

Online Reviews

Lucbert, Françoise and Richard Shryock, eds. *Gustave Kahn: Un écrivain engagé*. Rennes: Presses universitaires de Rennes, 2013. Pp. 288. ISBN: 978-2-7535-2171-1

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The fruit of an exhibition project and colloquium undertaken with the Musée d'art et d'histoire du Judaïsme, *Gustave Kahn: Un écrivain engagé* stands alone, contributing one of the first truly wide-angle studies of Gustave Kahn (1859-1936) as an iconic figure for fin-de-siècle writers and cultural activists of the first three decades of the twentieth century. For many, the name Gustave Kahn evokes the Symbolist generation, and perhaps debate over the origins of the *vers libre*. Françoise Lucbert and Richard Shryock's collection of essays convincingly proposes that there is much more than this to the picture, and indeed much to be gained from further study of Kahn's expansive engagements with cultural production. In addition to his career as a prolific writer, literary and art critic, editor, and social commentator, Gustave Kahn was a major player among the Symbolist poets, a literary theorist, an engaged intellectual, and a committed promoter of the arts and social reform. Navigating between diverse circles of writers, artists, and social and political personages, Kahn also wrote or served on the editorial staff for numerous periodicals, including *L'Hydropathe*, *La Jeune Belgique*, *Menorah*, *Mercure de France*, *La Plume*, *La Revue Blanche*, *La Revue Indépendante*, *Le Quotidien*, *La Raison*, *Le Siècle*, *Le Symboliste*, and *La Vogue*.

Opening like a Mallarméan fan, *Gustave Kahn: Un écrivain engagé* reveals myriad folds of a sorely neglected oeuvre from numerous disciplinary directions. With essays by sixteen scholars, the volume benefits from the wide range of contemporary approaches to the field of Kahn studies, offering much to our understanding of Kahn as writer, art and social critic. Each exposing different aspects of the writer's work, working relations, and thought, the individual pieces productively reflect among themselves as the collection contextualizes and juxtaposes his remarkable cultural interventions in five complementary acts: *Un écrivain engagé*, *Aspects de la vie littéraire*, *De la musique à l'art social*, *Nouvelles approches sur la critique*, and *Un intellectuel dans son temps*.

Together, the essays of this volume show the breadth and depth of Kahn's meditations, exploring the place of poetics—and more precisely *poesis*—in his vision of the relationships between art and the social, his conception of “liberté” in life and in art, and his approach to the *vers libre*. It also documents, in many cases for the first time, Kahn's relations with other writers, artists, musicians, journalists, and public figures, his journalistic engagements, and his heretofore-understudied interventions (and occasional non-interventionism) as a French Israelite. The editors' choices effectively construct the image of an artist whose contributions engage key issues of his cultural moment, from the literary, artistic, social, and political questions that his work addresses, to his interrogations and deployment of genres as diverse as art criticism, novels, short stories, chronicles, prefaces, and poems.

Part one, *Un écrivain engagé*, opens with “Engagements esthétiques et sociaux de Gustave Kahn,” a thought-provoking and beautifully co-written study by Lucbert and Shryock, that, for its insights and new research, as much as for the ideal framework it provides for the subsequent essays, prominently stands as one of the great strengths of the volume. The essay contextualizes Kahn's production and trajectories, signals key issues, and focuses on the implicit agency of an aesthetic politic

courageously and persistently aspiring to a *poesis* that would embody new work and new life. Shryock's incisive "Transformer le monde à travers l'art pur," further develops aspects of the introductory essay, offering a nuanced analysis of the aesthetic politic and delicate paradoxes involved in the theorization of the *vers libre* and Kahn's particular vision of an *art pur*.

Part two, *Aspects de la vie littéraire*, exhibits the versatility of Kahn's literary production with an evocative essay by Jean-Louis Meunier on Kahn's *Le Livre d'images*. Bolstered by ample textual examples, the study suggests *prises de position* with regard to the *ut pictura poesis* tradition, inciting further exploration of Kahn's conception of image production in the verbal arts. Shifting from poetry to prose, in "Symbolisme et comique: les premiers contes de Gustave Kahn," Vérane Partensky proffers a rich examination of the (socio-) critical facet of humor in Kahn's early fiction, while Sophie Lucet's "Kahn et le théâtre: utopie et pratique," takes up the dramatic arts, deftly addressing the writer's ambivalent (and Mallarméan) relationship to the "anecdotisme" of contemporary theatre. The section closes with Patrick Besnier's discussion of Kahn's relationship with Alfred Jarry.

Further attesting to the stunning array of interests that traverse Kahn's work and impact, part three, *De la musique à l'art social*, opens with Jean-Pierre Lamberty's "Une résonance égoïste: Kahn et le compositeur Guillaume Lekeu." Moving from music to Kahn's fascinating work on the aesthetics of urbanism, Thierry Paquot's "Les plaisirs de la rue, une lecture de *L'Esthétique de la rue*," presents a note-worthy study of Kahn's largely ignored poetics of the street. The latter also sets the stage for Noriko Yoshida's discussion of poster art in "L'affiche selon Gustave Kahn: le cas de Jules Chéret." This section happily concludes with a rich examination of the place of cultural agency in Catherine Méneux's "L'idée d'un art social."

Part four, *Nouvelles approches sur la critique* effectively builds on previous discussions of aesthetic and cultural activism with Cécile Barraud's investigation of Kahn's journalistic chronicles, specifically, *La Vie mentale*, and the varied issues addressed in this rubric of *La Revue Blanche*. Lucbert's "Regards symbolistes sur le cubisme," underscores Kahn's close engagement with artistic currents. The essay compellingly foregrounds Kahn as a committed defender of the artistic avant-gardes of his moment, even when such innovation meets with the critic's own aesthetic ambivalence. Dominique Jarrassé's "Gustave Kahn critique d'art juif?" imparts an insightful discussion of the possibility of "Jewish art" as a category for Kahn. The article lends unspoken texture to "Kahn, interprète de l'oeuvre de Kupka: le témoignage d'une vive compréhension," where Pierre Brullé presents Kahn's criticism of the Czech (and Jewish) painter František Kupka (1871-1957), demonstrating the writer's continued involvement with modern art, and illuminating the Mallarméan specters that haunt the aesthetic and critical relationships between the two men.

In the fifth and final section, *Un intellectuel dans son temps*, the book unabashedly continues to go where no volume on Kahn has gone before, considering Kahn's relationship to his Judaism, his views on the place of the Jew and the Israelite in the arts and the Republic, and his previously under-examined role in the Jewish cultural renaissance of the early-twentieth century. Philippe Oriol discusses Kahn's delicate position during the Dreyfus affair, explicitly tracing his role as a French Jewish journalist and intellectual, bestowing chronological background for Philippe Boukara's "Un engagement socialiste et sioniste." A meditation on the place of Kahn's Judaism in relation to socialism (and its links to anti-Semitism), the latter opens with Kahn's association with Marcel Sembat (1862-1922), the first French socialist to direct a ministry by his own party's mandate, and for whom Kahn would serve as personal secretary. Highlighting the ideological relationships between Kahn's socialism and socialist contacts, Boukara traces the writer's progressively overt and particular genre of Zionism, as well as his activism within Jewish organizations and journals. Catherine Fhima's "Un parcours singulier d'écrivain juif" concludes the volume to discuss the changing place of Judaism in Kahn's production and his time. While all of the essays of this section could have been headed under the rubric "Un intellectuel juif dans son temps," the choice of the section title would seem consistent

with Fhima's reading and Kahn's own oscillations between visions of the Republican individual and his own identity as a French Jewish citizen engaging as writer, essayist, and critic with the Republic and its cultures.

A trove for Kahn scholars and a rich resource for students and scholars of Symbolism, fin-de-siècle studies, Jewish studies, writer-journalists, and poet-critics of late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries, *Gustave Kahn: Un écrivain engagé* offers excellent analyses of the writer's literary and critical production, artistic and social contacts, and his cultural engagements. Enjoyable, informative, and thought-provoking, it opens new vistas onto Kahn's work, thought, and action. With essays addressing the writer's interrogations of topics as diverse as *le vers libre*, *la libre pensée*, socialism, caricature, cubism, music, urbanism, poster art, aesthetics, and cultural politics, the volume presents a fine demonstration of Gustave Kahn as poet-chronicler of his time, providing something for everyone, and even more to those who will delve into each of its folds.

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