

EMIGRANTS IN IVAN CANKAR'S FICTION*

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Ivan Cankar wrote about emigrants with deep personal involvement. Not only was he a native of Slovenia, a tiny country that had been providing labor for the rich Western European countries and the USA, he was also born into a family from which laborers had often travelled to foreign lands in search of daily bread. His childhood friends as well as his own brothers were swallowed by the world beyond the boundaries of Slovenia. Therefore his reasoning about the emigrant is neither detached nor calmly speculative. His stories about emigrants read like ballads, their style sometimes transcending narrative or even lyrical prose and approaching biblical expression. Many of his stories open with an atmosphere-creating, meditative paragraph in the first person, which gives the narrative a strong frame of authenticity. Such an introduction also provides a bridge between the nucleus of the story, which is usually a realistic episode in an emigrant's life, and the symbolic extension and artistic interpretation of the event.

Cankar's emigrant stories were nearly all written the first decade of this century. In those years the writer was living in Ottakring, a working-class suburb of Vienna, as a boarder with a working-class family, the Löfflers. He had already given up the idea of obtaining a university degree at the Vienna University, and even of getting steady employment. His chosen occupation was writing. Through daily correspondence with literary friends and publishers in Ljubljana he was informed about the problems and upheavals in contemporary political, economic and cultural situation in Slovenia. At the same time, he was surrounded by the reality of a central European metropolis, with its cultural richness and cosmopolitan polish on one hand and its miseries and injustices on the other. Cankar's fiction of the Vienna period, therefore, reflects this dual aspect of his existence and loyalties. He writes about Slovene intellectuals, politicians, artists, peasants, and suffering children at the same time as he portrays miscellaneous misfits of Ottakring,

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alcoholics, prostitutes, sickly children and unemployed. His stories about emigrants form two distinct groups as well. One group represents the artistic interpretation of the fate of Slovene emigrants in the countries of Western Europe and the United States of America, while the other deals with Czech immigrants in Vienna. Regardless of which emigrants Cankar portrays, however, he always chooses only those who have found neither luck nor happiness in their new, chosen country. His emigrants to America fall into the midst of an economic crisis only to roam New York streets and flop-houses with other unemployed laborers—until they return home as failures. Those who had worked in West German mines and factories return home sick, exhausted and poor, only to die and be buried in their native soil. Czech immigrants in Vienna become Ottakring outcasts—unemployed, poor, sick, despised, their children prematurely grown, never assimilated.

1. Slovene Emigrants.

By 1900, when Cankar was twenty-four years old, he had already become aware of the threatening problem that his native land was bleeding to death, and that the Slovenes were doomed to extinction if the emigration tide was not stopped. In his correspondence with friends he talks about this gloomy prospect with great apprehension:

. . . it makes me feel very sad if I stop and think what kind of future our peasant nation will have. This nation is disappearing and dying. In the Dolenjsko region some villages practically have no male population any more; everybody is leaving to get lost forever. . . . If things continue this way, in two hundred years we won't exist any more.¹

To another friend he writes:

. . . I intend to write a drama about our peasants; this sad, general bankruptcy of our people, especially in Dolenjsko villages, is something tragic; it is taking place slowly and imperceptibly, and is, therefore, even more shocking . . . this terrible passivity is something enormous.²

The "bankruptcy" which Cankar writes about, was the economic crisis in which the Slovene peasants, who had until 1848 been serfs on the land they tilled, found themselves after the agrarian

reform. Unable to pay for the land they "owned" and heavily taxed, they sank into debt, and one after another were forced to sell their land. In 1870's this crisis reached its peak, and mass emigration followed.

Cankar started planning two dramas: one a tragedy about the proletarianization of the Slovene countryside, and the other dealing with emigration. The first plan he partially realized in his play *The King of Betajnova* in 1901; of the second plan, however, only four pages of a play were ever written, in spite of the fact that Cankar worked on it for eight years. The problem disturbed him deeply, and he was trying to convey the idea in a perfect form. That he was striving for perfection is shown in those four pages which are in themselves a masterpiece. The drama was to be called *Niobe*. The name and the motif from Greek mythology would symbolically represent three problems: firstly, the universal tragedy of an old mother whose children have left; secondly, the loneliness and sorrow of a Slovene peasant mother wasting away after all her children have emigrated; and thirdly, the decline of Slovenia, the motherland of a doomed people, a land dying of wounds from mass emigration. But the play never materialized. Cankar delayed writing it because he felt that he should leave Vienna and go to Slovenia to study the situation firsthand. But his perpetual poverty prohibited such trips.

Nevertheless, Cankar did not put the problem of emigration aside. Instead of writing one big piece about the problem, he portrayed the emigrants and expressed his ideas about emigration from Slovenia in shorter, less involved works, in short stories, as well as in some chapters of his longer prose works.

The earliest traces of the emigrant motif could be seen in Cankar's first novel *Strangers* and in the short story "Rue des Nations." There is no direct mention of emigrants in either, but in both the author expresses the feelings of homesickness and love for his homeland which he must have been experiencing in Vienna where he lived as a at least temporary immigrant. In *Strangers* he says:

He remembered those beautiful places, those hills and valleys, those rustling woods; it seemed to him that down there the spring sun kept shining brightly, meadows melting in its light, wheat waving in caressing breezes, dewy happiness spilling all over. . . . Oh, how he would kneel down and kiss that soil, he, the wanderer.³

But no matter how deep Cankar's love for his homeland was, he could not overlook the fact that this beautiful country could not support all who were born into it. He realized that people were

forced to leave in search of a better, dignified life. Thus, his emigrants soon displayed a new, tragic feature: they were people torn between their love for their homeland and their urge to live, to fight for a better life. By their very decision to emigrate they brought on themselves an existence of split loyalties, guilt complexes and sorrow.

The character of the emigrant developed step by step, with each step becoming less romantic, sentimental, and more and more tragic.

One of the first emigrant characters appeared in the story *The Cross on the Mountain*, in 1905. The hero is not yet tragic;—maybe momentarily sad, but neither physically nor spiritually broken. The man is one of those lucky emigrants who have found bread and butter if not a fortune in America. He has come home to find himself a bride. He is fat, red-cheeked, showing off and strutting through his native village, smoking a cigar, flashing a golden ring and generally behaving like a rich “Amerikanec.” Yet he falls in love with the wrong girl and has to return to America alone and crest-fallen. This first figure of Cankar’s emigrants is a loser, but he is not a tragic character. He is not unhappy because he is an emigrant; he is unhappy because of unhappy love.

The next step in the development of the emigrant in Cankar’s stories could be seen in the short story “The Idiot Martinec,” written in the same year as *The Cross on the Mountain*. Here the emigrants are shown in a new light: although the decision to emigrate is supposed to be the act of strong, young people who refuse to be tied to their doomed home and die with it, it is nevertheless an act of despair. In “The Idiot Martinec” the young would-be emigrants pretend to be happy; on the eve of their departure they drink and dance themselves into a stupor. The village fool, Martinec, plays the accordion for them. He, too, has decided to emigrate. Next morning he follows the little procession of three strong young men and the village beauty Hana, with whom he is in love. Yet he cannot carry out his decision. He watches Hana’s red silk scarf disappear beyond the hill, then he returns to the villages in the gully, to merge and die with the old folk. Sorrow and the feeling of doom envelop Martinec as well as the little procession of brave young emigrants.

A year after “The Idiot Martinec” Cankar wrote the story “Vagabond Marko and King Matjaž.” Like Martinec, Marko is a musician, and he, too, wanders through empty, dying-out villages and across untilled fields overgrown with weeds. He encounters only half-dead old men and women; all the young people have disappeared. But here the story continues where “The Idiot Martinec” left off: we encounter the character of a forsaken mother, a Niobe. In the story, she is Marko’s aunt Agata, an old woman living alone in a

decaying house; she moves around wrapped in a grey shawl, pale and wrinkled. She laments:

Five sons I had! five handsome young men, a pleasure to the eye. . . . Then, my oldest son became sick, very sick at heart. 'Mother, I can't live here any more, my home is strangling me, my heart is longing for far-away lands.' I cried and I begged, but he tore himself from my embrace and he left and I have never seen him since. A year later my second son became sick. . . .⁴

Agata lost all her sons, including her youngest, whom she had begged on her knees to stay. Although Marko remains with his aunt for a while, he cannot help her: he, too, is young and he, too, has been infected with the longing for the Eldorado somewhere beyond his native hills. While Martinec could not cut the ties which bound him to his beloved, doomed homeland, Marko has succeeded, as have his five cousins and other strong, brave young people. Yet all of them have taken with them their memories and homesickness, as well as the feeling of guilt because they left behind their mothers; Niobes to die a lonely death. Thus, the emigrant in Cankar's stories, is split within himself, a misfit even before he had tried his luck in a new, adopted country.

A year after "The Vagabond Marko," in 1907, Cankar drew a symbolic portrait of the emigrant which was to remain unchanged in all his emigrant stories yet to follow. He outlined him in a lyrical parable entitled the "Way of the Cross." In the parable Christ leads a procession of the humiliated and the down-trodden out of their valley of tears across Golgotha into the glory of resurrection. Among the sufferers in Christ's procession are abused children, pauper-peasants, factory workers and—emigrants. While the American in *The Cross on the Mountain* was a successful man if not happy, while the three boys and the lovely girl in the "Idiot Martinec" at least pretended to be happy, and while Niobe's sons left because their youthful ambition overcame their love for their mother, the emigrants in Christ's procession pretend no more:

They were carrying bundles of clothing and staring at the ground. They were bent at the waist, covered with dust. Men and women, old people and children. The children, too, were silent and stared at the ground.

'Where to, my dear folks?' asked the stranger.

'To America, to the promised land, to find bread and soil and homeland.'

They walked on and did not raise their heads; and they all started to sing a sad pilgrims' hymn.⁵

Thus, the profile of the emigrant acquired the feature of a tragic, even cynical weakling, who has sacrificed his homeland for a crust of bread and has in the process lost his identity, his very soul.

In the stories which followed this portrayal of the emigrant, that is, in the stories after 1907, Cankar tried to follow the emigrant's destiny in his new homeland. Cankar knew about the life of Slovene emigrants in America and Western Europe only from reports. He never travelled to these countries himself. And the reports were not good. A great number of Slovene emigrants in the years 1907-1908 was hit by the great economic depression in the USA. Unemployment struck hard. Many newcomers left America and returned home, usually poorer than when they had left. Cankar wrote about these unfortunate people from the point of view of an idealist, a patriotic observer. Since he never lived among Slovene emigrants himself, he could not write emigrant stories based on real people and real events. The stories are, thus, lyrical, poetic and symbolistic. Symbolism is clearly demonstrated already in the short sketch "Welcome!," written in 1907, and it intensifies with years. It reaches its peak in the poetic tale *Kurent*, in 1909.

The lyrical sketch "Welcome!" is written in a solemn, biblical style. It opens with a rhetorical introductory paragraph, an accusation and reproach to America:

"Oh, America, you land of yearning, the blessed Eldorado of immeasurable riches, the land where in the days of woe all the poor and oppressed found a haven—where are you, America, you promised land? It is no more. . . . The mines are empty, the factories closed, the steel wheels idle and rusting. As after a lost battle black battalions are running away, in silence, without hope. Each week, my dear folks, each week thirty thousands."⁶

Cankar then selects three men from this defeated swarm, and we hear their triple chant, colored with sorrow and feeling of guilt and shame when they approach the village in which the first one had left a bride, the second an old mother, and the third a large family. They are apprehensive about facing their folks, embarrassed about their defeat in the foreign land. But the relatives do not reproach them for anything; they embrace and welcome their guilt-ridden men.

In conclusion, Cankar sends a message of compassion to all emigrants who are returning home as failures:

You who fertilized foreign lands with the sweat of your brow, you who drenched it with your warm blood—welcome! Each of you is like a child who had run away because his mother could not provide his daily bread. But when he became sick, he returned home to his poor mother, and they greeted each other with tears.⁷

But forgiveness and compassion are not the lot of the emigrant in another story Cankar wrote in the same year as “Welcome!” The short story “Oh My Homeland, You Are Like Health”⁸ was written for *Hrvatski dnevnik* in Sarajevo, therefore the hero is a Croatian, and Cankar’s language in this narrative colored by Croatian words. But the fate of the emigrant is the same as of his Slovene counterpart: Gjuro had left for Germany fifteen years ago. And there, according to the author

... every time he returned from the factory, his body was weaker for three drops of blood: one drop had been swallowed by the powerful machines, the second dissipated in the black dust, and the third melted in brandy.⁹

Then, one day Gjuro fainted beside his machine, black blood streaming out of his mouth. He realized that his days were numbered. He tied his bag and returned to his homeland. As he stepped onto his native soil, he was moved to tears:

Fifteen years and more my poor eyes have not seen you, my mother. . . . Greetings to you, my wide, sweet-smelling fields. . . . Blessings and thanks to you, my land . . . you who had given me my life, you in whose embrace one can be reborn.¹⁰

But unlike the three men in the story “Welcome!,” Gjuro is not welcomed by the people in his native village. A new note is sounded in the evaluation of the emigrants: they are considered healthy, brave people no more. They are a cowardly minority who were unable to endure the hardships together with their fellow countrymen; after having given the best years of their lives to a foreign country they have no right to return home and reap where they did not sow. The villagers bring Gjuro a pile of straw and install him in a barn. Gjuro, a man who once had two homelands and now has none, cries bitterly; he kisses a lump of soil and dies.

The third variation on the theme of the defeated emigrant who returns home after an unsuccessful attempt to improve his lot appeared in the story “A Tale of Two Young People,” written in 1909.

It is the story of Pavle and Mana, a poor couple, who cannot afford to marry. So they decide that Pavle would go to America for a while and earn some money, while Mana would stay at home and also work hard to save some money. Then they would go back to their native village and get married. Pavle is full of doubts and apprehension when he hears his fellow-passengers discuss the prospects of life in America. They are saying that:

Years ago it did happen that a man returned from America with a purse full of money and with a golden watch. But these days when a poor man steps onto one ship, his poverty steps onto another and sails right behind him.¹¹

In America Pavle is faced with unemployment, starvation and temptation into crime. But since he is healthy and spiritually strong—he has not been drained yet by slaving in a foreign land—he decides to admit his mistake and return home. When he meets Mana, he discovers that she, too, had not managed to gather any dowry by working in the city. They decide, however, to return to the village, get married, and work their patch of land, having each other's love to sustain them.

This naively optimistic end of the story was Cankar's concession to the publisher Mohorjeva družba, which distributed books mainly among the peasant population, whom it tried to enlighten and elevate. The moral of the story is obvious: save your courage, your strength and your love for your homeland, and you will be repaid—not with riches, but with dignity and with the warm feeling of belonging.

This idea permeates and brings to its high-pitched conclusion Cankar's most symbolistic prose-work on the theme of the emigrant, *Kurent*. Written in the same year as "A Tale of Two Young People," it proclaims the same idea, but in an entirely different form. *Kurent* is a magnificent rhythmic narrative, in which the fantastic is superimposed on the underlying gloomy reality. The symbol has replaced the character completely.

In *Kurent* Cankar used motifs from some of his previous stories: like the idiot Martinec and like the vagabond Marko. *Kurent* is a musician, playing his tunes to the sad, the doomed, all over Slovenia; he, too, catches only a passing glimpse of the beautiful girl in her red, shiny scarf. The types of the oppressed and downtrodden for whom *Kurent* plays his tunes are the same that have walked in Christ's procession. To these old motifs Cankar now added a new one, borrowed from folklore and literature: *Kurent*, a miserable boy sells his soul to the devil and obtains from him a magic flute, which makes

people forget their miseries. Kurent's roamings end when he joins a procession of emigrants bound for the seaport.

Their faces were burnt from the sun, so that no one could say whether they were young or old; they were all dark and bitter, all to the last one. Thick dust covered their coats, their cheeks, their eyes.¹²

But all these people are determined to go—no matter where; even death is better than the life they are leaving behind. In the biblically powerful triple complaint we hear an old man, a young man, and a girl, saying their sorrowful good-bys. Kurent sees the plight of this sad procession. He takes his fiddle and plays a happy tune. But as soon as the emigrants have embarked on their ship and Kurent's song can be heard no more, they realize they have made a mistake. Staring at the shore, their eyes fill with tears as they beg:

Smile to us for the last time, oh homeland, you poor, dearly beloved! Smile to us, the dead. What is happiness, what youth, what life without you?¹³

This rhetorical question contains Cankar's final belief about emigration: no amount of money, no comforts in life can replace the loss of your homeland. Even if you succeed in a foreign land, you will never be happy. But most likely you will not succeed. Therefore, stay at home, suffer with your country, and love her—she is your one and only mother.

When the ship disappears with her load of emigrants, doomed in advance, Kurent, who has nothing except his magic fiddle, falls on his knees, hits the grey rock with his forehead, and cries out: "My land, my beloved, dear homeland, my mother! If you can't give me bread, give me stone. Even the stone will make me sing."¹⁴

2. *Czech Immigrants in Vienna*

In the same decade when Cankar wrote symbolic stories about Slovene emigrants he also created a number of realistic, even naturalistic portrayals of Czech immigrants in Vienna.

The Czechs who congregated in Ottakring were Cankar's neighbors and acquaintances. He was deeply touched by their predicament, especially by the suffering of their children. His landlady and intimate friend, Albina Löffler, was Moravian herself. Unlike the stories about Slovene emigrants, all the stories

about the Czechs in Vienna are based on real people and events.

In the short story "In the Springtime" the author tells the story of a little girl from Moravia who is destroyed by poverty and homesickness. Mařenka lives in a gray house opposite the author's. She has been brought to Vienna by her father, who had been in jail and now wants to get lost in a big city, in a foreign country. He is a drunk, and Mařenka's mother is ill; nobody cares much for the six-year-old girl. She often stands all alone in the stony backyard, dressed in Slovak peasant clothes that were not made for her. She never speaks. But when she hears a music-box peddler play a song in her native language about green, unmown meadows, she bursts into a wild cry and decides to escape and go back "home." That night her mother dies, and in general commotion Mařenka leaves. She walks and walks, but when she finally reaches fields, she realizes that they are foreign fields, that there is no path leading home. As in a trance she returns to the city and gets trampled to death under a horse-drawn wagon.

Another story, "Pavliček's Crown," also describes the fate of an underprivileged immigrant child, although it mainly concerns the child's father. Pavliček is an old, unemployed cabinet-maker. His wife has died of poverty; now he has to look after his invalid little son, Janjek, alone. In the story, Pavliček is faced with an unsurmountable problem: he has promised Janjek a ball, a piece of cake and a penknife for his birthday, and now he desperately needs a crown. He goes begging—but his landlord, the grocer and the innkeeper all chase him away. Finally, he steals the crown from the change bowl in the bakery. He gets arrested. The little cripple is left alone on his birthday, watching his "tatinek" being taken away by the police and insulted by the crowd.

The third story, "Zdenko Petersilka," again deals with sick, unemployed Czech immigrant parents and a helpless child. Petersilka is a very nice, soft-hearted man, sick with tuberculosis, extremely poor and unemployed. He is also an alcoholic. But his wife loves him loyally, and together they often get drunk and provide circus entertainment for the whole street. Their seven-year-old son, Zdenko, a pale, intelligent boy, suffers enormously. One day he first attacks the children who are making fun of his parents, and then hits his father in the face. This sobers Petersilka for a while. But they cannot fight the odds against them. For a while they try to save some money and they work hard, sewing day and night; but it is too late. Jan's tuberculosis has progressed, and during one of his drunk "performances" in the street he drops dead, blood gushing from his mouth. The ten-year-old Zdenko, who had watched the children poking fun at his father, silently knocks down one of his attackers. Then he

stands there, calmly waiting for his fate—a child who has grown up painfully and prematurely.

But the Czechs who failed in Vienna were not all sick or alcoholics or parents with sick children. Some of them were single, young, strong men—and yet they did not fare much better.

The story “Homeless” describes three factory workers, of whom two are practical men, employed and healthy, if not particularly happy. The third one, however, is a sensitive, frail man, without a job. One night, after a socialist meeting where somebody shouted into the crowd “Vaterloses Gesindel!,” he decides to return to his green Moravia, to his sweetheart. His two friends, with whom he shares humble living quarters, try to talk him out of it, but he persists. However, he only gets drunk in the nearest tavern, and then hangs himself on a pear tree.

All the good, softhearted Czechs who suffered poverty, illness, unemployment and homesickness, but especially their children, who became unwanted misfits in the society into which they were brought, kept haunting Cankar long after he had left Ottakring. Even in his last years at Rožnik, when past injustices had mostly lost their edge, the suffering of Czech immigrants in Vienna remained painfully vivid in his memory. In 1912 and 1913 he published two more stories from their life.¹⁵

The miserable hero of the first one, “The Sun Is Setting,” is another of Cankar’s former neighbors in Ottakring. Konopa is a jobless tailor. He has tuberculosis. He is single. For years he has dreamt of returning to his native Tatras, but has never managed to scrape together enough money for the journey. When his landlord gives him some cloth to sew him a suit, Konopa, instead, goes and sells it, and is—of course—arrested. Ironically, he is deported to his native land, to the Tatras.

In the second story, “A Bunch of Flowers,” similar fates are narrated. Jan Vymetal has advanced tuberculosis, he is a jobless tailor, he has a loyal wife and one tiny, prematurely wise child, Jelenka. On the eve of their landlord’s birthday the mother has an idea: let us send the landlord a bunch of flowers with our good wishes; he might realize that we are good people, although temporarily unable to pay the rent. The Vymetals spend their last few pennies on a few cheap white asters and send Jelenka, all dressed up, to deliver the message. The landlord throws the child out.

If we summarize Cankar's description of emigrants-immigrants as well as his beliefs about emigration in general, we come to the following conclusions:

1. For Cankar, an emigrant is a miserable, homeless wanderer, who has two homelands but does not belong to either. In the new land the immigrant encounters numerous difficulties: he does not understand the language, his clothes and habits differ from those of the natives, his own children are embarrassed and ashamed of him. But these troubles are minor, compared with those which destroy the majority of Cankar's emigrants: unemployment and poverty, leading to disease, alcoholism and crime. Many emigrants are too proud to return home. Some keep dreaming of returning home with a fortune. But they never do. Those who are forced to return because of illness, old age or unemployment are faced with a final disappointment: their former friends and neighbors consider them cowards who had run away when times were bad, but who shamelessly returned to be kept and fed by the strong ones who had remained at home and survived.
2. Cankar was neither interested in nor acquainted with the emigrants who had "made it," with those who had pushed their way into the pattern of the rich, money-making society of their adopted land. He never met or lived among well-to-do Slovenes in either America or Western Europe. Living in Ottakring and being poor himself, he paid no attention to the fact that many Czechs established their homes, businesses and careers in Austria quite successfully.
3. Cankar treated the emigrant with deep compassion, while at the same time he blamed his tragedy not only on the selfish society which exploited him but also on his native, overly sensitive disposition. Cankar was especially touched by the suffering of the immigrant children, who—robbed of their childhood—grew up prematurely wise, children denied not only toys, games and sweets, but also their daily bread and even the space in which to grow.
4. Cankar seems to have reached the conclusion that it is a mistake to leave your native land, no matter how poor it might be. It is easier to suffer poverty among your own people: you at least have a home in which you can live and die as a man who knows where his roots are, where he belongs. Of course, Cankar never

knew any political refugees, and therefore he neither described nor pronounced any judgment on this type of emigrant.

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NOTES

1. *Pisma Ivana Cankarja*, 3 vols., ed. Izidor Cankar (Ljubljana: Državna založba Slovenije, 1948), 2:363. All translations are by myself.
2. Ivan Cankar, *Izbrana dela*, 10 vols., ed. Boris Merhar (Ljubljana: Cankarjeva založba, 1951-59), 3:523.
3. *Ibid.*, 2:416.
4. *Ibid.*, 4:429.
5. *Ibid.*, 6:14.
6. Ivan Cankar, *Zbrani spisi*, 20 vols., ed. Izidor Cankar (Ljubljana: Nova založba, 1925-1935), 13:150.
7. *Ibid.*, 13:154.
8. The title was taken from A. Mickiewicz's epos *Pan Tadeusz*.
9. *Izbrana dela*, 6:171.
10. *Ibid.*, 6:172.
11. *Ibid.*, 7:27.
12. *Ibid.*, 6:347.
13. *Ibid.*, 6:350.
14. *Ibid.*
15. Whether Cankar wrote these stories at the same time as the previous ones about the Czech immigrants in Vienna and only published them in 1912-13, or whether he wrote them at that time is an unanswered question. Their style—first person narration, long introductions dealing with the author's moods, similarity of types, and time references—would suggest their earlier genesis.