

TEMPO RUBATO

JOAV BAREL

DRAWINGS AFTER KAFKA

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SEEING WITH AN ISRAELI - KAFKAESQUE EYE

(About Joav BarEl's Kafka drawings)

Once I had a chance to look through some copies of Kafka's hand-written manuscripts – particularly that of "The Castle" – and I remember the impression I got from the many small drawings that Kafka sketched in the margins especially at the bottom of the page. It was clear that these drawings were born of the thinking process that produced the text; that they were follow-ups or developments of the same poetic thought.

Kafka was not interested in painting for its own sake – it seems that he believed in the _illusory nature of plastic representation even less than in the vagaries of words – but his _literary thinking is so plastic, his ideas take on such distinct forms, that he was inclined to continue the literary thought through a drawing.

Indeed, the drawings are never interpretations of his writings; they are extensions or _summaries of them. The graphic line of the author, who likes to draw rather schematic figures – people who are lines, bending, extending their hands forward and backward, on a chair or inside some enclosure – exposes, sometimes quite directly, the intention of the story. It reveals the often hidden autobiographical nature of all of Kafka's characters, for one can easily argue that just as Kafka's stories are all bits of his autobiography, so his drawings are all self-portraits.

Kafka refrained from direct illustration of the stories, and it appears that he wanted to dissuade others from attempting it. We know of the letter he sent on October 25, 1915, to his publisher, Kurt Wolf, in which he asked that the cover illustration for the long story "The Metamorphosis", assigned to Ottomar Starke would not include any drawing of the cockroach. "The cockroach itself must not be drawn".

Nevertheless, Kafka – despite, or because of, what seems the great abstractness of his prose – attracted many painters, who found inspiration in the lively symbols in his stories, which are presented with an often incredible realism.

So, what then? Realistic or abstract? The dreamer of metaphysical nightmares, or a cold observer of external reality? That is the ultimate question in the study of Kafka, which creates the constant, fascinating state of hesitation experienced by every sensitive reader of the unique prose of the author from Prague.

You never know, you can never decide, whether Kafka was a realist (to be sure, he saw himself as a realist, a student of Flaubert), or perhaps a surrealist and a mystic, the dreamer of distorted visions, far removed from any naive realism, from any attempt to photograph reality in words.

It seems that in this middle-ground of indetermination between two opposite poles, Joav BarEl found his Kafka and his own connection to the Jewish-German writer. During the late fifties and early sixties,

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when the work of this Israeli critic and artist was at a peak, many of Kafka's writings began to be published in Hebrew translations (the history of the Hebrew translation and acceptance of Kafka started much earlier, of course). Joav BarEl read them then – or maybe earlier, in their English versions – together with other writers and colleagues, some of whom were interpreters of Kafka (his friend Gabriel Moked wrote in his early days and interesting essay on "The Metamorphosis").

So then Kafka became "his" writer, the one who expressed verily and in amazing fullness the torn world of the young Israeli artist, who found himself in a world that had no clear identity, having just been a revolutionary pioneering world, but growing old terribly fast, already decadent in great part. It was a world of total dread, which easily embraced the private nightmares of the artist, thinker and critic that Joav BarEl was.

It is interesting to compare BarEl's Kafka drawings to another, later, artistic version by Yosl Bergner. Bergner's Kafka is a humoristic-Jewish-European Kafka, perhaps more complex than the BarEl's Kafka, but less penetrating, less focused on the roots of the culture that formed the framework of the artist's interpretative drawings. In fact, Bergner's Kafka illustrations are Israeli only in name – after all, he painted them in Israel. But they make no comment on the Israeli situation, on the Kafkaesque phantasmagoria that is unique to this country. BarEl's Kafka, however, is certainly a Kafka who has come to this land, been reborn here, and creates out of the Israeli situation – particularly, out of the situation of Israeli art in those years. For that was an interim time, a time of vacillation that can easily be defined as typically Kafkaesque, wavering between the realistic and the abstract, the pioneering and the decadent. The historical-artistic sensitivity of Joav BarEl was acute: he was an art critic just as much as he was a painter, aware and cognizant of his artistic and historical time and of his Tel Aviv locality.

In those years, the "New Horizons" school was coming to exhaustion: Gone were the pioneering days of the Eretz-Israelian painting, drunk with the light of the Mediterranean and the landscapes that seemed so magical to the "orientalistic" eyes of painters of East-European extraction, who drew most of their inspiration from the École de Paris. But the new generation had not arrived yet. The black, nightmarish, conceptualistic star of Moshe Gershoni had not risen yet, and Raffi Lavi, the teacher and painter of metaphysical Israeli-hood had not made his mark yet.

Joav BarEl's drawings of "The Metamorphosis", and especially "The Trial", came at that time of transition, when the work and influence of the early artists, our "old masters", was coming to an end, and before the appearance of those artists who could be called "metaphysical". In this interim world, Joav BarEl webbed and wove in strong, Neo-Expressionist lines – which remind one occasionally of George Grosz' drawings and those of other "New Objectivism" artists – his own dream of horrors. It was almost inescapable that Kafka would be the inspiration for that nightmare.

Looking at these drawings today means going back to a strange, one could say pathetic, period in the chronicles of Israeli art. And even more so it means going back to the world of an artist who has been too much neglected by the writers of these chronicles. It means going back to the unique plastic expression of one of the few Israeli painters who were creative intellectuals – the reader-painter and the thinker-painter that Joav BarEl was.

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