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*Ivan Cankar*



*Martin Kačur*  
*The Biography of an Idealist*

C E U P R E S S

**Martin Kačur**

The Biography of an Idealist

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# Martin Kačur

## The Biography of an Idealist

Ivan Cankar

*Translated and with an Introduction  
by John K. Cox*



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# *Contents*

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Translator's Preface   vii

Introduction: Reading Ivan Cankar—Socialism,  
Nationalism, Esthetics, and Religion after One Hundred  
Years   xi

## **Part I**

Chapter 1	3
Chapter 2	27
Chapter 3	55

## **Part II**

Chapter 1	77
Chapter 2	99
Chapter 3	121

## **Part III**

Chapter 1	143
Chapter 2	165
Chapter 3	189



## Translator's Preface

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The name of Slovenia's best-known prose writer and dramatist, Ivan Cankar (1876–1918), entered my world while I was in graduate school—through the trope of the national awakener, via chance encounters with his works in those delightful used bookstores in Bloomington and Chapel Hill and by dint of a brief visit to his home village on an early trip to Slovenia. When I actually started reading beyond the parable of the stubborn and star-crossed Jernej, I quickly detected a lot of grit and gristle between the twin icons of Cankar as patriot and Cankar as mystic. There was the bohemian personal life, the jaw-dropping productivity, intriguing satire that embraced the sarcastic and profane, an obsession with the victims of capitalism and ignorance and hypocrisy that bordered on the obscene (yet somehow seemed transcendent), and Aesopian political pronouncements worthy of inclusion in any *fin-de-siècle* or Yugoslav time capsule.

Because there is *so much*, philosophically and esthetically, *to* Cankar, and so much *of* Cankar that remains untranslated, I am elated to be able to join the ranks of the translators who have endeavored to bring parts of



Cankar's oeuvre into circulation in the anglophone world. It is my fervent hope that the publication of this novel will spark meaty discussions among readers, and that more Cankar will find its way into translation soon.

The textual basis for this translation is the 1966 edition of *Martin Kačur: življenjepis idealista*, published by Mladinska knjiga in Ljubljana, with annotations and an afterword by Ignac Kamenik. A small number of textual errors in the Kamenik text were corrected on the basis of the 1967 edition of the novel, edited by Josip Vidmar and published in the third volume of Cankar's *Izbrano delo*, also by Mladinska knjiga.

This book would not have been possible without the friendship and assistance of many people. My special thanks go out to Nick Miller and Linda Kunos for getting this project rolling; to Božidar Blatnik, Katja Sturm-Schnabl, and Erwin Köstler for inspiring me to explore Slovenia and Slovene over the years; to my dear friends Jeff Pennington and Peter Vodopivec for their unstinting advice and material assistance along the way; and, as ever, to my wife Katy and our children, Lilly and Ethan.

I also need to express my appreciation for the support offered during this project by Betsy Birmingham, Alf Brooks, Kevin Brooks, Henry R. Cooper, Jr., Fran Fisher, Sibelan Forrester, Bogdan Rakić, Kelly Sassi, Verena Theile, and the excellent staff of the Interlibrary Loan office at the main library of North Dakota State University.

I believe this is also the place to express my wonder and gratitude in regard to the best lifetime of language teachers imaginable: Frau Fritsch, Marilyn Jenkins Tur-

*Translator's Preface*

beville, Kim Vivian, Doryl Jenkins, Roger Weinstein, Magda Gera, Sibelan Forrester, Anto Knežević, Anka Dušej-Blatnik, Jana Kobav, and Piotr Drozdowski.

This translation is dedicated to Ethan, for all his warm, madcap energy.

*John K. Cox*

Professor of History  
North Dakota State University



# *Reading Ivan Cankar*

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## SOCIALISM, NATIONALISM, ESTHETICS, AND RELIGION AFTER ONE HUNDRED YEARS

### INTRODUCTION

The Caribbean writer Jamaica Kincaid (b. 1949) asserted in her long essay on the history of Antigua that “all masters of every stripe are rubbish, and all slaves of every stripe are noble and exalted.”<sup>1</sup> Josip Vidmar, a major literary historian and once the President of the Slovene Academy of Arts and Sciences, declared that Ivan Cankar, in a radically different setting, held analogous views: “whoever is a victim is pure and exalted” and it is the “‘humiliated and outraged’ of this world” who are “spiritually close to his heart” and receive his “proud melancholy love.”<sup>2</sup> This notion certainly captures the spirit of much of Cankar’s work; it is, for instance, the driving force in the newly translated novel at hand, *Martin Kačur*, the story of the disastrous degeneration of an idealistic country schoolteacher.

<sup>1</sup> Jamaica Kincaid, *A Small Place* (New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1988), p. 81.

<sup>2</sup> Josip Vidmar, “Ivan Cankar (1876–1918).” In Ivan Cankar, *My Life and Other Sketches*, transl. Elza Jereb and Alasdair MacKinnon (Ljubljana: Državna založba Slovenije, 1971), p. 10.

For decades, though, the best-known Cankar work to anglophone audiences has been *The Bailiff Yerney and His Rights*, and this work, too, gives voice to the victims of injustice and hopelessness; when the long-time farm-worker Jernej is suddenly driven from the manor, he seeks justice—not pity, mercy, or forgiveness—and ultimately revenge. His arguments are worthy of Gracchus Babeuf in their assertion of right over might and their claims to the fruit of one’s own labor. One can read this as class struggle, or national liberation, or, as has been agilely proposed, the designation of Slovenia as a “proletarian nation” worthy of sympathy among internationalist communist and traditional patriotic audiences alike.

But one need only take the short step from the highly symbolic action of Jernej’s campaign to the “slum stories” dating from Cankar’s time in industrial Vienna to see a very concrete rendering of victimhood in socioeconomic terms. The characteristic and quite chilling story “Mimi” (published in Slovene in 1900 but not yet translated into English) is painfully hard to forget: a young girl in the cold city surrounded by hunger, sexual abuse, alcoholism, predatory bosses, and pollution cannot fathom what “crime” she must have committed to deserve a life this denatured and desperate; she finally takes her life by plunging out of the very building that is her prison and the very window that should have been her access to sunshine and flowers. Then there is more incontrovertible evidence of Cankar’s social critique: the many war sketches and parables from the end of his life, where a kind of anthropomorphized religion has taken the place of nature as the symbol of the ideal, but in

which the militarization and mass destruction of the Great War provide the indispensable setting. Without a doubt Cankar saw it as his tasks to put forth a profound critique of the existing order and to chart a path to renewal. The reader must decide for herself whether Cankar's "relevance" is primarily based on the cause of nationalism, social justice, or spiritual reconciliation.

Reading Ivan Cankar today can be depressing. Surprisingly enough, though, this is a good thing. Time and distance can liberate the reader—if he or she chooses—from many of the categories, accolades, and prisms previously associated with this talented and prolific Slovene prose writer, poet, and dramatist. But the raw emotions of novels like *Martin Kačur* remind us of the enduring affective power of Cankar's work. Indeed this introductory essay will soon enough turn to consideration of Cankar's significance in both political and literary history; in addition, many people are quite used to examining Cankar's work in relation to his psychology, patriotism, and spirituality. But to pick up *The Ward of Our Lady of Mercy* as an introduction to Cankar's oeuvre, to read it, and then to feel profoundly depressed—this is sure testimony of the author's enduring artistry and abiding emotional power.

In the aforementioned novel, we witness a roomful of children slowly dying of disease and untreated handicaps. They are in a convent hospital, a group of about twelve girls, and the duality of life inside and life outside the ward provides the narrative structure of the short novel. But the overarching theme, and the blow that re-

peatedly, mercilessly, but quietly, clinically, even stoically delivers the emotional punch of the book is the realization that everybody *demand*s something from these hopelessly ill and vulnerable girls; everybody is more powerful than they—yet all the grownups desire things and take them, in effect gorging themselves physically and emotionally on the tenderest of victims, many of them their own flesh and blood, all of them potent symbols of ultimate vulnerability. All the adults bring their selfish demands and preconceptions to bear on the young victims, resulting in neglect and exploitation of breathtaking dimensions. The abuse, including rape, visited on the girls (and their mothers, one should add) by men in the outside world is shocking; its description in the book got Cankar in trouble with the censors of his day. But the inside world is equally characterized by this emotional neglect and physical exploitation: drunken fathers on visits seek food and kill the girls' pets; blue-blooded, tight-fisted philanthropists ask coldly for the girls' blessings through prayer; and the Church (while providing reasonably good physical care) demands the sacrifice of their sensuality. Even the case-hardened girls themselves impatiently summon the death of one of their own, the protagonist Malchie, when her lingering passing, so frightfully and graphically presented by Cankar, delays the start of their springtime excursion into the countryside.

Life outside is cruel indeed; Cankar in his naturalistic mode here shows us plenty of examples of even grownups "on strings," buffeted by poverty and corruption. Whatever the root causes of their behavior, the (biologi-

### *Reading Ivan Cankar*

cal) fathers are the worst: lascivious, drunken, violent, or absent at best. Nonetheless the life outside holds promise, or seems to: sunshine, flowers, birds, church bells, holidays, fluffy snow, carriage rides, room to run, boys...and maybe even faint hopes of a welcoming pair of arms or eyes in a tenuous family setting. But Cankar demonstrates finally, conclusively, that the difference between the outside and inside worlds is just a mirage. And the reason that this book is such an excellent introduction to Cankar's work is because the reader quickly becomes aware of another illusory distinction: that between the sick little girls in the ward and all the adults in the rest of his work and, by easy extension, the rest of us. We need only remember the most poignant scene in *The Ward of Our Lady of Mercy*, with the tragic powerlessness and pathetic dreams of little Minka, so eager to give love and so hungry to receive it and so unaware of all the structural impossibilities of both. But Cankar, as partial as he was to poignant depictions of mothers and children, wants us to feel as deeply about the crushed dreams and harsh socio-economic realities and loneliness of all of humanity.

### BIOGRAPHY

Ivan Cankar was born on May 10, 1876, in the village of Vrhnika, not far from Ljubljana. He lived with his parents, Jožef and Neža (née Pivkova), and seven siblings through elementary school. His father was a tailor and the family life far from prosperous. He then went to



high school in Ljubljana, then the capital of the southern Habsburg province of Carniola (German *Krain*, Slovenian *Kranjsko*). He lived in hardship in the city, but he proved himself a talented student and began writing poetry. In 1896 he moved to the metropolis of Vienna to study engineering. He quickly gravitated towards philosophy instead, although he never earned his university degree. He learned French and Italian, read widely, and met with friends for intensive discussions of contemporary currents in European literature. For the next fourteen years he resided mostly in Ottakring, a working-class district in Vienna, with some time spent in other parts of the Empire: in and around Ljubljana and also in Pula and Sarajevo, cities in the neighboring South Slavic regions of Croatia and Bosnia. He lived mostly from the advances and proceeds deriving from his writing; despite his prolific output, it was a precarious existence. By 1907 his activities were taking an increasingly political bent, and he ran unsuccessfully for a seat representing Ljubljana in the Austrian parliament. His profession of socialism and Yugoslavism (solidarity among South Slavs) placed him in progressive, if not radical, circles; indeed he was jailed for several months in the fall of 1914 for pro-Serbian views considered dangerous to the Monarchy at war after the assassination of Archduke Franz Ferdinand. Cankar never married but had significant, long-term romantic relationships with a working-class woman in Vienna, Albina Löffler, and then with her daughter, Steffi, and in Ljubljana with Mici Kessler, a student. Cankar died on December 11, 1918, of pneumonia. He is buried in Ljubljana.

## *Reading Ivan Cankar*

In his lifetime, Cankar published an astounding thirty-three books. This number is even more remarkable because his first major work, the poetry collection *Erotika*, appeared in 1899 and his remaining books all appeared before 1917. There were, of course, unpublished and uncollected writings which were gathered after his death, as well as many compilations and re-issues. His thirty-volume *Complete Works*, edited by Anton Oc-virk, was finally brought out over a number of years and was completed in 1976. A major ongoing translation project by the literary historian Erwin K stler and the Austrian publishing house Drava is making a significant number of Cankar's works available in German. Although translations of Cankar exist in an amazing number of languages, from Hindi and Finnish to Chinese, they include only a small fraction of his works. Today Cankar remains very popular in Slovenia. A major Slovene cultural center and publishing house are named for Cankar; many streets and topographic features are named for him, and a very large banknote bore his image in the early years of independent Slovenia.

### THE LITERARY WORKS

Cankar's opus is huge. He compressed a lifetime of writing into less than twenty years and his double-time march through every genre, from poetry and autobiography to short stories and drama, leaves us amazed. But there are grounds for joy as well, for the interested reader will not soon run out of new Cankar to explore.

One of the first thing one notices is that there is, of course, some thematic overlap and some works that lack fermentation time (i.e., smooth editing), but in Cankar's defense one must just as quickly add that he writes not only in different genres but also different modes or styles; there are naturalism, symbolism, and expressionism at the very least in his writing, and they account for some of the different feeling from work to work. It is also no artistic sin to stake out a particular geographic and psychological territory and re-visit and re-work it consistently over the years. Far from a foible, actually—this is part of the characteristic genius of Faulkner, Hardy, Greene, and Kadare. Indeed, Cankar's territory is unique in the anglophone world and is highly moving *and* highly instructive from a historical point of view. But before exploring more of Cankar's unique contributions to Central European literary and political history, it might be worth mentioning, by way of orientation, a few more of the parallels or connections to other writers that today's readers might notice as they make their way through Cankar's works.

There is in Cankar, without a doubt in this historian's mind, a substantial chunk of shared territory with Émile Zola, the great naturalist who chronicled the battered lives of the ordinary men and women of industrializing France both urban and rural. In addition, Cankar's emphasis on the terrors and disappointments—and especially the perfidies—of childhood puts one very much in mind of Graham Greene; the bloody dénouements and pitiless comparisons in his parables and fables about animals and human society remind one of Meša Seli-

mović and other existentialists; his ruminations on Paris as the capital of the mind, true home to all European artists (or not), yield intriguing comparisons to a host of writers from Nietzsche and A.G. Matoš to Danilo Kiš. I think, though, that the most profitable general comparison might be a rather surprising one: George Orwell.<sup>3</sup> Beyond the leftist political stands (think *Homage to Catalonia*), the bohemian personal inclinations (think *Down and Out in Paris and London*), the impulse to chronicle the misery of the new era (think *The Road to Wigan Pier*), and the occasional famous characters from the animal world, the red-letter mutual province is the commitment to brutal honesty, to relentless inquiry and unstinting directness, to the war against hypocrisy and duplicity. The search for self-knowledge and the attempt to lay bare the operating mechanisms of society are everywhere in Cankar, even in the merely “decadent” and oft-anthologized poem “Viennese Evenings.” But the fourteenth chapter of Cankar’s memoirs<sup>4</sup> puts it in normative methodological terms: it holds a moving plea for honesty of observation in writers and in ordinary mortals, too—and it points clearly to the moral Sword of Damocles hanging over the head of every member of that former group: that “[w]hen we read his confessions,

<sup>3</sup> Nearly every commentator on Cankar has produced a list of parallels, influences, or comparisons; the literary luminaries range from Dostoyevsky and Ibsen to Molière and the Bible. See Vidmar, in *My Life*, p. 7; Avsenik Nabergoj, pp. 262 and 275; Lavrin, in *The Bailiff Yermey*, viii and xi; and Slodnjak, *Ward*, p. 7.

<sup>4</sup> “My Life,” in *My Life and Other Sketches* (Ljubljana: Državna založba Slovenije, 1971), pp. 60–64.

we are seized by the feeling which is the most terrible sentence on a writer: we do not believe him.”<sup>5</sup> And lest artificial lines be drawn between the political and the personal, let us not forget to be forthright always about our fellow humans and ourselves: “For the heart,” wrote Cankar at the end of one of his most famous sketches, “is a righteous judge and knows nothing of great or small...”<sup>6</sup> Orwell is still called by many “the patron saint of common decency” and this epithet would suit Cankar very well also.

Only a small percentage of Cankar’s works have been translated into English. There are many worthwhile projects for translators waiting in the wings; perhaps one might single out the novel *Gospa Judit* (Miss Judith, 1904) as especially deserving,<sup>7</sup> or the strange and autobiographical novel of youth, *Grešnik Lenart* (Lenart the Sinner, 1921), or the tale of social exclusion and banditry entitled *Smrt in pogreb Jakoba Nesreče* (The Death and Burial of Jakob the Unfortunate, 1907). The play *Za narodov blagor* (For the Good of the People, 1901) would make interesting reading in Central European political history. Literary and social historians would all benefit from seeing more of what this translator call’s Cankar’s “slum stories” from Vienna in English. And, last but not least,

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 64.

<sup>6</sup> “A Cup of Coffee,” in *My Life and Other Sketches* (Ljubljana: Državna založba Slovenije, 1971), p. 143.

<sup>7</sup> A story exploring the sexual behavior and psychology of a married woman, this novel bears a certain resemblance to heavy-hitters from other parts of Europe such as *Anna Karenina*, *Effi Briest*, *Madame Bovary*, and Borisav Stanković’s *Bad Blood*.

some of Cankar's political speeches, so important in depicting the contexts of late Habsburg decline, the Great War, and the origins of Yugoslavia, are to be recommended to translators. The works discussed below would be on that list, as well as "Ni bilo v programu," ("It Wasn't on the Program") about systemic military violence, and "Ministerialna komisija" ("The Ministerial Commission") on Cankar's arrest and interrogation by Austrian authorities in 1914.

It might also be useful at this point to recommend some representative or especially thought-provoking works already available in English. The first *tranche* of new Cankar reading for the curious could well start with *The Ward of Our Lady of Mercy*. One could go on to include the following autobiographical works, for instance: "My Life," "The Fox," "Other Lives," "Our Plot," and "A Cup of Coffee."<sup>8</sup> They stress his profound love of nature in general and the Slovenian countryside in particular, the cruelty and exclusion inherent in human society, and his complex, adoring, and guilt-ridden relationship with his mother. Another set of stories that are indicative of Cankar's stylistic and thematic breadth are "The Shadows," "Verzdenec," "Local News Items," "Our Beautiful Country," and "The End."<sup>9</sup>

<sup>8</sup> All published in *My Life and Other Sketches*.

<sup>9</sup> All published in *Dream Visions and Other Selected Stories*. Translated and with a preface by Anton Druzina. Illustrated by Lillian Bulc. Willoughby Hills, OH: Slovenian Research Committee of America, 1982.

CANKAR'S NONFICTION

Cankar's life was crowded—not just with events in the personal and artistic realms but also with political engagement. He was a committed patriot and nationalist; he was also a committed advocate for the marginalized and vulnerable, the underdogs of society—or to use the words of a more ideologically explicit time than our own, the exploited or oppressed masses—who lived, or tried to, in thrall to poverty, disease, ignorance, hypocritical priests, and corrupt politicians. Of course these concerns come up, and often, in Cankar's literature. But they are also explicitly addressed in some of his speeches and essays. Most of these are unavailable in English; one sketch from late in his life, however, entitled "The Locked Chamber,"<sup>10</sup> conveys well his sense of political engagement and also his belief that his country stood at a crossroads in portentous times.

Cankar's famous speech "Slovenci in Jugoslavani" ("Slovenes and Yugoslavs," 1913) is a fascinating testimony to the power of South Slavic solidarity in the face of Habsburg callousness and growing international anarchy. Cankar is careful to state several times that Slovene culture, and especially language, should never be renounced or eroded, but that it makes great sense for Slovenes, Croats, and Serbs (and, presumably, Bosnians and even Bulgarians) to work together *politically*. Rather than any kind of assimilationist or capitulatory program, Cankar's message is actually one of dual emancipation

<sup>10</sup> In *My Life and Other Sketches*, pp. 180–183.

for Slovenes, one that stresses their subjectivity and agency: Slovenes should burst forth from the framework of unproductive and constrictive Habsburg political life at the same time they assert their cultural independence from both Serbs and Croats (“Illyrians”)

Another very well known nonfiction item is “Kako sem postal socialist” (“How I Became a Socialist,” 1913). Historians know quite well—even if today’s politicians ignore the fact, and if popular culture has already forgotten it—that socialism has meant different things to different people at different times. More concretely we can safely assert that, before the enormities of Stalin’s crimes became known, or before the centrally planned economies slowed down in the face of global energy issues and the demands of the service economy, socialism or communism was associated with the promise of radical change and also emitted the allure of certain key achievements. Personages as diverse as Milovan Djilas and Aleksandr Wat, for instance, attest to the former; the Five-year Plans, immunity to the Great Depression, the emancipation of women, resistance to racism and fascism (think Spanish Civil War! think Stalingrad!), and anti-colonial wars attest to the latter. Cankar, on the strength of his ethical concerns, fits into this category as well. He writes that after observing much “injustice, misery, evil, and hypocrisy,”<sup>11</sup> Cankar felt called to turn his attention to things more important than just poetry; he wanted to analyze “forces” and powers, not “dream

<sup>11</sup> In Boris Zihlerl, ed. *Ivan Cankar in naš čas* (Ljubljana: Cankarjeva založba, 1976), p. 93.



of the stars.”<sup>12</sup> Contemporary literature he condemned as “maudlin” and political parties as impotent, so he was drawn to the self-confidence, authenticity, and life-affirming programs of the socialists. It is very interesting to note as well that Cankar thought in global terms about economics and exploitation, in a way that was quite sophisticated for his day. He knew that Chinese laborers in the Transvaal were tearing up the earth to extract diamonds to be shown off by the ladies of New York; and this was just one example of what universally dominant capitalism meant: “the great masses of people are, by dint of their labor, the producers of culture, but not its consumers.”<sup>13</sup> In addition, Cankar was an unorthodox and undogmatic socialist, and he asserted an early but unequivocal version of the right to what would be called by the 1940s “separate roads to socialism” for different countries.<sup>14</sup>

#### THIS BOOK

*Martin Kačur* was written in 1905 and published in early 1907 during Cankar’s long stay in Vienna. It is the story of the decline and fall of an idealistic young teacher assigned to the Slovene hinterland. Kačur has already been

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 94.

<sup>13</sup> See “Slovensko ljudstvo in slovenska kultura,” in Ivan Cankar, *Očiščenje in pomlajenje* (Ljubljana: Državna založba Slovenije, 1976), p. 34.

<sup>14</sup> See “Očiščenje in pomlajenje” in Ivan Cankar, *Očiščenje in pomlajenje* (Ljubljana: Državna založba Slovenije, 1976), p. 127.