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Edvard Kocbek: Nothing is Lost

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Introduction

EDVARD KOČBEK was born in 1904 in the foothills of the southeastern Alps in a part of the world that is now Slovenia, but at that time was still Austria, and thus part of the Austro-Hungarian empire. His father was an organist at the local Roman Catholic church, and Kocbek spent so much time helping him that he later described the church as his second home. In high school he studied classics and foreign languages, and by the time he had finished his schooling, World War I had come and gone and left Slovenia with limited independence as part of the newly established Kingdom of the Serbs, Croats, and Slovenes. Kocbek entered the Catholic seminary in Slovenia's second city, Maribor, with the intention of becoming a priest, but after two years left in protest against the rigid rules and narrow outlook of his clerical superiors. It was a sign of things to come, yet despite this early and characteristic rebellion against orthodoxy, he did not lose his faith. "A person's essence," he wrote in his essay "Thoughts on Man" some ten years later, "lies in the conscious and ceaseless realization of God's creative presence in him;" and he continued to practice a highly personal brand of Catholicism till the end of his life.

Moving from Maribor to Ljubljana, the capital of Slovenia, Kocbek studied Romance languages and literature at the university and edited the Catholic youth magazine, *Cross*, while also contributing poems and articles to a Catholic Socialist periodical called *Fire*. As a promising young poet, he attempted to negotiate a middle way between the pious provincialism of much Slovene literature of the time, the avantgarde constructivism pioneered by the poet Srečko Kosovel, and the self-conscious documentary realism associated with the popularity of socialism. Of crucial importance for his development were two trips to western Europe, one to spend a summer in Berlin, and another on a year's scholarship to France, where he encountered German expressionism and French surrealism first hand, and came under the influence of Emmanuel Mounier and his circle at the Catholic literary magazine, *Esprit*. Mounier had developed a brand of radical Christian socialism that he called "Personal-

ism," which rejected the idealist notion that men's activities were no more than a reflection of the spirit, and accepted that religion did not hold all the answers to the social problems of the modern world.

Returning to Slovenia, Kocbek wrote an outstanding cycle of poems, "Autumn Poems" in a mode that might be described as metaphysical realism: a religious response to the natural world was combined with an attempt to reconcile the spiritual essence of life with physical appearances. In most of these poems Kocbek ignored traditional rhyme and meter in favor of free verse forms shaped by rhythm and assonance, and introduced a modernist aesthetic to a poetry dominated by folklore and romanticism. Building on this cycle, Kocbek went on to produce several more cycles ("Love Poems," "Comrade Poems," "Poems about the Earth") that he brought together in his aptly named first collection of verse, *Earth*, in 1934, a work that set the seal on his growing reputation as Slovenia's most original and accomplished young poet.

The poems in *Earth* were set in his native region of eastern Slovenia, a land of low rolling hills, vineyards, wine presses, pastures, and wooded hills that was intimately familiar to him from his childhood, and they evoke a settled world of peaceful work and play in the pastoral tradition.

*The sun is wreathed in cobwebs,
the air is homely, as in a curtained
cottage parlor, and a heavy fruit
has rolled downhill into the rotting wood.
Now and then a wheelbarrow squeaks,
there is a sudden rustle in the long leaves
of corn, and the lazy hum of late bees
over the buckwheat.*

It is a world in which men and women take their place as an integral part of nature, whether it be peasant women climbing the fields on their way home from work in the evening, or men slipping into sleep by the wine presses after a day spent crushing the grapes. The poet, "an ancient monk" watching "the enchanted world" before him, maintains his vigil while others sleep.

*Stars twinkle outside,
then the lamp burns low, the dripping stops, and
for a long time there is nothing, till down in the valley
the morning bell tolls.*

The poet's sympathies extend to the animal kingdom too. In one much celebrated poem Kocbek describes a drover and his team of oxen "moving with measured jerks" as they slowly cross a landscape and disappear behind some trees.

*Their glistening russet hides smell warm,
and as they enter the wood with their dreamy
driver it seems they are disappearing forever.*

*A little later I see the young red oxen
nodding out of the wood and up the hill.
They haven't changed a bit. In this peaceful
land time has stopped.*

There was a hint of pantheism in Kocbek's devotion to nature, mixed with cosmic pain ("Earth, I reach out to everything from you, earth / to you I will return, my flesh smells of holy / sacrifice and mortal sorrow . . ."). As he watches the women coming from work he experiences a similar emotion: ". . . their song echoes in the / woods, and I could stuff my mouth with bitter / soil in sorrow over their sound." Lying among a tree's roots as a violent thunderstorm brings premonitions of death, he treasures the thought of his mortality. "Let everything be destroyed except dread / wherein lies intimacy, intimacy."

Kocbek's was a personal horror akin to a kind of holy dread (the Slovenian word *groza*, usually translated as "horror," can equally be rendered as "dread"). This was in line with the philosophy of personal responsibility that he developed in essays on Kierkegaard and Péguy, among others. Only man, he wrote in another essay, could be the source of meaning and "vital fertility," because "in nonpersonal life we find neither well-being, nor order, nor a combination of sense and utility. . . . Man represents a heterogeneous reality in a homogeneous being, he cannot be exhausted spiritually, physically, or so-

cially. . . . The problem of man is in the final analysis a religious problem.”

But Kocbek was by no means indifferent to the social and political currents of his time, and was acutely aware of other sorts of horror at large in the world in the mid-thirties. The Kingdom of the Serbs, Croats, and Slovenes, for example, had become a monarchist dictatorship with the new name of Yugoslavia, and an unsavory penchant for political assassinations. Mussolini had come to power in neighboring Italy; Hitler’s stentorian threats were being borne on the prevailing winds from the other side of the Alps; and in slightly more distant Spain a civil war had broken out in which the European powers were fighting by proxy, and the twin ideologies of Fascism and Communism had begun their battle for supremacy.

In timid, conformist Slovenia, where the religious and political establishments listened to the Vatican and sided with Franco, Kocbek caused a sensation with an essay, “Reflections on Spain,” that he published in 1937 in the Catholic journal, *Home and World*. By serving Fascism, he wrote, the church in Spain was revealing its inherent bias in favor of the “spiritual bourgeoisie.” The only recourse for honest dissenters was to risk heresy by demonstrating their “spiritual bravery” and voting for “a greater and better truth according to their consciences.” This was far better than supporting the rank hypocrisy with which the church justified Franco’s excesses. The essay split the intelligentsia in Slovenia for months afterward, and Kocbek got the punishment he had anticipated when he was indeed accused of heresy and threatened with excommunication.

Kocbek was moving closer to socialism, but saw that it too was an ideology like any other, carrying dangers of its own. “A revolutionary thrust solely for the sake of establishing authority, order, safety and decorum, without a deeper goal, is more likely to decline into petty bourgeois philistinism than to relax into a spiritual entity,” he wrote in one of his essays, and in 1941, on the very eve of war, he noted in his literary journal *Act*: “The intellectual of today must understand that much depends on his resoluteness. He must opt for a new order as soon as possible, but must not support any particular ideological group completely. He should remain a free agent within it, a creative center of vital experience.”

When war did come to Slovenia, Kocbek did not hesitate. He volunteered at once to join the Executive Committee of the Slovenian Liberation Front, a coalition of resistance forces that included both Tito's Communists and Slovenia's Christian Socialists, whose leader he became, and he rose rapidly within its ranks even after Tito's party had taken more or less complete control. In 1943 he went with the Slovenian delegation to Jajce for the second meeting of the Anti-Fascist Council of the Liberation Movement of Yugoslavia, chaired by Tito, and played a prominent role in the Slovenian resistance to Fascist occupation right up until the war's end. By then this decidedly unmilitary poet had attained the rank of general, and for a brief moment served as a minister in Belgrade, before returning to Ljubljana to become Vice President of the Presidium of the National Assembly of Slovenia and Vice President of the Executive Committee of the Slovenian Liberation Front. He was by far the most senior and most important non-communist in the Slovenian government.

Kocbek did not stop writing during the war years, but nor was he quick to publish after the war ended. The establishment of Communism in the whole of Yugoslavia coincided with a new wave of Stalinism in Russia; the institution of an iron discipline and rigid censorship in Marshall Tito's quasi-independent Yugoslavia was no better than in the Soviet-conquered countries of Central and Eastern Europe. It was not until after Tito broke with the Comintern in 1948 that Kocbek ventured to publish his first postwar book, *Comradeship*, which contained not poetry, but excerpts from his war diaries (1949). The book met with a hostile reception and quickly disappeared from bookshop shelves. Kocbek's unsparing account of some of the excesses of the Communist-led Partisans during the war, including the cold-blooded execution of a group of former prisoners-of-war for refusing to join the Partisans, was too much for Slovenia's leaders to stomach, and the censorship prevented any reprints.

It was Kocbek's book of short stories, *Fear and Courage*, published in 1951, that brought about his public disgrace and official downfall. The book contained four novellas on the Partisans' wartime campaigns and depicted guerrilla warfare with unsparing honesty, en-

compassing both its bloody heroism and the senseless cruelties endemic to irregular campaigns. Kocbek did not hesitate to confront his own complicity in these actions and expressed his ethical qualms with an objectivity and realism that had not been seen in Slovenian (or Yugoslav) literature before. It was too much for the Yugoslav Communist Party, which in domestic policies was fully in tune with the Stalinism that it professed to reject. Kocbek's book was anathematized as "political pornography" and immediately suppressed. The entire literary and political establishment was mobilized to vilify and denounce him as an enemy of the people, and he was speedily expelled from all his public offices and forced into silence.

For ten years he became a nonperson. His house was watched, his telephone tapped, and he was kept in enforced quarantine. The predictable result of this persecution (particularly in such a small country) was to turn him into a hero to dissidents and a beacon to a younger generation of poets, so that when a few of his poems did begin to appear again, he became a rallying point for the student radicals of the sixties, and the patron saint of rebellious literary magazines such as *Review-57* and *Perspectives* (both of which were closed by the authorities). Kocbek, meanwhile, earned his living by translating from French and German and publishing the results under a pseudonym. In 1963, virtually thirty years after his last collection, Kocbek was allowed to publish a new book of poems, *Dread*, that included selections from his writings over the preceding decades. The book was a huge success and won the Prešeren Prize (Slovenia's most prestigious literary award) in 1964.

While it was clear that the book's title had a very broad range of meanings, Kocbek was at pains to play down any political overtones and emphasize the personal. "*Dread*," he explained, "is not just an accidental and unusual title for my second collection of poetry, but is also the reflection of the fundamental atmosphere of my life; dread comprises both wonder and opposition, my dread is pure ecstasy, the continuous possibility of conquering despair and nothingness." Nevertheless, while it remained true that, as in everything he wrote, Kocbek filtered his subjects through personal emotion and a spiritual apprehension of reality, his goals in publishing *Dread* went far beyond the personal.

The poems in this collection explore a far wider range of emotion and experience than those in his previous collection, *Earth*. They range from celebrations of the joys and sorrows of Partisan life ("Loud greetings to you, my living comrades," "Moon with a Halo," "The Game," "After the Meeting") to meditations on the meaning of the struggle against Fascism ("Drunk with change," "Rain," "Moonlight") to love poems ("Unknown Woman," "The Bay") to musings on death and immortality ("Crucifix in a Field"). Through all of them, particularly the Partisan poems, runs the thread of what one critic, writing about Kocbek's war diaries, called Kocbek's "activist engagement with history," conducted "without ideological or political bias, but from the point of view of a constructive and . . . religiously dedicated and responsible person. He juxtaposes the world of cruel political and military pragmatism with original existential questions. . . . Kocbek-the-believer is always juxtaposed with Kocbek-the-heretic."

Kocbek's conflict between faith and skepticism found frequent expression in these poems in the form of paradox—his quintessential trope. In "The Game" the speechmaker "stammers in his dreams," a lowly peasant "commands the brigade," and "the quiet woodcutter is full of questions." He develops this idea further and with great playfulness in "Dialectics."

*The builder demolishes houses,
the doctor advances death
and the fire brigade chief
is the arsonists' secret leader,
clever dialectics says so
and the bible says something similar:
he who is highest shall be lowest,
and he who is last shall be first.*

In another fine poem, "Hands," Kocbek endows the concept with a metaphysical dimension that ends in a confession. The poet describes himself as living "between my two hands / as between two brigands, / neither knew/ what the other did. / The left hand was foolish because of its heart, / the right hand was clever because of its skill." In a military skirmish he is forced to turn and flee, experi-

ences a stark fear of death, and falls among thorns that draw blood from those same hands.

*I spread them like the cruciform branches
of the great temple candlestick,
bearing witness with equal ardor.
Faith and unfaith burned with a single flame,
ascending hotly on high.*

Dread established Kocbek's reputation as the best poet then writing in Slovenian (indeed one of Slovenia's best poets ever), and also as the "father" of Slovenian modernism, which was being rediscovered and built upon by the younger generation. In 1967 he published *Document*, a second volume of his wartime diaries, to universal acclaim, and this was followed by the republication of the first volume, *Charter*, and in 1969 *Report*, a third selection of his poetry. It emerged that before *Report*, Kocbek had completed another selection of poems, *Pentagram*, devoted mainly to his Partisan years, that he had withheld out of political prudence, and this appeared for the first time in a two-volume edition of *Collected Poems* in 1977, together with two new and hitherto unknown selections, *Embers*, and *Bride in Black*.

The *Collected Poems* of 1977 consolidated Kocbek's reputation and filled in some of the gaps in his earlier work. Of particular interest are the early poems in *Pentagram*, which demonstrate Kocbek's talent for personalizing the political and politicizing the personal. The word "pentagram" refers in part to the five-pointed star of the Partisans during World War II, and of the Yugoslav Communist Party then and thereafter (a much subtler emblem than the Soviet hammer and sickle), but also, and more powerfully, to an ancient cabbalistic sign that was traditionally popular in Slovenia as a talisman against demons (it was carved on the cribs of the newborn for good luck). This rich double meaning naturally attracted Kocbek's attention, and in a title poem of the same name he suggests a continuity between ancient resistance to evil and the war-time crusade against a new kind of demon.

*History rambles through nature,
man is mysteriously hawk-eyed.*

*Day is a sharp spearman's bright aura,
night a shield armed with a star,
a tribe's talisman in bloody glory.*

*From the clay we hear wise shamans:
the stubborn and promising light of this star,
will deliver us from evil,
will hand us the keys to ultimate joy,
will reconcile power with freedom.*

But the demons that Kocbek most feared were within. The Pentagon cycle contains two separate poems with the same title, "Guilt," both of them dealing with his own ambivalence in the face of violence in war. In one he writes:

*Obedient to the pitiless command,
I cannot quell the seething in my breast.
What can I do with this exorbitant "I"
That is turning me into a beast?*

This recalls an earlier comment in his essay on Kierkegaard: "action is will, after action comes guilt." During the Partisan campaigns, action was inevitable, of course, and couldn't help but bring out the "beast" in him. But there was another and larger beast, the beast of war, that engendered fresh waves of guilt and doubt, as in "On Fire."

*I am riding the beast,
To be or not to be,
Anxieties increase,
I cannot leave.*

Even more powerful is his wonderful poem, "The Stick," in which Kocbek compares the piece of wood he holds in his hands to a shepherd's crook, a walking stick, an officer's cane, a conductor's baton, a divining rod, or a magician's wand, and imagines all the positive uses he can make of it. But he will do none of these things for they are "risky and foolish." Instead

*I will break it over my knee
and throw it down a deep ravine,*

*so that its heavy notches
may measure my fall.*

In keeping with this habit of interiorizing his conflicts, Kocbek wrote very few poems that might be called overtly political, and even when he did they were wrapped in allegory. In "Parrots," for example, he imagines a plague of parrots.

*Green and yellow, they screeched
in our houses, kitchens and gardens;
unclean, ravenous and vulgar,
they invaded our bathrooms and bedrooms
and finally settled in people.*

It is not hard to see these parrots as political watchdogs, but Kocbek also compares them to the demons that actually enter people and possess them, as in the bible, and the solution he envisages is equally internal and psychological. The parrots will be driven out and will die once the wise men in the community realize what is happening, assume the necessary responsibility, and ultimately take action.

Kocbek similarly takes responsibility for his own actions while remaining defiant and welcoming the consequences.

*When I spoke
they said I was dumb,
when I wrote
they said I was blind,
when I walked away
they said I was lame.
And when they called me back
they found I was deaf.
They confounded my senses
and judged I was mad.
Now I am glad.*

This selection of Kocbek's poems covers many other dimensions of his work and his world. One such is the patriotic strain that emerges in poems like "Black Sea," with its wry political barb

aimed at Serbia and Russia, and in his wonderful long poem, “Lipizaners,” on the white stallions that perform in Vienna’s world-renowned Imperial Riding Academy, but are bred and raised on the limestone pastures of western Slovenia.

*Others have worshiped holy cows and sacred dragons,
thousand-year-old turtles and winged lions,
unicorns, double-headed eagles, phoenixes,
but we have chosen the most beautiful animal,
it has proved itself in battle and in circuses,
carried princesses and golden monstrances,
and that is why the Viennese emperors spoke
French with clever diplomats,
Italian with pretty actresses,
Spanish with almighty God,
German with unschooled stable boys,
and with their horses, Slovene.*

During the last few years of his life Kocbek enjoyed the fame that was his due. He was lionized in literary circles in Slovenia, and was permitted to travel, at last—to England, France, Germany, Austria, Italy—to read his poems and meet other writers, becoming especially friendly with the German Nobel Prize-winning novelist, Heinrich Böll. But he was never recognized by the political establishment, and in 1974 Böll was forced to mount an international campaign on his behalf when, in an interview for his seventieth birthday, Kocbek boldly mentioned the mass murder of monarchist “White” prisoners by the “Red” Communists after the war and became the subject of an orchestrated hate campaign. By now, however, he was far too prominent to be sanctioned or jailed. His work was being translated and read throughout Europe, and he was recognized, as one critic put it, as one of the five thinkers and intellectuals in Slovenian history who had shaped the nation. Six years later, after his death in 1981, he was granted a state funeral.

Although Kocbek’s status as a dissident (albeit one who never went to jail) had something to do with his fame in the last two decades of his life, his true stature derives from his power as an artist. He was miraculously able to rise, indeed almost float, above

the topical concerns of the moment, even when they pressed upon him with the greatest urgency and unpleasantness. From the earliest poems in *Earth* through to his last, unfinished poem with its typically defiant title, "I haven't done playing with words" (which ends this selection), Kocbek engaged life with an openness to experience, an attentiveness to its hidden messages, an indefatigable playfulness, and a mastery of the lyric form that were the unmistakable marks of a major talent.

As for his personal credo, it was best summed up in a 1974 essay that he wrote titled "On Poetry, Freedom and Necessity."

As a writer I am completely independent, no force on earth can tell me what to do. . . . Spiritual revelations apart, poetry has been the most important thing in my life, a refuge for my inventions and fantasies. It was able to protect me, anticipate events, point the way ahead, and confirm my actions at moments of gravest doubt or indecision. It gave me the power of protest, rebellion, and revolutionary action in the contradictory world of today."