

CYNTHIA ARRIEU-KING

## On Kosovel's *Look Back, Look Ahead*

Srečko Kosovel, *Look Back, Look Ahead*. Brooklyn, New York: Ugly Duckling Presse, 2010.

There's a lot of flash and headlining on the internet when one looks up Srečko Kosovel's *Look Back, Look Ahead*. He's a Slovenian Keats, or a Jimi Hendrix, his work as wild, piercing, passionate, exclamation point. As if magically, hot off the cultural machine, an Eastern European poet arrives who serves as the younger sibling to Rilke, as Salamun proposes in his blurb. While the Slovenian reputation of this poet has remained strong since his death in 1926, and while several healthy English translations already exist, Ugly Duckling Presse's Barbara Siegel Carlson and Ana Jelcnikar illuminate Kosovel in the younger poetic readership's consciousness.

This volume does not try to represent Kosovel's work as anything but a transcendent complication. In four sections, these fine translators and editors have grouped poems according to movements or themes: the first somewhat Romantic or bucolic, the second, more preoccupied with cosmologies via constructivist forms; the third tending towards prose and the fourth tending seemingly to an integration of all his influences. Almost in relinquishing the idea of perfected translations, and in acknowledging the elision of experimental works, etc., the translators and editors foreground Kosovel's willingness to hybridize. He's not trying on his aesthetic hats but using them to express an ethos of transformation, transcendence: accepted incompleteness.

Kosovel's Romantic softness allows the bucolic and the everyday to burn—and this recollection of the homeland, the pines, helps him undercut the idea of nationalism and its family of absolutes. In "October," he writes:

Wet gardens glitter  
in the evening gold. Darkness  
drapes over the brown thatched barns.  
...

Everything muted, everything dying  
in the golden melancholy dusk.  
A field darkens, the green sky  
grips my anxious heart.

Where the disorder and strangeness of "green" sky and the contrast of the beautiful dusk and the poet's sadness show him alienated from some peace or order, or something longed for, Kosovel shows the countryside as intricate, its own animal. It cannot be made into anything restful. Its golden qualities raise it from normalcy and allow him to say that what is at hand—what is home—cannot be anything ordinary. His youth and this Romanticism go hand in hand: he knows "you can't understand" and "O you sheepish, white nation— / Now can you see what you really are?" The indignation rings into his lyric like it does in Mayakovsky, but the violins can't sob. Slightly more at ease, they're just pines; they're just straw. He stays primordial as if by slight-of-hand which plants his meaning in the physical and allows his avant-gardism to broadcast resistance: to occupation, to a false, pre-occupying idea such as Nation.

Charles Simic says, "Poetry is three mismatched shoes at the end of a dark alley." And this sense of the inexplicably thrown together world, this Eastern European wry quality that makes the world absurd and allows Kosovel to hinge the romantic and the awful. The posture of the individual against the world, depressingly disconnected or contemplating his smallness, Kosovel's absurdity feeds from Romanticism's alienation, but lightens it often:

#### AUTUMN LANDSCAPE

The autumn sun languishes  
as though it grieves  
behind the slim cypresses  
and the white graveyard wall.  
The grass is bathed in red.  
Do you wear dogmatic clogs?  
A bicycle abandoned on the autumn road.  
You ride through a doomed land.

A sobered-up man crosses the field,  
like autumn he's cold,  
like autumn he's sad.

Faith in humanity.  
To me a sacred thought.  
Mute silence is like sadness.  
I'm not sad anymore  
for I no longer think of myself.

The relationship between the man and the field has little to do with his senses—it's as if he's been collaged into the painting. The man becomes cold and transparent simply because he is likened to autumn. The repetition of the simile-structure makes sure we think he is not quite himself, he actually embodies dominating forces. People aren't built to be seasons, and when we imagine they are like a season, they become strange, eternal, helpless, overrun. And so the Romantic alienation is destroyed by an absurd leap, by a universalizing stance. The horrible grass bathed in red—it could be red light of sunset, or blood depending, almost an accusation when followed by the question, "Do you wear dogmatic clogs?" Clogs are so heavy, so put on, as if the concentrated bluntness of fundamentalist approach, even if the man himself is held strangely—surreally—like wine in two wooden cups/clogs.

Kosovel's influence by Rabindranath Tagore helps diversify his Romantic alienation into a contemplation of the multitudes. Having lived through a subjugation of Slovenian culture opened Kosovel up to "Tagoreana," a trend of adopting Tagore's anti-nationalism and mysticism that threads through this volume, bolstering his ideology and grounding his surreal lyric. In addition, Tagore's anti-nationalism points Kosovel's thoughts towards community—shared space— versus the idea of the nation, the monolithically abstract. In the beautiful prose poem "Bread," Kosovel writes:

It's eleven o'clock. Eleven for me looking at Hodler's 'Spring,'  
eleven for the young Bosnian reading Tagore, then looking  
away as though he were sitting by the white shores of the  
Ganges. Eleven for him studying, and eleven for the two of  
them drawing.

One thought, one dissonance: Bread.  
'I'm hungry.'

All the worlds crushed. Faces crumpled, straight lines  
gone crooked and mathematical proofs mere riddles. Tagore  
hushed, spring stopped.

When the five dorm-mates articulate this hunger, the transcendence of the bucolic imagery distorts to a messy equation, one dissonant and looking towards the future. The characters hang together in a parable that fans of Edson or Simic might love as much as fans of the Eastern European avant-gardists: Kosovel himself was fretting about how competing ideologies could co-exist and must, a more pointedly peace-oriented lyric.

The third section of the book seems geared toward these more prose-like flights while the later part of the book contains more complicated lyrics, constructivist work and actual plates of Kosovel's drafts. These Constructivist and graphic innovations in this work remove the human figure and add an absurd philosophical syllogism to his repertoire:

#### CONS 5

Manure is gold  
and gold is manure.  
Both = 0.  
0 = (infinity sign)  
(infinity sign) = 0  
A B <  
1, 2, 3.  
Without a soul  
you don't need gold.  
Without a soul  
you don't need manure.  
Ee-ah.

Kosovel uses constructivist graphics and equations more abstractly throughout his works to make poems free of narrative or weighty trappings. Apparently, there is no donkey bray at the end of the original; that is a stroke of translation genius explained in the translator's note, a way of accommodating two vowel sounds meant to be nonsensical. But the reader is assured that this choice would sit well with Kosovel's slightly mischievous indignation.

And of course it's impossible to say page to page what the translator's effect is. So when Kosovel's avant-garde and Constructivist tendencies hold something violent to their sides at all times, the original transcendent Romanticism softens his work to something complete and not idealizing. There is something of the old world here, of folk-

lore, of simplicity, and that is what makes Kosovel able to rend the heart.

This volume provides an editor's and a translator's note of unusual clarity and insight at the front: these speak to specific and difficult moments and solutions arrived at, as if Ana Jelnikar and Barbara Siegel Carlson have climbed a wall to reach some fruit and handed it down to the other as best they could. And the editor's historical salient note sets the right tone for Kosovel's poems. Jelnikar's "Afterword" rearticulates the poet's importance as a "seminal modernist poet" who came to prominence overnight, whose poems have been tucked away by the dozens in so many disparate places. His political awareness, his hopes for a solution to conflict on a "more global scale," and his belief that people need poetry "as much as they need bread" give him a cosmopolitan air congruent with our own 21st-century poetic preoccupations. This volume then presents Kosovel's best works with an eye toward his development and freshness as well as his command of glimmering aesthetic contradictions and melancholy.