

## The Nightmare of Repetition

Katja Perat

“What we cannot reach flying we must reach limping.  
The book tells us it is no sin to limp.”

*Al-Hariri of Basra*

In 1919, the first great war of the twentieth century ended and the Habsburg Monarchy, which played an unfortunate part in its opening, had disintegrated. Sigmund Freud, who, since the publication of *The Interpretation of Dreams* in 1900, had persisted in the belief that all dreams are rooted in the profoundly egotistical inclination of the self to ignore unpleasant reality in favour of wish-fulfilling fiction, found himself doubting his own theory. There were numerous cases of soldiers who came back from the trenches only to suffer from what Freud referred to as traumatic war neuroses, as a result of which they were haunted by endless repetitive nightmares, repeatedly returning to the origin of their trauma. Freud was forced to ask himself: are these war veterans not living proof that not all dreams serve the purpose of wish fulfilment?

The following year, Freud wrote one of his most speculative and uncertain philosophical essays, *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, in which he presented an argument meant to allay these doubts. Limping rather than flying, he reached the conclusion that: no, traumatic dreams, like masochism, or a game in which a child enacts a painful

situation, such as his mother abandoning him, do not fall outside the domain of the pleasure principle. Despite what intuition might suggest, they do serve the purpose of wish-fulfilment. But what wish is being fulfilled? For Freud, it was the illusion of control over the uncontrollable pain that afflicts the living. Only by repetitively returning to the source of pain – in dreams, in life choices, in art – do we feel we control a destiny (a life, a history) over which we in fact have no control. People, Freud argues, are injured by existence itself. We find each new impulse that must be incorporated into life, each change, each event, whether internal or external, ungraspable and almost unbearable. Unable to comprehend such events, we keep returning to them, trapped in our compulsion to repeat, and thus exposing the compulsion of destiny.

Two years earlier, Ivan Cankar, often considered the most important Slovenian modernist author, also Freud's compatriot in the Austro-Hungarian Empire, and a man who briefly served as a soldier before being sent home from the front due to ill health, wrote a collection of sketches entitled *Images from Dreams*. The dreams he describes uncannily resemble Freud's notion of the war neurotic's dream, infinitely spinning within the symbolic circle of death *en gros* and *en detail*, never abandoning the realm of war as its ultimate reference point. Similar to *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, *Images from Dreams* is a work that attempts to catalogue the consequences of war on the sense of the individual and historical self. Both authors knew that this effort could never be entirely successful, but nevertheless their work suggests that the effort must continually be made.

### Modernism as the Collision of Symbolism and Naturalism

Cankar's preface to *Images from Dreams* grounds the collection in the soil of the modernist crisis of representation:

I have never found it easy to write; in recent times each sentence I write is almost physical torment. It is not only the unpleasant and sad external things that bind my weary hand and press my thoughts to the ground. It is probably true that my words would flow more smoothly and with greater joy, if... if there was a little sun, if I could just once take a breath from a full and freed breast, if I could at least once look ahead and at myself without fear, with eyes unobscured. And yet this is not the essence; and I am not the only one among us who would complain were I not ashamed to do so. It is something else, something deeper and much more painful that causes my speech to resemble a tentative, barely intelligible stutter, that makes my thoughts, instead of streaking brightly skyward, flutter uncertainly, not knowing where to go and thus unable to go anywhere. (Cankar 7)

Cankar never offers a satisfying explanation of this deeper, different, and incomparably painful cause of silence, perhaps because none is possible. There can only be limping attempts to asymptotically draw closer to the core, without ever being able to reach it. Like Ludwig Wittgenstein, also Cankar's Austro-Hungarian compatriot and a fellow veteran, Cankar knows that certain experiences cannot be captured in language. But unlike Wittgenstein, he is not convinced of the ethics of silence. In a more Beckettian spirit, Cankar believes we must insist on

articulating what resists articulation, the only achievable goal being to fail better. “You, pilgrim, must not be ashamed!” Cankar writes in the preface, addressing not only himself, but others who might have the urge to write that which is impossible to write.

You, pilgrim, were commanded by heaven to see what others cannot see, to tell what others cannot tell. You have no right to lock the doors, not even the ones you opened with your own trembling hand. If light lures you from the bottomless depths, you must descend without hesitation or fear, and bring this light to the people. Often your words are clumsy and heavy, they hide like a timid child afraid of strange company; often you withdraw your gaze, lower your eyes, because even you, most of all you, the most outspoken one, are ashamed of love. But each word that you conceal in shame will scorch your heart forever; and you, oh pilgrim, you know this pain! (Cankar 13–14)

Silence is not an option, because of the pain it causes – what is experienced cannot be unexperienced – and, by turning away from it in silence, we lose the sole possibility of controlling our trauma. Those who have seen must report what they have seen, even if that means nothing more than recording their blindness. Here is where the question of form becomes a pertinent one. What literary means should be employed to come as close as possible to the articulation of that which cannot be articulated?

*Images from Dreams* is not a novel. The images – or dreams – are not connected by a narrative arc that organizes reality into a causal temporal structure, and thus imposes a sense of order onto it. Rather, the work is composed as a collection of sketches or vignettes that cannot

be read separately as stand-alone pieces, because they are profoundly interconnected with the cyclical and repetitive movement of – this may sound tautological – images and dreams. Rather than being a compilation of short stories, Cankar’s work represents an organic totality of metaphorical dreamwork, each iteration of which is symbolized (or I could say symptomized) in its continuous reinscription, in the motion of repetition and difference.

In his post-World War II work *Ivan Cankar and Symbolism*, Dušan Pirjevec, a problematic legend of socialist Slovenian comparative literature, attempted to historicize Cankar’s work. Pirjevec insisted that Cankar, who began his literary career as a firm believer in the social ethics of naturalism, later rejected it because of its empty materialism, which leaves no room for questions regarding the spiritual and the ideal, and therefore no hope for redemption. He includes the following quotes from Cankar’s *Vignettes*, a collection of short stories published in 1899: “I collected my models as I found them on the street – pieces of everyday life with no great idea, no connection to eternity, to the global spirit, and the other clatter we had kicked out of the temple of art once and for all” (Pirjevec 578).

He also quotes a love letter Cankar sent to Anica Lušin the previous year: “That which is real around me has no value in and of itself, and it seems to me only a symbol of eternal ideas. That is why this external life is so petty and ridiculous, and one beautiful thought more valuable than the whole world” (Pirjevec 579). Pirjevec believes that Cankar, influenced by Ralph Waldo Emerson’s pantheistic symbolism according to which each particle represents the whole and vice versa, decided that there wasn’t much sense in mimetic realism because regardless of how accurate descriptions of day-to-day reality are, they still

cannot reflect the complex unity of existence that is only available to us through metaphor.

Pirjevec claims that the world to which Cankar's writing introduces the reader is not the sterile world derived from Marxist foundations; rather it is a mystical, living thing, an organic totality inside of which nature, history, and subjectivity breathe as one. Thus, natural and spatial descriptions sparkle with immanent magic; the night *breathes*, the light in one's window is never just light. It is a promise of hope (or home), and we recognize the delight we feel when we encounter it.

I do not wish to dispute Pirjevec's understanding of Cankar's symbolism – at least not entirely. But I would like to argue that, although it can be useful for some of his work, such a reading appears too narrow for *Images from Dreams*. This is not to suggest that *Images from Dreams* are not braided with the mystical threads that obedient readers would encounter if they opened the text on its final page, and perused the last paragraphs:

I shouted; it burst forth from the depths of my dying heart:

“Mother!”

The flame in her eyes was as silent and dark as before; the cold breath from her mouth touched my soul, and I recoiled in horror. I shouted in pain and mortal realization:

“Homeland!”

The flames in her eyes became milder, clearer as if mercy and salvation had been awakened in them. But my guest, my judge, he sat unmoving, did not reply, did not release me.

Then my heart cleaved open in horror and pain, and released all it had left:

“God!”

At that moment, with that word, I was sweetly awakened from a terrible affliction. At my side, by the cup of tea, sat my saint and saviour; she held my hand and smiled as a mother smiles at a child who has recovered from a long illness.

Her name was: Life, Youth, Love. –

(Cankar 147)

What we are offered is a Klimtian picture of the eternal struggle between damnation and salvation metaphorized in the encounter between two incarnations of death – one a stern male figure, and the other a beautiful maternal woman – and the weak and mortally ill man who must trust his instincts and decide between them. If this conclusion, because of its decisive place in the textual structure, encapsulated the dominant trait of *Images from Dreams*, it could be claimed that Pirjevec was correct in his arguments. But given the amount of pain, dehumanization, and death that burden the collection's stories, this ending reads more as a false attempt at hope than its organic emergence from the world of darkness.

In my view, the main weakness of Pirjevec's argument is his claim that Cankar entirely abandoned naturalism in favour of symbolism. Although Cankar does not have the mimetic ambition in *Images from Dreams* to paint a realist world of solid causal relations, he is fully committed to providing painfully detailed descriptions of war as a phenomenological state of being. An example of this can be found in the following detailed description of the dehumanization of starvation:

But something stuck in my memory and now returns whenever I look at gruel on a plate or some other watery

greyish matter... We marched night and day, day and night, God have mercy... not on a road or a path, but through fields and swamps, always forward, who knows where. A comrade led me by the hand because I couldn't see; my left eye was infected, the right filled with tears. It did not really hurt and I was not especially tired, I was only hungry, so hungry I could eat grass if there were any. We stumbled onto a pile of corpses, lying there perhaps three days. We kneeled, though not to pray for the poor souls... The backpacks were all empty, others must have beaten us to them. I rummaged through the coats, the pants, and finally I felt something like a crushed piece of dry bread soaked in puddles and blood, drenched with the spirit of death. I ate it to the last crumb, the last drop.

(Cankar 86–87)

Cankar is not vacillating between competing late-nineteenth-century literary trends of impersonation, but rather he is deliberately collapsing these trends into an inseparable amalgam, which feels like the only literary model capable of encompassing the two opposing tendencies that propel his attempt to write about a war that could not be written about – namely, the desire to tell the truth, and the desire to survive it.

### Who is Modernist? Whose Modernism?

In accordance with Laura Winkiel's understanding of what makes modernism modernist, Cankar's obsessive turning and returning to the question of the (im)possibility of representation, his commitment to fragmentation, and the omnipresence of epistemological doubt should be enough to bind him to the modernist tradition. And yet there is a certain comparative anxiety that underlies any

discussion of Cankar's modernism, which is inherent to the power structure of modernist geography as a geography of uneven development.

Here I offer a clarification of what I mean by comparative anxiety. In 1981, Anton Slodnjak published his article "Ivan Cankar in Slovene and World Literature" in *The Slavonic and East European Review*. In the article, Slodnjak is eager to define Cankar, in the spirit of art-for-art's-sake, as a law unto himself, a modernist extraordinaire who managed to balance his concern for the little man with the most complex aesthetic and philosophical ideas of his time. And yet Slodnjak expresses an agonizing concern over why Cankar chose to read Shakespeare instead of Oscar Wilde. Could it be that he was not fully in touch with his age? That it would take no more than a light breeze to knock over the façade of modernism and reveal the peasant's cottage behind it?

And to complicate things further, Cankar is not only in a precarious position as a Slovenian writer, but also as an Austro-Hungarian writer. This is primarily because he writes in a peripheral minority language, but it is also a general condition of the periphery. This insecurity is common throughout Central Europe. A good example of this insecurity can be found in Margarete Johanna Landwehr's "Modernist Aesthetics in Joseph Roth's *Radetzky*," a theoretical meditation committed to proving that Roth's novel is modernist despite the fact that everything she says seems to prove the opposite. Why couldn't Roth experiment with syntax a little more? Landwehr seems to be asking herself: why couldn't he be more Joycean so we could think of ourselves as fully modern?

In the long march of the Slovenian nation from self-awareness to its role as an independent nation state, Cankar was interpolated as the ur-Slovenian writer when

it comes to offering proof of civilization (linguistic and otherwise). Having been briefly imprisoned for political agitation in favour of Slovenians uniting under the Yugoslav flag, he opens all imaginable doors and windows, also allowing us to interpret him as a national author. But I think we would have a better understanding of his position if we were to view him in the transnational setting; and yet even naming that setting is not a straightforward matter. Austro-Hungarian? Post-Austro-Hungarian? Habsburg? Central European? Central-Eastern European? Eastern European? Balkan? All feel true in a sense, but also too narrow, perhaps because I am alluding to something of a structural nature. To use the terms of world-systems analysis, I would read Cankar as a (semi) peripheral author, marked by his borderline position within fin-de-siècle central Europe, where an abundance of cultural, national(istic), and imperial interests collided in a catastrophic war mainly fought by those who were the least identified with the decision makers.

As suggested in the Warwick Research Collective's *The Question of Peripheral Realism*, the non-negotiable absurdity of the (semi)peripheral region where the taxes paid to the centre are the highest, and the rewards for identifying with the centre and its power the lowest, often gives birth to fascinating cultural results. Hence the unexpected conclusion that most avant-garde art comes from backward places, as the curious case of Fyodor Dostoevsky suggests. To quote from Joseph Roth's novel *The Emperor's Tomb*: "The heart of Austria is not the centre, but the periphery. You won't find Austria in the Alps [...]. The substance of Austria is drawn and replenished from the Crown Lands." (Roth 11)

When World War I literature is historicized through this lens, it is not surprising to discover that one of its

most famous articulations, W. B. Yeats's "The Second Coming," is written from the (semi)peripheral position of Ireland, a British quasi (or perhaps more than quasi) colony. The same situation applies to Central Europe after the disintegration of the Austro-Hungarian Empire. As Marjorie Perloff discusses in the *Edge of Irony*, most canonized Austro-modernist literature, from Joseph Roth to Paul Celan (and including Freud and Wittgenstein, both of whom appeared in Perloff's study), was written by Jews, members of an ethnic/religious group painfully aware of their borderline status and complicated affiliation.

Cankar's *Images from Dreams* never found a dwelling in the house of world literature, mainly because of the author's decision to write in a minority language that situated his work firmly within a provincial setting. But the concerns of the work belong to the world far more than they belong to the nation. Thus we arrive at the question: to what kind of a world do they belong?

### **Fighting Somebody Else's War**

*Images from Dreams* opens with a short note, almost an apology, in which Cankar begs the reader to understand that the images are a document of the horrors of war, and therefore the words that contain them will always be insufficient and ambiguous. Even without this note, *Images from Dreams* would belong to the modernism that was created as a by-product of mass destruction accelerated and honed to perfection by modernity. The work bears the imprint of a very particular nihilism, which, as I intend to argue, is not just the result of the general pointlessness of war and the difficulty of coping with death *en masse*, but is also because most of the soldiers fighting and dying in the war to which imperial powers summoned them felt little connection to the empires in question.

If we interpret World War I as an imperial war, then we must pay particular attention to the relationship between the warring empires and their subjects, who were destined to experience political conflict in the most palpable form possible: on their bodies which were offered up for mutilation and death. As W. B. Yeats puts it in his poem “An Irish Airman Foresees His Death”:

I know that I shall meet my fate  
 Somewhere among the clouds above;  
 Those that I fight I do not hate  
 Those that I guard I do not love;  
 My country is Kiltartan Cross,  
 My countrymen Kiltartan's poor,  
 No likely end could bring them loss  
 Or leave them happier than before.  
 Nor law, nor duty bade me fight,  
 Nor public man, nor cheering crowds,  
 A lonely impulse of delight  
 Drove to this tumult in the clouds;  
 I balanced all, brought all to mind,  
 The years to come seemed waste of breath,  
 A waste of breath the years behind  
 In balance with this life, this death.

Similar to how Cankar regarded the Austro-Hungarian Empire, of which he was a subject but with which he couldn't identify except in the framework of exploitation, Yeats's Irish airman fights for England, knowing full well that, in a political sense, this war has nothing to do with the people with whom he identifies: (semi)peripheral Irish peasants. It is difficult to impose sense on this particular social (or national) positioning, so extreme that death – as in Freud's *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* –

appears to provide the only promise of peace and reconciliation.

All of which is not to say that Cankar, like Yeats, idealizes death rather than seeing it as the final proof of human helplessness. In the sketch “Fear,” it is revealed how the village idiot became the village idiot: the reason is that he witnessed death, even if only its apparition, and therefore is destined to lose his mind. Cankar writes:

Well, this one has already seen the other side! Do you know what happened to him when he was still a boy? He was once alone at home, in a large room, and it was already dark; his folks had gone to a wedding to feast their eyes. The child hunkered in a corner and watched the night tiptoe closer and closer. It was then that the neighbour Šimen thought up a very special prank. He found a hollow pumpkin, carved a set of eyes and a mouth in it, and placed a burning candle inside of it. He set this pumpkin on his head, flung a long white sheet around his shoulders, and went into the hallway. Ever so quietly, ever so slowly, he opened the door, opened it wide, and stood in the doorway, tall and frightening and not uttering a single word. He left as he arrived, slowly and quietly closing the door behind him. Outside he blew out the candle, threw away the pumpkin, and returned to the room, merry and loud. “Well, Mihec, what are you doing here all alone and quiet, hunkering in the corner? Are you by any chance afraid?” The child said nothing, pressed himself against the wall, his body shaking, his teeth chattering. “Well, Mihec, why are you shaking – it is I, Uncle Šimen!” The child remained silent. Well, he did manage to get his tongue back, but he never regained his wits... Tell me, when he saw Šimen with that pumpkin and that sheet, did he see the other side as well? (Cankar 29)

Like Mihec, the people who were forced to experience the Great War (as it was called before it was known that another great war was to follow) could never recover from seeing what lay on *the other side*. What has been seen cannot be unseen, and this is true even if it can also not be narrated or spoken because of the human incapacity to articulate or form meaning in such extreme situations.

But the human incapacity to grasp mortality even on a minor scale, let alone on the massive scale of trench warfare, is only the beginning. Cankar seems to suggest that if we try to understand war as a concept, we soon find the proverbial abyss staring back at us, incomprehensible in the sense of the Lacanian “real,” a black hole in which all concepts invented by language in order to organize the world fall apart. In “Children and Old Men,” Cankar portrays this notion in a vignette about children trying to make sense of the letter that reports that their father “fell” in combat.

A letter had announced that their father “fell” in Italy. “He fell.” Something unknown, new, foreign, completely incomprehensible, stood before them now, and it stood there tall and wide; it had no face, no eyes, no mouth. It belonged nowhere; not to the loud life in front of the church and on the street, not to the warm dusk around the tile stove, not to the fairy tales. It was not joyous, and yet neither was it especially sad; for it was dead, it had no eyes to explain with a look why and from whence it came, and no mouth to speak of it in words. Their thoughts stood in front of this large phantom, meek and frightened, as if facing a mighty black wall, unable to move. They approached the wall, blankly stared, and fell silent. (Cankar 25)

The bewildered children in Cankar’s story offer a useful reflection of the confusion everybody present during the historical moment of World War I must have felt, regardless of their inability (or unwillingness) to admit it. Not only are the children not entirely sure what exactly “to fall in battle” means, they are also not entirely sure what war is, why it is fought and against whom – and yet they are eager to try and answer the questions for themselves:

“But what kind of army is this, Matijče, tell me... tell me a story!”

Matijče explained:

“Well, an army is like this: people stab each other with knives, cut each other with swords, and shoot each other with guns. The more you stab and cut, the better, and nobody scolds you for it because that is how it must be. That is an army.”

“But why do they stab and cut each other?” asked Milka, helpless.

“For the Emperor!” said Matijče, and they all fell silent. Somewhere in the distance, in front of their veiled eyes, something magnificent appeared, illuminated with bright glory. They did not move, their breath hardly dared to escape their mouths, as if they were in church before a great blessing.

Then Matijče waved his hand and caught a second thought, perhaps only to dispel the grim silence lying over them.

“I will go to the army as well... I will march upon the enemy!”

“But what does the enemy look like... does he have horns?” Milka suddenly asked in her thin voice.

“Of course he does... how could he be the enemy other-



wise?” claimed Tonček, serious and almost angry. Matijče did not know the answer. “I think he does not!” he said slowly, but his speech halted along its way. “How could he have horns... he is a man like us!” said Lojzka, annoyed. Then she thought for a moment, and added: “But he does not have a soul!” (Cankar 26)

The children in Cankar’s “Children and Old Men” have an idea of what the structure of war looks like: there is a leader, there is an enemy, and there is violence that brings all together. What they do not understand, despite their desire to do so, is how to clarify these concepts in a way that would make them applicable to their own situation. Both the Austro-Hungarian Emperor Franz Joseph I, and the enemy, whether it is a horned creature or not, are as vague and incomprehensible as the idea of “falling” in battle.

One of the reasons for the lack of a symbolic structure of meaning to war is the parallel lack of a solid political background. When the Austro-Hungarian Empire entered the war, it was already in a state of national fragmentation and internal ethnic conflict. Cankar himself, with his support and agitation for a southern Slavic alliance, was engaged in one of the many nationalist and ethnic movements putting strain on the vast empire. The empire disintegrated immediately after its military defeat because it could no longer provide an ideology that made people believe that their sacrifices had been equal to a greater cause. The centre did not hold.

As Kafka wrote in “Building the Great Wall of China”:

Our country is so vast that no fairy tale can do justice to its size. [...] And Peking is only a dot, and the

emperor’s palace only a smaller dot. The emperor as such, to be sure, is for his part great through all the hierarchies of the world. But the living emperor, a man like us, rests as we do on a couch that, while generously proportioned, is still comparatively narrow and short. Like us he sometimes stretches his limbs, and when he is very tired, he yawns with his finely chiselled mouth. How are we to learn anything about all this, thousands of miles to the south; after all, our lands almost border on the Tibetan highlands. And besides, every piece of news, even if it were to reach us, would come much too late, would be long obsolete. (Kafka 119)

Kafka’s China is composed of distant peripheries only loosely connected by the idea of a centre, which most citizens never actually see, and is only heard about through second-, third-, and fourth-hand legends mutilated by unfaithful repetition, is a metaphor for Kafka’s political experience of the late Habsburg monarchy. Likewise, the absence of a clear sense of where exactly Cankar’s *Images from Dreams* takes place evokes an empire with no real material grounding. As can be inferred by the title alone, *Images from Dreams* does not take place in the physical world, despite the fact that the stories often depict the traumatic impact of the physical world on the people inhabiting it. But the dreams are not situated in any particular political entity. The people encountered in them have Slovenian names and the emperor is mentioned from time to time, but those are among the few geo-historical markers the text provides. Meaning is created through allusion and symbolic representation, because these are the only honest means of communication that do not contradict the impossibility of articulation that results from the trauma of war.

Notwithstanding the enduring ambition of high school teachers to discover the one thing an author had in mind when he was saying something else, Cankar's symbols – like Freud's symptoms and dreams – never point to a single cause, and therefore cannot be interpolated or translated into a single unit of meaning. However, despite my conviction that more is lost than gained in this heretical act of paraphrasing, I want to focus on a particular symbol out of *Images from Dreams*, and read it through a single meaning. I want to do this – *mea culpa* – because it serves my argument. I'm referring to the image of the chestnut tree in "A Special Sort of Chestnut Tree." A chestnut tree grows at the edge of town. It is the strongest, healthiest, most beautiful chestnut tree the world has ever seen. It blossoms the first and sheds its leaves the last. In the wintertime, it sleeps peacefully, knowing full well that spring will find it rested and ready to bloom in its inconceivable beauty once again. But then a woman, the one-eyed Marjeta, has a strange dream. She dreams of a gold bug climbing the chestnut tree. Looking up at the trunk of the tree, she realizes that the entire tree is covered with gold bugs, shining like coins. When she wakes up, she decides to dig under the tree and find out whether or not her dream will lead prophetically to treasure buried underneath the chestnut tree. She digs and digs until – screaming – she realizes that there is indeed something buried beneath the chestnut tree – but it is a different kind of treasure:

The soil all around the chestnut tree was ploughed and dug to a depth of at least two feet. Among the mighty roots that twisted and swaggered to all sides lay a pile of human skulls; dirt and mud filled the eye sockets; grass had sprung up from some of them during the

night. Other bones were scattered round so it could not be known to which skull they belonged. A shoulder touched an ankle. There were so many of these white, peaceful things desecrated by soil and worms that they could not be counted. If the people had dug deeper still, a graveyard such as the world has never seen before might have been uncovered. [...] "Now it is revealed: the source of all that strength, that love, that youth!" Oh my friends, my loved ones, our chestnut trees will bloom and bloom! (Cankar 70)

A gold tree, gathering its strength and beauty from the bones of those buried beneath its majestic roots. It would not be too bold to assume that Cankar's chestnut tree symbolizes (among other things it might represent) an empire, or rather an imperial centre, its grandeur cultivated by the sacrifices made at the periphery. Thus I argue that – despite Cankar's attempt to find hope through mystical redemption – the prevailing tone of *Images from Dreams* is nihilistic. It is perhaps not as frivolously organized around its own death wish as Yeats's Irish airman, yet the work is nevertheless firmly rooted in the belief that its particular historical momentum and position is absurd to the point of insolvability.

### The Ethics of Difficulty

In her search for a common denominator that would lift particular modernisms out of their national contexts and place them on a transnational platform, Jessica Berman wrote the following in *Modernist Commitments: Ethics, Politics, and Transnational Modernism*:

Whether written in the metropolitan centres of Europe, the long-marginalized spaces of late colonial India,

Civil War Spain, or the proletarian neighbourhoods of the American Midwest, modernism brings to the fore narrative's role in helping us imagine justice. [...] [M]odernist narrative might be best seen as a constellation of rhetorical actions, attitudes, or aesthetic occasions, motivated by the particular and varied situations of economic, social, and cultural modernity worldwide and shaped by ethical and political demands of those situations. (Berman 13)

I would like to add that one of the prevailing traits of "justice" as conceived by modernist writing is the fight for a narrative space that would *do justice* to the complications and difficulties of inhabiting modernity as historical fact. I would also like to applaud the Warwick Research Collective's assumption that the pressures of modernity are most fiercely experienced in (semi)peripheral settings, mainly because these are the environments that often pay the highest taxes to the centre (both figuratively and literally), receiving few social benefits in return. A survey of modernist literature, from Joyce to Apollinaire, reveals that many of its greatest names were profoundly marked by an uncomfortable relationship with their own ethnic identity and belonging.

I choose to read Cankar's *Images from Dreams* as part of this conversation not only because its material is derived from Cankar's own (semi)peripheral position as a Slovenian writer, as well as a subject and soldier of the Habsburg empire, but because the textual matter is deeply immersed in the question that haunts so many modernist works (literary and others): how to employ the reparative function of literature to help us heal the wounds inflicted by modernity without being untrue to the horror of factual experience, horror to the point where all language

ceases? Cankar, like Freud in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, decided that he would limp to the goal, rather than fly. He died one year after writing *Images from Dreams*.

#### Works Cited

Berman, Jessica Schiff. *Modernist Commitments: Ethics, Politics, and Transnational Modernism*. Columbia University Press, 2011.

Freud, Sigmund. *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, translated by James Strachey. Liveright Publishing Corporation, 1950.

Kafka, Franz. "Building the Great Wall of China." *Kafka's Selected Stories*, translated by Stanley Corngold. W. W. Norton & Company, 2007.

Landwehr, Margarete Johanna. "Modernist Aesthetics in Joseph Roth's *Radetzskymarsch*: The Crisis of Meaning and the Role of the Reader." *The German Quarterly*, Vol. 76, No. 4 (Autumn, 2003), pp. 398–410.

Perloff, Marjorie. *Edge of Irony: Modernism in the Shadow of the Habsburg Empire*. The University of Chicago Press, 2016.

Pirjevec, Dušan. *Ivan Cankar in Simbolizem*. March 2018, <https://www.dlib.si/stream/URN:NBN:SI:DOC-DA5SDE11/87be31a-5c45-48e1-bd59-eea698f7df1c/PDF>.

Roth, Joseph. *The Emperor's Tomb*, translated by Michael Hofmann. London: Granta, 2013.

Slodnjak, Anton. "Ivan Cankar in Slovene and World Literature." *The Slavonic and East European Review*, Vol. 59, No. 2 (Apr., 1981), pp. 186–196.

Warwick Research Collective. *Combined and Uneven Development*. Liverpool University Press, 2015.

Winkiel, Laura. *Modernism: The Basics*. Routledge, 2017.

Yeats, William Butler. *An Irish Airman Foresees his Death*. March 2018, <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/57311/an-irish-airman-foresees-his-death>

## Mitja Ficko vs. Ivan Cankar Images “without lipstick or jewellery”

Robert Simonišek

Ivan Cankar had an extraordinary influence on Slovenian visual art even if we only take into consideration the engaged oeuvre of Janez Boljka (1931–2013), who created many depictions of Cankar. In 1904, Cankar reviewed a Viennese exhibition of Slovenian impressionists in the context of his understanding of the essence of art as *Stimmung* (mood), and this review had an enormous influence on the approbation of Slovenian critics of the time. During Cankar’s Viennese period, when the art metropolis of the declining Austro-Hungarian monarchy was blossoming with the Secession movement, with Gustav Klimt (1862–1918) at its head, Cankar showed his inclination towards the Slovenian painter, printmaker, and illustrator Hinko Smrekar (1883–1942), who provided illustrations for many of his works. Both men combined irony, sarcasm, and ruthless social criticism – expressed by Smrekar most sharply in his caricatures. In contrast, Cankar opposed the aesthetics of certain visual artists who were, like himself, taken with national ideas, and, in the spirit of the era preceding the fall of the empire, emphasized Slovenian or Yugoslav identity. For example, Cankar criticized the efforts of a group of young artists from the Vesna Association who emphasized the importance of the Slovenian nation through attributes such as traditional folk attire and bonnets. Cankar characterized their simplistic understanding of these symbols as

anachronistic. This type of subtle observation of various aspects of the field of visual arts emerged from Cankar’s broader cosmopolitan perspective. As a fierce individualist, he demanded greater depth and heart from artists, and viewed the propagation of ethnic or national identity on the exclusively descriptive level as *passé*. In Cankar’s attitude towards contemporaneous visual phenomena in Slovenia, we detect one of the key dilemmas experienced by visual artists at the beginning of the twentieth century: the relationship between mimesis or naturalism and the abstract. This is a dilemma that continues to occupy many artists today. Cankar, who in his thirties was a forerunner of the European avant-garde, remained anchored in literary-symbolist ideals and was favourable towards impressionism and the mysterious effects created by the dappling of paint, and its subjective and open treatment of the material world.

In *Images from Dreams*, Cankar closely approaches that which is known in visual terms as “dark modernism.” The images and details in these collected sketches or vignettes most reflect expressionism, which in Slovenian visual arts reaches its peak in 1922 (whereas it had entered the broader European scene more than a decade before). Shortly after Cankar’s death, such Slovenian expressionists as France and Tone Kralj, Božidar Jakac, Veno Pilon, Fran Tratnik, and others “belatedly” established themselves in the Slovenian art scene. For many Slovenian expressionists, Cankar was the key figure of modernism. After World War I, the young Jakac, for example, occupied himself with the illustration of Cankar’s 1909 *Kurent*, and the *kurent* (a folkloric figure present in Slovenian Shrovetide festivities) became the symbol of the genius emotional figure of the new era in Jakac’s work. As a logical response to Cankar’s expressionist tendencies,

which are the most intense in *Images from Dreams*, the Kondor imprint collected and published the visual images of several artists of the expressionist school. In the Beletina publishing house's reprint of the Slovenian original of *Images from Dreams*, Cankar's text was accompanied by selected motifs by the painter and graphic artist Janez Bernik (1933–2016). Both of these books were edited by art historian Milček Komelj. The primary emphasis expressed in the visual material of both publications is on suffering in the context of a specific historical catastrophe, such as World War I, and on suffering as a subjective category with a physical, spiritual, or religious dimension. The two, of course, are often reciprocal and complementary. When I was asked to select the visual images of a contemporary Slovenian artist for the English translation of *Images from Dreams*, I found myself before a difficult challenge that I might formulate with the following question: who among contemporary Slovenian artists thematizes the existential discomfort of their era more effectively than Bernik, and, like Cankar, engages with their creative work through longing and death above all?

The selected paintings of the artist Mitja Ficko (1973) do not have a direct connection to Cankar's literature, nor do they specifically address the characteristic themes of war and its consequences that we find in *Images from Dreams*. In this geographical region, many living artists have thematized this form of violence in depictions of the Yugoslav wars of the 1990s and, more recently, the refugee crisis. However, the inconsistency of the historical framework in the selection of visual material might be excused with Cankar's view that external material in art does not guarantee authenticity, and in any case is not crucial in the search for a kinship between different artistic fields. As both Cankar and Ficko believe, creativity

is above all concentration and emotion. Throughout his career, Ficko, who began exhibiting at the end of the 1990s, has developed a unique conceptual world of images suspended between reality and abstraction that might be characterized as fantastic or conditional magic realism. He studied with Janez Bernik and Gustav Gnamuš (1941) at the Ljubljana Academy of Visual Arts, from which he also received a Master's degree in 2002, mentored by the painter Metka Krašovec (1941–2018). He is one of the leading names among Slovenian painters of the middle generation. His work is frequently exhibited in foreign countries and he has attended many residences. At the turn of the millennium, he was one of the most important protagonists in the establishment of the Metelkova Cultural Centre, where he had a studio until 2010. In recent years, he has lived and worked between Ljubljana and Leipzig. During his two decades of producing paintings and drawings, Ficko has established a wide register of visual meaning in which he creates "new worlds that reside on the border between the real and the imagined." In an interview, he explained that his paintings do not have a predetermined structure but emerge as premonitions, ideas, or scenes. In other words: they "happen." The artistic process is not a rational and continual process that constructs a new visual reality according to a plan, but rather the painter follows his "feeling."

Cankar's and Ficko's primary artistic impulse is sensing both the environment around them and their own internal impulses. We can only speculate how Cankar would have sensed our time and its radical transformations, or how he would react to the current situation in Slovenian and European art and culture. During the era of Slovenian post-independence, his "burden" of nationhood would have lost its importance as a critical axis defining social

problems. Violence in the Central European milieu, as defined both in Cankar's and Ficko's aesthetic horizon, continues to be present and thematized by artists. Nevertheless, the contemporary artistic production of Ficko's generation, characterized by globalization, is dispersed and latent, featuring either abstract or figural representations. At the 2015 exhibition entitled *Nazaj v votlino* (*Back into the Cavity*), Ficko provided an explanation of his creativity, pointing out the division between external perception and what occurs in the human interior. He explains how he successfully avoids "external noise," while his "interiority" is constant, awakening voices, pictures, apparitions, fears, and joy. In Cankar's time, war represented this intense external noise as civilization's most cruel and explicit form of violence. If we disregard the external and political dimensions of *Images from Dreams*, then we are left with Cankar's internal world with its emotional inventory and memory fragments, his gaze at images, scenes, and events, his experience of nature mostly revealed in the pre-war period. In many ways, Ficko's work is suited precisely to the polyphony of internal voices characteristic of expressionist poetry and the kind of utterances found in *Images from Dreams*.

As we find in many of Cankar's other works, there is also a complex weave of various narrative perspectives that, in addition to the primary threads, include autobiographical and remembered fragments, descriptions of concrete visual reality, murmurs, etc. This fragmentation is even more apparent because of the diversity of the material and the concise force in the stories. This lapidary quality is also present in Ficko's work, being realized in the way only fragments of a whole appear on the canvas and are thus translated into a new order. Because of the allegorical overlapping and connections that emerge in

the work through the creative process, the final composition functions irrationally or "hallucinogenically," to use the painter's description. In response to the phenomenological penetration of information and digitalized images in a pumped-up world, Ficko fights against art being subordinated to the logic of banal daily life. Of course it is precisely in this regard that Ficko, like Cankar, remains conscious of and strives for the authentic treatment of material and the transcendence of clichés. Ficko's medium is considered "traditional" as other media have supplanted paint on canvas, as is his treatment of material, which he adapts to subjective presentation. One of the regular features in his works is the relationship between light and darkness. In the painting *Trinajsta postaja* (*The Thirteenth Station*), which is an allusion to the twelve stations of Christ's passion frequently depicted in visual arts from the Middle Ages onward, Ficko directs the power of light directly at the viewer. Of course the painting can be read on an entirely secular level, with only its enigmatic title suggesting a connection between the light and Christ as the light of the world. In other words, Christ is no longer present in the image but rather appears as a cosmic "icon." His suffering in the thirteenth station is elevated to the highest possible level of the organic world, the embodiment of light. This kind of work also reflects Ficko's specific relationship to spirituality. As is apparent in his work, he remains restrained towards conventional religious symbols and Christian iconography. Certainly Ficko's travel to the Middle East, which concluded with a stay in Mount Athos with a community of Orthodox monks, influenced his perception of spirituality, religious symbols, and their visual expression.

The most obvious similarity between Cankar and Ficko is the "dream material" that the two artists include

in various compositions. Dreams, whether they are the product of Freudian trauma or Jungian synchronicity with archetypes of the collective unconscious, tear apart the dimension of present time and space in which the existence of the individual is captured. In terms of the approach to the treatment of the dream landscape, both artists stand outside so-called theoretical interpretations. To some extent, it is possible to read Cankar within a psychoanalytical paradigm, if only because he was living in Vienna during the era when psychoanalysis emerged. And yet the labyrinth of his dream images is not connected only to the experience of childhood, repeated in the figure of the mother, or to what in Freudian terminology could be reduced to guilt, trauma, and frustration. By establishing longing and love as the fundamental internal impetus, Cankar adds an eschatological emphasis to his literary characters and to people as a whole, and thus creates a complicated cosmos that cannot be entirely understood within the Freudian dialectic of the intellect versus the subconscious. In addition, the “dream material” in *Images from Dreams* is very specific, because the dreams are partly equated with the apocalyptic events of war in which the horrors of reality appear dreamlike in comparison to the previous reality. In contrast, Ficko, with his mysterious figures and landscapes, opens the door to a magical world, to the selfless world of longing and melancholy in a wider register. His figural motifs and landscapes are sophisticated in terms of their relationship to the imagination, and at the same time are also in dialogue with a reality that functions in a living manner. A kinship can be found in his compositions with the modernism that is sought in the lyrical instances of dream worlds rather than their direct connection to fear and horror. Ficko typically preserves the spatial dimension as tangible substance in real

form or as allusion. It is possible to feel in the compositions the almost physical presence of the here and now, and at the same time the gaze into the distance and the starry sky under which his figures meditate. Ficko makes all of this available to the viewer through bright, colourful tones, the gaze of the viewer gradually being directed to the central motif, the mysterious figures often having their backs to us, going on their way. At times they are already so far from us that their faces fade into a dramatic chord of colour.

Cankar and Ficko are also similar in the context of fantastic metaphors and images – the tradition of literary and visual symbolism. In the story “Shades,” Cankar names the Swiss symbolist Arnold Böcklin (1827–1901), best known for his painting “Isle of the Dead” (1880) and a model for many visual artists who were inspired by fin de siècle symbolism: “He knew that Böcklin’s terrifying horseman, violent death, rides across the whole wide world. He knew that worlds are crumbling and being reborn under the hooves of the biblical horse; he knew that the horse carries fire in its mane and plague in its breath.” Cankar’s only direct reference in *Images from Dreams* to visual art by a specific painter, “Shades” evokes two of Böcklin’s paintings with apocalyptic undertones: *War* (1886) and also *The Plague* (1898). In contrast, we have Ficko’s cycle of paintings entitled *Ferryman* and depicting a variation on the Greek mythological character Charon who conveys dead souls to the underworld. Ficko inserted this motif, which also appears in the work of numerous European painters and is today most familiar to us through Böcklin’s *Isle of the Dead*, into his own unique dream vision. The themes of transition and travel, whether in the metaphysical or psychological sense, are extremely important in his works. It is not only that

Ficko intentionally draws from symbolism as a historical phenomenon, but also that his method of selecting and combining images approaches symbolist mystery and the perception of menace. We observe this tendency in works such as *Pozna vrnitev* (*Late Return*), *Bela soba* (*White Room*), *Tunel* (*Tunnel*), and *Prinašalec luči* (*Bringer of Light*).

Individual passages of Cankar's in which nature appears in various seasons are not lacking romantic or even a fairy tale tone. Although the impressionistic descriptions in *Images from Dreams* are diluted, they are not, as in other works by Cankar, self-referential, but rather strengthen the fundamental tone and mood of the collection, creating a contrast between the beautiful and the ugly, optimism and tragedy, life and death. These passages are written graphically, picturesquely, and with a hint of magic. Despite the morbid atmosphere and violence that permeates the book, it almost seems that Cankar relaxes during certain stories, particularly when events occur in nature. In the story "Among the Stars," we are witness to the ongoing cosmic events in our natural surroundings: "All the lights were illuminated in the heavens, and even the angels, accustomed to glitter and shine, had to cover their eyes; it was a great holiday." If we consider Ficko's oeuvre, we realize that an important part of his work is the presentation of colourful segments from nature, such as paths, trees, and gardens that function as closed worlds. We also find similar archetypal solitary settings in Cankar's work, in places where there is a "a more joyful song," which is the title of one of the stories in *Images from Dreams*. Although animals appear more frequently in Ficko's landscape paintings than they do in Cankar's *Images from Dreams*, and have a special and enigmatic significance, it could be argued that, in terms of interpre-

tation, animals play a similar symbolic role in the work of both of these artists. The passages that feature an experience of nature in which the aggressive actions of man are not present function as a break and an escape from the cruel reality dictated by war. Such partial withdrawals from the urban din and virtual reality are also present in Ficko's work as a sort of "return" to a quieter and more mysterious place. Although a century divides the two artists, we emphasize that the starting points of both are visible and tangible, whether in the urban environment or in more remote places. The series of dream sequences they depict emerge from their own experiences of a world and a world that is accessible to the senses. The lives of both artists, like all lives, are ambiguous, contradictory, and susceptible to symbolism. Given the disintegration of ideas and the heterogeneous development of European art at the time of Cankar's death along with contemporary trends, Ficko is equally enraptured by past horizons as Cankar was in his time.