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Review: Gustave Kahn, *The Solar Circus*, trans. by Sam Kunkel (Michigan City, IN: First to Knock, 2023)

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Gustave Kahn, *The Solar Circus*, trans. by Sam Kunkel  
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Given the vast number and variety of contributions Gustave Kahn made to the French literary and artistic fields in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, it is surprising he is not better known in France or elsewhere. Kahn was an exceptionally multi-faceted author and critic who, among other achievements, had a major impact on free verse in France and the development of the French Symbolist movement in the 1880s and 90s. In the early twentieth century, Kahn was a significant influence on F. T. Marinetti, the Italian founder of Futurism. During the 1920s and 30s, Khan played a major role in the French Jewish cultural renaissance. This prolific writer published more than 1600 articles, books, and poems during a fifty-year period from 1886 to his death in 1936, and his art criticism is still read to this day.

The last 20 years has seen a flurry of critical attention around Kahn's work. He has been the subject of two colloquia in France in 2005 and 2006. The Museum of Jewish Art and History in Paris organized an exhibition devoted to him in 2006-2007. In 2009, Classiques Garnier published an edited collection of articles: *Gustave Kahn [1857-1936]*. A separate edited collection, *Gustave Kahn: Un écrivain engagé*, appeared in 2013 with the Presses universitaires de Rennes, providing a broad view the writer's involvement in his time. These are, of course, accessible only to a Francophone audience. Unfortunately, little English-language scholarship exists except for some studies of Kahn's art criticism.

The increased critical interest in Kahn has its parallel in the translation of his works. The new translation of his 1898 novel *Le Cirque solaire* [*The Solar Circus*] sheds a welcome light on an important dimension of his work. It joins Brian Stableford's *The Tale of Gold and Silence* (Blackcoat Press, 2011) and Colin and Sue Boswell's *The Mad King* (Snuggly Books, 2021) as the third novel by Kahn to be translated into English in recent years.

The novel is the curious tale of Count Franz, ruler of a Bohemian state, who prefers solitude to governing. One day, he sees a passing circus and is immediately attracted to the lead performer Lorely. His decision to follow the circus and Lorely for some time manages to move him out of his solipsistic existence. After the circus establishes a permanent footing in London, he learns that his younger brother Otto, who wants to push Franz out of power and rule with a strong hand, has been killed. Franz returns to his kingdom and to his solitary ways. This is a novel not motivated action but by Franz's interaction with the exceptional world of the circus.

Sam Kunkel's translation of *The Solar Circus* is first rate, which is especially notable given the challenges Kahn's novel presents for the translator. His introduction helps to align English-language readers' expectations with some of the novelty of Kahn's style. This allows Kunkel to respect Kahn's proclivity for long sentences, whose structures reflect key dimensions of the novel itself. Equally difficult is the impact of Kahn's free verse on the novel as its influence represents an important dimension for Kahn. Kahn uses archaic vocabulary to help set the tone of the tale even though it is set in contemporary Europe. The novel includes references to myths, legends, and literatures from around the world. This edition provides helpful explanatory footnotes to guide the reader through them. The edition provides both an introduction and note of explanation at the end of the novel, by the translator, that provide necessary context for understanding the work's significance, as well as an interesting reflection on the novel by the publisher.

Before the late 1890s, Kahn's literary publications were almost exclusively poetry, which was considered the highest form of literature in the nineteenth century. However, his interest in writing novels had been present since his earliest years as a writer as his 1882 correspondence with Stéphane Mallarmé indicates.<sup>1</sup> His first novel, *Le Roi fou* [*The Mad King*], appeared in serial form in 1895 and as a separate volume the following year. This was followed by several novels including *Le Conte de l'or et du silence* [*The Tale of Gold and Silence*] and *The Solar Circus*, both in 1898.

*The Solar Circus* was published at a time when the Naturalist fiction of Émile Zola occupied a dominant position in literature. As a Symbolist writer, Kahn's emphasis is not on the material

reality of the world but the cerebral experience of it. In one of the first articles that helped define the Symbolist movement in 1886, he wrote ‘le rêve étant indistinct du réel’ [dreams are indistinct from the real]. This breaking down of the barrier between the dream world and the material world foreshadows a central dimension of Surrealism elaborated in the 1920s. Critics noted this aspect of his work when the novel first appeared. Léon Blum, writing in the avant-garde *La Revue blanche*, asked ‘A-t-il vécu, a-t-il rêvé?’ [Is this an adventure or a dream?]<sup>2</sup> Likewise, Paul D’Armon, a critic for the newspaper *Le Voltaire*: ‘Le poète est constamment en insurrection contre la sottise des Apparences que nous nommons la Réalité. [...] [C’est] simple pour lui, [...] de montrer symboliquement le Réel capituler devant le Rêve’ [The poet is constantly in revolt against the foolishness of Appearances that we call Reality. [...] [It is] simple for him [...] to symbolically show the Real capitulating before the Dream].<sup>3</sup>

One way to blur the boundaries between dream and reality is through combining poetry and prose. As Kahn stated in an article in 1902, ‘il ne faut pas séparer la prose des vers, dans le cerveau d’un auteur, ce sont des moyens d’expression jumeaux qui doivent rester liés l’un à l’autre’ [One must not separate prose from verse, in the mind of an author, these are twin means of expression that must remain linked to each other].<sup>4</sup> This blending of poetry and prose is one of the challenges faced by Kunkel. In his introduction, he describes the phenomenon as ‘poetic sentences’ (p. 19). The infusion of poetic language into prose produces a more impressionistic vision rather than direct and minute description. In other cases, dimensions of Kahn’s poetry are rendered not through poetic form but by creating another key aspect of the Symbolist aesthetic: sensation. Kunkel makes note of Kahn’s use of exceptionally long sentences that are composed of a seemingly endless stream of items, evoking the sights one would see when watching a parade of circus performers.

Interestingly, Kahn tried unsuccessfully to produce a stage version of the novel. The nearly complete manuscript can be found at the Bibliothèque nationale de Paris. Poetry played a role, as Sophie Lucet points out in her examination of the manuscript which includes both prose and

verse.<sup>5</sup> This seemed to be a project to which Kahn was attached. The Théâtre Antoine announced the inclusion of a five-act *Le Cirque solaire* in its 1901-02 season.<sup>6</sup> Kahn must have continued to work on the play as it is mentioned again in 1908 as being a great lyrical drama in three acts and five tableaux with music by Henry Lutz.<sup>7</sup>

The setting of a circus serves to highlight the contrast between the dream-like, artificial world of performance and the ordinariness of everyday reality. The choice of a circus may seem odd for the twenty-first century reader. However, as Jennifer Forrest notes:

The last half of the nineteenth century represents the height of the circus as an elegant entertainment, doomed to become thereafter associated almost exclusively with the pastimes of the popular classes and children. Patronized assiduously by high society, the bourgeoisie, artists, poets, and novelists, the performance of the circus acrobat offered to creative minds new aesthetic opportunities that challenged conventional concepts of narrative technique, space, time, and identity.<sup>8</sup>

The circus was a widespread motif in literature and art of the time as it provided an otherworldly experience of performers doing what is seemingly impossible (flying through the air, for example) and exciting the emotions of spectators all the while being grounded in the real.

Although Symbolist writing does not usually take the form of traditional political literature, Kahn consistently argued that literature should be social in nature. The conclusion of the novel has parallels with *The Mad King*. In both novels, the story ends with social upheaval in the kingdom. The mad king is assassinated by a member of his family. In *The Solar Circus*, although Franz is the ruler, his younger brother Otto ruled while Franz was abroad with Lorely and attempted to push Franz out of power. Otto's authoritarian approach to government creates dissatisfaction among the people, one of whom assassinates him. The social upheaval depicted in both novels mirrors Kahn's views that moderation in a government is essential and that leaders must consider the needs of all their citizens and not just those who have money and power.

Another social dimension is visible in Kahn's dedication of the novel to the Naturalist writer Zola: 'In profound admiration, for the man of courage and the writer.' The brief statement indicates a radical shift in Kahn's position on Zola. Previously, Kahn had been vehemently

opposed to Zola and his form of realism. Indeed, the very aesthetics of *The Solar Circus* charts a different path for the novel. *The Solar Circus* was published at the height of the Dreyfus Affair, that split France along many cultural and ideological lines – especially regarding antisemitism. Kahn was Jewish and like other Jews suffered the consequences of discrimination. However earlier in 1898, Zola had published his famous ‘J’Accuse...!’ and put his own reputation on the line in defence of the Jewish captain Dreyfus who was falsely accused of treason. Not only did Zola’s actions change Kahn’s views of him politically but they also caused a shift in his position toward Zola’s novels of the end of the century.<sup>9</sup>

Sam Kunkel has provided an excellent opportunity to discover an unfamiliar piece of French literature constructed with a complex fabric that weaves together many different strands into a delightful read.

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<sup>1</sup> Stéphane Mallarmé, *Correspondance, t. IV. 1890-1891. Supplément aux tomes I, II, et III, Tables* (Paris: Gallimard, 1973), p. 466n.

<sup>2</sup> Léon Blum, ‘Les Livres’, *La Revue blanche*, 1 December 1898, 556-58, (p. 557).

<sup>3</sup> Paul D’Armon, ‘Le Cirque Solaire’, *Le Voltaire*, 10 December 1898, p. 2.

<sup>4</sup> Robert Dieudonné, ‘Une Enquête: Chez les Porteurs de Lyre: Gustave Kahn’, *La Presse*, 20 September 1902, p. 2.

<sup>5</sup> Sophie Lucet, ‘Kahn et le théâtre: Utopie et pratique’, *Gustave Kahn: Un écrivain engagé*, ed. by Françoise Lucbert and Richard Shryock (Rennes: Presses universitaires de Rennes), p. 110.

<sup>6</sup> This is announced throughout the press. See, for example, ‘Courrier des Théâtres’, *Le Siècle*, 4 July 1901, p. 5.

<sup>7</sup> ‘Le Masque de Verre’ [pseudonym of Pierre Mortier], ‘Échos’, *Comoedia*, 16 February 1908, p. 1.

<sup>8</sup> Jennifer Forrest, *Decadent Aesthetics and the Acrobat in Fin-de-Siècle France* (New York: Routledge, 2020), p. 1.

<sup>9</sup> For more information on Kahn’s shift, see Richard Shryock, *Lettres à Gustave et Rachel Kahn* (Paris: Nizet, 1996), pp. 272-73.