

SREĆKO KOSOVEL AND THE EUROPEAN AVANT-GARDE

Janez Vrečko

Faculty of Arts, Ljubljana, Slovenia

I.

The Slovene poet Srečko Kosovel was born in the Austro-Hungarian Empire on 18th March 1904 in Sežana, near Trieste. He grew up in a nationally conscious teacher's family.¹ In 1916 he went to the polytechnic school in Ljubljana, since his parents wished to spare him from the horrors of the First World War. After this war, a third of the Slovene people found themselves transformed from subjects of the Habsburg dynasty into subjects of the Savoy kings, which for them was a catastrophic historical rupture. Even by the end of 1918 the Fascists had broken into the premises of the Slovenian bishopric in Trieste, and later forced the bishop to quit his diocese. In the middle of 1920, with the tacit consent of the authorities, the Fascists burnt down the *Narodni dom* cultural centre, the most visible and powerful focus of Slovene presence in Trieste. This arson attack was a baptism of fire presaging Fascism, and an introduction to the oppression that escalated especially after October 1922, when the Fascists came to power in Italy. They dismantled everything that was Slovene, from political parties to cultural societies, banned the Slovene language from public use, Italianised Slovene surnames, and suppressed periodical publications. School reforms in 1923 made Italian the exclusive language of instruction in schools. Numerous poets, writers and journalists had to leave the narrow confines of the Primorska (coastal) region homeland.

The fate of the Primorska region after the First World War was extremely traumatic for Kosovel. He observed with fear how nationalism and militarism were growing, and how Trieste was being transformed from an open, multilingual city, into a place of intolerance and brutal settling of scores with opponents of the regime; among them were quite a few Slovenes who were friends of Kosovel. He had similar criticism, too, for the state of the southern Slavs, the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes, for he soon

¹ The article was first published in: Srečko Kosovel, *Man in a Magic Square*. Translated by Nike Kocjančič Pokorn, Katarina Jerin, Philip Burt. Ljubljana: Myra Locatelli, k.d. and Mobitel, d.d., 2004.

realised how much of a threat to the Slovenes Serbian nationalism was becoming. In their centralising zeal, Serb politicians detected separatist tendencies in every single cultural and social activity. Along the lines of Bengali writer Tagore, Kosovel separated nationality, which meant to him something spiritual, from nationalism, which he held to be a material force. Kosovel rejected Fascism in Italy and the nationalism of 'Greater Serbia' of the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes as "militarised nationalism". The poet soon felt the aggression of the Greater Serbia policy himself, for he was not given a grant that would have been essential for him after the forced retirement of his father, who lost his job because he was a proud Slovene (Pirjevec, 12). His father's wish was that his son train as a forestry engineer, and in that way he could have worked professionally in afforesting the Karst, but this was not to be, for in 1922 Kosovel began Slavonic and Romance studies at University of Ljubljana.

II

Who was the poet Srečko Kosovel, who confidently wrote at the age of 20 that his "life is Slovene, modern, European and eternal" (3, 321)? Although he belonged to one of the smallest European nations, as a poet and thinker he sought solutions not just for himself and his own nation, but acted for the "salvation of mankind". We have a good reason to ask, therefore, how did he understand his poetic calling and the position of the intellectual in a Europe devastated by the First World War and in the early stages of a new world crisis?

III

Kosovel was revealed extremely slowly. A year after his death, in 1927, his friends published the selection *Poems*; 1930 saw the publication of *Selected Poems*, and in 1946, the first volume of *Collected Works* was published, this collection only becoming complete with the third volume in 1977. In 1967 Kosovel's experimental poetry appeared in an independent collection, and this then exposed a "hitherto unknown chapter in Slovene literature, which we might also call the European avant-garde" (Flaker, 1983, 7).

His poetic opus embraces impressionist poetry, but in 1924 and 1925, when he became familiar with Italian futurism, German expressionism, zenitism, Berlin constructivism and Russian constructivism, his poetry progressed to an experimental phase, into his famous *cons* poems, as he himself called them. From the late summer of 1925 on, he also devoted himself to revolutionary poetry. What is specifically interesting about Kosovel is that he was involved in all three "orientations" simultaneously, and therefore did not abandon impressionism during his avant-garde and politically orientated phase. For many years, readers only knew Kosovel from his impressionist poetry and partly through his later political writings. In the mid-sixties he

also became appealing as an avant-garde poet, for until then only around 15 poems from the “department of constructions” had been published.

It was precisely Kosovel’s exceptionally intense poetic and intellectual fate that spurred a range of literary-historical research. In this way it was finally established in the middle of the eighties that the Slovenes were involved in an intensive way in the avant-garde movements of the 1920’s, which today we label collectively the historical avant-garde, and this then showed that it was precisely Kosovel who was responsible for phenomena that entirely satisfied the criteria of the European avant-gardes. This overturned conclusively Willet’s contention that there were no avant-garde movements south of the line running from Vienna to Budapest (Willet 1978, 9).

The Slovene historical avant-garde may consequently be seen as a single and continuous movement, since from the intermediary aspect the experimentation stretches from literature through to the fine arts, theatre and music, and also incorporates the constitutive elements of every avant-garde, complete with public appearances, group activities, manifestoes, magazines and a logical sequence of aesthetic, ethical and political re-evaluation. Kosovel represents the internal constant of this movement.

IV

Thus far, literary doctrine has been led to link Kosovel with constructivism by the fact that primarily in his diaries and correspondence he frequently mentioned this concept, and that he called his poems by the abbreviation *cons*, which was also to be the name of the magazine which he intended to publish and manage as editor-in-chief.

Despite this, some linked him to Italian futurism, although a merely fleeting look at his manifesto *Mehanikom* (To Mechanics) shows that Kosovel was not one to join in with the futurist reverence for kinetic beauty and modern technology. He rejected Marinetti’s mechanical man and his “liberated words” (*parole in libertà*) and espoused a new man, which he writes with capitalised initials. He felt similarly about zenithism and its “words in space” (*Worte im Raum*), which to him was mere tinkering.

In his poetic repertoire Kosovel used almost all the main words from the contemporary technical arsenal, such as automobile, express train, aircraft, torpedo, motor and so on, and he had an ambivalent attitude to them. It was clear to him that it was the development of modern technology that had sown the seeds of education among people. “The radio, telegram, mail, railway, steamships, newspapers, and books are the promoters of development” (3, 26). “The automobile is a sensation”, “Automobile 4 km, thoughts 1 km, ambition 100 m”. It was clear to Kosovel that technology was the fruit of intellect, and was more interesting to the modern person than art, (see 3, 111), but that it also alienated people, mechanised them, and heartlessly civilised them. Hence Kosovel’s principle that “people cannot be mechanised”, “man is not an automaton”, and “Fall, dead man... slave of mechanics”. If at first he found the automobile to be a sensation, it

had now become a device that “sprays mud”, “The “car has no free will”, “There is no culture in mechanics”, and “Trains are as slow as black snails. Thought is like lightning”. Kosovel’s had a similar attitude to urban civilisation, to its countless illusions, which pressurise people and lead the West into inevitable destruction, to the death of Europe. The world of technology is a world in which man loses his original and organic qualities, his capacity for paradoxical thinking, that is, the world of the “exhausted European man”, who is in an “ecstasy of death”.

All this confirms that Kosovel was indeed far from Marinetti’s view, that he maintained a distance from the metropolitan, amusement, circus-like, profiteering, treacherous, and entirely mechanised Taylorian environment of conveyor belts, that he warned against the blind glorification of the “century that is mechanising” and against what Marinetti taught: that only those who allow themselves to be mechanised will survive. Kosovel sees the solution in a paradox that signifies for him a “leap from mechanics into life”, whereby he links himself to zenitist terminology in which the paradox is understood as flexibility of the mind, as a general condition for existence, and not as absurdity (*Zenit*, 1922, 13, 17). Emanating distinctly then from Kosovel’s manifesto is the opposition between life, which is alive, sparkling, paradoxical and electric, and mechanics and the mechanical, which are soulless and cannot comprehend paradoxes. Although his manifesto is written as a living appeal to mechanics and drivers, or to the operators of modern machines, its substance is intended for those capable of leaping away from mechanics in order to destroy the man of the machine. The second part of his manifesto is therefore a panegyric to the New Man, the man from places where the “day breaks; do you feel this glitter?”, whom Kosovel will also call the constructive man, and the age that will belong to him, the age of constructiveness (see 3, 591 -783). Kosovel himself tells us in several places where the art of this new man must seek examples and models: where “morning comes, arriving from the east...arriving with a red mantle” (3, 93).

V

An important avant-garde movement, which Kosovel knew extremely well, was zenitism. The magazine *Zenit*, which ranked among the five leading avant-garde magazines in contemporary Europe, had since its founding in 1921 propagated a new art, which would no longer be an elitist art of museums and coffee-shop decadence, but would be based on the “new foundations of constructivism”, which would regenerate and Balkanise Europe. This would lead to a new type of culture and person, with a Balkan stamp of ethics and direct humanity. For some time Kosovel was quite dangerously burdened with zenitism, mentioning it in his diaries every few pages. He attended two zenitist evenings in Ljubljana, and his estate includes several zenitist publications, with *Zenit* and works from the zenitist library even accompanying him home on his summer holidays in Tomaj (see 3, 454).

Correspondence and diary entries from 1924 indicate that Kosovel made no mention at all of other magazines apart from *Zenit*. From the summer of 1924 until the late spring of 1925, this was the only avant-garde magazine that he studied seriously, even “retrospectively”, back to the first issues. This provided him with information on Berlin constructivism, the orientations of De Stijl, on the Russian productivists, Czech poets, Italian futurists and so on. Through this editorial approach for *Zenit*, its editor Micić showed a “model of cooperation between avant-gardes that was in fact valid right across Europe. It involved a rapid adoption of views, models, experiences ...” (Krečić, 1981, 17). In this connection, Kos points out the examples and cases of constructivist poetry that were for him “perhaps the closest, if not the sole practical model of writing poetry in the modernist manner” (Kos, 1981, 45). It should be pointed out in advance that a distinction will need to be made between Kosovel’s zenitist theoretical stage in the “new manner” and the practical execution of the *cons* pieces, which will of course be far from the zenitist “practical models”.

Especially interesting in this respect are Kosovel’s Diary Notes VII, recorded in April and May of 1925, in other words at a time when the poet was involved intensively with zenitist constructivism, and learned of their methods and aims first hand, at zenitist public appearances. He realised that poetry could no longer be built on the “expansiveness of emotion”, that “poems cannot be woven out of moonbeams alone” (3, 555), and the poem *Rhymes* (Rime) contains numerous elements of Micić’s Categorical Imperative, from rhymes to phrases, declamations and sentimentality. In *Cons ABC* (Kons ABC) he orders his heart to stay cold, “A bottle in a corner says more than a collection of empty rhymes”, and in *Culture’s Prostitution* (Prostituirana kultura) he wonders: “Are you a madman or what, weeping with leaves in the wind?” Barking becomes the only counterweight for the poet, who “howls at the moon” and for whom the only cure is an enema. Brilliant irony is levelled at the sentimental longing for a woman, through the onomatopoeic sounds of rowing: *clap, clap* (*ibid.*). For Kosovel, Micić’s Categorical Imperative became the “programme and foundation for working with the clear principles of anti-aesthetics”, and his zenitosophy convinced him of the need to free himself from the obedient bread and butter of sentimentality (*Zenit*, 1924, 26-33, unpaginated). Kosovel first reckoned with the revolutionary dimensions of zenitist constructivism, then soon after, it seemed to him merely verbal and formally definable tinkering with superficial and short-term effects, so he opted for a criticism of *Zenit*, just as he had dealt with Italian futurism, and in this way for a reorientation of his world view and for a different poetic approach.

VI

From all the above it is clear that Kosovel was well acquainted with the numerous ‘-isms’ of his time; unfortunately, not all of them could be mentioned here; but he did not espouse any of them, since they involved merely

experimenting with form, merely changing literature and art, and not life as a whole. For this reason he had ultimately to turn towards those orientations which, alongside the revolutionised form, also took account of the man of the coming “constructive age”, and which, therefore, alongside a revolution of form, also observed a “revolutionary substance”. Among the movements of the 1920's, Russian constructivism came closest, perfectly linking modern technology and the new man, Kosovel's man of the future constructive age, which was decisive in his turn towards the then political left in Slovenia, and was closely connected to his writing of the *cons* poems.

A comparison between the idealising and fetishising of machines and modern technology in Italian futurism – which also attempted to mechanise man, and to the extent that it would be possible at any time to substitute or replace him with another mechanical man or a mechanical part of him – and the symbol of Russian constructivism, Tatlin's monument to the Third International, speaks volumes. This idea was never realised, unfortunately, for at that time the tallest building in the world would have been entirely devoted to man, since through the built-in geometric frames of the cone, pyramid and cylinder, revolving around their own axis and containing a radio station, the biggest library in the world and a clock, its density of information would ensure that the new, “coming” man would be superlatively informed. Contrary to the futurist Marinetti, Tatlin was not interested in the mere idolatry of mechanical technology, where a racing car could be more beautiful than Nike of Samothrace (for Kosovel, the automobile was “a device that sprays mud”), but in a process beginning with man and his spiritual transformation, which would in turn be followed by a change in economic relations. Kosovel was working on the same wavelength. To his essay, preserved in manuscripts under the title *The Collapse of Society and Art* (Propad družbe in umetnosti ; see 3/1, 807), Kosovel added in parentheses and in pencil a subtitle: “The New White Society of the Future”, at which in his opinion it would be possible to arrive only via “white barricades”, in other words, by a bloodless, spiritual revolution.

We are trying to establish to what extent Kosovel was acquainted with the fundamental principles of Russian literary constructivism, which functioned as the Literary Centre of Constructivists (LCC), to whom he could have been introduced by his friend Ivo Grahov, who illegally emigrated to the Soviet Union in the middle of 1924 and returned home in the winter of 1925.

The LCC was characterised by its attempt to synthesise numerous European ‘-isms’. In Grubel's opinion, this indicates the “synthetic” moment of the constructivist literary movement, an “attempt at merging all known procedures into a common poetic inventory” (*ibid.*).

Familiarity with the principles of the LCC finally enabled Kosovel to modify his *cons* poems for the needs of Slovene literary circles, in which there was still a need to accommodate the specific position of language, and thus the poetic idiom. Indeed, in recent Slovene history, literature had a nation-building function, something that also applied to certain other nations in the Austro-Hungarian Empire. The British historian A. J. P. Taylor established for them the notion that they were simply the brainchildren of

poets. For the Slovenes, the establishment of the state of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes (SCS) after the First World War after many long centuries offered the first hope of independent statehood, so the functional alliance of the literary and the national could now dissolve. At first, Kosovel concurred with the idea that the historical needs of the nation “in terms of literature have entirely changed” (3, 710), but it soon turned out that they would still need to be observed, for he realised that Serbian nationalism made the kingdom of the SCS worthless.

It was only through the central process of the LCC, through the principle of “gruzification” or the maximum loading of the subject, that Kosovel could undertake a complete poetic experiment. In the *cons* poems he synthesised intensive lyrical elements through mathematical, chemical, pictorial, typographical, and other elements, with political statements. Up to this point, however, these poems did not differ from zenitist and other practical models. Yet since we have established that he could not accept these, for these ‘-isms’ derived from a trans-rational, abstract conception of the word, and from their random collaging, as was the case for Marinetti’s *parole in libertà*, for Micić’s *Worte im Raum*, for the trans-sense language of the Russian futurists, Kosovel had to opt for “poems from words”, where “each word is a world unto itself”; and only LCC offered him this possibility. The LCC theoretician Zelinsky had indeed established the requirement that a poem as a whole must retain its logical semantic dimension. This requirement suited Kosovel particularly well, for he had serious intentions regarding the publication of his *cons* poems. In his definition of constructivism, Kosovel clearly summarised the requirement of the LCC and Zelinsky: “The substance seeks expression in a living, free, organic form, it seeks to be the substance and the form at the same time, hence constructivism” (3, 13). It was Kosovel alighting on the synthetic moment of the LCC that finally produced the *cons* poems as we know them today, signalling as they do a special feature in the European constructivist context and one of its peaks. This is “an unusual combination of political declaration and authentic intimate poetry, and there without a doubt lies its greatest value” (see Flaker, 1983, 77). In these poems, “within disintegration there operates integration, and within the modernist wreckage, there is still a classical order of things... Anti-poetry is transformed into poetry, into the ‘poem’ which Kosovel, in truth, still defended” (Paternu, 1985, 102). Kosovel created spatial, architectural and visual poems in which there was no place for abstract, coincidental, trans-sense or auto-illustrative conceptions of words. “Letters grow into the space, voices are like buildings... The gleaming of space... the light of the word”; “Everything is architecture, poetry, music, there is no more painting” (3, 718). “Development towards space. Each word is a world unto itself/movement between these worlds” (3, 769). “Works of art – an architectonic problem” (3, 703). Only such a conception of the word allowed Kosovel a restitution of the poem through the sensible and logical use of verbal and architectural material, where everything still took place in the “light of the word” as its semantic dimension.

All this enables us to understand Kosovel's perseverance with constructivism, for no other '-ism', no other movement of that time would have allowed him such syntheses of the experimental, the lyrical and left-wing, infused with the most important aspect - a recognisable meaning. This was the point that made Kosovel decide against all movements, from zenitism to futurism, that would not permit or accommodate this. We should mention here that Kosovel also adopted from Russian literary constructivism the requirement that poetic material must be accentuated or made to focus on a previously determined point of construction, which in turn refers back to the entire poem (see Grüberl, 1981, 125).

If we recall Kosovel's definition of the constructivist poem, whereby the "Poem must be a complex" (3, 601), and if we understand that complex as something that is connected within itself, bound, composed into a whole from several parts, then we see that this definition was close to the principle of constructivist "gruzification" or loading, since the complex related to the montage principle, which is the first condition and material for a 'loaded' poem, in which the montage principle has been superseded. Here too is the difference between Kosovel's initial, merely theoretical definition of constructivism, when he still defined a poem as a complex, and his later practical implementation, when he had already become familiar with Russian literary constructivism, although he had already previously anticipated brilliantly the problems and solutions for his *cons* poems.

In these, Kosovel consequently synthesised numerous contemporary avant-garde trends and 'loaded' them on the aesthetic and ideological levels. Of all the '-isms' of the 1920's, with their typographical, pictorial, ideological, and aesthetic material, Russian literary constructivism alone was committed to the semantic dimension of words and to the restitution of the poem according to the principle of the hermeneutic circle, while at the same time attempting to establish human creativity and freedom; this is why it suited Kosovel so well. He rigorously rejected, however, all those orientations which simply advocated free words without meaning, and at the same time supported the mechanisation of man, mechanical dynamics, the glorification of modern civilisation with no critical distance. Zenitism, Italian futurism and Berlin constructivism in particular were in his firing-line.

Only now is it possible to comprehend what Kosovel had in mind when he wrote in his manifesto 'To Mechanics' of the first declaration of war on all mechanisms in the kingdom of the SCS, which seemed to have occurred in Slovenia. He was obviously convinced that the shift which neither zenitism nor anyone else within the SCS state was capable of, was actually accomplished in Slovenia, with his *cons* poetry.

In view of all the above, it is also understandable why Kosovel did not devote himself more to collages. Only three survive: one from April 1925, and two from the end of December 1925. The collages are based on the montage process, on random word collaging, while the fundamental principle of the *cons* pieces was the constructivist 'loading', where montage was only one of the elements in what was termed the maximum loading of the content, which must be evident from start to finish. From the avant-

garde standpoint the collages are more conservative, belonging to a time of unreflected, avant-garde processes in which primary importance was given to the aesthetic aspect and breaking with tradition, while the ‘loaded’ *cons* poems were in the service of ethical and political re-evaluation.

VII

Kosovel began preparing for public appearances and his entry into the Slovene cultural arena, which he called an arena of lies, with an entirely different poetic programme, which should, however, just like his *cons* poems, advance “parallel to the European development” (3, 658).

Experimentation with the *cons* poems did not bring him liberation; he only saw it as a path “over the bridge of nihilism to the positive side” (3, 398), which he also describes as a shift to the left. “From absolute negation, nihilism, I have gradually moved, with my eyes closed, to the positive side. With my eyes closed, so that I might first get a little used to it, and then open them... What a pity that I cannot acknowledge any dictatorship whatsoever. Despite the fact that I always sympathised with the left, I could not understand their narrow-mindedness. Today I see more: my eyes are opening also to those who until now were locked in theory. And I am with them” (3, 400). In the same letter, Kosovel predicts that they will “take over the *Mladina* paper (3, 400/1), and will be able to “write a good deal”, although this will no longer be in the area of the “most modern”, but in the area of the “extreme” in the politically revolutionary sense. Indeed, as early as 1st September 1925 we can read in a letter to Fanica Obidova that he was compiling a collection entitled *The Golden Boat* (Zlati čoln), which he intended “to sell for sure” in the autumn. At the same time he informs her that “I started to take an extreme path in my poems, as well; my latest series of poems... The ‘Integrals’ have an entirely unique and special character. I think I shall hold a reading with them” (3, 402)

In this letter Kosovel first says that he has begun composing extreme poetry, with a special character. This would suggest that he must have been writing this poetry at the end of summer 1925, when he also “crossed over to the left”, and he also says that he is thinking of holding a reading. He therefore emphasises the content of the new poetry, and that corresponds perfectly with his finding that the “revolution of form was too superficial and short-term, while the revolution we are heralding is a revolution of the substance of European man” (3, 658). The new substance is tied to the “extreme path”, extreme in the sense of political substance and revolution. This is, of course, a vague description of the revolutionary nature of these poems from the ‘Integrals’ series, since the letter was written to a political activist, later a member of the Italian Communist Party, who was involved with poetry for only a short time, devoting the rest of her life to politics. So Kosovel wrote to her on 27th July 1925 that he had realised from her last letter what kind of path she was taking, and added that he himself was also “on the same path, in other words, I am heading for the same goal” (3, 399).

Kosovel consequently planned Integrals as a “socialist writer”, who was writing for the new “constructive man”, while at the same time he was clearly aware that “the time is coming when we will have to unequivocally state and declare our words” (3, 568); this, again, is tied to Integrals and the reading Kosovel was planning. The fact that he was hiding his *cons* poems from his friends and the general public, and that all his plans regarding their publication ultimately failed - e.g. the planned magazines Konstrukter and KONS, as well as the fate of *Zenit*, which at the critical moment was not able to exploit its position and link up with the left - forced Kosovel towards more realistic goals, such as the takeover of *Mladina*, and politically extreme poetry in the ‘Integrals’ series, which he would recite in public.

Surely, then, the transformation of Kosovel’s poetry from the *cons* poems to ‘Integrals’ is a clear consequence of information from outside, information about everything that was happening in Russia, where the constructivists were attempting in a similar way to rescue the futurist revolution that had lost its way, precisely with a renewed and great concern for the masses. In this way Kosovel’s poetry also acquired enlightenment and didactic dimensions (“Here we will educate everyone” 3, 690). It was also given a new name: constructive poetry, as collected ‘Integrals’, which would be published by Strelci, the publishing house of proletarian writers of the SCS state.

Tied to this shift “to the left” is Kosovel’s idea of an “international federation of proletarian writers, firstly here, in the SCS, and then abroad” (3, 698), which again proves how exceptionally well-informed Kosovel was, since in the first half of the 1920’s no such international literary organisation yet existed in Europe (Flaker 1982, 182). We may assume that this initiative too, like many others, came through Grahor’s intercession from Russia, where in 1923 the LEF established formal ties with the Moscow Federation of Proletarian Writers. In 1924, during Grahor’s stay in Russia, they were joined by the Literary Centre of Constructivists, and the Federation of Soviet writers was born.

According to Kosovel’s plans, the intended federation of SCS writers would publish ‘Integrals’, collections with introductions (3, 698), novels etc, all of which would be published by Strelci, the intended publishing house of this federation of proletarian writers. That the Integrals collections were supposed to bring social and revolutionary poetry can also be seen from the fact that Kosovel mentions all these facts in one single Journal IX, on pages 18, 19, 20 and 21. He therefore drew a very clear boundary between the *cons* poems and Integrals.

It is also interesting that during the summer months of 1925, when Kosovel was suffering from a creative crisis in his crossing over “to the left”, he began writing prose, including everything from a few lines to a grand plan novel to be called *Kraševci*. These attempts of Kosovel indicate that once again he was abreast of events in Europe, where at that time “the centre of gravity of the European left shifted from avant-garde poetry to socially functional prose” (Flaker, 1982, 186). This would not be mentioned were it not also dependent on events in Russian literary constructivism. We know that after 1924 prose writers began joining the Literary Centre of

Constructivists (see Grübel, 1981, 147); the reason was the already mentioned shift from experimental poetry to functional prose, which was not commissioned as we might naively expect, from below, from the proletarian base, but from above, from the Party. The Party indeed adopted the ideology of the avant-garde, but not their artistic idiom, and that anticipated early on the clash between political and artistic revolutionaries, a clash that ended tragically and hopelessly for the latter.

If we add to this the fact that Selvinsky, a leading theoretician of Russian constructivism, spoke in the Code of Constructivism in 1930 of a “double realism” or a realistic realism, and saw the path to it lying in the introduction of prose processes in poetry, which would sideline the inflated language of futurism, Kosovel’s prose writing makes even more sense. It is the planned federation of SCS proletarian writers is a very good indication that Kosovel made serious and above all very systematic plans for his prose writing, which were based in very thorough knowledge of all the essential developments in the then LCC.

We should emphasise that even in this decisive shift to the left, Kosovel did not lose his critical eye and objectivity towards his work. Parallel to the creation of the Federation of Proletarian Writers, he was pondering what was then the very salient issue of the position of intellectuals in the post-revolutionary period, their awakening from sleep (see 3, 673), the attitude of the poet towards the revolution and whether the revolution was in opposition to the poet or not (see 3, 746). But above all he intended to demand in his work and from his associates an “intellectual atmosphere that will not erase the special features from our faces...” (3/1, 811) And all this was already happening in the Soviet Union and in the LCC, as we have seen. The fact that the members of the LCC were intensively debating the function and place of intellectuals and the intelligentsia in Russian post-revolutionary society (see Grübel, 167), is another indication that Kosovel was familiar with the LCC.

Through the “takeover” of *Mladina*, Kosovel finally acquired his own outlet and seized the initiative on the left-wing front of his day. He took over from the Independent Farmers’ Party in autumn 1925. The magazine became a good basis for left-wing intellectual work up to the Second World War and onwards. The reason for Kosovel taking hold of *Mladina* lies in the fact that his plans with Grahor for a monthly magazine *Volja* (Will) did not succeed, while *Mladina* had assured financial support, which brought Kosovel financial security he had never known. With Kosovel, *Mladina* acquired a new, constructivist title page as the outward sign of a different approach, while Kosovel himself became the leading member of the editorial board and edited the first issue of its second year. “The model of ‘proletarian literature’ within Yugoslavia was introduced in Slovenia, by the magazine *Mladina*, in other words a magazine that was not organised from the centre of an international movement. This model is significant for the whole of Yugoslavia, because it introduced what was called social literature, which during the time of strict censorship was a cryptonym for ‘proletarian’ and ‘revolutionary’ literature” (Flaker, 1981, 187).

Kosovel took his pronounced, politically honed programme to the miners of Zagorje in February 1926, where he gave a very well received lecture on "Art and the Proletarian" and read his Ecstasy of Death, and hoped to repeat this a few days later in Ljubljana. However, he came into conflict with the authorities and they denied him hospitality in two Ljubljana auditoriums. Afterwards he might have fallen silent or gone underground, or even quarrelled with his too dogmatic friends. He died at the age of 22, without succeeding in publishing the already prepared – complete with introduction – collection of poems *The Golden Boat* (Zlati čoln), and without realising any of his numerous projects. Nevertheless, it is difficult to comprehend, how such vast poetic and intellectual potential could have been condensed into such a short human life. The answer was given by the poet himself when he wrote that his life was "Slovene, modern, European and eternal." (3, 321).

BIBLIOGRAPHY

(3, 321) This indicates the numbering from the *Zbrano delo Srečka Kosovela* [Collected Works of Srečko Kosovel], edited by Anton Ocvirk, and published between 1946 and 1977. The first number refers to the volume, the second to the page.

FLAKER, Aleksandar: *Poetika osporavanja*. [Poetics of Challenge]. Zagreb, 1982.

FLAKER, Aleksandar: "Konstruktivna poezija Srečka Kosovela". [The Constructive Poetry of Srečko Kosovel]. *Delo*, 28. 7. 1983 (KL, p. 7).

GRÜBEL, Rainer: *Russischer Konstruktivismus*. [Russian Constructivism]. Wiesbaden, 1981.

KOS, Janko: »Avantgarda in Slovenci«. [The Avant-garde and Slovenes]. *Sodobnost* 8, 9 (1980).

KREČIČ, Peter: *Slovenski konstruktivizem in njegovi evropski okviri*. [Slovene Constructivism and its European FRAMEWORKS]. Ljubljana, Faculty of Arts dissertation, 1981.

PATERNU, Boris: »Slovenski modernizem«. [Slovene Modernism]. *Sodobnost* 11 (1985).

PIRJEVEC, Marija: »Srečko Kosovel in slovenstvo«. [Srečko Kosovel and the Slovene Identity]. *Primorska srečanja* 273 (2004).

WILLET, John: *The New Sobriety 1917–1933*. London, 1978.

VREČKO, Janez: *Srečko Kosovel, slovenska zgodovinska avantgarda in zenitizem*. [Srečko Kosovel, the Slovene Historical Avant-garde and Zenitism]. Maribor, 1986.

■ ABSTRACT

UDK 821.163.6.09-1 Kosovel S.

Key words: Slovene poetry / Kosovel, Srečko / literary avant-garde / constructivism

The paper explores Kosovel's attitude towards Italian futurism, Balkan zenithism and Russian constructivism. Kosovel's work as a whole, including his letters and diary entries, makes it clear that he would not follow the Italian "liberated words" (*parole in libertà*), because to him – being a Slovenian poet, and particularly a Slovenian from the Primorska region – the word was sacred and untouchable. His manifesto "To the Mechanics" is further proof of his guarded attitude towards Marinetti's movement. Similarly, Kosovel rejected Micić's zenithism; he saw it as "playing", whereas he wanted art and life to be about seriousness, about "simultaneously revolutionising meaning and form". So it was only after his friend Grahor had returned from the Soviet Union that he was given a chance - through Russian literary constructivism – to use the principle of "gruzification" and "focalisation", and introduce his famous cons poems, which combine revolutionary form with recognisable meanings. His aim was to publish them in a specialised magazine KONS, that he himself would edit and publish.

In the summer of 1925 he experienced "a shift to the left" and began to create a different, "constructive" poetry. It was intended for publication by a proletarian publishing house, which he would call Strelci (Shooters). These plans were cut short by his untimely death at 22. Today, his cons poems are unique, and represent one of the pinnacles of European literary constructivism