

## REVIEWS

**Irena Avsenik Nabergoj.** *Mirror of Reality and Dreams: Stories and Confessions* by Ivan Cankar. Translated by Jason Blake. Frankfurt: Peter Lang, 2008. 309 pp., \$74.95 (cloth). ISBN: 978-3-631-57812-4.

In Aravind Adiga's recent international bestseller *The White Tiger*, the impoverished and brutalized countryside of India is referred to as "the Darkness." From out of this brutalized and brutalizing space emerges Balwal, the book's anti-hero. In the Ivan Cankar short story "Jakobovo hudodelstvo," which is one of the dozens of stories analyzed in this new book by Irena Avsenik Nabergoj, the main character, the perpetrator-cum-victim named Jakob, also ventures forth from a place "where the sun does not shine" and where humanity is a long "procession of the unfortunate and the humiliated." This story, one of Cankar's very best in the eyes of this translator and reviewer, is an appropriate spot to begin a review of Avsenik Nabergoj's book because its themes typify the aspects of Cankar's oeuvre that concern her and because the abbreviated treatment the story receives points to some of the methodological challenges she faces in her book.

By analyzing myriad examples of Cankar's short and long fiction and plays, the author confronts us with the details of Cankar's trips to the "lower depths of the human spirit" (25). Avsenik Nabergoj categorizes the kinds of suffering and injustice in Cankar's corpus under subheadings such as abused children, suicide, alcoholism, political corruption, laziness, conceit, ignorance, apathy, lust, murder, and philistinism.

Whether in the teeming proletarian districts of Vienna or in the rural reaches of the St. Florian Valley, we are in an artistic world saturated with the “misery and suffering of the poor [and] humble” (21). The key to Avsenik Nabergoj’s argument is where she wants to head with this large load of plot details and characterizations: Cankar writes about these things in order to champion “the primacy of the spirit over the body, the primacy of man as an individual over depersonalized collective society, the primacy of love, sympathy and mercy over the human form, and the primacy of divine over human justice” (25). Not everyone will agree, of course, that Cankar, who was up to his ears in the muck and odium and ideas of the “real world,” truly consistently wanted life’s struggles abstracted down to their symbolic value, and the resolution of those trials to a pietistic or quietist inner quest. That said, Avsenik Nabergoj demonstrates considerable skill in finding parallels between Cankar’s ideas and the works of many other thinkers and artists, ranging from Plato, Sophocles, and St. Augustine to Dostoyevsky, Nietzsche, and Tolstoy. She generally employs these other writers not to show their direct influence on Cankar (although in the case of Biblical writings and others, she does this effectively as well), but rather to illuminate psychological workings and philosophical or ethical precepts that help us interpret Cankar’s works.

This is a large-scale undertaking and it is obviously an intellectually ambitious one as well. Avsenik Nabergoj’s analytic vocabulary could, in the opinion of this reviewer, be fleshed out and tightened up. More precision with phrases such as “longing for redemption” and “subordination to truth,” as well as additional clarity on such terms as guilt, confession, conscience, and freedom, would focus and strengthen her arguments. It would also seem to be the case that other observers working this same landscape of suffering and injustice might make more of things that are peripheral to Avsenik Nabergoj’s argument, such as the anti-clericalism of individual characters and the nature of political conflict and choices. Furthermore, Cankar’s preoccupation with children, especially little girls, as registers for the loss of innocence suggests that a Freudian analysis might be a useful supplement to the characterization of the children simply as symbols. Cankar’s ruminations on socialism, Yugoslavism, and the (naturalistic) duties of the writer and artist are likewise left out of the analytical picture in favor of consideration of “the imperfect human ordering of society” and the “unwritten Holy law, the law which even the sum of church commandments cannot include, far above human laws” (279).

Avsenik Nabergoj’s approach leaves certain questions of methodology unanswered. How do we account, for instance, for the absence from the book of a large number of Cankar’s best-known works? It would be hard for anyone to treat them all, of course, because he was astonishingly prolific, but the selection criteria should not go unmentioned. Where are the

novels *Na klancu*, *Gospa Judit*, and *Martin Kačur*? “Potepuh Marko in kralj Matjaž” and *Novo življenje* would also seem to offer material for her analysis. Would the animal fables have done so too? There is also the danger, it would seem, of reductionism in the processing of the many stories over which Avsenik Nabergoj has cast her net in building her argument. In the story about the hapless Jakob mentioned above, there is an awful lot in the buildup to the incident with the rich profligate—and a number of layered interpretations of the rich man’s flower-toss are possible, too—that deserves consideration as we prepare to judge or at least categorize Jakob’s assault. Alas, arguments cannot help but run roughshod over meanders and intricacies, but ultimately we are faced with this about the author’s general approach to Cankar’s writing: it is solely thematic and not concerned with *how* Cankar says what he says. To note this is not to condemn Avsenik Nabergoj’s work—certainly it is not condemnation coming from a historian. However, we should be aware of the limits to this argument. Moreover, these limits are underscored by the dearth of biographical information on the author in the book, especially with regard to the phases of his creative life. With more about the man himself, Avsenik Nabergoj might have been able to make a stronger case for Cankar’s ethical and religious preoccupations being an evolving, lifelong facet of his personality rather than the fruit of increasing turbulence and exhaustion towards the end of his life.

Cankar enthusiasts will delight in the excerpted letters built into Avsenik Nabergoj’s argument. Through them we are privy to Cankar’s discussions of his works with his brother Karel, for instance, and with the groundbreaking woman writer Zofka Kveder. There are also long synopses and expositions of works that are little known in English, such as the novel *Nina* (165–74), the play *Za narodov blagor* (pp. 241–53), and many others. The bibliography is excellent and useful to any scholar of Cankar, and the topical index is useful to anyone looking to pin down specific Cankar works on similar themes, such teaching, orphans, or mothers. Aside from the clunky title, the volume is well produced. There are a few photographs and several black-and-white illustrations of Cankar’s works; most interestingly, *Erotika* from 1899. The translation by Jason Blake reads extremely well.

So, to conclude: was Ivan Cankar a nihilist? We can ask this question today and still, as though the date were 1909 instead of 2009, come up with varying answers. We would probably ask this question today for different reasons than Cankar’s contemporaries, though. Whereas Cankar’s subject matter was considered scurrilous and implacably negative a century ago, we are now accustomed to much stronger stuff. A secondary consideration from his time has become the primary one in ours: does Cankar, who by common admission was a rare master of the representation of modern human suffering and social injustice, offer us any solutions to the misery immortalized in his prose? Perhaps “solutions” is not the right word.

Perhaps this is better: is there an end to the suffering, or a purpose to it? Salvation or rescue? Salvation from the suffering or salvation, as Avsenik Nabergoj (but definitely not all of us) would argue, through the suffering? At least two camps continue to present themselves readily: that of political engagement and that of metaphysics or Christianity. This book, an addition to the latter school, which is in turn already well rooted in many Anglophone understandings of Cankar, is a most welcome addition to the meager but growing library of English-language critical works on Slovene literature. It is hard to believe, but this is the first book in English devoted exclusively to the works of Ivan Cankar! Slovene literature deserves many more studies and translations, and Cankar deserves much more consideration.

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#### Works Cited

Adiga, Aravind. 2008. *The White Tiger*. New York: Free Press.

**Martin Grum.** *Slovenski prevajalski leksikon 1550–1945. Poskusni zvezek A–J*. Ljubljana: Društvo slovenskih književnih prevajalcev and Inštitut za kulturno zgodovino ZRC SAZU, 2007. 263 pp., €20.00 [= \$25.68] (paper). ISBN: 978-961-6515-04-7.

In 1830, Pushkin observed that *Переводчики — почтовые лошади просвещения* ‘Translators are the post-horses of culture’. Martin Grum, an independent consultant at the Institute of Cultural History in Ljubljana, has taken it upon himself to catalogue (and thereby recognize) some of these “post-horses” in what promises to be the most comprehensive compilation of biographical and bibliographic data on Slovene translators to date, represented in this trial volume (A–J) of an encyclopedia of Slovene translators active between 1550 and 1945 (*Slovenski prevajalski leksikon 1550–1945*; hereinafter *SPL*). Grum is especially well-suited for this task, with a bibliography of his own stretching back nearly three decades, including extensive work on bibliographies of various sorts and profiles of numerous translators. Of course, he has been able to draw upon this wealth of information in compiling the present volume.

In Slovenia, where talented people have often worn more than one hat, it sometimes seems that almost everyone is a translator these days. Official obituaries and biographies are filled with formulations like “literarni zgodovinar, prevajalec, esejist, publicist, literarni kritik, urednik in