

THE PROSE AND POETRY OF EDVARD KOCBEK (1904-1981)

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Among the most intriguing figures in the literature of the Slovene people between the 1920s and the 1970s is Edvard Kocbek, poet, story-teller, philosopher and thinker, essayist and politician. His intense thoughtfulness, in which images of human relations were shaped into expressive poetic metaphors exalting man's essence and ethical mission, and through which above all he illuminated the truth of his ever-changing, ever-exposed being; the discord he felt between poetics and politics, which he entered of his own ideological, ethical and especially cultural volition, wishing to be not only a spokesman and an artist-creator, but also a spiritual leader in a new era and a new art; the influence he exercised as a figure who, uniquely individualistic and self-confident in all his interactions with his fellow-thinkers and companions, epitomized a specific spiritual and cultural circle, where excitement was never lacking, and both enthusiasm for and dissension concerning his work abounded—for all these reasons Edvard Kocbek was revered and abused by the individuals who have comprised Slovene culture for over half a century.

Kocbek was above all a poet. He began to shape his fundamental poetic point of departure in the spiritually-oriented Catholic expressionism of the 1920s, but shortly thereafter found his characteristic expression in a poetry of the earth and man's direct contact with it. He was deeply rooted in the rhythm of nature and the ethics of man's elementary activity in it. This was expressed in his first collection of poetry, *Zemlja* (1934), in clear, simple and unadorned poetic metaphors celebrating the beauty of natural harmony, the divinity of the earth and the beauty of man's movement on it. Moreover, Kocbek's earth in the Slovene literature of the 1930s represented a basic theme of creativity as much in poetry as in the narrative, yet his earth (in comparison with the socially-oriented texts of the majority of authors of the time) implied a deeper, more ominous, yet intimately colored, almost mystical image of earthly reality. Message above form, and clarity of metaphor over its exceptionality, were given great priority by Kocbek.

Kocbek's writings developed from German expressionist poetry and the atmosphere of French Christian existentialism, especially as found in Emmanuel Mounier, whose model he followed late into the 1950s. Both in his philosophical statements and in his narrative prose he expounded the ideas of personalism. He first aroused the literary public with his essay 'Premišljevanje o Španiji' (*Dom in svet*, 1937), which caused a controversy in the literary review *Dom in svet*. At the same time he drew attention to his own literary review, *Dejanje* (1938-41), in which he developed his philosophical ideas about human existence, history, the nation and its culture. Because he joined the Liberation Front at the beginning of the war, which as a resistance organization united groups with differing ideological views, he experienced the Partisan Movement in a special way. His early commitment to the Resistance was not nearly as significant for his poetic biography as it was for the prose of his diaries. His experiences during the war would later give rise to one of the most interesting eye-witness accounts in post-war Slovene literature, *Tovarišija* (1949).

Kocbek's poetic development at this time found its expression in the form of diary accounts, in which his experiences in the war were juxtaposed to others' accounts of actual events, conversations, and political points of view. There is no doubt that these diary notes reveal an influential artistic power, operating in conditions of poetic inspiration. Kocbek, aware of the fateful significance of these war-time events and with a feeling of prophetic power rooted in the currents of nature and in his own sensitive intimacy with it, gave

expression to the war in a rhythmical, melodic, hymn-like, pathetic allegory of the Slovene past. *Tovarišija*, with its duality of documentary prose and intimate diary, and as the first literary diary after the war, served for the most part as a model for the diary genre with Partisan themes.

Kocbek's later diary composition, the more extensive *Listina* (1967), with the chapter *Slovensko poslanstvo* (excerpt 1964), contains the same basic structure in the narrative, but with less developed poetic expressiveness than was found in the first diary. At the nucleus of the later diary is Kocbek's historical and national idea, which we may illustrate with the following reflection on the Slovene nation:

“Res je, če Slovenci nismo le Trubarjev protestantski misijon ali zgolj Prešernov kulturni domislek, če nismo samo baročna katoliška provinca ali prehodna razvojna stopnja do balkanskega imperija ali alpske federacije, temveč smo naravni in zgodovinski organizem, resnična in izvorna narodna prvina, pravi narod s svojim angelom varuhom in demonom skušnjavcem, potem si moramo svojo narodno prihodnost in človeškost do kraja utemeljiti in tvorno izraziti, ne glede na zvezo narodov, v kateri bomo živeli, ne glede na gospodarski prostor, ki bomo morali v njem enakopravno sodelovati, in ne glede na družbo, v kateri se bomo počlovečili, kajti narodne človečnosti ne more nadomestiti niti univerzalni duh religije niti je ne more odpraviti socializacija produkcijskih sredstev.” (*Listina* 184)

In *Listina* the author developed his idea about the nation and its future. With a truly poetic vision he attempted to establish the future direction of Slovenia, by examining the essence of the nation and the characteristics of its history. With perseverance and great verbal suggestiveness he constructed the diaries to illustrate his desire for a national self-consciousness based on his knowledge of life's laws and his unconquerable faith. Kocbek, in his “manual switchboard of the spirit” (as Rebula termed it in his analysis of *Listina*¹), experienced history in a poetic way. In much the same way did he view this experience as a theme for his short stories, which were published in the collection *Strah in pogum* (1951).

This collection of four short stories arose at a time when apologetic literature was prominent. This literature praised the victory of the Partisan movement and socialism by casting the complexities of war-time ideological themes into romantic, black-or-white tales. In the discursive, novelistic action of his short stories, Kocbek presented the subject in his own way; his moral and philosophical idea is incorporated into the narrative about the fate of the Slovene man, soldier, intellectual, clergyman, suspended between fear and courage, guilt and repentance, duty and humanity—stretched, as it were, between history and the intimate. This classic dilemma found a welcome place in Kocbek's novellas.

A master of intellectual dialogue, in which he analyzed the development of human conscience and consciousness and the spiritual and physical conflict brought about by the demands of the historical period, in the fundamental concept and individual points of his short stories he came down squarely for the personally responsible, active man, who does battle to achieve self-realization and consequently a basic notion of life (in the short story “Temna stran meseca”).

Narratively speaking, in the most successful and the most interesting short story, “Blažena krivda,” whose theme is the liquidation of a suspected traitor, he entrusted the choice of narrative development to the event itself, which is brought about by the caution of conscience and faith in the justness of man's nature. The traitor denies the betrayal into

which he has been forced by the German soldiers' threats to his pregnant wife. The trek through the forest by the suspect and the liquidator leads, through a test of interpersonal relations, to the discovery of guilt and an analysis of the fact that man does not have the right to intervene in the life of his fellow man. An incidental shooting separates the two, and from a distance the liquidator shoots at the suspect. He falls. The liquidator runs through the forest to escape into his own reality, and, feeling guilty, taunts a snake which crosses the road to bite him. The biblical metaphor also breaks up the event: the poisoned liquidator runs further, and comes to an isolated house where he meets his 'executed' victim, who similarly has run there for help. Here the two victims of war-time hatred find their human image, their humanity, and their forgiveness, which bring them together after a revealing and truthful confession.

It is indeed an idealization, to such a degree that as a result the whole story comes to resemble a fairy tale about goodness and humanity, an ideal which in reality, perhaps, cannot be attained. In the literary context, however, the theme of man's ethical awakening relates to catharsis, one which a contemporary work of art might also contain within itself. In the demand for simple realism, which could only reflect representational actuality, Kocbek's narrative point of view was, in Slovene literature in 1951, a prominent peculiarity.

Similarly, in the short story "Ogenj," with its action and with its very dynamic and scenic narrative, containing far fewer philosophically-meaningful dialogues, he depicts the confrontation between two priests. The first comprehends his vocation in terms of human activity and helping his fellow man. The second is totally given over to the idea of the militant church and, in the service of this ideology, will not recognize digression or compromise. The central action develops in a church building in which two indigenous factions are battling each other as well as the Italian soldiers who are occupying the country. Senseless violence murders humanity itself, and with it also trust in God; the point perhaps being an awareness of the new man, cleansed in blood.

The last short story, "Črna orhideja," has always been an enigmatic text for Kocbek's critics, both upon its publication and in later interpretations of his works. Here again he develops the theme of execution with a deeper symbolic significance, in which he also includes the point of the cathartic importance of the biblical sacrificial offering. Here is pretty Katarina, the traitress who is loved equally by the executioner and the whole partisan squad. Just in the nick of time they catch the girl, while they are awaiting a terrible battle. Her beauty and love overwhelm them all and thus, according to Kocbek's narration, her death illuminates and endows with new power the warring soldiers. Their battle, following the sacrificial offering of the beautiful girl, is set afire and is full of a mystical faith in eventual victory. Katarina dies in the white clothes of a new bride, as she herself desires, since in her death she is joined with her loved one. In a fable-like way, filled with erotic rapture, the story—with its picturesque symbolic motifs and its unreal, extraordinary environment—can no longer be called philosophical prose, as we might otherwise term Kocbek's novellas; rather, it is a romantic fairy-tale about conceptuality and the meaning of sacrifice, a tale which most frequently escapes rational explanation. Therefore we can not accept these white-cloaked visions in a simple-minded way, just as one could not accept them in Burger's "Lenore" at the time of its appearance, and as we today nevertheless relate unreal fables to ourselves and are astonished by their beauty.

Kocbek's short stories elicited twofold criticism. The first resulted from the surprising contests in them, contests which spoke of a new relationship in the interpersonal conflict between the two ideologies in the War of Liberation and in war in general. The second

revealed a new attitude towards the ethics of war in Kocbek's philosophical point of view, which was of course the result of the philosophy of personalism, that individual involvement and realization and personal moral responsibility on which humanity is based. Literary criticism found controversial importance in the overdone philosophical language with which the main figures spoke, and in the way a story turned into a philosophical dispute. The fundamental point of view is thus in the apparently intrusive, lively matter of experience, which it forms and directs ahead into a determined point, the message which "teaches." A more potent opposition to Kocbek came from a political perspective; at the time this was most likely not due to the literary value of *Strah in pogum*; he had to remove himself from political activity at the highest level and move into silence, which also affected his literary activity. For a long time he did not publish in literary reviews (except in the Catholic *Nova pot*, where his essays and travelogues appeared.) Under political threat, Kocbek's works acquired a different meaning and a different place in literary judgment. Since at the time he always kept his philosophical views based on Christian Personalism, especially the exceptional personality of his creative generation, his personal and literary life after that became more intensely complex, spiritually and intellectually more demanding.

He grew in opposition and in popularity, sometimes in the image of the suffering and the persecuted, yet as a persevering and creatively strong poet who in his own specific situation gains spiritual power as he artistically deepens and more clearly crystallizes his poetry in a critically-engaged picture of his time.

Perhaps it is really due to the particular role it has played in history that his poetry has also become philosophically sharper, concentrating on the poetic message of man in historical time. His poetic-intimate world, vulnerable, pushed into the special state of the loner, excluded from the actual everyday political mainstream, becomes more open, unveiling in his poetry pain and guilt, misunderstanding and at the same time spiritual superiority, a conquering combativeness and an enraptured faith in the communicative power of the poetic word. Kocbek's impressionable personality was powerfully concentrated in the poetic word, which in its later development became clearer and clearer, more penetrating in form, and more simplified, because he brought into the philosophical center of his poem all his poetic energy.

Kocbek's poetry during his last creative period is exceptionally intellectual, reflective, and expressive of an intense yearning for the truth about contemporary man. With the collection *Groza* (1963) he created his best post-war poetry. In his second collection, *Poročilo* (1969), his poetry failed to develop new qualities; rather, he seemed to come to a halt in his creative evolution. In the 1970s his collected and reprinted readers were published, four books of essays, recollections and diaries: *Svoboda in nujnost*, 1974; *Krogi navznoter*, 1977; *Pred viharjem*, 1980; *Sodobni misleci*, 1981.

The essence of Kocbek's poetry is not simply a matter of the poet's fate and his personal pain, but rather above all the question of Slovene national identity, Slovene history and the nation's fate in the past, present and future. Kocbek is, in his poetry as well as in his prose, a bard of the Slovene language, as he opens himself up, together with his language, to the entire world, to everyone who feels in it an acknowledgement of his nation's existence, its past and its fundamental value, humanity:²

Obrnil sem se v gneči
in zavpil: ne bom izstopil,
nikoli ne bom izstopil,

nihče ne bo izstopil,
peljali se bomo dalje,
peljali se bomo v zamorje,
da potolažimo Lepo Vido.³

‘Zamorska’

Although in its later stages Kocbek’s poetry lost some of the playfulness of formal yearning, its metaphoric color and its melodic harmony, in its sharpness and philosophical clarity it still found compensation for poetic aesthetics. It overflows with a prophetic seriousness, with which it uncovers the essence of life’s fundamental questions—questions about the poet’s fate and man’s fate in general, about memory, death and birth, about the enduring and lasting legitimacy in which he sees the solution to his own fate and that of his nation. In poetic allegory the vision and the self-reliant power of the creator of poetic verse is uncovered, which in the Slovene past has always implied the epitome of Slovene independence.

The material world almost completely disappears from his later poetry. The earth, in the widest possible sense of the word, in Kocbek’s poetic beginnings represented the aesthetics of a new reality:⁴

Drevo, beseda in človek
trije samotarji
sredi ravnine.

Tišina in ptica
in uho čakajo:
kje je veter?

Strmijo drug v drugega,
od vekomaj povezani
s skrivnim spominom.

Vprašanje je ljubezen,
ljubezen je veter,
in veter je začetek.

Drevo je tišina,
beseda je ptica,
človek je uho.

Drevo je zašumelo,
ptica je zažvrgolela,
človek je zapel—

Drevo, beseda, človek,
trije prijatelji
od vekomaj.

‘Na polju’

All the more frequently he chooses the world of concepts as the nucleus which carries the poem. Nature, which remains throughout a treasury of the poet’s allegories, now in his newer poetic representations is shown in its fundamental and simple forms (a tree, a bird, wind, sun, sky, and man); these are interwoven with the conceptual world which the poet uses to shape his message (birth, the ability to forget, memory, death, fears, pain, torment, anxiety, terror, denial, infinity, eternity, despair, sin). Both planes of the poetic world unite the poet’s personality with his destiny in historical time and without this his poetry would be impossible to interpret correctly. Thus would Kocbek’s poetry, with its diminishing concreteness, attain wider dimensionality and especially speak out with an enigmatic polyvalence:⁵

Sem,
 Ker sem bil,
 in vsakdo
 me bo mogel pozabiti
 In vendar
 moram reči:
 sem
 in sem bil
 in bom,
 in zato sem več
 od pozabljenja,
 neizmerno več
 od zanikanja,
 neskončno več
 od ničā.

Vse je večno,
 Kar nastane,
 rojstvo je močnejše
 od smrti,
 vztrajnejše
 od obupa in samote,
 silnejše
 od hrupa in greha,
 slovesnejše
 od zavrženosti.
 Nikoli
 ne bom prenaahal biti.
 Nikoli.
 Amen.

‘Molitev’

Thus in his poetry, which was essentially directed towards a philosophical message, as well as in his narrative prose, whether this was in diary or essay form or, especially, in the form of a philosophical short story, Kocbek’s artistic power is above all to be found in the poetic quality of his style.

The most exciting narrative states are those which are contemplative, those in which the author shows his virtuosity and power to uncover the shades of the minute, hidden, quiet states in man’s internal being in contact with nature and himself, in the establishment and description of the organic association and overflowing of life into nature.

Kocbek makes note of the finest stirrings of the human spirit, creating with an acuteness demanded by a situation that excludes passivity; by an ideology; by external pressure; by historical necessity, which has (according to the poet’s principles) far fewer rights over the human sphere than life’s inexplicable drive in itself.

Many have been the discussions in recent times about Kocbek’s artistic output. These most frequently stop with his *Strah in pogum*, dwelling on the fate which befell the collection and its author. As, in particular, a politically exciting figure, he is perhaps better illuminated by his social activity than by his poetic and narrative creativity. Both are however tightly connected: the poet is a typical example in the Slovene literary past of the very significant role of the artistic word in the historical development of the nation. The book published to commemorate Kocbek’s seventieth birthday, therefore, is justifiably dedicated to the poet “who through this tempestuous century, with the ideas of the cosmopolitan and with the zest of the poet, deciphered the signs in the Slovene skies from Christ to Marx, and interpreted them in the glow of the word for the future of truth, rights, and freedom.”⁶ This poetic marking of Kocbek’s personality and his work, as well as his actual contribution to Slovene literature, assure his place among the combative, enduring and spiritually intensive poetic thinkers of Slovene literature this century.

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- * Translated by Michael Vezilich and Henry R. Cooper, Jr.
1. Alojz Rebula, *Edvard Kocbek: Pričevalec našega časa* (Trieste, 1975) 94.
 2. 'Zamorska', *Groza*, 1963; cited from *Edvard Kocbek. Zbrane pesmi I-II* (Ljubljana: Cankarjeva založba, 1977) I: 196.
 3. Lepa Vida is a character from Slovene folk poetry, most commonly employed in literature as a symbol of painful departure from home, of being a displaced person—a situation Slovenes have often experienced in their history.
 4. 'Na polju', *Groza*; cited from *Zbrane pesmi I*: 190.
 5. 'Molitev', *Groza*; cited from *Zbrane pesmi I*: 200.
 6. Rebula, *Edvard Kocbek*, 1.

POVZETEK

V informativnem članku o celotnem literarnem delu Edvarda Kocbeka (1904-81) avtorica obravnava pisateljeva temeljna miselna in estetska izhodišča, kot se pokažejo v razvoju njegovega umetniškega ustvarjanja. Na kratko označi pomen njegove spominske proze in novelistike za razvoj sodobne slovenske proze in predvsem značilnosti razvoja Kocbekove poezije, ki je centralna oblika njegove umetniške izpovedi in najavtentičnejši izraz ustvarjalčeve osebnosti, ki je bila v vsem svojem življenju in delovanju usodno vključena tako v politično kot v literarno dogajanje svojega časa.