

*Le Roi fou*: Gustave Kahn's Speculative Symbolist Fiction  
Richard Shryock

Gustave Kahn played a leading role in the French Symbolist Movement. He is perhaps best known for being the first to systematically use free verse and the first to theorize it. Some hold that he invented free verse. His work in *petites revues* such as *La Vogue*, *Le Symboliste*, *La Revue indépendante*, and others helped to define this new literary movement in the 1880s and 90s. His literary corpus is extensive covering many genres. His critical work engaged him in many of the literary, artistic, and social debates of the day. His first novel, *Le Roi fou* occupies a unique place in his corpus and in Symbolist literature. As well, it was the product of a period of exceptional upheaval in France. It is unusual for him as it marked his first attempt to express political ideas through his literature and unusual for Symbolism as one of the few pieces of overtly political literature. *Le Roi fou* attempts to balance the didactic qualities of speculative fiction with the symbolist esthetic.

*Le Roi fou* first appeared in serialized form between June 1894 and April 1895 in the artistically and politically avant-garde journal *La Revue blanche*. It was published in a single volume in 1896. It was the first time *La Revue blanche* published a novel. This venue, however, was not unfamiliar to Kahn as he was the second most frequent contributor to the journal. The novel was written during the period when Paris was rocked by a series of anarchist attacks that historian Jean Maitron calls L'Ere des attentats. Anarchists and many others hoped that these attacks would be enough to spark the downfall of the Third Republic. While this period ended in 1894, it was of course not known at the time that it had ended. The first installment of *Le Roi fou* was published the same month that the French president Sadi Carnot was assassinated by an anarchist.

Nearly all of the Symbolists during this time expressed support for or at least openness to the views of the anarchism. These writers, however, were broadly criticized by some anarchists for

continuing to write mostly literature that avoided any references to contemporary struggles or that showed any interest in the matters that inspired these anarchists to attempt to overthrow the Third Republic. Many, including Kahn who was an intellectual anarchist, wrote articles supporting anarchism. In 1894, Kahn used his position as editor of Brussels-based *La Société nouvelle* to publish major anarchist theorists such as Mikhail Bakunin, Peter Kropotkin, Elisée Reclus. As well, he published a series of thoughtful articles under his name and his pseudonym about the execution of the anarchists Auguste Vaillant and Emile Henry. Kahn's shift in his writing toward a form of social art should be seen as an extension of his editorial activities.

While attempts at bringing politics directly into Symbolist literature exist, they are few in number. Bernard Lazare and Pierre Quillard used allegories that could easily be read as commentary of current events. For example, Lazare's "Le Mot de l'énigme," which was a rewriting of the Oedipus myth, was even reproduced in the literary supplement of the anarchist journal *La Révolte* in 1893. Concurrent with the publication of *Le Roi fou* in *La Revue blanche* was Saint-Pol-Roux's "Le Fumier," which used allegorical characters such as "Le Pèlerin du Ciel" or "La Vierge du Puits" to make social commentary. Adolphe Retté's *La Forêt bruissante* also put into poetic dialog characters such as "Le Veillard" and "Le Berger" to the same ends. The only Symbolist who used the novel to express political ideas directly was Paul Adam. As J. Ann Duncan shows, Adam often attempted to create a "jeu de miroirs" in which each character reflects an aspect of society and the synthesis formed by the whole thereby constituting the total signification of the work.

The version of *Le Roi fou* in book form has preface that situates the genre of the novel:

Est-ce un roman politique? non; un roman à clef? non plus; pourtant ces empereurs, ces rois et ces ministres il semblera au lecteur en avoir entendu parler! Ils vivent alors! oui et non;

ils sont déjà partiellement, et surtout ils seront, si le cours des choses s'accélère dans la direction qui s'indique actuellement.

It concludes with this explicit statement : « Le rideau se lève ici sur une tragi-comédie romantique dont le cadre et le fond sont sociaux et actuels. » As J.C. Ireson notes, Kahn's first attempt at prose carried an explanation whereas his poetry, which was often considered opaque, never did so.

*Le Roi fou* takes place in a fictional Germanic monarchy called Hummertanz. In German, the name means the dance of lobsters and indicates from the outset that this novel is set in a fanciful mode. The plot is rather dispersed and is constituted by little more than a thin sequence of events. The novel foregrounds the relationship of King Christian and his aide the Duke of Sparkling. However, their actions are repeatedly interrupted by the social and political turmoil wracking the kingdom that finally leads to the King's insanity and his ouster by the forces of a neighboring kingdom. The novel was criticized at the time for paralleling too many aspects of Belgian life. In her review in the *Mercure de France*, Rachilde referred to it as a "Belgique morose."

The novel functions as an indictment of capitalism and of the monarchy. In the modern kingdom of Hummertanz, the narrator shares the mindset of the inhabitants and their place in history:

tous les âges de fer, de bronze, etc., de la planète avaient trouvé leur absolue plénitude en l'âge du capitalisme; que l'âge du capitalisme qui avait dicté les plus solides assises de leurs institutions, était l'âge définitif et qu'ils étaient, sous la plus paternelle tutelle, des citoyens heureux sous le ciel large.

Indeed, capitalism has become the dominant force in the country seeping into and controlling virtually every aspect of society. The bourgeoisie had succeeded the aristocracy in many ways. The proportional system of voting is based on the income of individual voters. Even the army is hierarchized by the fundamental principles of capitalism. The church, also dominated by capitalist values, supplies key support for the government. Nevertheless, despite the high degree of collaboration between the crown and the other institutions of power, socialism is depicted as an eventuality. Only the continual use of indiscriminate violence against the people will prevent this. A revolt at the end of the novel, leads to the end of King Christian's monarchy. A neighboring kingdom invades to quell the unrest.

The novel navigates a series of socio-political and esthetic obstacles to offer a warning to its readers about the possible future course of governments in Europe. Esthetically, the Symbolists, including Kahn, were opposed to the realism. In a 1897 article "Des Tendances actuelles de la littérature, » Kahn describes two parallel types of literature : « les intuitifs et les observateurs, en langage usuel les idéalistes et les réalistes, les poètes et les prosateurs ». The Symbolists fall into the former category and, of course, the naturalists belong to the latter. "Nos jeunes esthéticiens préféreront une belle couleur légendaire. Ils abrègent les détails si chers à nos devanciers, pour n'étudier que des mobiles et des conséquences. » The mimetic dimension present in realist fiction attached to description is rejected. However, mimesis remains present when referring to the causal effects that bring about change in the story. Writing a review of the novel in *Le Journal*, Armand Silvestre notes "les ministres aussi chimériques que lui-même, fantastiques juste autant qu'il faut pour rester dans la vraisemblance de leurs actes, [...] » « C'est le mélange de la réalité et de la fable, suivant les règles communes qu'elles ont entre elles, qui fait vraiment le mérite de *le Roi Fou*. »

The speculative fiction genre suits Kahn's undertaking well. Boris Groys in his 2014 "Visible and Invisible Sides of Reproduction," points to at least two etymologies of "speculative" "from the Latin *speculum* (mirror)," which "means a true reflection of reality as an empirical fact." but also "a reflection on reality that may be hidden behind its empirical image." (Groys 2014, 33). Mathias Nilges using Arjun Appadurai's notion of speculation as a form of immanent critique notes "for it conceives of speculation not as a matter of simple techno-utopianism or of the construction of naive futures but instead as an immanent critique of the existing." While using this dimension of speculative fiction is not surprising or particularly innovative, it fits in well with the Symbolist aesthetic of in a number of ways. The novel avoids a didactic tone. Instead of having clearly stated positions about what is criticized, it tends to move by suggestion and causes the reader to create logical links with elements outside the novel.

Another way in which Kahn manages to have his prose align better with the idealist art of Symbolism is by breaking the traditional narrative patterns of the novel. The novel's digressive form undermines the coherent, logical narrative structure in which one event leads to the next and in so doing creates a familiar, knowable world. This is one product of the preference for the focus on the *mobiles* and *conséquences* he described as characteristic of current literature. A curious aspect of the novel's plot: the king's folly does not arrive until the very end of the novel when it is triggered by a bomb blast. The mental state of the king emphasized by the title does not occur until 95% of the action has transpired and is not the cause of the problems in the novel. While there is the suggestion of insanity in one of King Christian's ancestors that could affect him (though it did not affect his father) (p. 137), no obvious signs of this appear. In the final pages, the king is murdered by a family member who herself is insane. Neither his insanity nor his murder cause any major changes in the plot. They seem to be an ultimate end of this dying monarchy. While the adjective "fou" does not seem to be important to the plot when referring to the king's mental state, another meaning is

“un mouvement [...] irrégulier, imprévisible, incontrôlable (*Petit Robert*) or “qui va dans tous les sens en donnant l’apparence de désordre (*Trésor*). This seems to align with the structure or lack of structure of the novel.

Description in the novel can contribute to a sense of looseness. As Maurice Leblond remarked in his review of the book “Car tout ce que voit et décrit M Gustave Kahn, prend un aspect merveilleux, devient féérique. Le moindre détail, la plus quotidienne aventure acquièrent, sous son style, un extraordinaire et pittoresque apparat. » This approach no doubt contributes to the Symbolist descriptions of the countryside or an architectural feature as:

Ce heurt brutal qui froissa tant les grêles baladins de son somme éphialtique, n'évoque-t-il pas le débouché brusque, aux carrefours inattendus, des grosses forces que l'on ne dompte jamais, qu'on est impuissant à assoupir pour longtemps, et qui longtemps geignantes en un craintif rhembasme, apparaissent un jour de total esclandre dans le bruit formidable de crécelles géantes, en de hourvariés ébrouements.

Kahn occasionally uses a language filled with these archaisms, neologisms, and uncommon words more typically associated with Symbolist poetry than of Romanesque prose.

One additional stylistic device that helps to separate his novel from naturalist prose is the frequent use of irony. Setting the story in the land of the dance of the lobsters (*Hummertanz*) indicates this approach from the outset. The narrator uses it as well in some of his characterizations such as referring to the subjugated citizens as “heureux.” Irony, of course, provides an indirect way of talking about something or of criticizing it.

Kahn approaches the writing of his first novel as an extension of his poetic writing. Contemporary social and political problems abound in this novel warning of greater future unrest.

One legitimate question to ask is what country is Kahn writing about. Dominique Fagnot in his critical edition of the novel makes clear the strong parallels between King Christian and the Belgian King Léopold I. Kahn was living in Brussels in the years prior to the publication of the novel in *La Revue blanche*, but is this just an indictment of that country? It was certainly safer for Kahn, who was about to move back to France, to criticize Belgium than his home country.

During the publication of the novel in *La Revue blanche*, Kahn returned to France. Before the publication of the first installment, the French parliament, in response to anarchists attacks, passed the first two *lois scélérates* limiting the freedom of the press. After the assassination of the French president in June 1894, a third even more restrictive law was passed. In his dissertation on modernism and the mass press, Max McGuinness conjectures that “The novel’s subversive political message might well have fallen afoul of [the new press laws] had it been expressed in non-fictional form or a less recondite prose style.” This is certainly possible but Kahn distanced himself from French politics by seeming to place his novel in Belgium and in describing the problems of a monarchy. In the months prior to the publication of the novel, he wrote articles sympathetic to anarchists and warned that guillotining them would only lead to more violence.

Four years after the publication of the novel, in an article entitled “Faiseurs de rois” after anarchists had assassinated a number of rulers, he wrote to explain the acts. As he did in *Le Roi fou*, he makes the argument that monarchies only exist with the support of capital and the people suffer from capital. He concludes by saying “La seule façon de supprimer le régicide, c’est la suppression de la monarchie; la seule façon de garantir la vie des chefs d’Etat républicains, c’est l’amélioration constante du système social. Il n’y a pas d’autre remède.” This expansion to the republican form of government, obviously extends to France. While such extra-textual comments provide a link that may have existed for the author, readers may or may not have made this connection.

While Kahn's novel combines social matters while still respecting the Symbolist esthetic, one can ask the question of how successful this was. Although Kahn would return to prose in the future, it did not have a social slant to it. Other writers did not embrace this style or attempt to imitate Kahn in this respect. It is not clear how fully some of the critics saw his approach as a productive way to use literature to further social and political ends. The anarchist-oriented newspaper *La Renaissance* had a review of the novel as its lead article, yet the critic focused primarily on Kahn's use of irony.

The implied reader of this novel is certainly not someone of modest education. The novel lacks the easy-to-follow narrative structure and accessible language (as the quote from the description shows) one would expect in attempt to reach a larger audience. This is one of the ways that these forms of Symbolist literature, which include a social dimension, differ from more traditionally definition social literature. However, Kahn and many others of his generation did not see social changes as necessarily coming from "below," from the working class. France had had a century of revolutions and insurrections that did not always have happy endings. Kahn and many others saw the locus of change in those in power. It is to those readers that this novel is addressed.