

KOSOVEL AND NIHILISM: AN ATTEMPT AT CONSTRUCTIVE DECONSTRUCTION

Matevž Kos

Faculty of Arts, Ljubljana, Slovenia

Today, Srečko Kosovel holds a secure position in the canon of Slovenian literature, yet despite being a *classic* author, he is the cause of diverse, also ideologically motivated polemics and a corresponding struggle of interpretations – which use his vast poetic opus as a battleground. Slovenians have problems with Kosovel even now, eighty years after the poet's death. One of the latter such "symptoms" were the events surrounding the fifth anniversary of Slovenia's independence, on 26th June 1996, and the state celebration in one of the main town squares of the Slovenian capital. It was officially called "Cons. 5 – The Triumphal Arch to the Fifth Anniversary of the Independence of the Republic of Slovenia". *Cons. 5* is one of the most famous of Kosovel's poetic "constructions", and the authors of the celebration borrowed its title for a more "symbolic" meaning, as they said, since it was the fifth anniversary of the construction of the new state. *Cons. 5* was not even directly used in the celebrations, however, for some important political men, including the minister of culture, the use (or misuse, in their belief) of the poem's title was reason enough to withdraw from the honorary organizing committee. The title itself was not so much a problem as what was hidden behind it – whether spoken or not. And that, of course, was the poem itself. It goes like this (*Collected Works II*: 23):

Dung is gold
and gold is dung.
Both = 0
 $0 = \infty$
A B <
1, 2, 3
He who has no soul
needs no gold,
he who has a soul
needs no dung.
EE-AW.

At first sight, *Cons. 5* strings together diverse, unusual and not very lyrical elements such as mathematical symbols or the onomatopoeic

sound of a donkey's bray, which is a mockingly loud conclusion to the poem. Somewhat unusual, trivial at first sight, and yet: a donkey braying in Kosovel is probably related to Nietzsche. The most likely source for the "donkey" is in Nietzsche's *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*. Kosovel read it and, as it is documented, even recommended it to others. "I, A" (ee-aw) appears in Nietzsche several times, and has a similar – ironically subversive, also mocking – function as in Kosovel.

It is almost necessary to know something about the circumstances in which the poem was written, as well as the wider context of Kosovel's poetry, to understand *Cons. 5*. In the notes to *Collected Works*, the editor Anton Ocvirk points to the agricultural manual *Dung Is Gold*, which Kosovel came across during his stay in Tomaj and was the direct inspiration for this poem. Equally important is Kosovel's diary entry from 1925, which is the draft for *Cons. 5*: "Gold fever./ People have gold fever. Capitalism/ Dung is gold./ Gold is dung, because it is used as such/ Culture = a maid/ a maid to the capital." (*Collected Works III*: 688)

By bringing in these 'meta-poetic', con-textual circumstances, we make one of the most basic intentions of *Cons. 5* clearer. Above all it is an attack on capitalism; however – and this should not be overlooked – not by way of transparent ideological agitation. Together with some other similarly oriented Kosovel's texts, *Cons. 5* puts the sting into words only indirectly: the comfortable, domesticated image of a 'bourgeois' world is taken apart, disharmonised and thus presented as an extremely unstable, dynamic structure, which in itself – as it is – calls for radical change.

The donkey braying at the end of *Cons. 5* not only expresses a certain mocking and ironically parodic distance, but also declares a fundamental vote of no confidence in the existing historical world.

At this point, a couple of interesting questions arise. For example, what is the instance, the position, from which Kosovel's poetry declares a fundamental lack of confidence in a certain historical world – Slovenian society and the Europe of the 1920's? Why is poetry the medium of this lack of confidence? In the name of what ideals does this Kosovel poem protest? And also, what does the fact that the Kosovel's poem protests, that it apparently has certain ideals and so on, what does this mean for the *modernist structure* of Kosovel's poetry? After all, we may also ask ourselves, what happens to these ideals if we look at them from the perspective of Nietzsche's philosophy, for example in the light of his demands for a revaluation of all values or in the light of the criticism of all so-called modern ideas?

As it becomes clear from many of Kosovel's essays, in parting with the old world and setting up *the new*, he ascribes a special role to the poetic word, to literature, or rather to the culture as a whole. Kosovel does not see his poetry or art in general as an isolated pursuit, which would be purely aesthetic and in this sense "autonomous". *Cons. 5* and similar – provisionally speaking – modernist texts may give the reader an aesthetically "autonomist", "non-mimetic" impression – almost in the sense of (ultra)modernist poetics and its demands for "expelling sense" from poetry, which were popular in Slovenia at the time of the first publication of

Integrals (Integrali), that is, in the late 1960-ies. The context of *Cons. 5*, which I have already mentioned, as well as Kosovel's words about "the cultural movement" with the poetic word at its centre, however, speak of something else.

First, we have to look at Kosovel's attitude towards the Slovenian poetic tradition. Kosovel does not see it as something belonging in a museum that, in the avant-garde manner (most bombastically in the "*antipassatismo*" of the futurists), needs to be surpassed and discarded. On the contrary: Kosovel sees himself as heir to and a continuer of the Slovenian literary tradition. This means that he bases his writing in the endeavours and aspirations of his predecessors. And the most prominent, initiatory place in this story is that of France Prešeren, who is the *centre* of the Slovenian poetic canon.

Kosovel expressed his attitude towards the author of *The Toast* (Zdravljica) in several places. Let me quote the final passage from Kosovel's paper *Prešeren*, written in February 1924. The incentive was the anniversary of the poet's death.

I would wish for one thing – that in this dark age, when we have forgotten why we are alive, we reach for his poetry and try to obtain from it the power that helps in suffering and in struggle, that gives a person faith in life, that shows the aim to life. Because it is a special trait of deep and beautiful souls to show their own lives, to show the only way that the soul needs to take: towards Beauty. And Prešeren is such a soul. (*Collected Works III*: 122)

From this passage, written in Kosovel's typically elevated style, we may discern some suggestive thoughts. Prešeren's poetry is the target source of life's power, which helps in suffering and struggle. Is therefore the will to poetry that Kosovel demonstrates by referring to Prešeren as the ultimate poetic authority, the will to *more* power, to a surplus that qualifies a person for active entry into life's arena? This is where the question of Kosovel's attitude towards Nietzsche becomes relevant.

Kosovel's thoughts are sometimes Nietzschean. The impression is corroborated by references to Nietzsche in Kosovel's writings. In 1923 he apparently read Nietzsche's *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, because he mentions it several times in this period, also in his correspondence (*Collected Works III*: 382, 481). Kosovel refers to Nietzsche as a kind of authority, if not a spiritual teacher. However, in this context Kosovel also writes of his endeavours; not only that, he writes, for example, of "sacrificing for Beauty and Truth". In his text *We Are Standing* (Stojimo), also from 1923, he mentions Nietzsche and immediately goes on to talk about "the struggle for man and mankind", about the Slavs, who will save "the tired European man with their great will for life, with their juicy, barbarically joyous *lust for life*" (*Collected Works III*: 42). The same year Kosovel wrote in a review: "If man wants to live...he must step into the surroundings. He is not a man of a rotten society, neither is he a man of the most ideal collectivity; he is man-god, Nietzsche's Übermensch. With him the world stands and falls." (*Collected Works III*: 236)

In a diary entry from the period, Kosovel was even more direct: "When I feel most bitter in my heart, I read Nietzsche." (*Collected Works III*: 703).

However, we must say in advance that Kosovel indeed dialogises, at times perhaps flirts with Nietzsche, yet he understands him very much in his own way – far from the radical nature or consistency of the original Nietzschean thought. Like Ivan Cankar before him (See: Kos 2003: 147–180), Kosovel *humanises* will and power, and only in this explicitly humanistic context understands them as the means of human (individual and collective) emancipation. The same goes for Kosovel's frequent slogans about humanity, new man, justice, new society, new ethos etc., which otherwise often resound with the programmatic principles of so-called messianic expressionism.

Within Kosovel's horizon, all these ideas – explicitly "modern" or "decadent" according to Nietzsche – however, have no deeper conceptual connection to Nietzsche's perspective. Or more precisely, with *perspectivism* in Nietzsche, which means: to see all being in the light of the will to power and the eternal return of the same, and therefore also "beyond good and evil". Perspectivism according to Nietzsche is not about seeing life from the perspective of development in the sense of an eschatological progression towards a certain Goal, least of all in the light of any kind of ethical postulate. In short, Nietzsche proceeds from the will to power as a fundamental "structure" of nature, the "instinct" of being, as "the eternal return of the same". What keeps returning is the will to power as a self-willing power (cf. among others, Nietzsche 1991; 577–8).

For Kosovel, poetry and art in general are not the embodiment of ebullient power and the will to life in the Nietzschean sense; power is limited in advance. In other words: power, which is limited, and on which Kosovel wagers, is not power which would will itself; it is not power which would be the ultimate principle of life. Kosovel limits himself to the amount of power necessary to somehow bear suffering and then give it meaning through engagement *within* the movement for the realization of a certain *humanitarian* idea. This is why this power cannot be expansionist, turned outward. On the contrary, the limits of this world, to use a phrase that Kosovel probably does not use by coincidence, are the limits of the *beautiful soul*. And the world in which this beautiful soul lives and feels at home is poetry. The aim of the poetic beautiful soul is "to walk towards Beauty".

It is necessary to add that the foundations of Kosovel's "poetics" as they appear in his discursive texts are heterogeneous, often even contradictory. Kosovel's watchword for the truth of poetry is Beauty; however, following Cankar's example, he does not understand it in the sense of harmony as one of the categories of "classical" aesthetics, nor in the sense of art-for-art's-sake or aestheticism. A typical example is Kosovel's 1925 draft of the essay *Modern European Life and Art* which he was planning at the time. Among other things, he says that art

... is no longer, as seen by some professorial aesthetes, an aesthetic problem, but rather an aesthetic, ethical, social, religious, revolutionary problem, that is, the problem of life.... Because only the artist who has stepped from

the swamp of modern society and entered a new society that he himself felt, only this artist is the new priest of the truth, righteousness, humanity, and kindness. (*Collected Works III*: 650)

The foundation of this renovation, claims Kosovel as he goes on, is an "ethical revolution": "We want action. And you cannot move on to action without an ethical revolution." (*Collected Works III*: 651)

In the last part of Kosovel's life this persuasion was given more concrete, social and political content. He explained his views most clearly in his lecture *Art and the Proletarian* (*Umetnost in proletarec*), which he gave towards the end of February 1926, three months before he died, in Zagorje. Kosovel discussed the modern artist and the necessity that he enters the movement which "fights within the class struggle for a classless society". The subject of the movement is the proletariat, and in Kosovel's mind, the emancipation of the proletariat, in Marx's words, is a prerequisite for the emancipation of the whole of mankind.¹ The realisation of Justice will bring "a new, proletarian, humanitarian culture". Therefore, surmises Kosovel, "proletarian culture is a necessity, without which the proletariat cannot fulfil its task" (*Collected Works III/3*: 29).

Here, a question, which could be called "the question of poetry", arises in all its clarity. Namely: on these foundations, how does one adjust the poetic word so that it fits the truth of the *new age*? Because, in spite of all his confrontational activism, the poetic word of Kosovel is above all *the word of yearning*. And yearning in itself is aimless and open, it concerns the heart, the soul, and an unspecified sorrow, if I use the poet's words, which we encounter in all the "developmental stages" and "genres" of his writing.

Is the allure of the sirens of *the new society* as an eschatological project – in its realisation, Kosovel bestows an initiatory role on literature – such that it could put into question all of Kosovel's previous poetic endeavours? Because, constitutive to him are searching, "ontological" uncertainty, inherent discrepancy, wavering between solipsism and activism and the corresponding state of crisis; but most of all, the common denominator in Kosovel's poetry remains the elementary lyricism of the "beautiful soul". Despite the techno-poetic, thematic and other metamorphoses of Kosovel's poetry, – this remains his defining foundation (cf. Kos 1997).

With regard to these dilemmas I must once again point to certain formulations from Kosovel's correspondence. These are sentences that Kosovel wrote in his letter to Fanica Obidova in the summer of 1925: the poet speaks of being in the midst of a great revolt and of the creative nervousness that

¹ And also the first prerequisite for the emancipation of smaller – according to Marx (and Hegel) "non-historical" – nations. For Kosovel's vision of the "proletarian revolution" is not nonnational in the sense of the "world revolution" and the related "dying off of nations". Kosovel's diary entry from 1924 is meaningful enough: "Through the socialism of revolution to the freedom of nations." (*Collected Works*: 624) Similarly: "Nation is above state, because nation is organic, natural and legitimate, whereas the state is a mechanical political and economic factor." (*Collected Works III*: 659)

is part of this revolt; at the same time, this nervousness is already a wider, almost metaphysical notion: "A nervous man is a medium for cosmic tragedies."

Particularly interesting for us is the sentence in which Kosovel speaks of the fact that man must "cross the bridge of nihilism to the positive side" (*Collected Works III*: 397–8).

This sentence is actually a slightly different version of a thought we find in one of Kosovel's diary entries from that time: "We will have to go through the nothingness of negativism to get to the true *constructive path*." (*Collected Works III*: 700)

There are other, similar formulations scattered through Kosovel's writing. In another letter to Fanica Obidova he wrote, for example: "From absolute negation, nihilism, I have gradually moved, with my eyes closed, to the positive side." (*Collected Works III/2*: 400)

In this letter Kosovel explains his current poetic dilemmas and also envisages where his poetry is going. Kosovel's self-labelling and self-explanations of all kinds should make us aware of several things. First of all, Kosovel's words about "the true constructive path" and "the positive side" do not simply denote a kind of aesthetic "quasi-reality" or literary quirk; Kosovel's thought here is explicitly socially oriented.

This, in turn, means that he puts his own poetry (or literature/art in general) directly at the service of ideology and politics. Kosovel is quite clear on this in the letter cited earlier to Fanica Obidova, dated 27th July, 1925:

Although we must know politics, my work is in literature. Today I understand my work and my domain perfectly: I have to do in literature what our youngest do in politics; that is: portray the age in which one world is decaying and another is arising. *Why and how, depends on the individual.*

You see, this is our task. Literature must awaken knowledge in people! It must intensify the power of life. (*Collected Works III*: 401)

Literature, therefore, should intensify the *life force* in people. Kosovel's imperative brings us again to a comparison between Kosovel and Nietzsche. As far as Nietzsche goes, we have been establishing that his term "will to power" can only be used provisionally in Kosovel, in the sense of a *constructive* will to power. It is the kind of will to power that will serve man as a "personified ethos", to use Kosovel's phrase. He gives the most vivid explanation of this "personified ethos" in his lecture *Crisis* (Kriza) in November 1925 in Ljubljana. The first sentence of this lecture is the same as the title and the first line of Kosovel's poem *Europe is Dying* (Evropa umira). Even a casual glance reveals that the poem is made up of two halves or two levels. On one level we witness an explicit, almost transparent social criticism. These are the lines which state that Europe, such as it is, is dying, or that the League of Nations is a lie. The other side of this social criticism, or almost ecstasy, as much as is possible by the poetic subjectivity turned outwards, is an emphatically intimate reflection.

This duality of social criticism and emphatic individuality, or social engagement and lonely melancholy are constitutive elements of the poetic attitude we could in general call "Kosovel's paradox".

Kosovel's lecture *Crisis* is one of his more famous publicity texts. This lecture offers similar findings as the poem *Rhymes*: that clichés should be put in museums, and that "everything has lost its value". The loss of value happened in the name and in the light of the future. This future appears on a horizon that begins with words about "the death of Europe". The death of Europe is the condition for the birth of the new world and new man. And this is where art acquires special significance. Moreover, in his *Crisis* lecture, Kosovel even wrote in the first person plural that "we" come "in the sign of art". At the same time, he understands this art in a distinctly humanist sense, in the sense of *getting closer* to man: "*the humanitarianism of art consists in getting closer to man*" (*Collected Works III*: 20).

This is immediately followed by the (penultimate) sentence, which is a paraphrase of a Nietzsche's well-known Nietzsche's words or rather slogans; however, Nietzsche's thought is already critically rejected. Kosovel says: "Not beyond good and evil, just and unjust, not with the superhuman lie; we come as people through good and evil, just and unjust." (*Collected Works III*: 20)

Kosovel's engagement on this level is clear: he demands engagement in the name of man and mankind, and this engagement at the same time is in the name of good versus evil, justice versus injustice. If Nietzsche abolishes *the moral* distinction between good and evil and morals in general (*morality is immorality*), if socialism to him is just a "modern idea", a manifestation of social decadence (cf. particularly Nietzsche 1991: 78–88), if the so-called good man to him is just another name for modern man, for a Christian or a nihilist (Nietzsche 1989: 197), than Kosovel demands precisely the opposite: he calls for an emphasised ethical and moral attitude, because man – man as an ethical subject – must decide again and again between good and evil, just or unjust. After all, this is where Kosovel's words of man as "personified ethos" originate.

In one of Kosovel's diary entries from 1925 (*On Suicide*) there is a formulation about nihilism. It is about the fact that nihilism comes directly from modern society: "*nihilism /is/ the only philosophy which organically originates from modern discord, the split between society and man; modern culture cannot produce a better 'philosophy'*" (*Collected Works III*: 648) The alternative to this nihilism is not the will to power as the active source of life in Nietzsche's sense; Kosovel's point takes a different turn: he speaks of ethical revolution, which is at the same time spiritual revolution; and not in the name of the *Übermensch* as the figure of the will to power, but in the name of the new humanity and its moral attributes, which are, to use Kosovel's language, primarily love, honesty and truth.

It is in this context that we must understand the poet's words about the great revolt he is in; about the fact that we must "cross the bridge of nihilism to the positive side". After all, as early as 1924, Kosovel wrote this isolated, but meaningful, critically distanced thought in his notebook: "The dreams of nihilism: to kill all, to tear it all apart, to die, the delight, to lay waste, to lay waste." (*Collected Works III*: 617)

* * *

As far as Kosovel's attitude to Nietzsche goes – and to the issues of “European nihilism” – it manifestly confirms the complexity of the circumstances of Kosovel's poetry and life. And these are circumstances that probably dictated the poet's *incorrect* reading of Nietzsche, as well as his attempts to not only recover from nihilism, but also *overcome* it. These attempts are, according to the logic of this, beyond correct or incorrect *understanding* – in Kosovel they are in close contact with his vivid, straightforward personality, as well as with “the negative total” of the post-war Slovenian world of the 1920's.

Translated by Katarina Jerin

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- KOSOVEL, Srečko (1964): *Zbrano delo I*, ed. A. Ocvirk, Ljubljana: Državna založba Slovenije.
- (1974): *Zbrano delo II*, ed. A. Ocvirk, Ljubljana: Državna založba Slovenije.
- (1977): *Zbrano delo III*, ed. A. Ocvirk, Ljubljana: Državna založba Slovenije.
- (1967): *Integrali '26*. Ljubljana–Trst [Collection Bela krizantema]: Cankarjeva založba in Založništvo tržaškega tiska.
- KOS, Matevž (2003): *Poskusi z Nietzschejem: Nietzsche in ničejanstvo v slovenski literaturi*. Ljubljana [Razprave in eseji; 51]: Slovenska matica.
- (1997): »Kako brati Kosovela?« In: S. Kosovel: *Izbrane pesmi*. Ljubljana [Knjižnica Kondor; 280]: Založba Mladinska knjiga, pp. 129–67.
- KRALJ, Lado (1986): *Ekspresionizem*. Ljubljana [Literarni leksikon; 30]: Državna založba Slovenije.
- (1986): “Kosovelov konstruktivizem: kritika pojma“. *Primerjalna književnost IX/2*, pp. 29–44.
- NIETZSCHE, Friedrich (1988): *Sämtliche Werke. Kritische Studienausgabe in 15 Einzelbänden*. [KSA]. Ur. G. Colli in M. Montinari. München/Berlin/New York: dtv/de Gruyter.
- (1984): *Tako je govoril Zaratustra. Knjiga za vse in za nikogar*. Transl. Janko Moder, Ljubljana [2nd edition], [Filozofska knjižnica; 15]: Slovenska matica.
- (1988): *Ecce homo*. Transl. Janko Moder, Ljubljana [Filozofska knjižnica; 36]: Slovenska matica.
- (1991): *Volja do moči. Poskus prevrednotenja vseh vrednot: iz zapuščine 1884/88*. Transl. Janko Moder. Ljubljana [Filozofska knjižnica; 34]: Slovenska matica.
- VREČKO, Janez (1986): *Srečko Kosovel, slovenska zgodovinska avantgarda in zenizem*. Maribor [Znamenja; 89]: Založba Obzorja.

■ ABSTRACT

UDK 821.163.6.09-1 Kosovel S.:1 Nietzsche F.

Key words: Slovene poetry / Kosovel, Srečko / philosophical influences / Nietzsche, Friedrich / nihilism

The paper proceeds with the question of Kosovel's attitude towards nihilism. More precisely, what Kosovel understood under this term, which he was acquainted with and himself used, and in what sense did he try to transcend the subject of nihilism. In this context, the discussion primarily turns on Kosovel's attitude towards Nietzsche, as far as it can be reconstructed with the help of Kosovel's own formulations in his letters and diary entries. On the bases of these, it is possible to advance the thesis that the alternative to nihilism for Kosovel was not "will to power" as the active life principle in Nietzsche's sense. Kosovel's aspirations followed a different path. Namely, the poet spoke of the ethical revolution, which was simultaneously a spiritual revolution, but not in the name of superman as an exposed, isolated figure of the will to power, but in the name of new man, new humanity and its moral attributes.

If Nietzsche abolishes the moral differentiation between good and bad and morality as such (morality is immoral), Kosovel's endeavours go in the opposite direction: he aspires to a decidedly ethical and moral stance, since man – man as an ethical subject – needs constantly to choose between good and bad, justice and injustice. It is in this light that Kosovel's formulation of man as "ethos incarnate" should be understood.

Nietzsche is not a key figure to open doors into Kosovel's poetic world, and yet in Kosovel's perception of Nietzsche there is some kind of significant ambivalence. This ambivalence was somehow bolstered by what could be referred to as an unintentional misreading of Nietzsche.