

HOODED CROW, PART 2 of 2

Richard Hell



“It is a fundamentally insane notion, he continues, that one is able to influence the course of events by a turn of the helm, by will-power alone, whereas in fact all is determined by the most complex interdependencies.”— from *Vertigo* by W.G. Sebald

This essay paused on the verge of mentioning that W.G. Sebald, in his novel *Vertigo* (1990), which is woven through with Franz Kafka—called Dr. K in the book—and specifically with Kafka’s brief story (or situation) “The Hunter Gracchus,” implies or speculates that Kafka was gay. Others have suggested that’s a trait of Kafka’s that Sebald identified with. I wouldn’t consider the issue of the sexuality of either of them relevant here except that it made for a nice cliffhanger between parts one and two of this essay (after all, Gracchus died by falling from a cliff) and that the *Vertigo* narrator, who shares a lot of history with Sebald, interprets the “Gracchus” story specifically as revolving around that homosexuality.

Gracchus, the Black Forest huntsman who’s been dead for six or eight centuries, but not fully, because the helmsman of his ship of death let slip its rudder, dooming their barque to drift the seas of earth forever, the shores of death unreachable. It’s explained: “As it was Dr. K who conjured up this tale, it seems to me that the meaning of Gracchus the huntsman’s ceaseless journey lies in a penitence for a longing for love, such as invariably besets Dr. K, as he explains in one of his countless Fledermaus-letters to Felice, precisely at the point where there is seemingly, and in the natural and lawful order of things, nothing to be enjoyed.” That sentence is packed with allusions, also sprinkled throughout the book, to occurrences in Kafka’s life that the narrator reads as possible evidence of his romantic interest in men. Felice, of course, is Kafka’s frantically, anxiously pursued girlfriend, with whom, across five years, there were two separate, cancelled periods of formal marriage engagement.

I was brought to the Sebald by Joy Williams’s recent novel of our apocalypse, *Harrow*. That book also makes significant

use of the “Gracchus” story, which led me to discover not only that *Vertigo* focuses on Gracchus too, but that my own new book, *What Just Happened*, does as well in that not only does it contain three or four pertinent references to Kafka across all three sections of it but it displays full page twice a single photograph of a magnificent crow solitary in a field in Sweden. It’s a Eurasian Hooded Crow, or, in Swedish, a *kråka*, which word is one of many in various European languages referring to the avian family corvids (crows, ravens, rooks, magpies, jackdaws, etc.) that derive from the Latin stem *gracc-*, as does Gracchus. *Kavka* is the word for jackdaw in Czech and Kafka’s father had an engraving of the bird on his business card. But the four texts—*What Just Happened*, *Harrow*, “The Hunter Gracchus” (plus “A Fragment,” which appears to be a false start for “Gracchus”), and *Vertigo*—are linked in other ways as well.

The Sebald novel not only operates like a dream, but, to me, that itself seems its primary purpose and metaphysics (of nothing). It’s not a dream with a message; it’s dreaming as the message. Life as a mysterious and unsettling dream, not fantastical in any thrilling, magical way, but merely inaccessible to the likes of limited us (limited universe). We are its prisoners and puppets. There’s no way out. This is clearly much of the reason Sebald identifies with Kafka: the styles of both of them operate as dreams do. Mysterious transitions and recurrences. Nothing exists except as nodes in a network, including time, past and future; all things have qualities only specifically in relation to other “things” (events), otherwise they’re nothing. History is only as real as memory which we all know is personal and mutable; the only more general quality of it, of history, being that it’s human nature enacted. And that everything disappears and turns into other things and people destroy and compete and compete and destroy. There is no “progress,” there isn’t even a direction. We actually are half asleep—we have about as much control over our behavior as if we were asleep. All of our lives are unintended consequences. This is the yield of the four intertwined texts.

Are we to accept that Kafka deliberately named the character Gracchus after himself? Why is the Gracchus story resonant for Joy Williams and W.G. Sebald? As so often with Kafka, the story isn't really a story anyway, it's a situation. A physically metaphysical one. (As Williams says, "Gracchus, the literal expression in a concrete image of an abstraction. That was what Kafka did best. And what a comedian! The peculiar painting in the ship's cabin. The doves. The fifty little boys in attendance.") There is no resolution. There's just the setup and its imagery and odd anecdotal moments. Though the question of the culpability of the doomed man does arise—in fact it's assumed that his inability to die must be a punishment. And Sebald runs with it. I'd love to be able to call in for reinforcement a line reportedly spoken by Kafka on his deathbed regarding a vase of flowers in the room, "that they were like him: simultaneously alive and dead" (but I can't because I can't find corroboration for the attribution). The books enact their authors' incomprehensible world experience the same way that history itself isn't a narrative but rather simply human nature enacted. It doesn't make any sense, it's just the way things are for us. It doesn't lead to anything, it just transpires. There's no purpose to any of it and people can't help who they are.

Sebald makes a pretty convincing case for the homosexuality, though I'm not sure how much he may be stretching the indications. In this connection, Williams has a character remark about the widespread condition of having found oneself a human without any clear idea of what that entails and suspecting that one is "meant to be more or different but fumbled about in the smoky light of half-realized lives instead," which is not a dissimilar interpretation to Sebald's, of repressed homosexuality as a stifled life. It's not really that one thing leads to another, it's that one thing leads to everything, is everything (nothing).

The cat-lamb is on the prowl too, as another instance of the liminal: placement on both sides of a boundary or a threshold. Predator and prey, male and female, carnivore and herbivore (Kafka was a vegetarian). Of course the main character in *Harrow* was born Lamb. But, as the owner of the pet cat-lamb, in "The Crossbreed" has it, "Once when, as may happen to anyone, I could see no way out of my business problems and all that they involved, and was ready to let everything go, and in this mood was lying in my rocking chair in my room, the beast on my knees, I happened to glance down and saw tears dropping from its huge whiskers. Were they mine, or were they the animal's? Had this cat, along with the soul of a lamb, the ambitions of a human being? [...] Perhaps the knife of the butcher would be a release for this animal; but as it is a legacy I must deny it that. So it must wait until the breath voluntarily leaves its body, even though it sometimes gazes at me with a look of human understanding, challenging me to do the thing of which both of us are thinking."

Another theme of my book is that everything is a hole: an exit that's an entrance, an entrance exiting. . .

It all seems like
the descriptions puzzlers
propose of how the universe
behaves at last: black holes and rabbit
holes and worm holes: everything
empty while threshold.

And this notion has counterparts in the various texts too. Kafka in his diaries describes a moment in a church in Verona, probably visited when traveling to Riva in 1913, "I entered reluctantly, saw a larger than life-sized dwarf stooping under the holy water basin, walked around a little, sat down and just as reluctantly went out as if outside there were another such church attached door to door." Sebald in *Vertigo* described Dr. K in Verona at the Church of Sant'Anastasia feeling, as he was departing the building, "for a moment as if the selfsame church were replicated before him, its entrance fitting directly with that of the church he had just left, a mirroring effect he was familiar with from his dreams, in which everything was forever splitting and multiplying, over and again, in the most terrifying manner."

It's not really that one thing leads to another, it's that one thing leads to everything else. History has arrived at the point where dream logic, like conspiracy theories, is a better description of our condition than anything superficially more scientific. Everything is going on in secrecy, out of our reach.



"There is a—let us say—a machine. It evolved itself (I am severely scientific) out of a chaos of scraps of iron and behold!—it knits. I am horrified at the horrible work and stand appalled. I feel it ought to embroider—but it goes on knitting. You come and say: 'this is all right; it's only a question of the right kind of oil. Let us use this—for instance—celestial oil and the machine shall embroider a most beautiful design in purple and gold.' Will it? Alas no. You cannot by any special lubrication make embroidery with a knitting machine. And the most withering thought is that the infamous thing has made itself; made itself without thought, without conscience, without foresight, without eyes, without heart. It is a tragic accident—and it has happened. You can't interfere with it. The last drop of bitterness is in the suspicion that you can't even smash it. In virtue of that truth one and immortal which lurks in the force that made it spring into existence it is what it is—and it is indestructible!

It knits us in and it knits us out. It has knitted time space, pain, death, corruption, despair and all the illusions—and nothing matters. I'll admit however that to look at the remorseless process is sometimes amusing."

— Joseph Conrad, in a letter to R. B. Cunninghame Graham,
20 December 1897

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