

# THE CANONISATION OF AN 'ABSENT' AUTHOR

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The following reflection on Srečko Kosovel, written in the year of the centenary of the poet's birth, may appear, at least at the outset, to be a type of exterior observation, the type that has no inherent connection to Kosovel's poetry, and is therefore moving away from the discussions customary when one speaks of such an important poet. It may even appear "sacrilegious" at first sight, but – I hope – it will transpire that the reflection only seems to stand on the outside. It will address the problems of authorship and canonisation that inadvertently strike the eye, in the case of Kosovel, and would not lose their appeal with time, because they have given rise to questions that not only concern Kosovel, but also relations between the literary author, literature, and meta-literary contexts in general. The theoretical framework that may help in this analysis is partly related to contemporary criticism of authorship as developed in the late 1960's by Barthes, Foucault and others, partly to the model of the literary system and its evolution as developed by Schmidt and co-workers within the field of empirical science (Schmidt 1980, 1989), and to a great extent to modern analyses of the literary canon and processes of canonisation (Guillory 1983, Juvan 1994, Dovič 2003).

It is well known that Srečko Kosovel (1904-1926) entered Slovenian literary, cultural and political history as a poet of many faces: as a melancholy poet of the Karst, a sensitive poet with a distinctive premonition of death, a visionary of social revolution, and also as a truly avant-garde poet. Relatively soon after his death he became a true icon, perhaps the most important name in 20<sup>th</sup> century Slovenian poetry, a national literary classic. His name virtually became a trademark; schools were named after him; he is well represented in anthologies of poetry and literary histories; and he has to this day received a thorough introduction and analysis in the high-school curriculum. Kosovel's classic status has been due largely to literary historians, who have published extensive studies and monographs about him. In the year of the centenary of Kosovel's birth even more time was devoted to him – and after all, a poet's worth within the canon can also be measured by the amount of attention accompanying his jubilees. There were numerous round tables, symposia, readings, celebrations, there are

new scientific studies underway, popular essays, newspaper commentaries and special monographs on Kosovel and his work.

Without a doubt Kosovel is a classic, almost a cult figure in Slovenian cultural history. And in what way is he available to us today? A potential recipient of Kosovel's poetry faces tons of various editions, compilations and selections of poetry: from rare pre-war editions to small, paperback, pocket and ornamented editions, etc. Those who wish to upgrade their high-school experience of Kosovel are, however, primarily guided by the reference editions of his collected works (from the collection *Collected Works of Slovenian Poets and Writers* (Zbrana dela slovenskih pesnikov in pisateljev)) and, of course, by the legendary 1967 illustrated edition of so-called *Integrals* (Integrali). With regard to this, one may ask some interesting questions about the process of canonisation.

Because similar questions come to mind with regard to other authors, the case of Janez Trdina may serve well to present the problem, which becomes much more complicated with Kosovel. There is a moment when it becomes blatantly clear what a historical construct – almost a lie – the canonised “Trdina” is, as available to us in *Collected Works*, and how much effort is required to make out the original context, which stubbornly eludes us. In the case of Trdina, the collection contains twelve volumes of the same format, binding, typography etc., so we are dealing with a whole which is organized, homogeneous, and in itself gives the impression of a kind of coherence, unity and inner harmony in the author's body of work. In reality, however, the compilation of the twelve volumes contains completely diverse textual material: from relatively jumbled manuscript notes, which obviously never reached the phase of final authorial editorship, to arranged, relatively polished and completed texts – like most of the *Tales and Stories about Gorjanci* (Bajke in povesti o Gorjancih). Even though these facts are more or less adequately explained in the endnotes, one thing is evident: the pieces which the author undoubtedly intended to publish are intermingled with those about which it is anything but clear whether the author would wish to have published them in such a form; it is also obvious that this mixture is hidden by the uniformity of the edition.

In the case of Trdina, therefore, it is possible to claim that the editor of the first edition of the *Selected Works*, Etbin Kristan, (working for the publisher Schwentner), and even more so the editor of the *Collected Works*, Janez Logar, became co-authors in a way: they co-modelled “Trdina” for successive generations. And yet Trdina lived long (from 1830 to 1905) and was actively in charge of the fate of his texts; if nothing else, he had control over whether he would publish something during his lifetime or not. The situation with Kosovel is very different. As is well known, Kosovel died at twenty-two of meningitis in Tomaj in 1926. In the few years of his active literary production he created an incredibly vast, and also remarkably diverse range of poetry – there are over one thousand poems in the twelve folders kept at the manuscript department of the National Library. He left, therefore, heaps of poetry, but very little information about it. His authorial work ended at writing the text, and could not go on to include selection,

polishing, the method of presentation to the public, the means of winning recognition from his contemporaries in the literary system etc. – all these practices are always a part of the life of a literary producer. But for Kosovel to become a classic, someone had to do this work for him.

Those who undertook this job were first faced with the dilemma of how to cope with the mass of material. As I was ploughing my way through this truly impressive material, I discovered that there are extremely few guidelines by which to classify it. It would be difficult to arrange the material into thematic fields with any justification; the same goes for the principle of stylistic affinities. It is not possible to determine with any kind of certainty the chronological order of the poems. The only opposition that might serve as a sign of a hierarchy would be the opposition signed/unsigned; however, this is not and cannot be reliable, because it really is insufficient evidence that the signed poems are indeed better or more accomplished, or that the poet would have preferred them published or would have wanted them published at all. Should we consider the quality of paper? One of the best authorities on Kosovel's legacy, the editor Aleš Berger, believes that it is possible to determine when the poems are fair copies, and that we could consider these poems to be more complete. But even this is an unreliable guideline. The opposition titled/untitled also leads nowhere. The odd mention of his plans and the few poems the poet published during his lifetime also do not provide significant help.

It seems ironic, but it makes most sense to organize the manuscripts alphabetically, as they are stored in the Library. The moment anyone wishes to do something with this legacy, the only sensible alternative turns out to be a construction, which can only be more or less informed, a construction of a continuity, of a story. Another agent in the literary system has to take the place of the author: another author, editor or critic. By doing their authorial work, they each become a co-worker, a co-author to Kosovel: Ocvirk with Kosovel, Gspan with Kosovel, Brumen with Kosovel... The significance of the fact that Kosovel as author is somehow absent, unavailable, is actually hard to assess. But it should by no means be neglected, or lost sight of, or any discussion about his poetry trying to go beyond the level of the analysis of individual poems – this includes the issues of the development of his style, issues of modernism, the avant-garde etc. – will lose its credibility.

## The literary canon

The problem of an author "absent" in the way we have described, somehow detached from his own work and image – because he could not accomplish all the tasks expected of a literary producer – and yet with a name written in gold letters among the "Great Authors", enables and forces us to think through the basic features of the literary canon and the processes of its formation. The literary canon undoubtedly holds one of the most important roles in modern literary theory, and becomes crucial when literature

is not studied as literature alone – that is, as a sum of literary texts and their authors – but in its wider cultural and social context. In this context, the role of literature proves multi-faceted: the literary canon is not only a selection of the most appreciated texts in a cultural community, but a wider whole, containing also the names as authors' "trademarks", all of the important text interpretations, everyday sayings adapted from canonised texts, simplified formulas and quotes "for everyday use", typical evaluations, and so on. Put simply, not only Kosovel's texts, for example the best "Integrals" or "Cons" pieces, are part of the literary canon, but also the well-known fact that the poet was in poor health and died young, that he was "the poet of the Karst", and even the history of readers' reception seems inseparable from the whole image. The literary canon is an important element in "the foundations" of a community, a textual basis on which a society builds, and also maintains and recycles its historical memory; it is a kind of a mirror through which it establishes its identity, as Marko Juvan points out (1994). Against the texts that are a part of the literary canon, all past, but also current cultural experiences of this community are measured and legitimised.

The canon, of course, is highly selective, and changes with time; particularly due to the influx of new, fresh authors, canonical choices regarding the distant past are more selective and schematic. To function well in its role as a social cohesive, the canon needs effective mechanisms of reproduction, and the school system is the most important (Guillory 1983). Kosovel remains "Kosovel" mainly because he is produced and reproduced as such by the school system – in this sense, it is the terminus of canonisation and the ultimate point of validation. Before that, however, the canonised author has to pass countless screening processes. Let us look at this journey, as analysed in detail by representatives of the Dutch empirical school, for example Kees van Rees (1989). An individual with literary ambitions is first scrutinised by editors, so the majority of writers are never published. When someone does publish something, the critics will, with luck, pay a certain amount of attention to the text. If the author stirs enough interest among the critics and essayists, literary history will gradually seize him or her in its scientific claws and "clean up the author", who is then, if need be, ideologically adapted and assimilated. Only after that may the author and the text appear in school curricula, in textbooks, on mandatory reading lists, or among high-school diploma examination materials. This is an "ideal" and simplified picture of the process. The author can have some bearing on the processes, if he is alive, that is. It is easier to pass one's text through the initial filters of editors and publishers if one knows the techniques of lobbying, mingles with the right people (editors, critics) etc. The same goes for all the later stages – the image of "a good author" which reaches the stage of scientific examination is often rather distorted, burdened with para-textual processes, personal connections, and so on.

During his lifetime, Kosovel published very little, but he was incredibly prolific. He most definitely wanted to publish his poems, but he ran out of time to carry out his radical ideas for their proper distribution. The

only ideas he put into practice were the high-school paper *Fair Vida* (Lepa Vida), and the literary and drama circle named after Ivan Cankar; for a couple of months he and his colleagues managed to take over the editorship of the magazine *Youth* (Mladina). His own collection of poems, the magazine *Constructor* (Konstrukter), and a book collection, all remained unrealised visions. The circumstances following Kosovel's death were unusual: his contemporaries were left with an endless sea of manuscripts and almost no hierarchy among them; with almost no plans or even outlines for the structure of the future collection of poems that Kosovel surely had in mind.

## Constructing a classic

And thus begins the story of Kosovel that has little to do with the deceased. His friends deserve all the credit for the fact that the manuscripts were even tackled – this poetry could quite easily have remained a story from a drawer, a non-existent story. The path which led to Kosovel being considered among the classics is full of arbitrary decisions, more or less justified editorial judgements, and of digging through the manuscripts; but it is also the history of a specific, very contradictory reception. All this was already true of the first modest selection of poems in 1927, published a year after the poet's death. The selection was made by Alfonz Gspan, who decided on mainly traditional poems. The same was true of the 1931 selection by Anton Ocvirk, a scientist and founder of comparative literature in Slovenia, and Kosovel's younger contemporary. It is Ocvirk who was the main actor in what we may call the "construction" of the canonical Kosovel. Ocvirk took over most of the manuscripts, and after the World War II, Kosovel was one of the first authors confirmed for publication within the ambitious collection of *Collected Works of Slovenian Poets and Writers*. In 1946 Ocvirk published the first volume of Kosovel's *Collected Works*. He included many of the poems, but *not* the most radical ones, for the reason – which he himself later explained – that they seemed to him fragmentary, unfinished; he felt they were still first drafts that Kosovel was throwing onto paper in a creative fever, and not real, aesthetically refined poems. However, Ocvirk did include some of the more radical Cons poetry in this first edition.

But this is where the real story only just begins. There were many poems left in the legacy; most of all, those that are now considered the most radical. For this reason a revision of the 1946 *Collected Works* was needed. The new version of volume one was issued in 1964, and the second volume, which included the so-called *Integrals* (Integrali), appeared in 1974. The most radical poems, which were given the editorial title of *Integrals*, were first published in 1967, and this prestigious edition was also edited by Anton Ocvirk, with design by Jože Brumen. The book shocked the public: where had these poems, "the best" of this Slovenian modernist and avant-garde writer been all this time? The finger was pointed at Ocvirk, who

had “held back” the manuscripts for all those years. This finger, however, somehow missed the point: because Kosovel was dead, and had left no plans, the selections of materials and even the titles of collections or series of poems – in short, all editorial interventions – were *totally arbitrary* in any case. This means that every editor could always pick according to his own judgement, according to his own taste and aesthetic values. It could be said that the editors constructed, even “produced” their own Kosovel. And we can only now answer the opening question of how Kosovel could become a poet of such diverse faces: his heterogeneous opus, soaking up influences from all kinds of literary trends and movements, permitted even diametrically opposed constellations of aesthetic and ideological preferences. Therefore the history of Kosovel’s reception and canonisation must be read as a history of editorial appropriations and adaptations: before World War II, Kosovel was a national poet who had established the imagery of the Karst as the “Slovenian imagery” – at a time when Tomaj was far inside Italy, and Kosovel was studying in another country. The post-war Kosovel could adopt the state-approved face of a revolutionary socialist and sympathiser of the working class. With the flourishing of the neo-avant-garde art in Slovenia, it turned out that Kosovel was actually a modern, avant-garde poet; parallels were established with futurists, constructivists, zenitists, etc. The avant-garde Kosovel – interest in him also grew due to the French poet Marc Alyn – is therefore a poet with a completely different face from that of the once lonely poet of the Karst. By the publication of the 1967 *Integrals*, the Slovenian neo-avant-gardes had acquired legitimacy and become part of a certain historical continuity. However, the *Integrals* book in itself is not a kind of innocent belated publication: it is once again an arbitrary choice, with an arbitrary, possibly even flawed title, accompanied by graphic design which is far from neutral, because it associates Kosovel very closely with the avant-garde context of the period when the book was published. In this sense the story of *Integrals* is related to a chronologically specific interpretation which is ideologically motivated. From this aspect, the often-thematized question of the historical avant-garde in relation to Kosovel can in a way be seen as an artificial question, created in hindsight by literary history to prove the synchronicity of the Slovenian and European literary movements – and here might lie one of the reasons for the particularities in Kosovel’s canonisation.

## Conclusion

As we somehow try to sum up what we consider important here, we may find support in the modern systemic and empirical approaches to literature of S. J. Schmidt and others. In the scheme of systems theory the author as a literary producer is inextricably linked with other related roles in the literary system: the roles of a mediator, receiver, critic. In this regard, Kosovel’s case seems particularly interesting, since as a literary producer Kosovel did not actively engage in systemic relations; or rather, the impact of his

very few engagements in his short life (few publications, editorial work, socialising) is negligible in comparison to what has been done for Kosovel by those who took it upon themselves to do what in normal circumstances is undertaken or at least directed and supervised by the literary producer. It is possible, therefore, to claim that the canonisation of Kosovel, today unanimously regarded not only as one of the best Slovenian poets, but also the most radical representative of the historical avant-garde, took a course which completely "bypassed" the poet. As a canonical author, he was entirely *constructed*, because he had no influence over his own cultural fate.

This does not mean, however, that other authors can play a decisive role in their own canonisation: on the contrary – this happens mainly posthumously, and the authors' ultimate images are tailored by an army of institutions which take part in relatively complex processes. Posthumously, Kosovel victoriously entered the literary arena, but the primary role was played by actors in the literary system other than him. For this reason he seems all the more interesting a case study for various processes in the literary system and the author's role in them. On the other hand, we may also understand our findings regarding Kosovel in the context of a modern criticism of what Barthes calls "the tyranny of the author", or as a contribution to understanding the creation of the "author-function" (Foucault 1979). Several studies have shown the historically contingent nature of individual authorship, which was able to develop in specific social circumstances, became legally codified by the regulation of copyright, and was based in the romantic rhetoric of an inspired genius (Bennet 2005). "The tyranny of the author" still controls most social discourses related to literature – publishers, magazines, critics, state institutions; and also an important segment of traditional literary science benefits from the mythologised dimension of the Author. However, it has been seriously questioned on the theoretical level. From this point of view it is no longer contestable to claim that Kosovel as a canonical author is not at all identical to the poet as a historical person; he is the result of an "authorial co-production" involving the mechanisms of the literary system, as well as scientific observations of literature. We should neglect neither of them if we wish to understand better what is really going on in the process of the social "production" of an author.

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## ■ ABSTRACT

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The author as a literary producer is inextricably linked with other related roles in a literary system: those of mediator, receiver, editor, critic. In this regard, Kosovel's case seems particularly interesting, since as a literary producer Kosovel did not actively engage in systemic relations, or rather, the impact of his very few engagements in his short life (scarce publications, editorial work, socialising) is negligible in comparison to what was "done for" Kosovel by those who have taken it upon themselves to do what in normal circumstances is undertaken or at least directed and supervised by the literary producer him/herself. Thus it is possible to claim that the canonisation of Kosovel, today unanimously regarded as not only one of the best Slovenian poets, but also the most radical representative of the historical avant-garde, had taken a course which totally "bypassed" the poet. Posthumously, Kosovel victoriously entered the literary arena, but the primary role was played by other actors in the literary system, since he left no instructions as to what should be done with his extensive and hierarchically disordered legacy. For this reason he seems all the more interesting a case study for various processes in the literary system and the author's role in them. By the same token, most discussions of Kosovel and his work to date have overlooked this important context, approaching "Kosovel" as something pre-given and at disposal, which can easily lead to simplifications.