

# Human Hearts are Small and Cages are Big: Political Poetry from an American Perspective

Richard Jackson

English Department, Holt Hall, University of Tennessee at Chattanooga, USA  
svobodni@aol.com

*The paper examines the concept of political poetry from the perspective of an American Poet focusing on Slovene poetry, especially that of Srečko Kosovel, and with comparisons to American and other poets.*

Ključne besede: literature and politics / Slovene poetry / American poetry / political poetry / social engagement / Kosovel, Srečko / Bell, Marvin / Hass, Robert / comparative studies

Let me begin with a poem by the American poet, WS Merwin from his book, *Present Company*:

TO THE NEW YEAR

With what stillness at last  
you appear in the valley  
your first sunlight reaching down  
to touch the tips of a few  
high leaves that do not stir  
as though they had not noticed  
and did not know you at all  
then the voice of a dove calls  
from far away in itself  
to the hush of the morning  
so this is the sound of you  
here and now whether or not  
anyone hears it this is  
where we have come with our age  
our knowledge such as it is  
and our hopes such as they are  
invisible before us  
untouched and still possible (129)

The poem was read at the large, televised service for the American Congressional Representative and other victims shot in an attack in Tucson

Arizona in January 2011. The fact that it was read at such a gathering, and the fact that so many people responded to it in letters to editors, on Facebook and on Twitter, venues far removed from the academy, suggests the power of political poetry today. And yet Merwin's poem is not overtly political; like many American poets, the approach to political situations is through metaphor and symbol in a very indirect way, conveying its effect through the syntactic and prosodic rhythms through which its images and statements operate. What a poet means is far less the referent idea behind the text and far more the way, the manner. That the poem seems personal, addressed to a "you," stems from the fact that American poetry owes so much to Whitman whose "I" and "you" are not solipsistic or confessional, but rather offer a universal perspective in which the text operates.

Poems are rhythmic explorations, and their power is conveyed by their rhythm. Robert Hass expresses this in his *Twentieth Century Pleasures*:

Because rhythm has direct access to the unconscious, because it can hypnotize us, enter our bodies and make us move, it is power. And power is political. That is why rhythm is always revolutionary ground. It is always the place where the organic rises to abolish the mechanical and where energy announces the abolition of tradition. New rhythms are new perceptions. (136)

Stanislaw Baranczak, the Polish-American poet also describes political poetry in terms of technique:

regardless of theme and specific address, poetry is always some kind of protest... That's why all the metaphors and rhythms—it's just a way of putting the world's chaotic gibberish in some meaningful order and restoring the original weight to abused words. That's why all the concreteness and conciseness—to resist the engulfing power of the world's empty abstractions and statistical generalities. That's why all the speaking in first person singular and seeing things from a strictly individual perspective—it's poetry's way of standing up to the world whenever it tries to elbow the individual aside and of the stage. (9)

Poetry is a "form of religious as well as political thought," writes Jay Parini in *Why Poetry Matters* (179); among other things, poetry "transforms our politics by enhancing our ability to make comparisons and draw distinctions" (181). This transformative faith in language originates in Dickinson and Emerson's belief that poetic language provides us with an originating experience of the universe.

That is, poetry is not simply an act of *witnessing*—and Giorgio Agamben<sup>1</sup> has shown us how impossible this can be—but an act of *transformation*. This is the case, too, for political poetry as well, which is to say that the ostensible content may very well seem minor, perhaps not even the result of direct experience, but with a good poet the implications of such con-

tent can be enormous. A poem is, to borrow from Longinus, a *transport*, a metaphor that takes us to another realm, another world, with different values, visions, rules, and which is why Plato was so afraid to have the poets in his *Republic*. This is precisely what poets like Joy Harjo making use of American Indian myths to transcend materialism, Michael Harper and Yusef Komunyaaka making use of jazz to get at ideas of freedom and oppression, Wendell Berry writing as it were through and out of the land to get at environmental issues do—they begin with the ordinary, the everyday, the seemingly nonpolitical, but move towards the metaphysical—a movement that is inherently political in its implicit critique of materialistic and global values. In the poems of these poets the language is transformative: the apparently sayable approaches the unsayable.

Wallace Stevens writes in his essay, “The Noble Rider and the Sound of Words,” all poetry is a struggle with the “pressure of reality,” those external forces of the world. For him, poetry is therefore “a violence from within that protects us from a violence from without” (665). This violence can be seen, as Terrence Des Pres points out in his *Praises and Dispraises: Poetry and Politics in the 20th Century*, in the way Stevens makes one metaphor tumble into another, extending and challenging the assumptions of each previous metaphor—a form of self questioning that I will come back to shortly. For Stevens, the poem is self-reflective, courageous enough to question and undercut its own self just as much as the world around it, to interrogate its opening assumptions, so that the poem becomes a process of thinking and feeling, rethinking and re-feeling.

Marvin Bell’s “I Didn’t Sleep” exemplifies this process, and at the same time seems to echo Kosovel’s “Ljubljana is Asleep” but from the opposite perspective—

I didn’t sleep in the light. I couldn’t sleep  
 In the dark. I didn’t sleep at night. I was awake  
 All day. I didn’t sleep in the leaves or between  
 The pages. I tried but couldn’t sleep  
 With my eyes open. I couldn’t sleep indoors  
 Or out under the stars. I couldn’t sleep where  
 There were flowers. Insects kept me up. Shadows  
 Shook me out of my doziness. I was trying hard.  
 It was horrible. I knew why I couldn’t sleep.  
 Knowing I couldn’t sleep made it harder to try.  
 I thought maybe I could sleep after the war  
 Or catch a nap after the next election. It was  
 A terrible time in America. Many of us found  
 Ourselves unable to sleep. The war went on.  
 The silence at home was deafening. So I

Tried to talk myself to sleep by memorizing  
The past, which had been full of sleepiness.  
It didn't work. All over the world people  
Were being put to sleep. In every time zone.  
I am busy not sleeping, obsessively one might say.  
I resolve to sleep again when I have the time. (4)

The sleep in his poem starts as simple sleep but becomes transformed into a sleep of reason (lack of insight), then the inability of sleep as a sign of conscience and guilt, and finally as a sign of a lack of historical and political awareness and consciousness of a whole society—and more: for being put to sleep” is a euphemism for killing, being gassed, executed, bombed into oblivion. Which is also the consequence of such ignorance, such lack of awareness. The *desire to sleep* becomes by the end the *need not to sleep*. The counterpoint between the personal and the political, here the act of sleeping and the knowledge of war, is typical of Bell and most American poets (Stevens' counterpoint of “within and without”). Because he also often writes in this mode, Kosovel seems to us very American. In “Ljubljana is Asleep” (123) Kosovel rails against the “red chaos” where all of “Europe has one foot in the grave” but counterpoints that with two statements in parentheses that refer to a lover:

In red chaos a new humanity  
is coming. Ljubljana is asleep.  
Europe's dying in a red light.  
All the phone lines have been cut.  
O, but this one is cordless.  
A blind horse.  
(Your eyes are as if from  
Italian paintings.)  
Out of the brown walls  
white towers rise.  
A deluge.  
Europe one foot in the grave.  
We arrive like a hurricane.  
With poison gasses.  
(Your lips are like berries.)  
Ljubljana is asleep.  
The conductor on the tram is asleep.  
In the Europa café  
they're reading *Slovenski narod*.  
Clicking of billiard balls. (13)

That last image is at once innocent and ominous for it echoes both the playfulness of the game and prefigures the sounds of gun and cannon.

It is counterpointed against the people in the café quietly and innocently detached as they read a journal, and the conductor who, like the country, has fallen asleep. The gasses certainly echo the horrific beginnings of gas attacks in World War I, and, added to the idea of deafness and blindness earlier in the poem, suggest a full cutting off of all the senses, an act which makes the “new humanity” incredibly and sadly ironic. This is the robotic age of the new, mindless citizen that Kosovel fears—Bell’s sleeping citizen. In addition, two parenthetical references suggest that the poet is speaking to a beloved: the form of the poem both refers to and undercuts the lyric love poem. Of course, the beloved is also the country as a whole, humanity as a whole, but the direct address makes the poem all the more poignant. This interruption also draws attention to the ideal that seems to have lost any possibility of coming into being. If Ljubljana and the country is the lover, a kind of pastoral vision in the midst of the chaos, the parentheses suggests a warning that can only be given privately, off stage so to speak, for fear, perhaps, of the “red light” (blood, bolshevism?) that threatens not only the state, but the individual. In other words, the poem gives us the experience of a naive bystander about to be annihilated by forces it doesn’t understand and a poet who feels powerless to convey the danger. There is an incredible power in this humility.

Bell’s poem “Coffee,” acts in many ways like Kosovel’s “Swan Poem”—

The house smells of coffee, and I want some.  
 It’s my coffee and I want it. I dreamt of coffee  
 And now I want it. I want the dream and the coffee  
 In the dream. It was my dream and my coffee.  
 Wait, no, it was *his* coffee in my dream. He wants  
 The coffee, and I want the coffee in my dream.  
 My god, it’s my coffee, isn’t it, and I want coffee,  
*That* coffee, and *that* dream. The dream of coffee  
 Is a wartime dream. The war is endless. I want  
 The war to end. I want to wake up and have it  
 Be over. I want my coffee and my dream back.  
 It’s his war and my coffee. Get out of my house,  
 Mr. president. You can get your own coffee. (67)

Because coffee is so common and basic—some of us would say essential—it shows to what extent the government—here George W Bush—tries to invade personal space and destroy what we have been calling personal autonomy. Again, the language transforms itself—here as the meaning of coffee gradually evolves. The poem becomes almost allegorical—with Kosovel, I would point to “Swan Poem”—

Soundlessly it arched its white  
neck over the water.  
To the water's thicket, tower and castle  
it closed an eye.

And in the middle of the lake,  
it couldn't sink. The order was cruel:  
to live, to suffer, to gaze at one's own  
shattered face.

At grief unending, unending,  
and as into the water's reflection,  
you gaze (living against the will)  
with grief in your heart. (119)

The swan becomes emblematic of any being under the directive of an "order." On the one hand it is a poem that alluded to a narcissism that seems to be the only escape from "tower and castle" from whence, it would seem, orders arise. In the original Slovene the rhymes gradually regularize (lines 1-3, 2-4 of stanzas 2 and 3) but the first stanza has only an off rhyme in lines two and four: the result is a sense of gradual surrender enacted in a sense of resistance to rhyme at the opening and a slipping into it as the poem progresses. There is a sense that this oral rhythm suggests, then, the "unending, unending" quality of the grief that the original gesture of arching its neck "over" the water is transformed by the "order" (of the rhymes, too) into a permanent drowning in the waters themselves. Allegorically, of course, the enactment in the poem can be linked to the fate of anyone or anything under the rule of an order of any type.

What is crucial about these examples is their sense of self: the persona of the writer does not take the perspective of some sort of omniscient observer, but rather one who struggles to discover relationships and implications. Perhaps, for an American poet, the greatest difficulty in writing political poetry is an arrogance that leads to self righteous pronouncements. The poem itself must question its own procedures—perhaps by shifting stylistic gears, asking questions, suggesting alternatives, changing tone or course in the middle, keeping an ironic tone, understating or overstating for effect. For the poet, the danger is still always that political and social poetry will become mere propaganda and sophistic, simplified persuasion;—playing to easy responses and catering to the 'correct' side. It is always a question of language first: even the most political of poems, if they are strong, are language driven rather than theme driven. This is a crucial notion more understood by poets than critics and teachers—language per se, even the playful attitude towards language that is at the heart

of any good poem, is always a political instrument. As Jacques Derrida says: “‘everyday language’ is not innocent or neutral. It is the language of western metaphysics, and it carries with it not only a considerable number of presuppositions of all types, but also presuppositions inseparable from metaphysics, which, although little attended to, are knotted into a system” (117). But this play of language is precisely what creates a world that provides alternatives to the official worlds of various political powers.

This sort of self questioning requires a certain attention to the poet’s own humble ignorance if he or she is to be listened to. The danger for the poet is that in trying to describe a problem he or she puts him or herself above the problem, sees the poet’s role as separate from the problem. This is the theme of Nobel Prize winning poet Wislawa Szymborska’s “Cassandra” in a poem translated by the American translator, Claire Cavanaugh:

It’s me, Cassandra.  
And this is my city covered with ashes.  
And this is my rod, and the ribbons of a prophet.  
And this is my head full of doubts.

It’s true, I won.  
What I said would happen  
hit the sky with a fiery glow.  
Only prophets  
whom no one believes  
witness such things,  
only those who do their job badly.  
And everything happens so quickly,  
as if they had no spoken.

Now I remember clearly  
how people, seeing me, broke off mid-sentence.  
Their laughter stopped.  
They moved away from each other.  
Children ran towards their mothers.  
I didn’t even know their vague names.  
And that song about a green leaf—  
nobody ever finished singing it in front of me.

I loved them.  
But I loved them from a height.  
from above life.  
from the future.  
Where it’s always empty  
and where it’s easy to see death.

I am sorry my voice was harsh.  
Look at yourselves from a distance, I cried,  
look at yourselves from a distance of stars.  
They heard and lowered their eyes.

They just lived.  
Not very brave.  
Doomed.  
In departing bodies, from the moment of birth.  
But they had this watery hope,  
a blame feeding on its own glittering.  
They knew what a moment was.  
How I wish for one moment, any,  
before—  
I was proved right.  
So what. Nothing comes of it.  
And this is my robe scorched by flames.  
And these are the odds and ends of a prophet.  
And this is my distorted face.  
The face that did not know its own beauty. (107-8)

There are three frames—if we can borrow from Derrida’s understanding of the dynamics of poetry in “Living On”—

- 1) The simple surface narrative of Cassandra’s story.
- 2) The way the poem reflects Szymborska’s relationship to the communist government and the role of the poet.
- 3) The radical self questioning—her gradual understanding through four stages of the failure of a poet who puts herself in the role of a lecturer and ends only with a “distorted face.”

The crucial thing here is for the poet not to place him or herself above the situation of the world: we are all complicit directly or indirectly, we are all guilty by omission, inaction, delay, verbal deferral or imprecision, or merely by the same sort of arrogance and self righteousness that Cassandra cannot avoid: we are all part of the problem. Basic to these poets are two principles: 1) that the poet’s knowledge is limited, and so the vision itself is humble; therefore the poet does not place him or herself above the situation described, that is, there is a sense that the poet participates in the general guilt of humanity; 2) a corollary, really, that the poet does not, from an exalted position, feel lucky to have this situation to write about.

So, how should poetry act?—what should it do? What CAN it do? When the late Palestinian poet, Darwish, was asked about the poet’s role, he answered:



It is not possible for poetry to affect change, but it is perhaps possible to change consciousness. Poetry might transform the reader's relation to his surroundings. The aesthetic experience is an individual experience and it develops into the possibility of saving the world from ugliness....Its role is to resist that which is an obstacle to the reader's humanity, to his being. Its role is to deepen the idea of beauty in human beings. The idea of beauty leads to the idea of peace, peace between the individual and himself, between the individual and his being, between the individual and nature. (322)

That link with nature creates, for Darwish an antidote to the materialistic, greedy, consumerist society that the world has largely become in a Globalized economy, and which leads to a perspective that values larger, more permanent things: soul, brotherhood and sisterhood, respect for the natural world, for fellow human beings. The poet does this by transforming the language of materialism to one of a kind of secular spiritualism.

I think of Italo Calvino who writes that poetry and fiction have "the ability to impose patterns of language, of vision, of imagination, of mental effort, of the correlation of facts, and in short the creation (and by creation I mean selection and organization) of a model of values that is at the same time aesthetic and ethical, essential to any plan of action especially in political life" (41). This doesn't mean a poetry of statement, but literally, as I have been arguing, a poetry that enacts a transformation within the text of the poem. Or take Adam Zagajewski who says in an essay on Polish literature: "The aesthetic value of an apt description becomes in some imperceptible way an ethical value as well; a fragment of the world perceived anesthetically through literature mysteriously changes its nature; it becomes a small part of the world of value and culture" (38). In his poem, "Five Men," Herbert describes a simple event—the five are shot in front of a wall "in the garish light / of obviousness." Is that the end, though, Herbert seems to ask? Should he write about the horror of the fact in a more direct way? For him, that would involve a polemic that would reduce his thinking to that of the state language. Instead, he asks:

what did the five talk of  
 the night before the execution

of prophetic dreams  
 of an escape in a brothel  
 of automobile parts  
 of a sea voyage  
 of how when he had spades  
 he ought not to have opened  
 of how vodka is best  
 after wine you get a headache

of girls  
of fruit  
of life  
thus one can use in poetry  
names of Greek shepherds  
one can attempt to catch the colour of morning sky  
write of love  
and also  
once again  
in dead earnest  
offer to the betrayed world  
a rose (107-8)

What the poet discovers through his self questioning is something the state and various political systems would have preferred to remain buried with the five men, the five senses also—our doors to consciousness,—that the individual transcends the state, that self questioning leads to questioning of the state. We could find other examples but let's turn now to Slovene poetry.

The Slovene poet, Dane Zajc, describes our fight against what he calls the stalkers of the world, these are not just the communist, fascist or other totalitarian political forces, but even the everyday forces we hardly think of in a free society—big business, inhuman beauraucracy, nationalism—perhaps today the unscrupulous people who have created a world financial crisis—so many of the isms that infect our lives. Stalkers, Zajc says, “wish to show us that our objects are not actually ours, our living space is not really ours.” They want to steal our identity (our autonomy). In the end, whatever their origin, they are political forces that attack the very basis of culture, language. He writes in a 1992 speech:

They keep inventing new words, thus alienating their speech from the language of their native land. The stalkers use their language to create a land of their own, their own exclusive domain accessible only to the initiated. Those who do not know how to use their language (it is not actually a language, but a curious hodgepodge of words, floating on the surface and obstructing the view of the depths) stand out in the crowd like a sore thumb.<sup>2</sup>

This is why, for instance, Czesław Miłosz, writes:

whoever wields power is also able to control language and not only with the prohibitions of censorship but also by changing the meaning of words. A peculiar phenomenon makes its appearance: the language of a captive community acquires certain durable habits; whole zones of reality cease to exist simply because they have no name...Only if we assume that a poet constantly strives to

liberate himself from borrowed styles in search of reality is he dangerous (*Captive Mind* 27).

The answer to the stalkers is, as I described it above, a poetry of transformation. The poem is a unique form of discourse, at its best subverting the accepted view of things, always proposing new and unique perceptions and visions, based on desires, hopes. A poem, as Jacques Derrida has said, deconstructs the generally accepted reality, and this is politically dangerous.

In a statement from an interview that reflects that of Robert Hass quoted earlier, Zajc says: “When a poet loses his rhythm, he loses his ethical principle,”<sup>3</sup> he says near the end of that interview. Rhythm is an orderly way of perceiving, a way to hold the world together.

It is by trying to absorb this confusion in the form of honest self-questioning that the more overt political poem achieves an ethical stance. In concluding, I am reminded of the lines by Edvard Kocbek, the Slovene poet, in his poem, “In The Torched Village”:

I lean against the wall,  
it is still hot  
from the long fire,  
there's no one around,  
the fiend has fled,  
the ground sinks away,  
the universe falls apart,  
the stars are dying.

All at once comes drifting in  
the scent of violets,  
I begin to listen to  
gentle voices,  
the grass rises  
awaiting new footsteps,  
ash embraces ash  
for a new hardness.

The brook splashes  
into the stone trough,  
the cat is coming back  
to the charred doorstep,  
I grow and I grow,  
I am becoming a colossus,--  
already I can see  
over terror's shoulder. (65)

The movement here enacts a reversal of positions and perspectives that is essential. The defeated man leaning against the charred wall at the beginning of the poem, dwarfed by the “universe” that is falling apart, and the dying “stars” becomes, by the end of the poem, the colossus for who these tragedies of war, personified by “terror,” are themselves dwarfed by the poet’s encompassing vision. It is a vision, as the middle of the poem asserts, that comes not from huge political statements or poems, but tiny observations, the loving perspective of “gentle voices.” Perhaps the turn-about comes most subtly in the sense that “ash embraces ash,” the very images of desolation from earlier in the poem made here to enact a new beginning. It is a good example of this transformation of language I have been describing. If, as Milosz argues, “Language is the fabric from which garments of all philosophies and ideologies are cut,” what this poem does, what the poet universally can do, is suggest ways to transform our language of death into a language of life. Freedom of imagination and the imagination of any freedom, then, become the same thing. In fact, it would be better to talk not so much of imagination, a static noun, but of imagining, of a verb, a process, a hope for a future without which we will be enslaved by our own human limitations, and then by the limitations of the state.

This brings us again to the poetry of Kosovel. The transformative characteristic of his use of the language of science, economics and math is clearly seen in any number of poems. For Kosovel, as for any good political poet, the personal and unique—here of a quirky use of technical language—is always a lens through which to see larger issues. “An elephant treads through my heart” he writes in “CONS XY.” The image of the hearts which itself gives way to images of flowers, is counterpointed against references to prices and length of time:

An elephant treads through my heart.  
Kludsky Circus – entry 5 dinars.  
Don’t cry anguish from the rooftops...  
She smiles: ka-ching, ka-ching.

Human hearts are small and cages are big.  
I want to walk through people’s hearts.  
Are you of this or that clique?  
A thousand dinars or 7 days in jail.

The flowers in my heart never cry.  
Who wants to be young and dejected.  
What if a gendarme comes through the door.  
It’s a war tribunal – you’ll go to jail.

Flowers, stay through these heavy days.  
 Your eyes, officer, glint like a bayonet,  
 dumb and mean. (Flowers, don't look!)  
 Gandhi was locked up for six long years. (137)

I mentioned earlier that all good poetry, including political poetry, is a means of transport, and that one becomes transported through various transformations. Here the movement from heart to flowers parallels that of the circus to the police and war so that the oppression is at once satirized and feared. The heart image itself suggests the movement for the individual to the larger society. The 7 days punishment is counterpointed by Gandhi's imprisonment in order to suggest how long resistance will take place—there is no quick solution. Behind it all is the mention of money, what drives the oppression, what drives so many wars. Even the cry in line 3 become echoes in the glint in the eyes of the officer, but transformed from anguish to threat (“glint like a bayonet”). The poem is one of Kosovel's most intricate in terms of its echoes and metamorphic movements: that Ovidian strategy itself allows the poem to act like a three ring circus, constantly shifting its point of attack, allowing an ever expanding critique of what is happening in the world around the poet.

A related strategy is his use of what seem like non-sequiturs but are in reality threads that finally connect and transform themselves into a vision. CONS XY is itself a good example of this technique in the way it connects images such as the cry and the bayonet. Here is “Eh, Hey”—

Eh, hey: it's raining on the gray houses of Ljubljana,  
 shrouding them in a gray curtain against the sun.  
 In Trieste they are burning down our Edinost.  
 Christ has come into the league of Nations.  
 No, not the good, beautiful Christ  
 glowing in a halo of love.  
 A pseudochrist is in Geneva.  
 What, is it raining in Geneva, too?  
 Christ has come with the brown rebels  
 and stands there on the gray street  
 chasing away the scribes and Pharisees.  
 He shoots and kills.  
 He shoots and kills.  
 O, you sheepish, white nation—  
 Now you can see what you really are? (59)

Of course one can trace the images here: the rain in Ljubljana and Geneva, the recurring Christ images and so the attendant scribes and Pharisees, the halo, the images of color, the sun near the beginning that is

reflected later in the idea of what can be seen. But what is crucial here is the rhythm of the occurrences, that is, the way, for example, Christ gets introduced seemingly out of nowhere, or the question about rain that comes unexpectedly, and the movement from Ljubljana to Trieste to Geneva, back to Slovenia. This kind of strategy, again, allows for a larger range of references: the poet can introduce this figure of a Christ, really an anti traditional Christ, or at least a Christ more violent than the one who chases money changers out of the temple, then gradually justify it while introducing other unexpected images. This quick shifting allows him to redefine references by association, so that, for instance, the scribes and Pharisees are certainly the treaty writers and politicians that threaten the country.

Another transformative technique is the use of a comic language, an anecdote, that on reflection, becomes serious. "Herrings," for example, simply describes the stink of those fish after they arrive in Ljubljana. On the other hand we recognize a parallel reference when, after inquiring about their political convictions the poem suggests the rotten state of Slovene politics:

A barrel of herrings  
arrived in Ljubljana.  
They were asked  
about their political conviction.  
They said  
they were from Iceland.  
A modern poet  
warns of ruin.  
The herrings were kept in the barrel all week,  
they began to stink. (115)

The role of the poet here seems like that of Szymborska's *Cassandra*: the warnings will go unheeded, at least until the stench of political corruption becomes too great. Why Iceland, one might ask. Iceland is the most detached, an island in the North Atlantic, and perhaps he is playing off the idea of its coldness, and the fact that the herring themselves are packed in ice, already, of course, dead. That the herring are kept in a barrel suggests how the politicians they represent try to hide: unfortunately, sealed in a barrel, they may not be discovered, their stink might not be apparent, until too late, until the barrels are opened. The background image here is one of time, the gradual stench: this is another crucial element in Kosovel's vision for he doesn't expect some sudden upheaval, but a more dangerously slow, almost imperceptible movement.

Kosovel's also obviously subverts establishment with his use eccentric typography in what would later be called "Concrete Poetry" in our own

age where lines might be written sideways, in various type faces and sizes, and with expressive word placements to create, in many cases, a kind of visual montage that echoes contemporary painting as much as poetry. But importantly for me is the transformative power of the words even behind that typography and graphic playing with language is the very transformative power of language itself. This concept of language is expressed in “Who Cannot Speak,” for example,

Who cannot speak  
has no need to learn.

You look for a new word—  
today it’s unclear  
which word it is.

You must wade  
through a sea of words  
to arrive in yourself.  
Then alone, forgetting all speech,  
return to the world.

Speak as solitude speaks  
with unutterable mystery. (67)

He begins by mentioning the need for speech, but realizes quickly that the speech he needs means finding a “new word” which is as yet “unclear” because it is part of the language of the power system. So he must wade through a “sea of words”—and what he arrives at is himself—but a self that has forgotten all speech of the current power structure. When that happens he can return to the world. But he has returned to the world with the “ineffable” language, the “unutterable mystery” that must be spoken, but can only be spoken by—or rather THROUGH—poetry. The poet ends speaking “as solitude speaks”—but not like the isolation of Cassandra, but rather the solitude of a new language that stirs the imagination, the reader, to create not a new world, but new worlds, worlds constantly being transformed. We can see this even in the changing notions of the words for speech and words that mean different things and different points in the poem. Like the way Marvin Bell described sleep and coffee, language for Kosovel is in constant motion, constant transformation.

In the introduction to *Look Back, Look Ahead*, I have called this method Kosovel’s *Poetics of Interruption*, one that doesn’t allow us the comfort of a single point of view. The poet’s role, finally, is to create a language that is beyond mere words, and cannot be described with them. It is a language,

a rhythm of thinking, that counters the static and official language of the state, of any oppressive power. He speaks to the American poet of today in his language and rhythmic consciousness, along with his sense of the priority of the self in visioning political issues, in a way that is crucial and encompassing, a way that makes him a kind of brother in arms against nearly overwhelming forces.

#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> See his discussion throughout *Remnants of Auschwitz: The Witness and The Archive*.

<sup>2</sup> Dane Zajc, in xeroxed *Proceedings form P.E.N. International Meeting*, Lake Bled, Slovenia, 1992.

<sup>3</sup> *Poetry Miscellany* 20 (1990): 17.

#### BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Agamben, Giorgio. *Remnants of Auschwitz: The Witness and The Archive*. Tr. Daniel Heller-Roazen. New York: Zone Books, 2002.
- Barancak, Stanislaw. "Introduction." *Polish Poetry of the Last Two Decades*. Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1991. 1-17.
- Bell, Marvin. *Mars Being Red*. Port Townsend: Copper Canyon Press, 2008.
- Calvino, Italo. *Six Memos For the Next Millennium*. Ed. Esther Calvino. New York: Vintage Books, 1993.
- Darwish, Mahmoud. *Exile's Poet*. Ed. Khamis & Rahman. Northhampton, MA: Olive Branch Press, 2008.
- Derrida, Jacques. *Writing and Difference*. London: Routledge, 2001.
- Hass, Robert. "Listening and Making." *Twentieth Century Pleasures*. New York: Ecco, 2000.
- Herbert, Zbigniew. *Collected Poems*. New York: Harper, 2007.
- Kocbek, Edvard. *At The Door of Evening*. Tr. Tom Ložar. Ljubljana: Aleph, 1990.
- Kosovel, Srečko. *Look Back, Look Ahead*. Tr. Barbara Siegel Carlson and Ana Jelnicar. Brooklyn: Ugly Duckling Press, 2010.
- Merwin, W.S. *Present Company*. Port Townsend: Copper Canyon Press, 2005.
- Milosz, Czeslaw. *The Captive Mind*. New York: Vintage, 1997.
- Parini, Jay. *Why Poetry Matters*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2008.
- Stevens, Wallace. *Collected Poems and Prose*. New York: Library of America, 1997. 665.
- Szyborska, Wislawa. *Poems New and Selected*. Tr. Claire Cavanaugh, New York: Harcourt, 1998.
- Zagajewski, Adam. *In Defense of Ardor*. Tr. Claire Cavanaugh. New York: Farrar, Strauss, 2004.
- Zajc, Dane. xeroxed *Proceedings form P.E.N. International Meeting*, Lake Bled, Slovenia, 1992.



## Srca ljudi so majhna in ječe velike: politična poezija z ameriškega vidika

Ključne besede: literatura in politika / slovenska poezija / ameriška poezija / politično pesništvo / družbeni angažma / Kosovel, Srečko / Bell, Marvin / Hass, Robert / primerjalne študije

Gledano z ameriškega vidika, so vse dobre pesmi ritmične raziskave, dejanja domišljjskih odkritij in izključujejo idejo o preprosti propagandi z nekakšnim jasnim namenom. To velja tudi za politično stališče: politične pesmi niso poročila o pričevanjih, ampak dejanja transformacije.

V Derridajevem smislu dekonstruirajo jezik prevladujočih oblastnih struktur. Pesnik ali pesnica skozi jezik preoblikuje svojo vizijo v vedno širši krog asociacij in zato tudi zavzetosti. Ameriško ukvarjanje s tehniko in osebnim je torej v resnici način, ki razkriva, kako estetika nekoga določa njegovo/njeno etiko. Poudarjanje jezika namesto očitnega referenta je posebej pomembno za pesnika, kot je Kosovel, saj so njegovi jezikovni eksperimenti porodili politične ideje in ne obratno.

Marec 2011