

KOSOVEL: A GREAT POET BUT A POOR PROSODIST

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Kosovel's early poetry – and it is debatable whether the literary historicist term “early poetry” is at all fitting for a poet who died at the age of twenty-two and left behind such a vast opus – offers excellent materials for an analysis of the loosening and deterioration of the traditional metrical structures into free verse. The young poet was visibly making an effort to keep versification in check, but it kept slipping out of his control; he was desperately trying to accommodate his inner sense of poetic rhythm to rigorous prosodic designs, but his verses stand awkwardly beside the traditional metrical line; and rhyme to him was still an indispensable mark of the sheer poetic quality of a poetic text, but only rarely did he rhyme in a way that was entirely satisfying to the ear. In the whole history of Slovenian poetry there is not a more drastic instance of a “crisis in verse”, to use Mallarmé's formulation. What is a gifted young poet to do if he is not in command of the material of his art, poetic language? He must create a new language, but how? By turning flaws into virtues, defects into strengths, and by forging a new vigour out of shortcomings.

When we speak of faults, we can only do so against the backdrop of a defined system of rules. Moreover: faults as such are the outcome of a rule put into effect. A very simple truth follows from this: if we make a mistake in a given system, the most effective way to neutralise it is to repeat it. A repeated mistake is no longer a mistake; it is already a system. At the start of his poetic adventure Kosovel intuitively adhered precisely to this artistic strategy: repeating mistakes. Fashioning an artistic truth out of a formal flaw!

A beginner cannot find fresh new rhymes, so he keeps repeating the same rhyming pairs, or even resorts to repeating the same words, a procedure that was strongly discouraged by traditional poetics, which saw in it simple mechanical repetition. In Kosovel's poem *Vas za bori* (Village Behind the Pines) such repetition paradoxically enhances the meaning of a poem.

*V oklepu zelenih borovih rok
bela, zaprašena vas,
poldremajoča vas
kot ptica v varnem gnezdu rok.*

Clasped in green pine hands
a white, dusty village,
a half-drowsing village,
like a bird in a safe nest of hands.

*Sredi dehtečih borov postanem:
Ni to objem mojih rok?
Velik objem, velik obok
za takó majhno gručo otrok.*

*Za zidom cerkvenim je pokopan
nekdo. Na grobu šipek cvetě.
Iz bele vasi bele poti –
in vse te poti v moje srce*

Amid the fragrant pine trees I halt:
Is this not the embrace of my own hands?
a big embrace, a great arch
Afor such a small group of children.

Someone is behind the church wal
On his grave a briar blossoms.
From the white village, white paths –
and all these paths lead to my heart.¹

The words *hands* and *village* are repeated more than once in the verse endings as rhyming words; the repeated words thus enter different semantic contexts and develop a set of semantic connotations that broaden the thematic field of these worn-out words far beyond the traditional *Weltschmerz* and its related poetics. Later, I will analyse this procedure to establish that what in fact we are dealing with is a quite singular re-animation of the troubadour principle of what I have referred to as *final/key words*.

Only Srečko Kosovel can get away with a word like “*bolest*” (“grief”, “affliction”, “sorrow”) in his poetry. With any other poet this word is so “heavy” it is unpalatable. Only in Kosovel’s usage is it semantically rich and diverse enough to be positively fresh. Poetic sound is always the product of meaning. Let us look at the introductory stanza in the poem *Slutnja* (A Premonition):

*Polja.
Podrtija ob cesti
Tema.
Tišina boleti.*

*Fields.
A wrecked house by the road.
Darkness.
The silence of grief.*

Most of Kosovel’s early poems, which Slovenian literary history has somewhat loosely labelled “impressionist lyrical poetry”, formally fall within the framework of traditional versification; more precisely: they belong to the period of its disintegration and demise. These texts follow formal metrical structures based on the rules of the accentual-syllabic versification, but which have already been significantly relaxed and are leaning towards free verse.

These poems are marked by simplicity of poetic language: verse rhythm is derivative of the most common and popular metres borrowed from long tradition, euphony is characterised by hackneyed rhymes, and the poems employ the most common stanza structures. Quatrains top the list, and Kosovel seems particularly fond of joining three quatrains into a poem, this being the form he employs most frequently.

¹ All the translations of Kosovel’s poems in this paper were made with the aim of facilitating the reader’s understanding of the content of Srečko’s poems, but not the rhyme and metre. They have no pretensions to literary merit and should not be read as Kosovel’s poems translated into English. In order for this paper to make sense to an English reader, I was obliged to keep to the original syntax as closely as possible, and did so as long as this was still within bounds of intelligibility. Rendering the formal properties of the poems in translation, assuming this could even be done, would inevitably change the content of the original poems to such an extent that many of the points made by the author of this text would be lost.

A careful assessment of the rhythms in these poems gives a highly diversified picture: a more or less equal predisposition to trochaic and iambic metres, and frequent use of a trisyllabic foot, which is less usual in Slovenian poetry (dactyls, amphibrachs, and even anapests, very rarely be found in Slovenian poetry, since few Slovenian words support the anapest stress pattern). The variability of the rhythm within a poem or even within a single line renders the traditional tool of *metre* in the case of Kosovel's poetry largely useless; it seems more appropriate to adopt the term *metrical impulse*, which allows for rhythmic variation, deviation from, and even violation of, the original metrical scheme. In many poems, the metre, or rather, the metrical impulse changes from one line to the next: the scansion of one line of verse reveals a regular rhythm, but already in the next line the rhythm changes, although it may still be metrically regular. Such texts are therefore *isometric* on the level of individual verse lines and *polymetric* on the level of the poem as a whole. The rhythm of a large number of Kosovel's poems constantly changes, even within one line, so that a metrical analysis is futile.

The underlying principle of traditional versification is the subordination of syntax to external, metrical criteria; or to put it simply, the sentence needs to yield to the limitations imposed by the metrical scheme (stress pattern, number of syllables, etc.). When after a long stretch of domination, at the end of the 19th and the beginning of the 20th century, metrical verse had run its course and was beginning to wear down to a cliché, poets were overcome by the need to break out of standard moulds that were stifling living inspiration. (I have deliberately used the traditional, rather sentimental word *inspiration*, because etymologically it stems from the Latin root *spirare* (= to breathe), suggesting the rhythm of lungs, blood, heart and body.) But the collapse of metrical rules, in fact, leads to the collapse of poetic language. In the organism of a line there emerges a structural vacuum, because the verse line is no longer organised by metrical laws and rules. In a sense, a regular metrical line constantly draws attention to its own poetic qualities, we could say, "sings out": *I am not prose, I am verse*. The signals of the poetic qualities in the traditional verse are regular (metrically organised) rhythm, the "jingle" of rhymes in verse endings, etc. How is a verse to prove that it is a verse, that it belongs to elevated poetry and not banal prose, if it has turned its back on its most powerful tool? The crisis of metre thus calls for a new organisational and ordering principle, a new manner of generating rhythm. The primary metre-forging function is now taken over by syntax. This development is demonstrated vividly by Kosovel's "impressionist" lyrics. In fact, it makes for the best case study within the entire history of Slovenian poetry, perhaps, to observe and understand the tectonic shift, the dramatic and far-reaching transition, from traditional metre into free verse.

The term *free verse* is dangerously misleading, suggesting as it does the illusion of complete artistic freedom, which is simply not possible in the domain of poetic language. A verse is invariably constituted through strong rhythm, be it metrically organised or organised in some other way, or it is not a verse.

Rather than repeating rhythmic and euphonious (sound) patterns characteristic of traditional verse, free verse is based on the repetition of syntactic units and words or phrases, very often functioning as rhetorical figures of *anaphora* (the repetition of the same words at the beginning of lines or sentences) and *epiphora* (the same procedure at the end of lines or sentences). This way of rhythmically organising a line, *syntactic parallelism*, is in effect the same as the ancient – historically the earliest – principle of poetic language, which has come down to us, for instance, through the marvellous psalms of the Old Testament. In Kosovel's psalm-like sonnet *Želja po smrti* (Longing for Death), the anaphora *Daj* (literally = “give” or “let”, but here best translated as “grant”) is repeated as many as seven times in the introductory line with the phrase, *Daj mi, Bog* (Grant me, God):

*Daj mi, Bog, da mogel bi umreti,
tiho potopiti se v temò,
še enkrat kot zvezda zažareti,
onemeti, pasti v črno dno,*

*kjer nikogar ni in kjer ne sveti
niti ena luč in ni težkò
čakati poslednjih razodetij,
kar od vekomaj je sojeno bilò.*

*Daj, da stopim stran izmed ljudi,
daj, da stopim in da se ne vrnem,
daj mi milost: temò, ki teši,*

*da v bolečini s Tabo se strnem,
daj, da odidem od teh ljudi,
daj, da odidem in da se ne vrnem.*

Grant me, God, that I should die,
quietly sink into the dark,
once again like a star blaze forth,
grow silent, fall to the black rock bottom,

Where there is no one and nothing shines
not a single light and where it is not difficult
to wait for the final revelations,
because for ever it has been destined thus.

Grant me that I should step aside from people,
grant me make this step, and never return,
grant me mercy: darkness which consoles,

so that in pain with You I merge,
grant me that I leave these people,
grant me that I leave, and never return.

An analysis of this poem reveals that a trochaic metrical pulse is undetermined three times with iambically intoned lines. It also demonstrates a procedure that is commonly observed in Kosovel: the loosening or even violation of the metrical scheme established at the beginning of the poem. A rhythm that pulsates and inspired cannot but steer the poet away from metrical dictates and limitations.

Particularly interesting is Kosovel's use of rhyme: in all honesty, his rhyming dictionary is extremely poor, with a prevalence of the so-called *verbal rhymes*. (Of all the parts of speech in the Slovenian language, verbs are the easiest to rhyme because of their corresponding inflections, and easily-formed rhymes tend to be semantically – and thereby also musically – poor.) It is as if Kosovel were endlessly repeating rhymes he had learnt from the poetic canon of 19th-century Slovenian poetry. For any other, less talented poet of Kosovel's time, drawing on such a familiar and worn-out domestic stock of rhyme endings would be a sign of grossly sentimental and conservative poetics. Not so with Kosovel: in his verses, these rhymes, a hundred times used and abused, suddenly ring out in a different, fresh, and artistically authentic way. A silent, but a deep and far-reaching break was effected within traditional versification: even those inherited rhythms and rhymes were now endowed with new sound and meaning through the different use of poetic language (for in poetry, sound and meaning are always closely bound together).

One of the strategies Kosovel employed in order to overcome semantic and euphonic bareness is – paradoxically – precisely the strategy of repetition, of which we have already spoken above. A repeated mistake is no longer a mistake. A semantically and musically weak rhymed word that is repeated is no longer weak, since the changed semantic context recharges the word with a new meaning. The repetition of rhymed words, which may have initially been an expression of the poet's shortcomings and awkwardness, an inability to find a word that would rhyme, became a conscious and productive *modus operandi*. Kosovel's use of this procedure was so thoroughgoing that his poetry no longer presents us with a rhyme in the traditional sense (that is, the repetition of all the sounds following the last accented vowel in a word), but with a procedure which Italian literary theory refers to as *parole rime, end-words*, where entire words are rhymed, where repeated words stand in for rhymes. I myself have termed this *za-ključne beside* (final/key words): the *final words* in a line are rhythmically, musically and semantically *key words*. The Provencal troubadours of the 12th and 13th centuries were fond of this method, and used it in many different ways: they either repeated end-words in each stanza in the same position (at the end of the first, second, third etc. verse line) or, following a complicated key, they repeated words in varied order. The most prominent example of the latter is a *sestina*, a poetic form that was invented by Arnaut Daniel and which repeats the end-words in the order of 6 – 1 – 5 – 2 – 4 – 3. After six sestinas, six stanzas of six lines, the final tercet *tornada* usually goes back to the original order of the end-words, two in each line. With the exception of the *sestina*, which has survived thanks to Dante and Petrarch, this troubadour technique sadly disappeared from the repertoire of European poetry; how unexpected and lovely to see it reanimated by an awkward young poet from the Slovenian Karst. The following poem can serve to demonstrate Kosovel's use of end-words:

Ne, jaz nočem še umreti,
saj imam očeta, mater,
saj imam še brate, sestre,
ljubico, prijatelje;
ne, jaz nočem še umreti.

No, I do not want yet to die,
for I have a father, mother,
I still have brothers, sisters,
a sweetheart, friends;
no, I do not want yet to die.

Ne, jaz nočem še umreti,
saj še sije zlato sonce,
saj mladost me drzna spremlja,
saj so cilji še pred mano;
ne, jaz nočem še umreti.

No, I do not want yet to die,
for the golden sun still shines,
for bold youth is still with me,
for there are goals still ahead;
no, I do not want yet to die.

Kadar pa ne bo nikogar,
staršev ne, ne bratov, sester,
ljubice, prijateljev –
in jesensko tiho soncebo
čez Kras, čez Kras sijalo,
kot bi za mano žalovalo –
res, ne bom se bal umreti,
kaj mi samemu živeti?

But when there is no one left,
neither parents, nor brothers, sisters,
my sweetheart, friends –
and the quiet autumn sun
shines across the Karst, the Karst,
as though it was in mourning for me –
then no, I will not be afraid to die,
for why would I live alone?

The final/key words in this poem are: *to die, sisters, friends, and sun*, but other words within the lines are also repeated, as is the final line of the first two stanzas, which gives the effect of a refrain. The stanza composition of this poem is somewhat unusual: two five-line stanzas are followed

by an eight-line stanza, as though the poet had set out to write according to a plan of five-line symmetrical stanzas, but suddenly, in a flight of inspiration, prolonged the third, concluding stanza. With the exception of the last four lines, which have successive verbal rhymes (a facile and rather bombastic procedure, but in this particular instance very effective), the text is unrhymed; the absence of rhymes Kosovel compensates for with compact, metrically organised verse (trochaic octosyllabic verse, with the exception of two seven-syllable lines with the same trochaic metre). If a series of unrhymed verse lines are suddenly followed by a rhyme, the unexpectedness of this acoustic transition makes it all the more powerful; the same effect is achieved by the absence of a rhyme after a series of rhymed lines; Kosovel must have intuitively felt the poetic and emotional charge of such shifts in rhyme and metre.

Rhyme, of course, is by no means merely a euphonic device; it is also a rhythmic and semantic phenomenon. The interdependence of rhythm and rhyme (note the etymological kinship between the two words) is a marked feature of many Kosovel's texts which move away from traditional versification. In other words, in those poems where the rhythm is metrically irreproachable, Kosovel allows himself to drop rhyme, and in those texts where the poet has abandoned metrical regularity, a stronger use of rhyme makes up for the instability of rhythm. This is yet another proof of the law mentioned earlier, that a structural vacuum left behind after the collapse of the traditional system of versification needs to be filled with other structural means: if rhyme is barely audible, rhythm speaks forth; if rhythm does not flow smoothly, lines are reinforced by rhyme. On the basis of the many examples Kosovel's poetry provides, one can derive another, more general, maxim: the period of deterioration of the traditional system of versification metre and rhyme are inversely proportional to each other. The poem *Spomnim se* (I Remember) is a good example of when a reinforced metrical design (a trochaic octosyllabic line) fills the structural vacuum which is left when rhymes and symmetrical stanzaic composition are abandoned. The organisation of the poetic text is made more compact also through anaphora (*in/and; tiho, da ni /quietly, so*) and syntactic parallels.

*Spomnim se, ko sem se vrnil
in molčal sem kakor cesta,
ki vse vidi, a ne sodi.*

*Tam pod tistim temnim zidom
sem poslavljaj se od tebe
in sem te težko poljubljaj
na oči otožnovdane
in na tvoje temne lase
in tajil besede rahle,
da bi Krasu bil podoben.*

*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.*

I remember when I returned
and was mute like the road
that sees all, but judges not.

There beneath that dark wall
I was taking leave of you
and heavy were my kisses
on your sad devoted eyes
and on your dark hair
and I kept tender words secret
to resemble the Karst more.

And on my way home,
I burst out crying on the road,
quietly, so the field could not hear,
quietly, so the woods could not hear,
so the tree did not weep
amid the woods, quietly, alone.

As an example of the reversed technique, let me cite the following poem *Mati čaka* (Mother Is Waiting), in which rhymes compensate for the absence of regular metre:

*Tujec, vidiš to luč, ki v oknu gori?
Moja mati me čaka in mene ni,
vse je tiho v noči, polje temno,
zdaj bi stopil tja, pokleknil pred njo.*

Stranger, can you see this light in the window burning?
My mother is waiting and I am not there,
everything is quiet in the night, the field dark,
I would go there now, kneel down before her.

*Mati, poglej: nič nočem več od sveta,
reci besedo, besedo, besedo od srca,
da bo v njej mirna luč in topel svit
zame, ki tavam okrog ubit, ubit.*

Mother, look: there is nothing more I want from the world,
say a word, a word, a word from the heart,
so it will hold calm light and warm gleam
for me, who am wandering around beaten, beaten.

*Joj! Ugasnila je luč. Zakaj, ne vem.
Šel bi pogledat, tujec, a zdaj ne smem.
Daj mi, da morem umreti tukaj, sedaj,
glej, meni je ugasnil edini, poslednji sijaj.*

Oh! The light has gone out. Why, I do not know.
I would want to go and see, stranger, but cannot right now.
Grant me that I should die here, now,
You see, the one, final glow has died.

The metrical impulse of this poem is trochaic, but one that undergoes numerous variations; the rhythm changes, as do the number of syllables, which vary between 10 and 15. In order to counterbalance these rhythmic fluctuations, Kosovel resorts both to consecutive rhyme, which is the simplest of rhyme schemes and the “loudest”, and to a symmetrical, regular stanza organisation. My notion of the inverse relationship between metre and rhyme in a period of deterioration of the traditional system of versification can be extended to include stanza organisation. In metrically looser poems, Kosovel and other poets of this transitional period insist on symmetrical, regular stanzas, whereas whenever a poem adheres to strict metrical composition, it allows for a more relaxed stanza composition and symmetrical stanzas give way to stanzas of different lengths, organised mainly according to the “thematic”, that is to say syntactic and semantic, aspect.

From the generic and formal point of view, many of Kosovel’s early poems are modernised ballads. It is interesting to note that Kosovel uses the title *Balada* (Ballad) for one of his short, simple and most celebrated poems:

*V jesenski tihi čas
prileti brinjevka
na Kras.*

Into the autumn quiet time
a fieldfare flies
to the Karst

*Na polju
že nikogar več ni,
le ona
preko gmajne
leti.
In samo lovec
ji sledi...*

In the field
there’s no one left,
only the bird
flying
over the woods.
And only a hunter
following it...

*Strel v tišino;
droben curek krvi;
brinjevka
obleži, obleži.*

A shot through the quiet;
a tiny trickle of blood;
the fieldfare
falls dead, falls dead.

Kosovel's combination of narrative and lyrical elements and the poem's tragic conclusion are probably why he chose the title, *A Ballad*. On the other hand, there are many poems to be found in Kosovel's work where, beside the dimensions of genre and theme, the poet also takes into account, consciously or unconsciously, the formal properties of the traditional Slovenian ballad. The best example of a ballad "proper" is the well-known poem *Bori* (Pines), which is based on the trochaic octosyllabic verse metre, universally one of the most common metres of the ballad. One other element of Kosovel's poem that falls within the characteristic features of the ballad is the use of dialogue. Instead of rhymes, the poem resorts to the principle of final/key words (*groza*/terror, *bori*/pines, *bratje*/brothers, *mati*/mother, *oče*/father); the rhetorical figures of *geminatio*, the immediate repetition of a word (here, the word *bori*/pines); and the anaphora (*bori*/pines, *ali*/or, *ko da/as* though), all of which contribute toward a tighter structure.

Bori, bori v tihi grozi,
bori, bori v nemi grozi,
bori, bori, bori, bori!

Bori, bori, temni bori
kakor stražniki pod goro
preko kamenite gmajne
težko, trudno šepetajo.

Kadar bolna duša skloni
v jasni noči se čez gore,
čujem pritajene zvoke
in ne morem več zaspati.

»*Trudno sanjajoči bori,*
ali umirajo mi bratje,
ali umira moja mati,
ali kliče me moj oče?«

Brez odgovora vršijo
kakor v ubitih, trudnih sanjah,
ko da umira moja mati,
ko da kliče me moj oče,
ko da so mi bolni bratje.

Pines, pines in silent horror
pines, pines in mute horror,
pines, pines, pines, pines !

Pines, pines, dark pines
like guards at the foot of a mountain
across the stony woods
whisper heavily, exhausted.

When a sick soul arches
on a clear night across the mountains,
I hear stifled sounds
and can sleep no more.

"Exhausted, dreaming pines,
are my brothers dying,
is my mother dying,
is my father calling me?"

Without answer, they swish
as in beaten, spent dreams,
as though my mother were dying,
as though my father were calling me,
as though my brothers were sick.

Pines, one of Kosovel's best poems, bears suggestive evidence that the young poet had overcome his initial prosodic awkwardness with the aid of the principle of repetition, and evolved it in the direction of a deeply personal and unusually mature poetic expression.

The crown of Kosovel's mastery of traditional versification is his sonnets – fifty poems brought together in part II of *Pesmi* (*Poems*) of Srečko Kosovel's first volume of *Zbrana dela* (*Collected Works*), edited by Anton Ocvirk (DZS, 1946). Some readers will not recognise these texts as sonnets, for the quatrains are followed by the third, six-line stanza (the tercets are combined into a sextain). But even this stanzaic composition has a place within the rich and diverse storehouse of the subgenres of the sonnet form, and is not Kosovel's invention. In these poems Kosovel is striving for the historically earliest metre of the sonnet verse line – the iambic hendecasyllable. And he achieves the so-called *simplex*, as Antonio da Tempo in the 14th century has referred to the demanding organisation of rhymes ABBA ABBA CDC DCD (the envelope pattern of rhymes in the quatrains, and

interlocking pattern of rhymes in the tercets – *rime incatenate*), which is the sonnet form most frequently used by the great Slovenian Romantic poet France Prešeren, and constitutes the basic rhyming model in the history of the Slovenian sonnet form. An example of such rhyming is Kosovel's sonnet *Truden, ubit* (Tired, Spent):

*Truden, ubit grem iz dneva v večer,
na mojih ustnih ni več molitve,
v moji duši prekrute žalitve
in brez miru sem, miru ni nikjer.*

Tired, spent I go from day to evening,
on my lips there is no more prayer,
in my soul, insults too cruel
and I am without peace, there's no peace anywhere.

*Kakor da sem že izgrešil smer;
v dalji ne vidim več odrešitve,
ah, v moji duši ni več molitve
in miru več ne najdem nikjer.*

As though I have already lost the way,
in the distance I no longer see salvation,
ah, in my soul there is no more prayer
and peace is nowhere to be found.

*Dvigni se, duša pobita, steptana,
dvigni, zagori, zapoj do Boga,
da boš kot harfa prijetno ubrana
kot med večernim žarenjem srca,
da spet bom zaslutit kraljestva neznana
tam preko morij, tam onkraj sveta!*

Rise, beaten soul, down-trodden,
rise, flame up, sing forth all the way to God,
so you will be like a harp sweetly fine-tuned
as when the heart in the evening glows,
so that once again I will intuit realms unknown,
there beyond the oceans, there beyond the world!

It needs also to be said that Kosovel did not combine this rigorous rhyme scheme with iambic hendecasyllables, historically the foremost and also subsequently the most frequent sonnet metre, but instead based the metrical impulse of his sonnet on dactyls, with some digressions and some oscillation in the number of syllables per line.

Besides this variant, Kosovel also liked to employ cross rhymes in the quatrains (ABAB), and repeated rhymes (*rime replicate*: CDE CDE) or *inverse rhymes* (*rime invertite*: CDE EDC) in the tercets. It is also interesting to note that Kosovel drew on a rhyme scheme characteristic of the *French* and *English* sonnet, which is highly unusual for Slovenian poetry. Here is an example which adopts the French rhyme scheme (ABBA ABBA – or ABAB ABAB – CCD EED) – *Iz cikla: Peto nadstropje* (From the Cycle: Fifth Floor).

*V petem nadstropju so dobri ljudje,
v petem nadstropju in v vlažnih kletih,
tam se nikoli ne utrne smeh,
oči tiho, mrliško brne.*

On the fifth floor there are good people
on the fifth floor and in damp cellars,
where laughter never erupts,
the eyes silently, deathlike, whirr.

*V petem nadstropju so dobri ljudje,
v petem nadstropju in v vlažnih kletih,
tam se nikoli ne utrne smeh,
oči tiho, mrliško brne.*

On the fifth floor there are good people
on the fifth floor and in damp cellars,
where laughter never erupts,
the eyes silently, deathlike, whirr.

*In otroci, ki se rode,
kot da imajo žveplo v očeh,
brezglasno leže, zvijajoč se po tleh,
v cunje gnijoče ihte, ihte...*

And children who are born
as though with sulphur in their eyes,
lie soundlessly in convulsions on the floor,
burying their eyes in rotting rags, weeping, weeping

...

*Toda peto nadstropje in klet
kadar pregnije, se zruši svet
in stisne smeh veselih ljudi.
Tropa vojakov s puškami gre,
a še ti se nad mrliči zgroze –
kako da bi mogli streljati?*

But the fifth floor and the cellar
when rotted through, the world collapses
and crushes the laughter of cheerful people.
A troop of soldiers with rifles is coming,
but even they shudder at the sight of the corpses –
how could they possibly shoot?

In Kosovel's sonnets there are five which adopt the rhyme scheme characteristic of the so-called English sonnet (ABAB CDCD EFEF GG). The following rather bitter poem, *Gospodom pesnikom* (To Gentlemen Poets), is a good example:

*Kot v peklu zakajeni vinski kleti
od jutra zbrani pa do polnoči
pisatelji, slikarji in poeti
dušijo svežost rože in moči.*

*Obrazi njih mrtvaški so in blede,
njih srca jih peko kot ogenj vic,
popivajo ob bedi in besedi
in javkanje, to njihov je poklic.*

*Gostilna je njihova zavetnica.
Pa naj velja še, kar je že nekdaj?
Jaz pojdem tja, ker beda in krivica
temnita zlati kraljevski sijaj,
ponižanje, trpljenje, glad in beda,
tam naj spoznanja željni duh spregleda.*

In a wine cellar smoky as hell,
from morning till midnight
writers, painters and poets are gathered,
smothering the freshness of flowers and strength.

Their faces are deathlike and pale,
their hearts smart like the fire of purgatory,
they drink over misery and talk,
and whingeing – that is their calling.

The tavern is their patroness.
Does what has always been, still to hold true?
I am going there, for misery and injustice
are dimming the golden regal glow,
humiliation, suffering, hunger and misery,
that's where any spirit thirsty for knowledge should
have its eyes opened.

Given their stanza organisation (4 – 4 – 6), it would appear that Kosovel's sonnets do not match the structure of the English sonnet (4 – 4 – 4 – 2), but with questions of poetic form, the sound aspect (in this case, the rhyme scheme) takes precedence over the graphic division or the visual make-up of the poem.

In contrast to Prešeren's exclusive use of feminine endings and rhymes in his sonnets, and all the poems written in iambic hendecasyllables, Kosovel often employs masculine endings and rhymes (or draws upon the so-called extended masculine rhyme, where the dactyl ending and rhyme replace the masculine rhyme), which has in fact been the general tendency of the Slovenian sonnet form since Prešeren. The use of masculine rhymes is one dimension in which Kosovel and other poets deviate from Prešeren's model of the sonnet, which, however, has continued to have a firm hold on many Slovenian sonneteers. It is significant that in the more socially critical and political poems (eg. in the sonnets *Revolucija*/Revolution, *Predkosilni sonnet*/Pre-lunch Sonnet, as well as in the poem above, *Iz cikla: Peto nadstropje*/From the Cycle: Fifth Floor), Kosovel uses almost exclusively masculine endings and rhymes, the tone of which is markedly sharper than that of the feminine endings and rhymes.

For Kosovel, writing sonnets was the apex of his metrical achievement; some sonnets are worthy of inclusion in an anthology of Slovenian sonnets. This would certainly apply to *Sonet smrti* (Sonnet of Death):

*In vse je nič. Te žametne oči
ki strmi v sivino,
njih temni sloj prodira med tišino
kot zvok, ki se v šumenju izgubi.*

*Te tihe, črne, žametne oči
mi s svojim temnim bleskom in milino
poljubljajo to sivo bolečino,
ki mojo dušo vsak dan bolj duši.*

And all is nothing. These velvet eyesso *kakor žalost*,
are like sadness which stares into greyness,
their dark layer penetrates silence
like a sound that is drowned by a rustle.

These quiet, black, velvet eyes,
with their dark shimmer and soft grace,
kiss away this grey pain
that suffocates my soul more with each passing day.

*Te tihe, črne, žametne oči
so kakor črno, žametno nebo,
nad ostro rano Krasa razprostrto,
so kakor luč, ki dušo pomiri;
ko ugasne nad pokrajino razdrto,
se v mehko temo duša potopi.*

These quiet, black, velvet eyes,
are like the black, velvet sky,
spread above the sharp wound of the Karst,
are like the light which appeases the soul;
when the lights go out above the shattered landscape,
the soul sinks into soft dark.

One of the most poignant poems is the sonnet *Ena je groza* (One Is Terror).

*Ena je groza, ta groza je: biti –
sredi kaosa, sredi noči,
iskati izhoda in slutiti,
da rešitve ni in ni.*

One is terror, that terror is: being –
amidst chaos, in the middle of the night,
seeking a way out and sensing
salvation will not come, will not come.

*Včasih se med ranjene skale
tiho razlije zlati svit
jutranje zarje – šel bi dalje,
pa že čutiš, da si ubit.*

At times the golden dawning
of daybreak quietly spills
between wounded rocks – you would go on,
but you already feel your are beaten.

*Kakor da se zarja rani,
kadar razgrne svoj pajčolan,
kadar razlije goreče slapovje
in ti zakliče pod goro: Vstani,
glej, že gori razbito gorovje! –
Ti čutiš ga in ne veruješ vanj. –*

As though the dawn hurts itself
when it spreads its veil,
when it spills its burning cascades,
and calls to you below the mountain: stand up,
behold, the shattered mountains are already ablaze! –
You feel him, but don't believe in him. –

After this early period of sonnet writing, Kosovel's poetic adventure took a different direction, towards avant-garde linguistic experimentation. The rhythm-forging function of syntax and the principle of repeating words mark the poet's withdrawal from traditional versification and his entry into free verse.

To conclude: the body of Kosovel's poetry written in regular metre offers many examples which show that artistically strong poetry does not necessarily rest on skilful versification. Srečko Kosovel is a poor prosodist and yet a great poet. Fortunately, in poetry versification is not all. Moreover, versification undergoes significant changes through time, and Kosovel's example demonstrates that shortcomings within one aesthetic system can become advantages in the next.

Translated by Ana Jelnikar

■ ABSTRACT

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Formally, the majority of Kosovel's early poems, which Slovenian literary history has unsatisfactorily labelled "impressionist lyrical poetry", fall within the framework of traditional versification; more precisely, they belong to the period of its disintegration and demise. Awkward in prosody, young Kosovel somewhat weakened traditional accentual-syllabic versification, thus bringing it closer to free verse.

In these poems, Kosovel's poetic language is very simple: verse rhythm is derivative of the most common and popular meters taken from a long tradition, the verse endings are marked by hackneyed, unoriginal rhymes, and the poems are usually divided into the most prevalent stanza structure (mainly quatrains).

Particularly interesting is Kosovel's use of rhyme: his rhyming dictionary is, in fact, extremely poor, with a prevalence of so-called verbal rhymes. (Of all the parts of speech in the Slovenian language, verbs are the easiest to rhyme because of their corresponding inflections, and easily-formed rhymes tend to be semantically – and thereby musically – poor.) It is as though Kosovel were endlessly repeating the rhymes he had learnt from the poetic canon of 19th-century Slovenian poetry. For any other, less talented, poet of Kosovel's time, drawing on such a familiar and worn-out domestic stock of rhyme endings would be a clear sign of a grossly sentimental and conservative poetics. Not so with Kosovel: in his verse, these rhymes, a hundred times used and abused, suddenly ring out in a different, fresh, and artistically authentic way. Kosovel surpassed the weakness of his versification by repeating his mistakes: a repeated mistake is no longer a mistake; it is already a system. A silent, but a deep and far-reaching break was effected within the traditional versification: even these inherited rhythms and rhymes were endowed with new sounds and meaning through a different usage of poetic language (for in poetry, sound and meaning are always closely bound together).

In short, this segment of Kosovel's poetry offers plenty of textbook examples which show that great poetry does not necessarily rest on skilful versification. Srečko Kosovel is a poor prosodist, but a great poet. Fortunately, in poetry, versification is not everything. Moreover, versification undergoes significant changes through time, and Kosovel's example demonstrates that the shortcomings within one aesthetic system can become advantages in the next.