main reason for it. According to the critic Valli, the 'contradiction' or 'the contrast between outer and inner, between appearance and essence, between sensual and spiritual, between limited and limitless' is the most obvious 'constant in Rebora's poetry'.³⁷ To express this conflict, the poet almost obsessively uses the rhetorical figure of antithesis and most of all – as the critic Bandini points out in his central essay on Rebora's linguistic expressionism – comparisons based on juxtaposing abstract and concrete concepts.³⁸ But like Kosovel, the poet was aware of the essence of and the inspiration for his poetry, as demonstrated by a letter of 1911: 'I slam into contrasts between the eternal and the transitory, between what I feel (and love) and what I wish didn't exist, between the possibility and embodiment, between the biddable and the elusive, between the roughness of a blacksmith and the temper of an impatient man... If I ever publish my lyrical fragments – my scary *poetry* – they will let you feel all these contrasts.'³⁹

This –, in many ways extreme –, position of the dissociated subject, called for a cathartic solution, which in expressionist literature was twofold: it either came across as a glorification of the redemptive role of poetry and the prophetic function of the poet, or as a proclamation of the decline of the Western world and the birth of a new world and a new man.

Kosovel approached the subject of Orphic revolt against meaninglessness and chaos⁴⁰ and of the antagonistic and encouraging role of the poet in several poems⁴¹; *A Young Poet Stepped on Parnassus* (Stopil je pesnik mlad na Parnas) is one of the most explicitly programmatic poems, in which the poet calls to the poet-pawns to step down from Parnassus, where the Muse 'is quiet and withdrawn', and fight: 'I call on you, poet: Embrace/ sharp rhythms, violence/ wake up, wake up/ from praying in silence!' In the poem *In Front of the Barrier* (Pred bariero) the call to fight is even more direct: 'brothers fighters, follow me onwards!'; at the same time, the verse introduces the motif of the brotherhood of the People (with a capital P), who are given the great task of building the new world. Another manifestation of the typical expressionist motif of a new Man and human brotherhood – arising from the horrifying experience of World War I and some-

how anticipated by Werfel's humanitarianism before and during the war (the titles of Werfel's two poetry collections *Wir sind*, 1913, and *Einander*, 1915, are indicative of this) – is the abandoning of the pronoun 'I' for the plural 'we', which Kosovel also employs, for example in *Our Chant* (Naš spev), where the plural 'we' once again carries the prophetic and activist themes of 'the anthem of the fight' and of 'passionate', 'untameable' fighters, with 'the chaos of fire' in their hearts.⁴² A similar shift occurs in the title of Rebora's second collection, *Anonimous Chants* (Canti anonimi, op. cit.) published in 1922. Folco Portinari has explicitly linked the 'anonymity' of Rebora's chants to the poet's tragic wartime experience, which 'inevitably led... to exceeding the personal dimension', and to the need to depict 'all the fortunes and misfortunes of the people of that time'.⁴³ As far as the Orphic subject matter goes, it is present in Rebora's poems, but only as a distant echo. In poem. LXIII of the first collection (op. cit, p. 104–6), for example, poets are defined as 'fighters' and 'heroes'⁴⁴, but in comparison to Kosovel's fighting poems, the content comes across rather vaguely. Similarly, the belief in the prophetic and liberating function of poetry is less persuasive and more abstract in Rebora than in Kosovel, although there is a somewhat hazy hint in poem. XLIX (ibid. p. 80–1) of the expressionistic *topos* of heading towards a great goal, which is the new world: 'Oh poetry/ ... you are the fanfare/ the rhythm of our way/ ... you are the joy/ which gives courage/ ... the certainty/ of the new day'.⁴⁵

The motif of the 'way' is also present in a Rebora's letter dating from 1921, in which the poet confides in his brother: 'I sometimes feel as if I was being called by someone, yet I don't know by whom or why; and yet I go on my way [...]'.⁴⁶ It seems therefore that Rebora, too, had a sense of the path that the new generation had to take, and the sense of the huge task entrusted to the young who had lived through and survived the tragedy of World War I: 'As my time of averageness is running out', he says in a poem written in 1926, 'I am already waiting for a voice to sound out/ *Clemente!* Do not delay! Begin!/ Fulfil the task of man...'.⁴⁷ Once again, we can draw parallels with Kosovel, because – as Kralj points out – the typical elements of the expressionist image of the 'great way' are present in his editorial in the first issue of the *Lepa Vida* magazine published in 1922, *We Sail Off in the Spring!* (Spomladi odjadramo). Kralj's commentary on the text could easily relate to the two Rebora quotations: 'There was probably no encouragement from the outside, the idea (of the 'great way' – author's note) had probably developed in Kosovel congenially, due to similar spiritual and social conditions (as German expressionism – author's note).'⁴⁸

The parallels in social and spiritual context indeed should not be overlooked, otherwise certain analogies between Kosovel's and Rebora's poetry would be inexplicable, particularly when taking into consideration the radical difference or even antithesis of their psychology, world view and choices in life. However, despite the radical differences in both authors, their expressionist phases chronologically and conceptually end in a surprisingly similar way – with a prophecy of a terrible disaster, which will give birth to a new world of brotherhood. Quite extraordinarily, both authors focused on

the motif of a disastrous flood: Kosovel in his cycle of poems entitled *The Tragedy on the Ocean*, which is possibly the high point of his expressionist lyrics, and Rebora in a poem with the very vague title of *Verses* (Versi) from – probably – 1926 or 1927. Let me conclude my comparison of motifs and subject matter in Kosovel's and Rebora's poetry by quoting the closing verses of Rebora's poem: 'The waters will subside/ from gentle homelands/ what remained silent will now speak/ the paths will clear. // From the stuff of the old/ a new world will arise/ ... A lot of hidden good/ dares not surface:/ it waits for the heart to respond/ to the answer of man',⁴⁹ the eagerly anticipated answer of man being, of course, brotherhood.⁵⁰

I continue with a few words on the stylistic characteristics of Kosovel's and Rebora's expressionist poetry. Kosovel uses numerous rhetorical and stylistic approaches also typical of German expressionism, e.g. explosive metaphors, strong colour contrasts, the use of emotionally charged, intensive verbs and generally strongly expressive imagery and words, gemination or doubling, even tripling of a word, a syntagm or even a verse, hyperbole and so on;⁵¹ however, the form of the poems remains traditional. The true innovative form in Kosovel's poetry only appears in his *Cons* and *Integrals* phase, with the nominal style, catachrestic montage, and the use of paralinguistic material; however, Kosovel's source for these radical innovations was not so much German expressionism, as other European avant-gardes. Significant in this context is the finding of Anton Ocvirk that Kosovel 'differs from German expressionists in his simplicity and emotional honesty, because he is never inflated' or 'aggressively emotional'.⁵² And this is the most obvious difference between Kosovel's and Rebora's style. That is, the latter *is* inflated, and the poet's statements are strained and forced. The language is overwrought, its syntax twisted and morphology deformed; the words fluctuate from stylistically neutral expressions to incongruent archaisms, Danteisms, and technical terms. By his violent treatment of the language, Rebora expresses his own spiritual division, and the reader has the impression that the linguistic mutilation and distortion is a desperate attempt to materialise the spiritual and to spiritualise the material. Rebora's sentences and words act as the linguistic equivalent of the deformed bodies and characters of expressionist paintings, or a stylistic pendant to the expressionist scream. The potentially soothing effect of Rebora's equally traditional form⁵³ is even further dissipated by the rich selection of imagery and metaphors, which respond to the expressionist principle of the aesthetics of ugliness.

Is there, then, such a thing as Italian expressionism? With regard to what has been discussed, one might respond in the following manner: we cannot speak of a true Italian expressionist movement – in terms of historical avant-garde, and also because Italian contemporaries were completely or largely unaware of German expressionism. That, however, does not rule out clear expressionist elements in the works of individual Italian authors, whose sometimes surprising analogies with German or Slovene expressionists come from a common awareness of the cultural and historical crisis of Western civilisation at the time.

NOTES

¹ C. Segre – C. Martignoni, *Testi nella storia, La letteratura italiana dalle Origini al Novecento, 4 – Il Novecento*, Mondadori, Milan 2001, p. 492. The translations of Rebora's verses are purely informative.

² L. Kralj, *Ekspresionizem* ('Expressionism'), DZS, Ljubljana 1986, p. 72.

³ C. Segre – C. Martignoni, p. 507. Among other expressionist-oriented 'vociani', critics normally mention Giovanni Boine and Piero Jahier, and occasionally and definitely marginally also Dino Campana and Scipio Slataper.

⁴ C. Rebora, *Frammenti lirici*, Libreria della Voce, Florence 1913; *Canti anonimi*, Il Convegno editoriale, Milan 1922; *Poesie sparse (1913–1927)*, in: Clemente Rebora, *Le Poesie (1913–1947)*, ed. Piero Rebora, Vallecchi, Florence 1947; *Lettere I (1893–1930)*, Edizioni di storia e letteratura, Rome 1976.

Quotes from Rebora's poems are from: C. Rebora, *Le poesie 1913–1957*, All'insegna del pesce d'oro, Milan 1961.

⁵ S. Kosovel, 'Kritika, gibalno življenje v umetnosti' ('Criticism, the drive of life in art'), in: ZD, III, DZS 1977, p. 210.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 12–20.

⁷ C. Rebora, *Le poesie 1913–1957*, p. 27.

⁸ C. Rebora, *Lettere I (1893–1927)*, p. 327. In the original: '(Chi di noi potrà o avrà coraggio di rimanere), o finirà pazzo o espanderà un'enorme incandescenza'.

⁹ C. Rebora, *Frammenti lirici*.

¹⁰ Pietro Rebora, 'Clemente Rebora e la sua prima formazione esistenzialista', in: *Clemente Rebora, All'insegna del pesce d'oro*, Milan 1960, p. 88.

¹¹ Cf. L. Kralj, *Ekspresionizem* (Expressionism), pp. 41 and 167.

¹² S. Kosovel, ZD, III, op. cit. pp. 113–4.

¹³ S. Kosovel, ZD, II, DZS 1974, p. 33.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 74.

¹⁵ C. Rebora, 'Per un Leopardi mal noto', in: *Omaggio a Clemente Rebora*, Bologna 1971, p. 153. It is interesting that Rebora's polemics against the mechanisation of human relations and society is very similar to the statement of Kurt Pinthus, the editor of the most widely-known anthology of expressionist poetry (*Menschheitsdämmerung. Symphonie jüngster Dichtung*, 1920), who in his preface ascribed the origins of the expressionist movement also to 'human order, piled up in its entirety upon mechanicism and conventionality.' (quoted in: L. Kralj, *Ekspresionizem*, p. 20).

¹⁶ For the motif of the metropolis in German expressionism see: *Deutsche Großstadt – Lyrik vom Naturalismus bis zur Gegenwart*, ed. Wolfgang Rothe, Reclam, Stuttgart 1978, pp. 14–21.

¹⁷ In the original: 'belva in una gabbia chiusa', 'il vario contrasto / della carne e del cuore', 'il marcio del tempo', 'un'eletta dottrina', 'un'immortale bellezza'.

¹⁸ In the original: 'ottenebrato / il mio volto', 'la verità della vita', 'canzone appassionata', 'un rider sento d'uomini e di donne / che nel lavoro preparan le voglie'.

¹⁹ In the original: 'il marcio' (op. cit., XIV, str. 27), 'fogna' (X, 21), 'fanghiglia' (VI, 15), 'sfasciume' (XXXVI, 58), 'pattume', 'rogne', 'rifiuti', 'rivoli di spurghi' (LXIX, 114).

²⁰ C. Rebora, *Lettere I (1893–1930)*. In the original: 'a Milano [...], ove l'aria pare viziata e impura come il fiato di un'ammalata' (p.5), 'Milano che pare ora un ventre enorme; e pute tosto che si risveglia' (p. 29).

²¹ S. Kosovel, ZD, III, op. cit., p. 339.

²² S. Kosovel, ZD, II, op. cit., pp. 496–7.

²³ For the tree motif in Kosovel's expressionist poetry, see: F. Zadavec, *Srečko Kosovel 1904–1926*, Lipa-ZTT, Koper-Trieste 1986, pp. 81–3.

²⁴ *Kakor drevo, ki se strele boji* ('Like a Tree Afraid of Lightning'), ZD, I, DZL, Ljubljana 1964, p. 127.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 367.

²⁶ C. Rebora, *Lettere I (1893–1930)*, p. 63. In the original: 'Ho sofferto e soffro indicibilmente', 'son rimasto come un albero sfrondata, che proprio ora si spoglia e tutto isterilisce quando intorno gli fluttua la primavera con mille inviti e richiami di rinascenza'.

²⁷ C. Rebora, *Le poesie 1913–1957*, p. 278. In the original: 'guasto occulto', 'ho sbagliato pianeta!'.

²⁸ F. Fortini, 'Frammenti lirici di Clemente Rebora', in: *Letteratura italiana. Le opere, IV- Il Novecento*, ed. A. Asor Rosa, Einaudi, Torino 1995, p. 246–55.

²⁹ C. Rebora, *Le poesie 1913–1957*, poem LI, p. 87. In the original: 'Oh il variar delle cose ch'io guardo, / e le vorrei! / Oh il variar della vita ch'io sento, / e la vorrei! / [...] quel che da lungi m'invita, / va sempre più in là: / e nulla è mio al passaggio.'

³⁰ S. Kosovel, ZD, I, p. 358.

³¹ *Ibid.*, p. 353.

³² S. Kosovel, ZD, II, p. 147.

³³ *Ibid.*, p. 159.

³⁴ C. Rebora, *Le poesie 1913–1957*, p. 181. In the original: 'Nulla, più nulla, / ceppo reciso'.

³⁵ S. Kosovel, ZD, I, pp. 261, 297.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 229 and ZD, III, p. 108.

³⁷ D. Valli, *Anarchia e misticismo nella poesia italiana del primo Novecento*, Milella, Lecce, 1973, p. 288–9.

³⁸ F. Bandini, 'Elementi di espressionismo linguistico in Rebora', in: *Ricerche sulla lingua poetica contemporanea. Rebora, Saba, Ungaretti, Montale, Pavese*, several authrors, Quaderni del circolo filologico linguistico padovano, Padova 1966, pp. 3–35.

³⁹ C. Rebora, *Le lettere I (1893–1930)*, pp. 105–6. In the original: 'Mi sbatto nel contrasto fra l'eterno e il transitorio, fra quello che sento (e amo) necessario e quello che vorrei non fosse, fra la potenza e l'atto, fra la cosa conosciuta e il lasciarla partire, fra la rozzezza del fabbro e la permalosità di un insofferente. [...] S'io pubblicherò alcuni pochi frammenti lirici – orribili come *poesia* – rivedrà codesti contrasti.'

⁴⁰ 'Chaos' was one of the key words of expressionism, yet it only appears once in Rebora's works from this period – in a short poetic prose *Fonte nella macerie* (A Well Among the Ruins, 1915). The sentence goes: 'Obelisco del caos, il campanile muto' ('Obelisque of chaos, a mute campanile'), in: *Le poesie 1913–1957*, p. 197.

⁴¹ For the Orphic and prophetic subject matter in Kosovel's poetry, see: F. Zadavec, *Srečko Kosovel 1904–1926*, pp. 117–22.

⁴² S. Kosovel, ZD, I, pp. 230, 243, 228.

⁴³ F. Portinari, 'Milano', in: *Letteratura italiana. Storia e geografia, III, L'età contemporanea*, ed. A. Asor Rosa, Einaudi, Torino 1989, p. 261. In the original: '(lo spettacolo tragico) può solo condurre [...] a un superamento della dimensione personale', 'tutta la storia, di tutti gli uomini del suo tempo'.

⁴⁴ In the original: 'combattenti', 'eroi'.

⁴⁵ In the original: 'O poesia, / [...] sei la fanfara / che ritma il cammino, / [...] sei la letizia / che incuora il vicino, / [...] sei la certezza / del grande destino'.

⁴⁶ C. Rebora, *Le lettere I (1893–1930)*, p. 410. In the original: 'Mi pare poi, a volte, d'essere chiamato, e non so da chi né per cosa; in ogni modo rispondo, e m'incammino da qualche parte'.

⁴⁷ C. Rebora, *Le poesie 1913–1957*, p. 190. In the original: ‘Mentre lavoro nei miei giorni scarsi, / mi pare deva echeggiar imminente / una gran voce chiamando: *Clemente!* / Per un’umana impresa ch’è da farsi...’

⁴⁸ L. Kralj, *Ekspressionizem*, pp. 182–3.

⁴⁹ C. Rebora, *Poesie sparse (1913–1927)*, pp. 191–192. In the original: ‘Decresceranno le acque, / emergeranno patrie pie, / parlerà ciò che più tacque, / si chiariranno le vie. // Il vecchio mondo disfatto / materia al nuovo darà / [...] C’è tanta bontà nascosta / che non osa uscir fuori: / attende s’aprano i cuori / a un’umana risposta.’

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 193.

⁵¹ For an analysis of Kosovel’s expressionist style, see: F. Zadavec, Srečko Kosovel 1904–1926, pp. 123–35.

⁵² S. Kosovel, ZD, II, note on p. 647.

⁵³ For the problem of form in Rebora’s first collection, see: P. Giovannetti, ‘I Frammenti lirici’ di Clemente Rebora: questioni metriche’, in: ‘Autografo’, III, 8, p. II–35. For Rebora’s linguistic expressionism, see: F. Bandini, ‘Elementi di espressionismo linguistico in Rebora’.

■ ABSTRACT

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Key words: Slovene poetry / Kosovel, Srečko / Italian poetry / Rebora, Clemente / expressionism / literary influences

According to contemporary Italian literary criticism, examples of both futurism and expressionism can be found in Italian literature. Segre and Martignoni detect explicit expressionist characteristics of style and theme in the work of the so-called ‘poeti vociani’, who were first published in the Florentine review *La voce* (1908–1914, 1914–1916). In fact, they go as far as to say that “the best ‘vociani’ represented the true literary avant-garde of the pre-WWI period (*Testi nella storia 4, La letteratura italiana dalle Origini al Novecento*, 2001).” Their opinion seems rather tendentious, if not ideologically biased, but one can equally question the somewhat radical thesis of Kralj which claims a total absence of expressionistic texts in Italian literature (Lado Kralj, *Ekspressionizem*, 1986).

A close analysis of the poems and letters of C. Rebora (1885–1957), one of the most eminent “poeti vociani”, puts such propositions about the existence of Italian expressionism to the test. Comparing Rebora’s opus (up to 1926/27) with the opus of S. Kosovel, I searched for any shared expressionist elements, taking the three major expressionist themes as guideline clusters for my analysis:

- an awareness of crisis and a revolt against modern civilization;
- feelings of loneliness, solitude, existential meaninglessness, alienation, inner disharmony, loss of identity, in other words – “dissociation of the subject”.
- responses to these feelings: either glorifying the poet’s prophetic function and praising the soteriological role of poetry, or prophesying the demise of European civilization, and announcing the birth of a new world and new human.

Rebora's poetry deals with all these themes, revealing, at times, a striking similarity with certain motifs in the poetry of Srečko Kosovel. Despite the fact that a stylistic analysis also confirms the thesis about Rebora's expressionism, there is insufficient evidence to show that Rebora – along with other “vociani” poets – was familiar with German expressionism. This, on the contrary, cannot be said of Kosovel.

The lack of influence of German expressionists on the Italian “vociani” may be explained first by the simultaneous appearance of the “vociani” poets and the German expressionists on the literary scene; and second, by scant knowledge of contemporary German literature among Italian writers at the time. Any possibility of German literature influencing the “vociani” poets should thus be excluded.

To conclude: expressionism as a literary movement proper did not exist in Italy. There were, however, decidedly expressionist elements in the work of certain authors. The surprising analogies observed between German and Slovenian expressionism can, on the other hand, be explained by a general awareness of the cultural-historical crisis of Western civilization of the time.