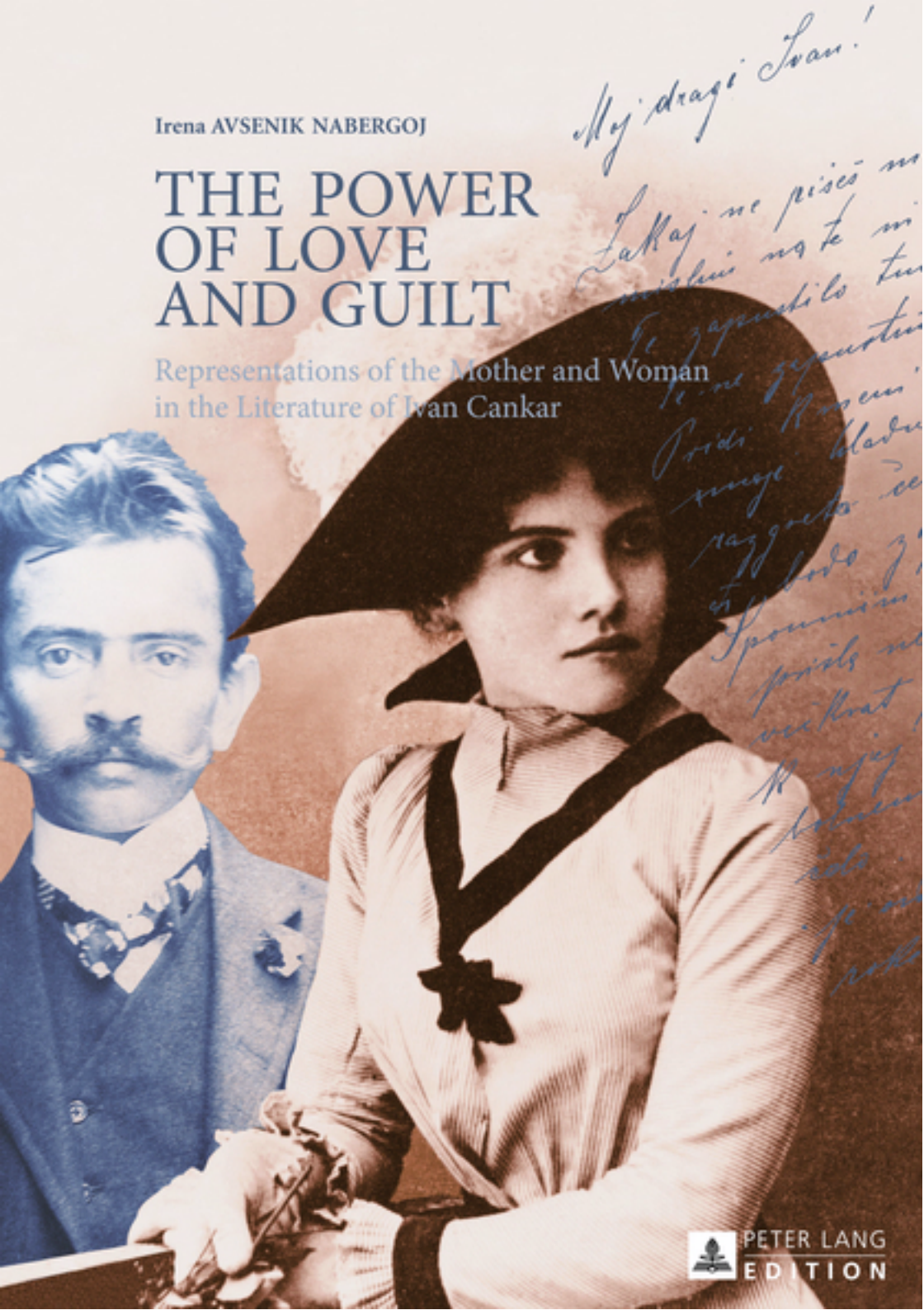
Irena AVSENIK NABERGOJ

THE POWER OF LOVE AND GUILT

Representations of the Mother and Woman in the Literature of Ivan Cankar



PETER LANG EDITION

Beauty, Love and Inspiration in Some Key Sources From Antiquity to Modernity

The great creators in Western civilization within the Greek-Roman, Hebrew-Jewish and Christian religions and cultures at times attained the status of wise men, seers, moral and religious teachers, or national symbols, because they raised fundamental questions and framed varied and profound arguments about foundational values – such as beauty, love, wisdom and righteousness – in religious literary texts and in such distinct fields as metaphysics, aesthetics and ethics. These leading creative minds offered detailed definitions of beauty, love and all other values naturally connected with them; some of them created fine literary presentations or many and varied profound explications of these virtues' qualities. The issue of foundational values, therefore, is central to literary criticism, philosophy and psychology. The values of beauty, love and truth articulate profound human reality as a spiritual attempt to transcend the fundamental conditions of life. In the background of this is an intense longing for happiness and the feeling that a lost original condition, or lost unity, must be restored. The longing for harmony and this lost unity inspires the human mind and soul to rise above physical desire to spiritual understanding, to journey from the finite to the infinite, from the contingent to absolute Beauty, Love and Truth. Love tends to transcend mere physical union, thereby reflecting a power capable of uniting people in a common bond. The highest aim of love is the experience of beauty, goodness and truth.

Love as a concept first appears in religion as the belief that the Creator, who loves his creation as a whole or at least in part, attracts the human race by awakening the power of love in man. The Creator is therefore the first natural object of human love, and this implies ethical problems. The Bible offers all the conditions for a refinement of desire that directs us from physical beauty and love towards divine Beauty, Love and Truth. Specific to biblical literature is the belief that the reality of the world reflects the splendour and glory of God, the Creator of all, including the humans created in His image (Gen 1:27). God is ultimate reality and truth, the foundation of everything that is real, the ultimate unity of all values and virtues, and the ultimate point of reference for all created things. It follows that the relation to ourselves and to our fellow humans is a function of our relation to God. Theology of Creation implies that God is almighty and infinitely transcends every special power even while simultaneously serving as a type of creative soil. Since God

transcends and affirms everything infinitely, speaking about God is done by means of analogy and through symbolic language. The material and finite reality is often applied to that which transcends our life infinitely in terms of being and meaning. Nevertheless, material beauties participate in the real Beauty of God, who is immaterial and plays a fundamental inspirational role. God is presented as the absolute and ultimate value, the ultimate unity in the love that embraces the whole of creation and inspires humanity to good works. Rather than precluding estrangement, in order to reunite estranged humanity through love, God takes it upon Himself and justifies those who act against love.

The classical Christian account of beauty entails, as a consequence, a negative attitude to artistic representation of humanity in the secular sphere. Characteristic of the secularization movement of the last centuries is the move away from a transcendent foundation of aesthetics towards supreme confidence in the artistic genius of authors. It is in view of this changed situation Leo Tolstoy that expresses his objections against the centrality of the principle of beauty in modern aesthetics. At the end of chapter 4 of *What is Art?* he claims: "Strange as it is to say, despite the mountains of books written on art, no precise definition of art has yet been made. The reason for this is that the concept of beauty has been placed at the foundation of the concept of art" (Tolstoy 1995: 36). Tolstoy places feeling at the foundation of the concept of art; this viewpoint is also questionable when it comes to the question of a coherent theory of the concept of art. It is therefore important to understand art in its most comprehensive sense, and this understanding leads Tolstoy to conclude: "Art, all art, has in itself the property of uniting people" (Tolstoy 1995: 129). This uniting property is possible precisely because of the universal characteristics possess by the generic human mind, including a longing for happiness and perfection, and the poetical spirit of human beings. It would, however, be too much to expect that the theory of art could ever resolve the problem of diversity of human beings concerning perceptions of good and bad, or beauty and ugliness; these problems remain unresolved at all levels of our life.

The survey of views on beauty, love, aesthetics and ethics represented in outstanding writers and philosophers through the centuries from Plato up to modern time raises a number of methodological questions. It is clear that the most convincing views were those expressed by literary critics and philosophers who were also literary writers. In literature, our ethical knowledge is mediated aesthetically. Moral philosophers have been so strongly influenced by the commandment paradigm that they ignored the role of literary texts

in ethical understanding. Collin McGinn concludes his attempt to clarify the difference between moral philosophy and literary presentation of reality with a methodological appeal: "We need new methods and styles with which to discuss stories and morals. Our discussions will be less abstract and more immediate, since we are now closer to lived ethical experience. The ethical will be seen to be inextricably bound up with other concerns, particularly aesthetic ones, but also with specific details of character and context" (McGinn 2007: 175). In addition to some other literary genres, McGinn points to the biblical style of providing an ethical education by means of the parable: "The parable is a small work of art that invites aesthetic evaluation as well as moral attention. It exploits the power of the story form in order to teach a moral lesson" (McGinn 2007: 172). The discussion of such matters in this study is meant as an introduction to literary analyses of selected biblical texts and texts from Slovenian and world literature from various periods. Among Slovenian writers, Ivan Cankar (1876–1918), who is recognized as the greatest Slovenian writer, is particularly important. His works in many literary genres are in line with ancient Greco-Roman, biblical and later literary traditions.

1. Beauty, Aesthetics and Ethics

In his book *The Beautiful Soul: Aesthetic Morality in the Eighteenth Century* (1995) Robert E. Norton deals with historical questions on the relationship between, beauty, aesthetics and ethics. He traces the origins and transformation of the idea of moral beauty throughout the works of Plato, Plotinus, Shaftesbury, Hutcheson, Kant, Schiller, Goethe and Hegel, albeit without venturing an independent explication of how beauty relates to aesthetics and ethics. It was this unexplained question that prompted Colin McGinn to explain the connection in his recent book *Ethics, Evil, and Fiction*, most specifically, in Chapter 5, "Beauty of Soul" (92–122). He begins with a discussion about the methodological limitations of moral philosophy: "My general position is that the human ethical sensibility works best when dealing with particular persons in specific contexts; abstract generalities are not the natural *modus operandi* of the moral sense" (McGinn 2007: 3). McGinn's aim is to enrich moral discourse by showing the value of literary forms as a vehicle of moral thought: "One of the reasons we are drawn to fictional works is precisely that they combine the particular and the general in ways we find natural and intelligible. The general is woven into the particular, which gives the particular significance and the general substance" (McGinn 2007: 3). His conviction that fiction and philosophy must be considered in a mutual and complementary relation is the guiding principle also of this study's approach.

The concept of beauty and its opposite – that is, the question of what is ugly – is the subject of aesthetics, which has often been defined as the study of the beautiful. Plato (427–347 BCE) is the first significant author to have endeavoured to understand, explain and evaluate beauty and the conditions under which beauty can be embodied in an object and, finally, in visual, literary and mixed musical arts. His evaluation of the fundamental aesthetic problem distinguishes between production of actual objects and of "images" of god, humans and objects. The key to his discussion about "images" is the concept of imitation (*mimesis*). Plato divides reality into two fundamentally different realms: eternal "ideas" or "forms" and the created objects of the world; these objects are defective in that they are imitative and thus only temporal embodiments of their eternal archetypes. In accordance with this fundamental division of reality, Plato recognizes an eternal and absolute form of beauty, along with various degrees of embodiment of the quality of beauty in the created world and in artistic creation. Imitation of eternal forms is in a sense both true and untrue (*Sophist* 240C). It is inevitable that this kind of

understanding reality in itself and in its embodiments raises the question of moral values, for the concept of beauty depends upon the beneficial and pleasing effects of subjects, objects and artworks. Plato points out that "the whole of man's life requires the graces of rhythm and harmony" (*Protagoras* 326B). One of his statements concerning the interaction of beauty, pleasure, and inspiration reads: "It is the duty of every man and child – bond and free, male and female, – and the duty of the whole State, to charm themselves unceasingly with the chants we have described, constantly changing them and securing variety in every way possible, so as to inspire the singers with an insatiable appetite for the hymns and with pleasure therein" (*Laws* 665C).

According to Plato beauty is closely allied to goodness and virtue. In the context of evaluating the effects of music, Plato argues: "To avoid a tediously long disquisition, let us sum up the whole matter by saying that the postures and tunes which attach to goodness of soul or body, or to some image thereof, are universally good, while those which attach to badness are exactly the reverse" (*Laws* 655B). Human institutions must take into consideration also the age of the people when considering their capacity to grasp reality and truth:

> What I state is this, – that in children the first childish sensations are pleasure and pain, and that it is in these first that goodness and badness come to the soul; but as to wisdom and settled true opinions, a man is lucky if they come to him even in old age, and he then is possessed of these blessings, and all that they comprise, is indeed a perfect man. I term, then, the goodness that first comes to children "education." When pleasure and love, and pain and hatred, spring up rightly in the souls of those who are unable as yet to grasp a rational account; and when, after grasping the rational account they consent thereunto through having been rightly trained in fitting practices: – this consent, viewed as a whole, is goodness, while the part of it that is rightly trained in respect of pleasures and pains, so as to hate what ought to be hated, right from the beginning up to the very end, and to love what ought to be loved, – if you were to mark this part off in your definition and call it "education," you would be giving it, in my opinion, its right name. (*Laws* 653A–C)

Plato was greatly concerned with the truth of human nature and with the social responsibility of creative artists. He was aware of the fact that authors follow their conscious and unconscious motives and intentions. Guyer

states: "Plato was also aware of the spell of beauty, especially beauty in our own kind, and attempted to channel our love of earthly beauty into love of a higher kind of beauty, something not otherwise accessible to the senses, the beauties of the Forms themselves, especially, of course, the Form of the Good or Justice" (Guyer 2005: ix–x). The first problem for Plato was to discover what effects the arts have on both individuals and on the entire social order. He calls for censorship over tales in which "anyone images badly in his speech the true nature of gods and heroes" (*Republic* 377E), or for example: "The tale of the teeth that were sown, and how armed men sprang out of them. Here, indeed, the lawgiver has a notable example of how one can, if he tries, persuade the souls of the young of anything, so that the only question he has to consider in his inventing is what would do most good to the State, if it were believed; and then he must devise all possible means to ensure that the whole of the community constantly, so long as they live, use exactly the same language, so far as possible, about these matters, alike in their songs, their tales, and their discourses" (*Laws* 664A).

Aristotle (384–322 BCE) turned his attention away from a Platonic idealistic account of reality to consider instead the structural qualities of artistic creation. The pleasure of beauty is on the one hand connected with the quality of imitation itself; on the other, it lies in the unifying structure of artworks. In *Poetics* Aristotle developed his theory of beauty of tragedy as a natural effect of "mimesis of an action that is complete, whole, and of magnitude." Proportion is an indispensable condition for the pleasure of beauty: "A beautiful object, whether an animal or anything else with a structure of parts, should have not only its parts ordered but also an appropriate magnitude: beauty consists in magnitude and order" (Chapter 7). It is unity of a complete action in poetic presentation of reality that denotes the difference between poetry and history: "It is clear that plots, as in tragedy, should be constructed dramatically, that is, around a single, whole, and complete action, with beginning, middle, and end, so that epic, like a single and whole animal, may produce the pleasure proper to it. Its structure should not be like histories, which require an exposition not of a single action but of a single period" (Chapter 23). Aristotle's concept of poetry as imitation of nature, human action and characters exerted great influence on Renaissance and more modern poetics.

In ancient Israel the concept of beauty was by definition bound to the concept of God as Creator of the world and humankind. The unity of all realities and values in the realm of God's transcendent ultimate reality and in relation to man inspired a great variety of symbolic presentation of God's

power, splendour, love, and beauty. God cannot reveal his beauty directly. The Bible emphasizes the luminous revelation of God's splendour and glory (Heb. *kabod*, Gr. *doxa*, Lat. *gloria*; and synonyms) through Creation and Salvation. This explains why God's own beauty is a rare theme in the Bible. Paradigmatic in this respect is Psalm 8, in which the author praises the glory of God as manifested in the wonders of the heavens and in turn reflects on the unique place of humans in the scheme of creation. The psalm opens with simple and sublime words of praise, and these words are repeated at its close (vv. 1 and 9): "O Lord, our Sovereign, how majestic is your name in all the earth!" In Psalm 45 (Vg 44) we find a conventional reference to the physical beauty of the king (v. 3): "You are the most handsome of men; grace is poured upon your lips; therefore God has blessed you forever." In the second part of the psalm, the author turns to the queen and proclaims: "and the king will desire your beauty" (v. 12). In Psalm 48 the author refers to Zion as the luminous revelation of God's splendour. The psalm opens: "Great is the Lord and greatly to be praised in the city of our God. His holy mountain, beautiful in elevation, is the joy of all the earth."

Ezekiel refers to beauty as God's gift in his allegory of the abandoned girl (vv. 1-43), which is used to present the problematic relation between God and His people; the allegory is depicted in terms of a husband-wife relationship. In verses 13-15 the author describes the beauty of a girl who has been abandoned by her parents in terms of the gift of God's splendour. This gift, however, was misused by the ungrateful girl: "You had choice flour and honey and oil for food. You grew exceedingly beautiful, fit to be a queen. Your fame spread among the nations on account of your beauty, for it was perfect because of my splendour that I had bestowed on you, says the Lord God. But you trusted in your beauty, and played the whore because of your fame, and lavished your whorings on any passer-by." In the Song of Songs, in a few instances, the bridegroom praises the beauty of the bride (1:8, 10; 4:7; 6:10). Allegorical understanding of the song in later periods connects this beauty with God's gift.

The inner connection between the created world and the Creator is poetically presented in Sir 43:9-12:

> The glory of the stars is the beauty of heaven, a glittering array
> in the heights of the Lord. On the orders of the Holy One they
> stand in their appointed places; they never relax in their watches
> look at the rainbow, and praise him who made it; it is exceedingly
> beautiful in its brightness It encircles the sky with its glorious arc;