

Foreshadowings of the Kafkaesque

in Alfred Kubin's Drawings

by Jennifer Anna Gosetti-Ferencei

Alfred Kubin: Drawings, 1897 – 1909

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of the Kafkaesque*

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The isolation of a mind that has crossed to the 'other side' of consciousness finds expression, in tones of the absurd and the macabre, in the art of Alfred Kubin (1877-1959), a fin de siècle Austrian artist and writer whose works have been assembled in a major exhibition at the Neue Galerie in New York. Kubin's drawings break open the life of dream and fantasy with a disturbingly vivid momentum: literalizing visualizations of the pathology of sexual desire and the self-negating reflexivity of human consciousness give a provocative edge to his works. The exhibit, the first major presentation of Kubin's work in America, is compellingly arranged and informatively notated, and features drawings in pen and black ink on paper, and several larger works frugally colored in tempera, oil, or watercolor, executed between the fin de siècle (1897) and the 1909 publication of Kubin's only novel, *Die andere Seite* (*The Other Side*). The drawings evoke the haunting of a mind, and of a very unhappy life (as a child Kubin had witnessed his mother's death, among other tragedies), given over to chronic fantasies of the grotesque. Their topography is as hallucinatory and disturbing as the expressive violence of Goya, often as uncanny as Freud's interpretations of Hoffmann's 'The Sandman.' There are echoes of Poe and of Nietzsche (of whom Kubin was an avid reader in his youth), and suggestions of the radical insomnia



Alfred Kubin, *The Lady on the Horse*, 1900-01
Image courtesy of Neue Galerie New York

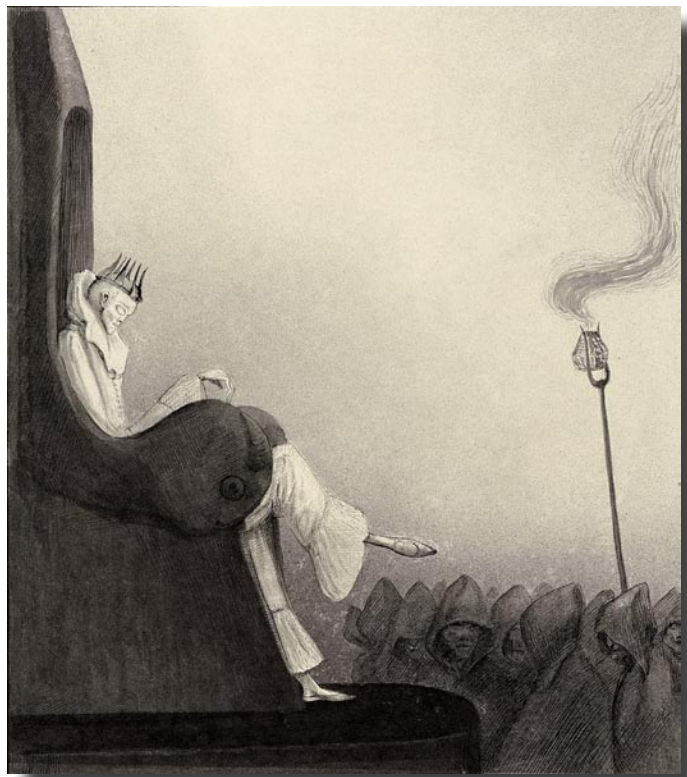
of mind captured more recently in Blanchot's attempt to think 'disaster.' The titles alone provide a taxonomy of *Angst*, evoking such situations as 'dying,' 'epidemic,' 'the entrance to hell,' 'suicide,' 'illness,' 'tortured man,' 'fear,' and 'dread.' One image entitled *Selbstbetrachtung*, ca. 1901-02 ('self-observation') shows a severed head that seems (paradoxically) to be observed by its abandoned body. The threat of animalistic hunger is amplified by distortions of scale: *Fledermaus*, ca. 1902-03 shows a swarm of people fleeing from a bat; *Eisbär*, ca. 1901-02 shows the polar bear as a giant weasel-like figure about to devour a tiny house in the snow, an innocent warmth emitted from its smokestack. *Truth (Die Wahrheit)*, ca. 1903 is represented as a giant faceless slug. Sexuality is not only violent but parasitic, sometimes rendered as a site of damnation: the female figure is literally devoured, dead, or mercilessly dominating (in *The Lady on the Horse*, ca. 1900-01, a woman on an all-too-real rocking-horse, itself seemingly frightened, crushes men's bodies like tiny broken puppets scattered on the nursery floor).

In a few more serene pictures, however, a melancholy whimsy prevails, as if the artist were marveling at an insight that must be won by distortions of realism—so that, as in Arcimboldo's representations of human decay, the sanity with which realism takes sides is ruptured and the strange beauty of extreme fragility emerges. In *Der letzte König*, ca. 1902, the last king (somehow foreshadowing Kafka's 'last' hunger artist) is a dainty mime-like figure in white sleeping or perhaps daydreaming above the dark-robed and possibly ill-intentioned subjects; the ghostly horse in an illustration for the novel half-turns in an awkward gallop against a black-etched ground, its eyes toward heaven; in *Die Gasse (The Alley)*, ca. 1905, a madman glides barefoot among cloaked passers-by, evoking more familiar figures of Munch, and a dark spindly tree haunts the wintry foreground.

One room is devoted to photographs and letters, where a postcard from Kafka confirms foreshadowings of the dark undercurrents of Kafka's fiction. Yet it is also the vacancy and anonymity suggested by some of the human figurations in Kubin's images that relate an abstraction Kafka found essential to his art. Kubin's figures of animals incongruously coupled with human figures (an erotic counterpart of Joseph K. has webbed fingers), the gestures and physical arrangements of torture (the flailing scene in the office closet), the alignment of violence, fear, and senselessness with the visible estrangement of the individual, are familiar to readers of Kafka. But in Kubin even the immaterial natural forces, like the wind (in *Der Wind*, ca. 1902-03), take part in some sad comedy of human pain: a huge human-like figure draped in

flowing white garments is pulled as if by threads through a dark abandoned field. When they evoke natural topographies and mingle natural forms, these spaces of Kubin's imagination pulse with Hieronymus Bosch and foreshadow Surrealism. The ink sketches and washes render dark, only tonally differentiated images in most of the works, leaving a sense that a dream-world to which they belong is only provisionally differentiated from reality.

Many of these images are related to Kubin's novel *Die andere Seite* (*The Other Side*) originally published with 52 illustrations, a selection of which constitutes the initial segment of the exhibit. The novel posits a dream-world established by a demi-god figure, Patera, in deep in Central China, a realm distinguished by its nostalgic refusal of any evidence of modernity and its governance by the will of an Asiatically-inspired dream-life (Kubin was not only a reader of Nietzsche but of Schopenhauer). The protagonist, an illustrator like Kubin, makes his 'passage' to the other side by train—a passage rendered in one of Kubin's touching sketches of a lone locomotive crossing dark rivers of space—and he gradually adapts to the half-light, the foggy world ruled by the forms and movements of Patera's dreams. These forms eventually dissolve into an apocalyptic morass of destruction, where the last echoes of human morality and reason die out, and the natural order giving distinction in nature falls to chaotic and destructive intermingling of species through sexual devouring and pestilence. Perle, the capital city of the *Traumreich*, is gradually overtaken by epidemics, moral and pathological, and by the animals that creep in from the surrounding jungle, rendered almost playfully in Kubin's illustrations. It is unsurprising that Kubin's protagonist's most creative insights are produced at the moment of immanent destruction, as he discovers a 'Psychographik' that could easily describe that of his author. The drawings of Kubin's narrator push imagery toward linguistic expression: this fragmentary style is more 'written than drawn.' In the thrall of this creativity the narrator leads a hybrid life, both drawn to the destruction and pulled toward visual enlightenment. The relation to language of Kubin's narrator reflects, it can be said, Kubin's own artistic development; while principally a painter and graphic artist, the novel itself initiates the transformation of Kubin's own visual surrealist aesthetic into literary form. The new aesthetic energy found in the 'other side' draws on the



Alfred Kubin, *Der letzte König*, 1902
Image courtesy of Neue Galerie New York



Alfred Kubin, *Der Wind (The Wind)*, ca. 1902-03
Ink on paper, 38.5 x 30.5 cm (15 1/4 x 12 in.)
Private Collection, New York
Image courtesy of Neue Galerie New York

Dionysian instability that is revealed to operate beneath the apparent order. The dissolution of the order of the familiar, rational world unleashes primitive creative energies that are rendered inevitably violent.

Kubin's imagination, both in the novel and its illustration, is resiliently topographical: in the drawings we are offered maps of Perle, and sketches illustrating scenes that are meant to allow us an imaginative venture into the dream-city. But Kubin's pictures, like his prose, fluctuate between fantasy and commentary on a recognizably human world. In one sketch, *Mann (Der Zeichner)*, 1909, the draftsman is bent over his work at a café, his cape and hat hanging on the coat rack, the loneliness of the figure nevertheless recalling the cafés of Berlin and Vienna and Munich. The café table's spidery legs

and curving, linear shadows suggest some existence that hovers between the familiar world and the troubling dream-world of the artist. The map of Perle, of which there are several on view in the exhibit, bears a European topography, the castle above the city clustered around the river below not unlike the arrangement of Salzburg or Prague. Yet the tonal pressure in the pictures, and gradually in the novel itself, is ever toward the dream-like irreality that breaks through the order of the recognizably European world of its author.

It may be no coincidence that minor episodes from Kubin's novel become magnified in motifs of Kafka's writing, and the relationship between their narrative styles may help to illuminate the innovative nature of Kubin's break with realistic mimesis. While scholarly speculation about the source for Kafka's castle in *Das Schloß* has focused on such diverse possibilities as the South American plantation in Schafstein's *Der Zuckerbaron* and the German castle looming above a Bohemian town, there is no more obvious—though entirely overlooked until this essay—literary forebearer than the *Palast* and *Archiv* of Kubin's *Traumreich*. Patera resides in a monstrously large castle that looms over the capital of the dream city Perle, presented in several of the illustrations, but the narrator, despite persistent attempts and a personal invitation to the region, is unable for much of the narrative to gain access to him. Just as Kafka's land surveyor fails to gain an audience at the castle, and wastes much effort in a bureaucratic labyrinth, Kubin's narrator is frustrated in his attempts: an *Audienzkarte* must be obtained from a nearby archive

that is stocked to the brim with documents. These occupy the attentions of the bureaucrats, but are revealed to have nothing whatsoever to do with the *Traumreich*; they have been merely imported, presumably out of date, from various archives around the world. Absurdly ineffectual, the archive is attended by sleeping and over-decorated officials writing with inkless quills. The narrator is led through a seemingly endless labyrinth of deserted passageways, halls, and offices which are filled to the ceiling with irrelevant documents and maps, only to find that the real government is housed somewhere else. The narrator finally receives a ticket for entrance to the palace, but it arrives the day after its expiration, as it has been circulating in an extended and fruitless postal exchange. The transpositions of scale, the literalizing imagery of absurd deferral of telos, and the abstracting distortion of spatial realism ring in Kubin's images with what we now call the Kafkaesque.

Not only the imagery of the palace, archive, and its bureaucracy, but the existential tonality of the absurd evoked by the best moments of Kubin's novel anticipate some of Kafka's major motifs. The inhabitants of Kubin's dream-colony depicted in the illustrations wildly defer to the anachronistic commander Patera, represented in a drawing as a classical Greek statue with vacant eyes, who is overwhelmed by the power of a modern capitalist from America, just as Kafka's penal colony is ruled by an archaic command losing power to the intervention of modern sentiment and its new norms. In Kubin, as in Kafka, illegible writing and cryptic symbols (for instance within the clock-tower) hold power over subjects, who respect an ever-present but nowhere localizable authority. What differentiates Kubin's novel is its expression of the conflict in the dream-life between creation and dissolution, a conflict expressed that seems a subtext of nearly all of the illustrations on view in the exhibition. Kafka takes departure from Kubin, and marks out his singular genius, when he insists that his Gregor Samsa's metamorphosis 'was no dream': 'Es war kein Traum.' Yet Kubin's novel, and his illustrations devoted to it, affirm the dream as both means to explore and the material of the mind's interior landscape. Kafka, we might speculate, transliterates Kubin's own literalizations of the radical instability of being human, while in Kubin they remain dream-images (in one illustration, an ape devours a woman head-first, in an image that could only be a nightmare, while Kafka has his ape physically and discursively 'report to the academy'). Yet the relationship between language and the visual imagination is crucial for both writers (thinking of their connection one cannot help but call to mind Kafka's illustrations in ink for *The Trial*). Kubin's art gives visual form, just as Kafka's language is said to do, for the violence as well as the occasional, if also tragic, majesty of the absurd that emerges from some darkest region of the imagination's 'other side.'

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