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Analysis of the texts

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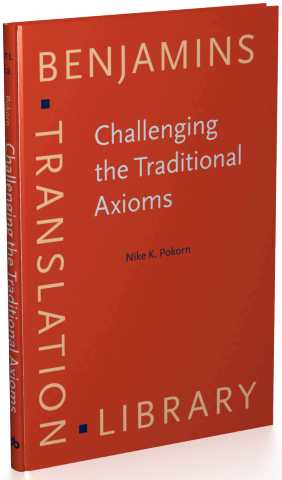

Pages 55–63 of
Challenging the Traditional Axioms: Translation into a non-mother tongue
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Analysis of the texts

Presentation of the selected originals

Nineteen prose texts by Ivan Cankar have been translated into English more than once, and all of them have been analysed. Although some of them might be referred to later on, a full report on the analysis seemed unnecessary. The following chapter will focus on the presentation of only those three texts whose translations were included in the questionnaire that will be discussed later, enabling us thus to interpret the results more accurately.

The Ward of Our Lady of Mercy

The Ward of Our Lady of Mercy was written between 1902 and 1903, and published in the spring of 1904. The structure of the work, consisting of a sequence of individual units, was regarded as innovative at the time of publication. The content of the work also proved to be shocking and scandalous to the original audience – it discussed themes the contemporary public did not want to hear. The ward of the title is in a hospital for incurably sick children in a large and unnamed city, where fourteen girls are dying, most probably of syphilis, passed on by their parents. The main character, Malchie, is the only girl who is aware of the fact that they have been put into hospital to die. Despite this awareness, she has no wish to return home, since she finds death her friend and neighbour. Her companions are portrayed as individuals and come from all levels of society: Lois, like Malchie, does not want to return to her rich artistocrat home and to her adulterous mother and drunken father. Katie and Tina come from a working-class family; Katie's body is covered with sores and she speaks to no-one, while fourteen-year-old Tina would like to leave: she is tormented by her awakening sexuality, but is doomed to early death like all the others. Pauline, a Jewish girl, is lonely and proud, while Rezika is kind and generous. Then there is Minka, the hunchback Brigid, and a blind girl, Toni, always yearning for the sun. Toni is the only one to return home, to an outside world plunged into cor-

ruption and misery. She is forced to leave the serenity of the ward and return to her dissolute father and adulterous step-mother whose perverted daughter sexually abuses the blind girl. The novel ends with the death of Malchie, symbolically represented as a mystical union with Christ.

The central themes of the novel are religion and death, but also disease, alcoholism, puberty and the erotic, also in its deviant, paedophile forms. Literary critics thus found in it a characteristic display of naturalistic motifs which Cankar tried to remodel according to the precepts of symbolistic narrative techniques (Kos 1976: 24; Bernik 1985: 166). *The Ward* is nowadays seen as one of the few Slovene European novels (Kos 1976: 31), and it is therefore surprising that it has been translated into English only twice.[11]

The novel allows for different and opposing interpretations. Thus soon after its publication the darkest aspects of the novel, describing the physically and socially-scarred girls, provoked extremely negative reviews, from both sides: liberal and conservative. The most praised liberal critic of the time, Fran Kobal, describes the work as "refined pornography, brought to artistic perfection" (Kobal 1904), and the conservative, right-wing journal *Dom in svet* rejected the work completely as immoral (D. S. 1904: 308). Cvetko Golar in *Slovan* (Golar 1903/1904: 187–188), a central-left literary magazine, attempted to be appreciative of the work, but could not avoid emphasising the feeling of "repulsion" one gets when reading the work – which did not help to promote a different understanding of the text. On the other hand, the critic Pavel Mihalek in the publication of Social Democrats *Naši zapiski,* was enthusiastic (Mihalek 1903/1904: 95), and so was Ivan Merhar who wrote in the most prominent liberal literary journal of the time, *Ljubljanski zvon*, that "from behind the darkness and shadows there appears a ray of hope, although weak and dimmed, but nevertheless an encouraging ray of hope and change for the better" (Merhar 1904: 380). Cankar's cousin, Izidor, who was a renowed literary critic and art historian and also one of the few who was capable of seeing beyond the mere surface, wrote: "The book starts with a poem of yearning and ends with a poem of saved souls. . ." (Iz. Cankar 1927: 12).

Literary criticism after the Second World War no longer regarded the naturalistic elements of *The Ward* as unacceptable; the most prominent literary critic in the sixties thus read the novel as the work in which Cankar, through the use of Christian motifs and symbolism, elevates the suffering child to the level where she becomes a sacrificial lamb and the saviour of straying humanity (Slodnjak 1967: 184). Within this horizon of understanding, the death of one of the main characters, Malchie, becomes the meaningful climax of existence, the entrance into a new and true life, individual salvation and ascension, the

first and the last erotic encounter consummated in mystical union with Christ (see Slodnjak 1969: 186–187). Such a reading seems to be also, according to his cousin Izidor, close to the interpretation of the text by its author:

> Regarding the criticism of my work, let me tell you this: one of my works was understood in a completely wrong and twisted manner. That was *The Ward of Our Lady of Mercy*. My thought was as pure as spring water when I wrote it. That is why the critical responses made me angry, although only great literary scandals make me feel that way. The idea of *The Ward* is not filthy, but tragic: fourteen sick girls anticipating life and health in death.(Iz. Cankar 1960: 9–10)

More contemporary literary criticism has focussed on the specific form and structure of the work: some defining it as a collection of short stories (Bernik 1983b: 164, 483), others as a cyclical, impressionistic novel (Kos 1976: 15–24, 1984: 88, 1987: 169). Naturalistic motifs, numerous Decadent elements and an Impressionistic style are emphasised in the work (Kos 1984: 88, 1987: 165; Bernik 1987: 14). The text reveals to some critics the author's struggle with sexuality (Kermauner 1974: 105; cf. Kos 1996) and the final goal of the protagonists is no longer seen in a mystical marriage but in a sensual and emotional fulfilment hidden in death (Kos 1976: 53–59).

A Cup of Coffee

At the beginning of 1914 Ivan Cankar prepared a collection of short stories with the title *My Field* (*Moja njiva*), but he died before it appeared. Some of the short stories destined to appear in that collection were published two years later in the book *My Life* (1920); however, not all of the stories were included in the selection and the original distribution of the texts was changed (see Koblar 1920: 139). It was as late as 1935 that the book appeared as it was originally intended, i.e. divided into four major parts, each bearing its own title. The short story *A Cup of Coffee* was published in the last part, entitled *By the Holy Grave* (*Ob svetem grobu)*.

At the time of its first appearance, *My Field* did not arouse any adverse reactions among the critics – everyone seemed to have liked it. Thus, for example, France Vodnik in the conservative *Dom in svet* only mentions that the book was published and that the values expressed in it are commendable (Vodnik 1935b: 445). A more detailed, but also appreciative review was published in the liberal *Ljubljanski zvon*, where *My Field* was described as one of the most

beautiful books by Cankar and "the most brilliant proof of his artistic growth" (Gspan 1936: 98–102).

Contemporary Slovene literary history places *My Field* in the Symbolist literary current on the basis of its themes and in Expressionism with regard to the formal and stylistic features of the sketches (Zadravec 1982: 88; Kos 1987: 177); and indeed, the sketches are filled with lyrical reasoning, Decadent and Romantic features are replaced by Symbolist and Expressionist elements, while the style is more abstract (see Kos 1987: 177).

The last section of *My Field* consists of 11 sketches entitled *By the Holy Grave*, all of them dedicated to the memory of a mother. Cankar's treatment of the relationship between a son and his mother seemed to many readers and also to his English translators as the most characteristic aspect of Cankar's creativity – as many as 10 out of the 14 translators treated in this study translated at least one of the sketches from that section. And this representativeness is reflected in the fact that Cankar's understanding of the relationship between a mother and her son, as well as the significance and importance of the mother in his writings, have often been critically discussed (see e.g. Puhar 1982: 25–29).

In most of the sketches included in *By the Holy Grave* the mother is represented as a caretaker and guardian of her children, as a dying or even dead mother and as a spiritual consort who can, even after her own death, console her son in his moments of crisis. Almost all of the sketches describe the relationship between the sacrificing, loving mother on the one hand and the ungrateful and wrongful son on the other. This relationship results in the emergence of the son's burning feelings of guilt, intensified by the fact that while his mother was alive they had not shared the same worldview. But when remembering his mother, the narrator finds strength in her expressed religious feelings which eventually helps him to overcome his own crisis (Bernik 1976a: 80, 1983a: 277, 1983b: 443, 1987: 243). The themes of sin, repentance, penitence and salvation intertwine in these eleven sketches and reveal a typical Catholic but also individualised moralism (Kos 1987: 179) – and this similarity between Cankar's treatments of the filial relationship to the mother with the Catholic cult of the Virgin Mary proved problematic for many scholars.

For some interpreters of his work, Cankar's mother thus became "the supreme ethical principle and the symbol of a covenant and debt" (Pirjevec 1964: 436), the only unchangeable and stable principle to whom everything else has to adapt to in order to become real and true (Pirjevec 1964: 19). The mother becomes a symbol, larger than life, bestowing the meaning of life to her son (Pirjevec 1964: 437) and revealing to him that he is a "free historical subject who exists, who is and is not nothing".

Not only Pirjevec, but numerous other scholars interpret this relationship according to their own understanding of the world; for example, quite a few of them attempt to parallel this fictional relationship between the mother and her son to the real relationship between Cankar and his mother. The narrator is simply identified with Cankar and the mother with Cankar's mother (see e.g. Vidmar 1971; Bernik 1976a: 82, 1983b: 430, see also 1983a: 227, 1983b: 490). Cankar was aware of this possible reading of his works at the time of their publication and therefore insisted that no simplistic conclusions be drawn:

> I would like to add that all those merry and sad stories were not written by me, i.e. the person who now talks to you and loves you from all his heart; they were written by someone you do not know and never will. Divide your respect if you have any: bestow the better part to me, to the one who walks with you, and give the rest to the one who writes stories and remains unknown.
>
> (Cankar 1959a: 294)

Although Cankar undoubtedly created all of his works out of his own experience, his writings should nevertheless be critically appraised in their totality; in fact, it would be very difficult to pinpoint the character in his works who undoubtedly and professedly expresses the author's point of view. Cankar is never only the doubting son but also the religious mother, they both stem from him and are the fruit of his creativity; he is not only the one who doubts and suffers torture, but also the one who suffers and saves; and finally, Cankar is not only an internalised dichotomy of doubt and faith but the one "you do not know and you never will", who partly and evasively reveals and hides himself in a complex, contradictory and illusive text.

If not simplistically identified with Cankar's mother, then the mother in these sketches is seen as a symbol larger than life: thus Izidor Cankar writes that in Cankar's works the maternal figure blends with the face of Virgin Mary, becoming "something transcending humanity, something that is eternal, miraculous and immaculately sacred" (Iz. Cankar 1969: 349). The most prominent post-war critics, Bernik and Vidmar, also argue that the image of the mother in the sketches surpasses mere descriptions of a pure, self-sacrificing and suffering woman and that the author sacralised her, making her "a martyr saint" (Cankar 1974: Her Grave: 279). Her grave thus becomes the Holy Grave, her letter Holy Scripture, her memory the holy memory, her sacrifice for her family the Holy Communion for her children, and visits to her grave a holy pilgrimage (Bernik 1976a: 80, 1983a: 277, 1983b: 430–431; Vidmar 1977: 9). While Bernik and Kos argue that Cankar's symbolic use of Christian religious vocabulary is an original artistic reworking of the Catholic liturgy and

religious symbols (Bernik 1983a: 277, 1983b: 431, 1987: 219; Kos 1987: 177), others claim that Cankar's cult of the mother is a natural continuation of the Marian cult in Slovenia (Vodušek in Vodnik 1935a: 110).

It seems that at the end of the day the understanding of the concept of the mother in Cankar's work usually corresponds to the interpreter's relationship towards Christianity. Thus for example, Lacanian scholars see in Cankar's mother the bearer of the phallus, the signifier or the herald of a symbolic castration (Močnik 1971: 88[31]; Žižek 1978: 206). The son is incessantly tormented by guilt and suffocated by the obvious suffering of his mother.

> To put it simply: all of Cankar's unending litanies about his mother only hide and with that symptomatically reveal the fact of immense relief that he was freed from his mother; they are a kind of neurotic conjuring directed at keeping his mother away, wishing that she would never return. (Žižek 1978: 206)

A similarly negative attitude is developed by Heideggerean critics who claim that the mother is not the one who possesses the phallus (Hribar 1983: 45) but the one who acts in the name of the Other as the Almighty (Hribar 1983: 45[16]), and thus remains a "bad" influence in her son's life:

> Cankar's mother is a bad mother, because she is too good. With her whining goodness and piousness she managed to annihilate (also in the name of God the Father, the Other as the Almighty) the ideal image of the humiliated real father, whose humiliation was due to biological and social reasons. She thus managed to create in critical situations an unknown horror instead of trust, and this horror then followed Cankar throughout his life. (Hribar 1983: 48)

And indeed, the mother's suffering causes suffering and a sense of sin in her son. But while suffering seems "bad" for Slovene Heideggerians, in Cankar's horizon of understanding, which is often close to that of traditional Christianity, suffering becomes redemptive since it leads beyond life.

Despite different interpretations of Cankar's conceptualisation of the mother, it is obvious that she and the relationship of her children towards her occupy a central and essential position in Cankar's work. This claim also seems to be substantiated by the fact that these sketches are the works of Cankar most often translated into English, which means that for their translators they best represent Cankar's work as a whole.

The sketch *A Cup of Coffee,* first published in the liberal literary magazine *Ljubljanski zvon* in 1910, discusses the concept of sin, which is considered not so much as the violation of a general moral principle, but more trespassing against internal commandments of the heart (see Bernik 1983b: 429). The sketch opens with an abstract reflection on how a sin, although it might appear

minute to others, can oppress the soul indefinitely, and how the grievousness of the sin is always judged by the individual and never by the state or the church. A short story then follows where a son, a writer, tells his mother that he would like a cup of coffee, although he is aware that his mother does not even have the money to buy bread for the family. The mother nevertheless manages to bring him a cup, but the son, completely immersed in his work, in a moment of distraction, tells her to go away. He is immediately aware of his cruelty and tries to make things right again, but it is too late – the sin carves itself into his soul for ever.

The sketch has been translated into English five times, but the translations, with the exception of Adamic's version, have received almost no critical response.

Children and Old People

This sketch was published in a collection of short stories entitled *Dream Visions* (*Podobe iz sanj*) that appeared during the First World War, in December 1917, in Ljubljana. Most of the sketches first appeared in the "conservative" literary journal *Dom in svet* in the period between 1915 and 1917, i.e. during the war and at a time when the magazine was edited by Cankar's cousin Izidor Cankar.

In *Dream Visions* problems of the First World War period are approached, the sketches become even shorter and quite a number of them no longer depict an event but offer a reflection, a symbolic meditation, dream or grotesque (Cankar 1975: 289–290; Bernik 1983a: 278, 1983b: 474; Kos 1987: 177; Zadravec 1991: 187). They are thus usually classified in two larger units: the first group consisting of more or less traditional, i.e. realistic sketches – like for example the sketch *Children and Old People*; the second group consisting of symbolic, expressionist sketches depicting almost no events and no realistic characters (see Bernik 1983b: 473). The translators into English almost unanimously decided for the first group of sketches, i.e. the traditional, realistic ones.

The collection is Cankar's last work and the only one he published during the First World War. In it, he expresses the wish to feel close to another human being, to his suffering, fear and horror, while exploring the human desire to find again its soul. Besides the obvious use of the expressionist idea of brotherhood among men (see Bernik 1981: 124, 1983a: 277), Cankar openly uses traditionally Christian notions. The narrator thus defines the three greatest values in his life: Mother – Homeland – God, as the only trinity that defends him from Death (Bernik 1981: 129, 1983b: 470, 1987: 226–227).

And this explicitly expressed religious elation, this optimism grown out of the painful experience of the horrors of the war, proved to be the most exciting to his critics.

Dream Visions and *The Cross on the Hill* were Cankar's only works that were well received by the critics and a wider readership. The immediate response to this work was unanimously positive – in Slovenia as well as in Croatia. In contrast to his other works, this time the Catholic critics wrote the most appreciative reviews, while the liberal critics showed some reservations. In fact, some of the critics were even euphoric, thus in the journal *Jugoslovan* we read: "For his great love for humanity Ivan Cankar will receive gratitude from his mother and his homeland, and God will repay him" (Mazovec 1917: 3). Cankar was not happy with such eulogies – but despite his protests, the collection was continuously showered with praise. *Slovenski narod* thus describes the collection as "a work of beautiful poetry, of pure, even purest lyricism" (Ilešič 1917: 2). The liberal *Ljubljanski zvon* finds in Cankar's depiction of human helplessness the rejection of resignation and the light of optimism (Glonar 1918: 147). And this optimism was detected by most of the critics in Cankar's expressed religiousness: thus some of them claim that the sketches "breathe in the framework of poetry and religousness" (Gangl 1918: 5), that the collection is a book of "goodness, love and faith" (Albrecht 1918: 192), some critics even go so far as to recommend the work for reading during Lent (Debevec 1918: 1–2) and argue that *Dream Visions* contain not only religious elements, but that with them the renegade Cankar finally returned to a religious understanding of the world (Pregelj 1917/18: 80–85). The response in the Social-Democratic camp was therefore reserved – they felt as if Cankar had changed sides and somehow joined the conservatives (see e.g. Kristan 1918: 1). Since Cankar was mainly praised as a Social Democrat and his expressed religiousness was suppressed after the Second World War, the book had a similarly reserved reception in the Socialist period.

At the time of its first publication, the book was well received in Croatia, despite the language barrier. The collection was hailed as the peak of Slovene, or even world literature (Lah 1918: 271–277; Sokačić 1918: 428–430); the book was appreciated by the public and sold so well that it was reprinted in 1920.

The sketch *Children and Old People* was thus first published in 1916 in the journal *Dom in svet* and then a year later in the collection *Dream Visions*. The sketch in a realistic manner depicts how children accept the news that their father "fell in Italy". The four children cannot understand the consequences of this news and stare "into something unknown, incomprehensible to the heart

and the mind" (Cankar 1975: 23). While the wife of the deceased cries in the stable, his parents, like his children, embrace the pain in silence.

This sketch is one of the most frequently translated sketches into English; in fact, it has been translated six times. Unfortunately, of some of the early translators all trace is lost.