

REGIONALISM VERSUS EUROPEANISM AS LEADING CONCEPTS IN THE WORKS OF SREČKO KOSOVEL

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“A moja pesem je Kras,
je Kras, je Kras”
Bianca, Pesmi v prozi¹

Introduction

A study of the works of Srečko Kosovel from the viewpoint of the contemporary question of regionalism in Europe, which will be a consequence of the growing integration in the European community, seems not very fruitful at the first glance. Such a debate — which is now in vogue in German and other European circles — has to be based on more appropriate and more up-to-the-minute facts than the lyric testimony of a Slovene poet after the First World War.

But it turns out that some arguments and points of view which Kosovel used in the middle of the twenties are valid even now, or have acquired a new significance in the last two or three years. Allow me to mention briefly some of these questions:

1. The relationship between major and minor states in Europe and in the world, and specifically the relationships between established small nations and not-yet-established or not-finally-recognized ethnic entities.

2. The role of Slovenia in the former Yugoslav state, in which a dominating Serbia restricted the equal participation of its minor partners.

3. The question of a future existence in a broader European community. Kosovel was an opponent of such a position, and in this he had no choice, given the context of expanding totalitarian nationalisms at that time.

4. The question of a future Europe will appear in a new light when the utopia of communism and socialism have been shown to be, in fact, a dystopia. Kosovel's visions of the future culture of humankind will acquire new dimensions under the auspices of the rule of law and modern democracy.

This article is the first outcome of my renewed intensive and sustained reading of Kosovel's texts. To penetrate to the author's concepts, i.e., to the leading principles and broader outlines, it is necessary to become knowledgeable primarily with respect to the written work, whether this be letters, diary-entries, or poetical products. I have been doing this intensive reading as part of a project for a concordance of the writings of Kosovel (at least, of those writings which have been published up to now). I hope that the results of this tentative sketch will be affirmed and made more precise, if this concordance is brought to fruition.

The texts I depend on vary, and it is important to classify them according to genre. Classified according to their contents of reality and

¹ Zbrano Delo [henceforward, ZD] II, 211.

aesthetic function, respectively, we have to distinguish the following *genera dicendi*:

- Letters from Kosovel to different correspondents. Here we find concepts and conceptional ideas which function as facts and are in certain sense biographical facts and mostly free of aesthetic function.

- Notes and textual fragments from Kosovel's diaries. These concern plans for new or unpublished writings, biographical data, and variants of existing texts. In some cases they are shorthand, outlines or summaries of existing works, and it is often possible to identify them as concepts in the sense of this paper. In the language of text-linguistics we can call them "condensates of texts", i.e., extremely reduced verbal abbreviations which are to be expanded and varied in the later process of text-generation.

- Literary criticism and essays about cultural problems, which are vastly enriched with conceptual material.

- Prose fiction, mostly in two genres, both typical for Kosovel and his poetical ancestor, Ivan Cankar, which Kosovel called either "Pesmi v prozi" (lyrical prose) or "Črtice" (sketches).

- Lyrical poems, i.e., "conventional" poems and poems in the tradition of the avant-garde (*Kons, Integrali*), i. e. his so-called constructivistic oeuvre.

The study of the textual corpus of Kosovel is handicapped because of the well-known editorial history. Anton Ocvirk, in particular, was responsible for the long delay in the publishing of his work, with the result that through the 1970s it was impossible to judge Kosovel's real significance for Slovene and European literature.² Some notes in Ocvirk's commentary on Kosovel's Collected Works suggest that a considerable portion of Kosovel's writings is still unpublished.

In spite of these editorial problems we can say that there are two global thematic complexes in the poetry of Kosovel:

- that of the Kras region (Karst);

- the concept of his political poems with their utopian and future-directed components, that which Kosovel calls the victory of the "constructive" over the "mechanic" principle.

Omitted here is the whole comparative approach, which is very fruitful in throwing light upon parallel European poetic currents, from the Czech Wolker to the Pole Broniewski, and the explicit interests of Kosovel for the Czech Silesian-minority poet Peter Bezruc. All these relations and coincidences are *terra incognita* for Slavic literary criticism.

² For more information about the scandalous editing history of Kosovel's works, see Alfonz Gspan in *Neznani Srečko Kosovel*, Ljubljana, 1974.

The historical role of Slovenia in Yugoslavia since the Twenties

We can isolate three phases:

1919-1941: Reorientation from the Austro-Hungarian to the Yugoslav paradigm.

Kosovel spoke on many occasions about the self-determination and emancipation of his people. It is at first sight astonishing to see him primarily in opposition to his own Slovene compatriots and the Yugoslav politicians, and hardly ever as a critic of the Italian occupiers of his own home territory, the Karst, and the Slovene coastal region.

The political situation for the Slovenes in the mid-twenties was actually desperate: a return to Austria was unreasonable and would indeed have been impossible (in spite of the fact that there are people today who regard this as being a real option). The state of the Serbs, Croats and Slovenes was for many people an unwanted construct, useful alone for the Serbs, and it was tending to become no less totalitarian than its German, Russian and other European equivalents.

1945-1980: The policy of balancing the ethnic and national conflicts in the Tito-era.

A limited, but nevertheless a certain, *modus vivendi* guaranteeing a solution of the Slovene national question was a consequence of the politics of compensation in the era of Tito, whereby the Slovenes reached the status of a republic in a relatively loosely-linked federation.

1980- : The orientation to Europe and the defence against the reimposition of Serbian hegemony.

It follows that serious efforts were made to loosen the ties without breaking them in an abrupt way, until the policy of Serbia towards the other peoples of Yugoslavia (for example, the Kosovo-crisis and later the abolition of the autonomous provinces and the boycott of Slovene trade) became evident.

It may therefore be interesting to look back to Kosovel's time in order to see which arguments he contributed to the discussion.

Regionalism vs. Europeanism in Kosovel's works

I am using these two concepts, Regionalism and Europeanism, as heuristic principles in such a way that they represent the specific world-view that informed Kosovel's writings, and so that we can conceive of them as a sort of model of the world that underlies them.

Kosovel returns repeatedly to the regional and European models of the world, incidentally, in all the textual genres that he has left to posterity. "Moje življenje je moje, *slovensko, sodobno, evropsko* in večno," he writes on Sept. 13, 1923 to Dragan Sanda,³ and the same sentence occurs in his

³ ZD III.1, 321 (emphasis by Kosovel).

first diary.⁴ He thus provides the spatial and temporal dimension for his thought.

Another entry in his diary especially emphasizes the spatial components of Kosovel's world:

Zapadna Evropa | Kraški pastir | Smrt Majke J. Konj Labod⁵

The region is Kosovel's central concept; he relates other spatial concepts (Europe, Yugoslavia) to this one. A significant portion of his poetry and prose has this regional concept as its theme. He thematizes the Karst and represents it as a region that, first, represents a certain perfection, that is, a sort of microcosm in which life is intact, and, second, has a future, and in which a humane future can be imagined.

These two possibilities are not present in his other spatial concepts. A future is possible in Europe, Yugoslavia and Slovenia (represented by Ljubljana) only by means of a humanization of these areas, if you will, of a future transformation in a "humanistic" revolution. The fact that Kosovel saw in the Communist-Socialist path a possibility for realizing his ideas is not surprising: at that time this was a common hope among Europe's intellectuals.

The concept of regionalism: Kras

Not only in his published works, but also in his plans and sketches, the ideal space "Karst" plays an important role. Thus he writes in his diary in 1925: "Kras. Kamnolomi | Povešt o Krasu, zemlji. Kraška priroda. Ljudje"⁶

In the same year he writes:

...Kako siv je Kras, kako mnogoličen, poln barv. Mlad realizem se mora roditi iz teh tal, napojen s sočno barvo hrastov in temnih borov, šumečih gora s tišino v duši in veseljem v srcu...⁷

Later these ideas become more concrete. The title is determinate: "Kraševci. Poveštice s Krasa," and in December 1925 this turns into a plan for a novel: "Kraševci. Roman iz dni potujčevanja obsodbe in uklanjanja. Subjektivni realizem."

At first his homeland, the Karst, as the hinterland of the Italian-Austrian-Slovene metropolis Trst/Trieste, is thought of by Kosovel as a bucolic landscape, which he experiences and describes as an idyll. Often he tells of tending goats:

⁴ ZD III.1, 597.

⁵ ZD III.1, 620. *Kraški pastir* is a cipher for Kosovel, for he writes very often of having tended goats during his vacations in Tomaj. *Smrt majke J[ugovica]* means the Serbian folksong from the Kosovo-cycle and *konj* and *labod* are poetical cyphers also.

⁶ ZD III.1, 701.

⁷ ZD III.1, 713.

Tudi idilo pastirskega življenja okušam, pašem vsak dan, škoda, da ni nikogar tu, lepo bi bilo; tako pa zamišljen strmim v nebo, ki je kot ogledalo morja, ali pa zvižgam, da prezvižgam vse, kar znam.⁸

But in his poetry as well he expresses similar things:

...mir, odrešenje, tišino, pokoj
bodo iz te pokrajine pile.

“Nedelja na vasi”⁹

To so najtišje pokrajine duše
v senci zelenih kostanjev,
v mirni kraški dolini.

“To so najtišje pokrajine”¹⁰

Occasionally, however, he contrasts this idyll to the rest of the world. In the poem “Majki”, which is to be found in his diary, he writes:

In še danes ko ljubi ves svet
jasno hladno mesečino
ljubim jaz ta plahi trepet
to tiho zaupno milino...¹¹

In a letter to Vlasta Sterletova (July 2, 1921) he describes his idyllic homeland in even more concrete terms:

Sploh se mi zdi, da pridobim več, če stopim na naš hrib in pregledam Kras, kakor če bi stal ne vem kje tam gori v brezizrazni Kranjski in zato ga imam rad in se tolikokrat vračam tudi od tam gor v mislih nanj.¹²

The Karst was for Kosovel not only the *locus amœnus*, the idyllic place, but it also included for him all of the connotations indicated by the words “domačnost” and “domačija” in Slovene or the word “Heimat” in German. It is also the place where the nostalgic retrospective is complemented by one’s biographical experience of self and which blends everything into a complex bundle of emotional and rational components.

Besides the word “Kras”, which as a signal and sort of “identifier” leads one into the thematic complex, Kosovel’s Karst-texts are informed by an inventory of words that is constantly varied but even so relatively limited.

⁸ Letter of July 27, 1921 to Nada Obereigner (ZD III.1, 327).

⁹ ZD I, 38.

¹⁰ ZD I, 320.

¹¹ ZD III.1, 644.

¹² ZD III.1, 291.

In fact, in his diaries, these words appear as syntactically unconnected series of concepts:

noč | burja | zvezde | vihar | skale | bori brinje | Kras | noč...¹³

skale ostre, trava, mah, gozd, mal hrib | Kamnolomi (beli) /
bori (crni)¹⁴

The pilgrim and the prodigal son are two incarnations of the lyrical self and they are personal symbols that point to the role of the distant observer who is familiar with the outer world of this idyll and who becomes aware of his growing alienation from it.

They furthermore point to the myth of *lepa Vida*, which for reasons of time I cannot treat in this paper, and which Kosovel always associates very closely with the concept of the region.¹⁵ He feels guilty for having distanced himself from his homeland (and from his mother):

In ko sem domov se vračal,
sem na cesti se razjokal,
tiho, da ni čulo polje,
tiho, da ni čula gmajna,
da drevo ni zaihtelo
sredi gmajne, tiho, samo.

“Spomnim se”¹⁶

In tam ob morjih
človek, ki je svoje srce prodal,
prazen in votel
po tej samotni ihti

“Noč”¹⁷

Kosovel's concept of region contains a component that is oriented toward the future, if you will: a utopian component. As a place of self-discovery it offers an alternative to life in the European metropolis, a refuge, an oasis:

...potem je upati, da vstane ta Kras, ta čudno nerodovitni Kras,
oaza sredi lažnjive civilizacije Evrope, tako rekoč zatočišče
romantikov.¹⁸

or, similarly, this chain of associations in the sixth diary:

¹³ ZD III.1, 636.

¹⁴ ZD III.1, 717.

¹⁵ See Taras Kermauner, “Vračanje mita v sodobni slovenski dramatiki.”

¹⁶ ZD I, 91.

¹⁷ ZD I, 65.

¹⁸ ZD III.1, 770.

O v mrtvašnici Evrope | ne duši lepo. | Nacionalizem na
katafalku. | O vse lepši je Kras | zvečer, | ko burja v skalah |
vihra.¹⁹

This leads in the "Integrali" to a confrontation with the aid of montage and — typical for Kosovel — chiasm:

Truden evropski človek
strmi žalostno v zlati veer
ki je še žalostnejši
od duše njegove.
Kras.
Civilizacija je brez srca.
Srce je brez civilizacije...

"Kons"²⁰

Finally, the spatial Utopia flows into his universal projection of a humane future society:

*Ni nujno, da se človek izogiba vsakdanjosti. Tudi ta navidezna osamljena vasica je del kozmosa. Jaz sem centrum svojega živega kozmosa, ki vibrira v duši in ga spoznavamo v doživljajih. Čudežev ni: vse kar je, je čudež.*²¹

Kosovel changed his residence several times a year. He spent his summers and vacations in his hometown of Tomaj; while studying he was forced to stay in unloved Ljubljana, which he repeatedly compared as a place of fog to the place of the sun, Tomaj:

Ljubljana mori s svojo meglo in svojo moralo; kdor stopi vanjo, je že apriori zapisan ugašanju. Zdaj šele vem, kaj je Kras in sploh vse, kar ni Ljubljana.²² Velika je razlika med toplim jesenskim soncem v Tomaju in v Primorju in med mrzlo meglenostjo, ki vošči tu vsakdan cinično z ironijo: dobro jutro!²³

This opposition, Karst *versus* Ljubljana, runs through his entire work and serves especially to affirm his concept of region.

¹⁹ ZD III.1, 642-643.

²⁰ ZD II, 73.

²¹ ZD III.1, 697.

²² ZD III.1, 339—in a letter to Nada Obereigner, October 9, 1925.

²³ ZD III.1, 459—in a letter to J. Ribičič, November 9, 1922.

The Intermediate Space: Misty Ljubljana

Nonetheless Ljubljana is not the exact opposite of the Karst region. In a certain sense it lies in a space between the concepts of the region and the world (or, perhaps, of Europe), and thus it forms something like an intermediate space, which in Kosovel's works is portrayed as if in a foggy, veiled light. Ljubljana possesses properties of both the Slovene homeland and the non-Slovene outside world. It is a part (even though only a minor part) of Europe, and at the same time is a victim of Europe and of the Serbian monarchy. Ljubljana is practically always foggy and cold, but its residents are also similarly alienated: he calls them "Hyenas,"²⁴ "corpses";²⁵ the city holds him captive "with an iron hand"²⁶ and the cultural conditions are characterized only negatively:

Laž;²⁷ grobnica;²⁸ mrtvašnica umetnosti;²⁹

Ljubljana's sleepiness comes to a peak in the well-known image of the Café Europe, which characterizes but does not necessarily represent the microcosm that is Ljubljana:

Ljubljana spi
Konduker na tramvaju spi
V kavarni Evropi
čitajo Slovenski narod...

"Ljubljana spi"³⁰

Both "Kavarna Evropa" and "Slovenski narod" can be decoded into their contextual (Café Evropa in the centre of Ljubljana and the Slovene newspaper, respectively) and into their metaphorical or their original meanings (Europe is a coffeehouse, the name "Slovenski narod" equals the Slovene people.)

But Ljubljana also stands for Kosovel's confrontation with Slovene patriotism (*slovenstvo*). It can be said that he deals harshly with the preponderant portion of the Slovene intelligentsia on this point. So he wrote to Fanica Obidova:

Glejte in ako pogledamo naš slovenski narod – kako je razjedena in zastrupljena inteligenca od cinizma, sarkazma – od te evropske bolezni.³¹

and, in another letter

²⁴ ZD III.1, 268.

²⁵ ZD III.1, 362.

²⁶ ZD III.1, 364.

²⁷ ZD III.1, 339.

²⁸ ZD III.1, 371.

²⁹ ZD III.1, 106.

³⁰ ZD II, 78.

³¹ ZD II, 78.

Vse današnje življenje sloni na laži in, kdor manj živi, manj laže.³²

Kosovel's attitude towards Ljubljana is extremely critical, but he makes clear distinctions between the Slovene capital and the non-Slovene world. All of his critical verve is directed towards altering negative Slovene characteristics into their positive equivalents. In doing so he assails the inactivity ("Kralj Matjaž spi"), the slave mentality ("hlapčestvo") and opposes to the discredited concept of nationalism that of the "narod":

nacionalizem je laž³³

narod je primaren, nacija je sekundaren.³⁴

Narod pomeni za nas šele oni narod, ki se je osvobodil nacionalizma. Vsi nacijonalisti pravzaprav ubijajo in ovirajo razvoj naroda, ker jim je vrhovno merilo "mili narodič". Vsi tisti mislijo seveda, da sestoji narod iz številke ne pa iz ljudi.³⁵

One of the programmatic articles in this regard was the short essay "Napake slovenstva", in which not only the errors of Slovene politicians are clearly pointed out, but also new perspectives are opened up:

Danes pa ni več doba narodnoobrambne akcije naroda, marveč več: danes je borba, borba za osamosvojitvev naroda.³⁶

The bearers of this political task are to be the healthy portions of the Slovene people: peasants, workers, and intellectuals; not, however, the *petit bourgeois*, which in its "melancholic resignation" and its "egocentric self-love" is incapable of bearing fruitful ideas into the future:

Njegovo slovenstvo je slovenstvo trenutka. Naše slovenstvo pa je sasidrano v slovenskih tleh, v najkrepkejših Slovencih, doma.³⁷

Ljubljana and its Slovene intellectuals have to change their faces into the shape of *slovenstvo*, which is rooted in the virtues of the peasantry and the healing power of rural life.

³² ZD III.1, 381.

³³ ZD II, 31.

³⁴ ZD III.2, 803.

³⁵ ZD III.1, 642.

³⁶ ZD III.1, 60.

³⁷ ZD III.1, 60.

The Outside World: Yugoslavia and Europe

The then-young state of Yugoslavia is sharply criticized by Kosovel, especially because it is not prepared to provide the Slovenes with the status of true co-determination. This lack of accommodation, which he finds among the Croats, is still prevalent today. Whoever attempted to stay apart, was branded a separatist and a federalist, which Kosovel occasionally portrays as his own experience in his correspondence with Fanica Obidova. About his fellow students in Ljubljana he wrote on March 23, 1925:

V naši sobi smo trije, dva Slovenca in en Hrvat. (V kolegiju imamo tudi Srbe, Makedonce, Dalmatince, Bosance Muslimane in Črnogorce, menda celo Bolgare). Jaz sem razglašen za separatista, federalista, avtonomista in anarhista, pomislite, samo zato, ker se s to vso družbo ne menim veliko ali nič.³⁸

Kosovel treats the Europe of his day even more critically than he does Yugoslavia. The representative of the "European lie," as he calls it, is the League of Nations in Geneva, in which the larger nations set the tone, although according to Kosovel they were long since discredited morally:

Angleži, največi zatiralci svojih kolonij, ne morejo glasovati za pravico.³⁹

The slogans "Evropa umira" and "društvo narodov laž" run through his entire work, his diaries, and his letters. He planned a tragedy with the title "Evropa umira", but he never finished it. A satire on the League of Nations "Na pragu človečanstva" also went unfinished. It is, of course, Oswald Spengler, whom Kosovel mentions and quotes several times, that nourished these thoughts.

The madhouse of Europe, which he calls "blaznica" or "norišnica," has at present no chance for development, according to Kosovel. Only the turn to humanity in the future will rescue Europe. Only the destruction of the old Europe, so despised by Kosovel, can open the door to the new world, which can be conceived of only in the future and only as a universal, humane one. Therefore the destruction of the old, mechanistic principle must be followed by the construction of the new, humane life.

...vzporedno z evropskim razvojem mora začeti pri nas doba konstruktivnosti, doba dela, energije, discipline in volje, doba konstruktivne revolucije. Treba zrevaltirati človeka prav do dna, do najgloblje plasti duše.⁴⁰

³⁸ ZD III.1, 393.

³⁹ ZD III.2, 801.

⁴⁰ ZD III.1, 658-659.

To conclude, I can summarize this Kosovelian anticipation of the European and universal humane society of the future in his own words — cited from his essay “Separatisti” — for it is still relevant for the recent situation in Slovenia:

Naš ideal je evropski človek, različen po svojih obrazih, a samo eden v svojem velikem stremljenju: ljubiti vse ljudi in v tej ljubezni delati. Ali je narod separatističen, če hoče živeti? Če se hoče razvijati sam v svoji smeri, če hoče izkristalizirati svoje telo v svojem duhu. Bodimo eno po duhu in ljubezni, a ohranimo svoje lastne obraze.⁴¹

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POVZETEK

POKRAJINSTVO IN EVROPEJSTVO V POEZIJI SREČKA KOSVELA

Članek je posvečen poskusu analize prostorske dimenzionalnosti v pesniškem svetu Srečka Kosovela — nasploh in v tematiki, razpeti med dvema poloma: med pólom lokalnega, domačijskega (Kras, Ljubljana) in pólom svetovnega, v nekem smislu globalnega (Jugoslavija, Evropa). Ta prostorska dimenzionalnost je pri Kosovelu tudi tematično pogojena: Tomaj in Kras v njegovi pesmi predstavljata osrednjo točko njegovega sveta, mesto pesnikovega pribežališča in sprostivne — in prenovitve — kar navsezadnje predstavlja že utopično komponento Kosovelove poezije. Na drugi strani pa presoja Kosovel v svoji pesmi skrajno pesimistično raztrganost sveta, Evrope in položaj slovenstva v SHS—Jugoslaviji. V tej širši prostorski dimezionalnosti dobiva Ljubljana, kraj kjer je pesnik prebil svoja študijska in ustvarjalna leta, še vedno centralno, vendar skrajno negotovo mesto, stalno v nevarnosti, da se med svetovnimi silami zruši in propade. Zdi se, da tudi vsa bogata Kosovelova kulturno— in literarno—kritična dejavnost in produkcija izhajata iz te iste predstave prostorske dimenzionalnosti.

⁴¹ ZD III.1, 658-659.