



Slight Return:
Remix and Ekphrasis

Robert Archambeau

Argotist Ebooks

Cover and “Kafka Sutra” images by Sarah Conner

Copyright © Robert Archambeau 2011
All rights reserved
Argotist Ebooks

Slight Return:
Remix and Ekphrasis

The Kafka Sutra

[Source texts: Kafka's parables and the *Kama Sutra*]

[Images by Sarah Conner]

Introductory

In the beginning the Lord of Lords created men and women, and in the form of commandments in one hundred thousand chapters laid down rules for the proper governance of the *Dharma*, *Artha*, and *Kama*. Those rules which treated of *Dharma* were disclosed by Swayambhu Manu; those governing *Artha* were compiled by Brihaspati; and those that referred to *Kama* were, such is the mystery of mysteries, expounded by Franz Kafka in one thousand parables. It is said he composed them on days following his return to Prague from Berlin, where he traveled to visit his fiancé Felice Bauer. On such days Max Brod would often find Kafka brooding over a small black notebook and the remains of his modest breakfast. Kafka revealed the contents of the notebook only after unrelenting rib-jabbing and taunting by his friend, a service for which the literary world will forever be in Brod's debt.

The original notebook being lost, the sutras were reproduced from notes and memory by Brod in abbreviated form in five hundred chapters. This work was again lost, but not before being prepared for publication in an abridged form of one hundred and fifty chapters by that notoriously renegade Hasid, Bohdan ben-Zalman, a kettle-maker and publisher of erotica, curiosa, and illicit literature. These one hundred and fifty chapters were then put together under seven heads or parts named severally:

- 1 *Sadharana* (on general topics)
- 2 *Samprayogika* (on rejected advances, etc.)
- 3 *Kanya Samprayuktaka* (on advances not quite made in the first place)
- 4 *Bharyadhikarika* (on rejection by one's wife)
- 5 *Paradika* (on rejection by the wives of others)
- 6 *Vaisika* (on fear of approaching courtesans, and the memory of maternal injunctions regarding disease)
- 7 *Aupamishadika* (on the application of useless ointments)

The few copies of ben-Zalman's proofs having been variously suppressed, lost, destroyed, found, thoughtlessly repaired, amended, corrupted, ignored, and otherwise removed from the historical record, we find only these few fragments of the Kafka Sutra survive. They are here rendered into English for the first time, that we may partake of their wisdom and vision.



The Great Wall and the Tower of Babel

from the Bharyadhikarika

He is to attain, through weeks of restraint, desire such that a tumescence is achieved scarcely inferior to the unruined glory of the Tower of Babel and, as regards divine approval, not entirely at variance with that edifice. He lies supine, that the monument of his desire towers above him.

She lies next to him, on her side, her back toward him, her curves and lavish limbs and silken surfaces forming in their long extension a Great Wall. She begins, softly, to snore.

He sees now that the tower failed because it was bound to fail.



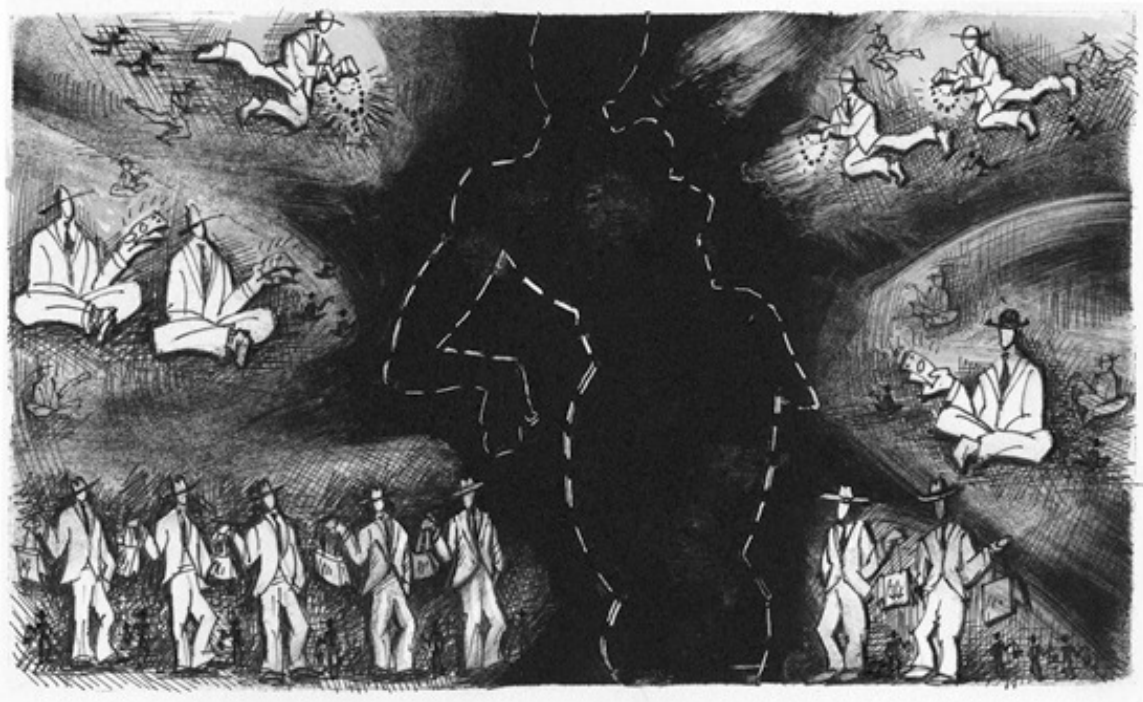
An Imperial Message

from the Paradika

She is an empress and sends him a message from the divan where, after the luxury of her bath, she stretches the magnificence of her flesh to be powdered by a favorite handmaiden. Her message, a summons of desire, is for him and him alone, her pathetic subject, a tiny shadow hidden at the farthest distance from her imperial sun. She orders her eunuch herald to kneel down beside the heat and delicate scent of her breast, and drawing him near strokes his shaved head with a hand whose soft tautness itself promises fulfillments undreamed of by even the most jaded rakes among the courtly aristocrats. She whispers in the eunuch's jeweled ear words that cause him, a veteran of many years service and witness to countless debauches of the court, to blush. At her command the messenger whispers the message back to her, that she may confirm its accuracy. The words bear such promise of pleasure that he trembles in memory of his lost manhood. And there, in front of the attendant harem of handmaidens and silken ladies in waiting, she dispatches her herald with a commanding gesture of her bejeweled and opulent arm.

The messenger starts off at once, a powerfully built and tireless servant. Eyes and jaw set in determination, he elbows his way through the crowd of nubile bodies. Where he encounters resistance, he points to his breast, which bears the glittering sign of the imperial sun, and the crowd parts for him. But the crush of bodies is immense; the imperial dwelling infinite. If there were an open field, how he would fly along, and soon the intended would hear the pounding of his fist on the door. But instead, look how futile are all his efforts, how vainly he wastes his burly strength. He is still forcing his way through the private rooms of the innermost palace. Never will he win his way through. And if he did manage that, nothing would have been achieved. He would have to fight his way down the broad imperial steps, and, even if he managed to do that, still nothing would have been achieved, for the palace, which lies within the infinite city, has no end.

Out in the provinces the intended lies supine and contemplates with sorrow the Tower of Babel.



Couriers

from the Kanya Samprayuktaka

He is offered the choice of becoming a husband or the lover of another man's wife. Men being as they are, he wants to be a lover, as do all the others. Therefore there are only lovers hurrying around the world, near-rabid with ardor and bearing their secret letters of desire. There being no husbands, though, there are no wives, so there is no one to receive their amorous messages. Secretly they would all like to put an end to this miserable way of life, but fear commitment.



Before the Door

from the Vaisika

Before the seedy entry to the brothel he finds a fat, greasy man on a discarded barstool. Having come from the countryside in great and urgent need, he asks the fat guard for entrance. But the guard says that it is not possible to admit him at just this moment. The man reflects briefly, then asks if he will be allowed to enter later on. "It is possible," says the gatekeeper, "just not at the moment." Since the door to the brothel stands open, as always, and the guard has turned toward the wall a little to shield the cigarette he's lighting from the wind, the man tries to catch a peek inside.

Seeing him, the guard laughs. "If you are so strongly tempted, try getting in despite my prohibition. But take note: I am powerful. And I am but the lowliest of the guards: from hall to hall wait guards at every door, each more terrifying than the last. By the time I get to the third door I can hardly stand to look at them myself." The countryman has not expected this — the brothel should be open to anyone prepared to pay. But when the man looks more closely at the guard and his coat trimmed with fake fur, his floppy hat, his gold-capped cane, his pointed eelskin boots and his long, thin, black Tartar's beard, it becomes clear that it would be better to wait for permission. The guard has given the countryman a little three-legged stool, much shorter than the barstool upon which his own bulk is massed, and gestures for the countryman to sit there at his side. There he sits for days and years, as the cold wind blows trash through the city's gutters. The man, who has equipped himself with many things for his journey to the city, slowly parts with everything he has, attempting time and again to bribe the gatekeeper. The latter accepts it all with a world-weary gaze, each time saying "I only take this so that you won't think there's anything you forgot to try."

Parables

attributed to the Kanya Samprayuktaka

He complains that the words of the sutras are merely parables and of no use in real life: “When the sage has written ‘there she is, go get her, they’re never happier than when they’ve got one up in ’em, etc.’ the wise man does not mean that you should approach some actual hottie, but speaks of a philosophical Other, some transcendent object of ontological desire, something that the sage cannot designate any more precisely than we can. I mean, he can’t actually help us at all. All these parables really set out to say is that the ineffable is ineffable, and we knew that already. But the aches of earthly desire: that’s something else entirely.”

She lies next to him, on her side, her back toward him, with her curves and lavish limbs and silken surfaces, and starts to snore.

Manifest Destinies, Black Rains

[Source texts: Anne C. Lynch, "A Sketch of Washington City," Harper's New Monthly Magazine December 1852; Masuji Ibuse, Black Rain, 1965]

With the broadest principles of freedom for the foundation of our government — with a magnificent country, whose shores are washed by the great oceans, whose lakes are seas, whose rivers are the most majestic that water the earth, whose commerce whitens every sea, whose railroads and canals, like great arteries, intersect its whole surface, and carry life and activity to its remotest corner; whose “magnetic nerves,” with the rapidity of thought, bear intelligence to its distant extremities; with a people springing from the fusion of many races, and whose energies are as inexhaustible as the resources of the country they inhabit, it would seem that here the human mind is destined to develop its highest powers, and that, while on one side its influence will roll back upon the tottering monarchies of Europe, on the other its advancing tide of freedom and civilization will stretch across the Pacific, to the shores of Asia, and pour upon them its fertilizing flood. —*Washington*

We reached the streetcar stop at Kamiya-cho. The streetcar tracks crossed each other here, and broken overhead wires and cables hung down in tangled profusion over the road. I had a terrifying feeling that one or the other of them must be live, since these were the same wires that one usually saw emitting fierce, bluish white sparks. The occasional refugees who passed to and fro had the sense to crouch down as they passed beneath them.

Mr. Omuro was a man of property, owning mills in three different places, as well as dabbling in calligraphy, painting, and art-collecting. I had visited the house myself several times during the past year for the benefit of his advice... Now, however, it was completely razed to the ground. Where the main building and clay-walled storehouse had once stood was an arid waste scattered with broken tiles. —*Hiroshima*

[1-1]

A magnificent country, whose commerce whitens every sea,
whose most majestic railroads and canals, like great arteries, hang down, broken, in tangled
profusion —

I had a terrifying feeling that one or another of them must
be live, fierce.

[1-2]

A man of property dabbling in painting and art collecting,
a man of property whose commerce whitens every sea,
a man of property with the broadest principles of freedom,
a man of property whose railroads carry occasional refugees.

[1-3]

A magnificent country's principles of freedom,
completely razed to the ground.

Where they had once stood an arid waste

Scattered with broken tiles

[2-1]

Here, it seemed, the human mind was destined to develop its highest powers.

Here, it seemed, in the inexhaustible country they inhabit.

Magnetic nerves, with the rapidity of thought, bore intelligence to distant extremities. I had a terrifying feeling

the mind was destined to spark and tangle: fierce and white.

[2-2]

Here, with a people springing from the fusion of many races, the human mind is destined to develop its highest powers

of thought. Calligraphy, painting, art-collecting.

An intelligence inexhaustible

as a man of property owning mills in three different places.

[2-3]

A people springing from many races is destined.

A people springing from inexhaustible ground is destined.

From fission, a distant people, razed.

From fission an arid waste is destined, and broken tiles.

[3-1]

Stretched across the Pacific, tottering,
we pour upon them, roll back on the tide.

A terrifying feeling, advancing.

Tangled, broken, we reach the fierce shores of Asia.

[3-2]

To the Pacific, to the shores of Asia,
to pour upon them the sense of civilization,
the sense of freedom advancing. On one side of the flood
the tottering refugees had the sense to crouch.

[3-3]

Now, where the tottering had stood,
clay-walled Asia was completely razed to the ground.
The storehouse scattered, broken
in the advancing tide, the fertilizing flood.

Diptych: Punk and Glam

[Source texts: The Ramones, Mick Rock's photo of Ziggy, Iggy, and Lou]

Sheena is a Punk Rocker

She, Sheena of the Jungle, the pulp-paged comics' great white queen,
she, Sheena, born in slumped-out England, born

for young Will Eisner's tabloid-writing scheme,
born of Jerry Eigner's drawing, Eisner's jiggle-in-the-jungle dream.

Reborn stateside nine months later (the money was better),
reborn a soft-core smash-hit shiksa, *Jumbo Comics* break-out dame.

Born first in the blur of Eisner's novel-reading dreaming —
she, Sheena, born first in Rider Haggard's one-hand-novel *She*.

Sheena born in the blur of the movie-goer's dreaming
when Jeffrey Hyman (he'd drop Jeff, and go by Joey,

he'd drop Hyman, and then go by Ramone) caught her
in a seedy New York retro matinee:

kitsch TV for downtown's nascent highbrow-lowbrow scene.

She, Sheena of the big screen, born Nellie McCalla,

born the butcher's daughter (fifth of eight), she couldn't stay
in dull Pawnee, hopped it from her butcher father,

hopped the train from dull Pawnee.

Reborn in chic L.A., she, Sheena, she'd drop "Nellie,"

pose for Vargas, pose it well and beach-front, pose it well, and not for free.

“I couldn’t act,” says Sheena, “but I could swing from trees.”

A pinned-up blonde, improbable as jungle queen,
improbable as her build, her frame, her curving fame, as in:

her 39-19-37, she, Sheena,
a big-screen screen-test six-foot queen.

She, Sheena, born again when Jeffrey (call him Joey) made
his infinitely probable 2 minutes forty, his infinitely perfect

four-chord *chart-this* scheme. Teens drive it up to 81,
in England make that 23. The hopped-up numbers scream

they know it: Sheena is a punk rocker, Sheena is
a punk rocker, Sheena is a punk rocker now.

Glam Rock : The Poem

1

The man who was to fall to earth in four years' time
still floated in his cloud of silvered fame. His name

was David Robert Hayward Stenton Jones.

He'd been a Kon-Rad, King Bee, Manish Boy,

a Lower Third. He'd be a thin white duke.

He'd be a Christ, an alien, he'd be a dance club king.

Remembering the self-invented master whose factory
invented selves, he'd play in film the man who

played the soup-can trick on art, he'd play that man (not well).

He'd play the husband of a wife -- she, born Somali,

she, born near Greece. He, born in Bromley, had one
real wife, she, born in Bromley, her girl's-mouth his,

the marriage bed that sweet narcissus mirror

where he'd play out all his parts.

These fragments has he shored against his gender, so.

His name was David Robert

Hayward Stenton Jones. Not David Jones, too close to Davey

of the pre-fab four. He'd change it first to Tom Jones, then again

and then again. But this year he was Ziggy,
this year he played guitar.

That's him on the left. The man who'd fall to earth,
camp in his arm-crook, his long neck's arch. Queer

in his gilded studied falsely vapid stare.

Nervous: glam and poise.

The others? That year he'd save them both.

2

So New York and yet he's called "L.A."

when he fronts the Eldorados at a dance. He'd been a Jade,

be mother nature's son, but been a Jade who sang

a doo-wop plaintive "Leave Her for Me."

And she was Lisa and she'd say. And she was Stephanie

who'd also say. And she was Jane and Candy too,

or she would be. But he was Delmore Schwartz's

best student, gone to smack and speed and hell,

and he'd come back. He'd play the White House

for two presidents, one ours, and one

the velvet revolutionary who'd call him the Velvet Underground's

own JFK, own wild-side walking Mao or Che.

A three-chord Che? No martyr -- though he'd bottom out.

He'd always be the cracked-id island suburb kid who double-coded

his libido's twists in "CHD," his high school band: the backward-reading acronym

for Dry Hump Club: three boys, a girl, and one guitar.

One guitar lesson's all he'd need, a Carl Perkins 1-4-5 he'd play.

He'd play too much with fire, the kind

his "mashed-faced Negro friend, called Jaw"

sold him, with hepatitis, early on.

He'd play five years with his best band.

He'd leave and play out on his own (not well).

He's on the right, behind his shades, behind the junkie act
in which the junkie hides.

Nervous: cold-edged poise.

Bowie'd helped him make Transformer.

Reed's cracked id made his music well again.

3

He'd write "China Girl," and he'd sing "Shades"
the second time the thin man fell to earth

to scoop him up. His name was Pop. Had been Osterberg, had
been Prime Mover, had briefly been Iguana,

would then be Pop. Twice called by Stooge, first
psychedelic, later (times where changing) not.

The Idiot who'd Lust for Life. Like the Velvets
but not all cerebellum: all burnout, bastard, broke-ass bum.

A pack of Luckies in his teeth. His arms around them both,
a drunken-sailor Jesus carried, his forward thrust

and their support. His eyes say "yes" his eyes say "now"
his eyes say "no one drives this drunken car." And they're in love.

The attraction? The man called Stardust, star-struck, said
"not Iggy in but Iggy and," and the Stooges drop to second bill,

while Iggy's resurrected (still on smack).

The wonder of attraction? Not his chops --

he tried for ten months, played Chicago blues (not well).

And not his lyrics, his "Mona" or his "TV Eye". Raw Power. For this,
Ziggy'd play his management, get Ig a gig, a big release.

Lou Reed gave his producer: chops, technique, tribute, and joy.

The wonder of attraction?

Not nervous, not with poise, not him.

No one to drive the car.

Perspective's trick's a little imp behind their shoulders:

Tony Defries. He, thinking

"Hammersmith Odeon" thinking "aren't they

fun!" He, thinking, too " but will it sell?"

and then he's smiling,

thinking,

"yes."

La Bandera

[Source text: card #16, “La Bandera,” the flag of Mexico, from the traditional Mexican card series “La Lotería]



It's in America (that is, the U.S.A.), that I have landed,
clutching my cars and TIAA-CREF,
my yellow-shingled house perched on its acre lot.

Which means? Which means? Which means the things I've seen
are wonderful, and sinister,
and many, many are the spangled flags.

I have seen them by the lakes and oceans, stiff,
with growing confidence, high in air; I have seen them
on the beaches, the landing grounds, I have seen them

in the fields and streets. They will never surrender.

I have seen them on ball-caps, plastic cups, on napkins
(on days not yet the fourth, in months not yet July),

seen them brazen on the mud-flaps of eighteen-wheelers,
on the foil packets of moist towelettes and, once, once, a pair of them,
tattooed on a stripper's spreading, well-toned inner thighs.

(Once? No, twice. Oh furtiveness, oh sneaking back).

I have seen Canadian flags, but they were in Canada,
and on flag poles, too. They do things differently up there.

I've seen, too, *la bandera*, the flag of Mexico.

With its eagle, born before Columbus, born as the sun.

Born for Tenochtitlan.

The eagle's claw-clutched serpent born for Aztecs,

who called it wisdom,
born with a hiss called “whispered truth.”

Later, born again for brazen Spaniards, and born royal:
águila real, the eagle clutched the writhing pagan serpent, and
perched brazen in the center, in the white field of the revolution’s tricolor.

Which means? Which means? A sneaking in
of church and crown, surviving, there (they never surrender)
surviving, brazen — a claw hangs on.

But that’s not where I saw them, not at first.
I saw them on my father’s forearm, saw them, tattooed, there.
Saw them as both wonderful, and sinister. Saw them,

and didn’t know. And didn’t know how, back from the Marines
— back from the beaches, the landing grounds,
the fields and streets, the *never surrender* — he swore off

the land of yellow-shingled houses, and all their acre lots,
took flight for Mexico, and beatniked there.
His perch, where he had landed, and for good,

or so he thought. And then? And then?
A furtiveness? A sneaking back.
A spreading land of many spangled flags.

Robert Archambeau's books include *Word Play Place* (Ohio University Press), *Home and Variations* (Salt), and *Laureates and Heretics* (University of Notre Dame Press). He is the co-editor of *The & NOW Awards: The Best Innovative Writing* (Lake Forest) and the editor of *Letters of Blood and Other English Writings of Göran Printz-Påhlson*. His writing has appeared in *Poetry*, *Boston Review*, *Chicago Review*, *PN Review*, *Pleiades*, *Cambridge Literary Review*, *Contemporary Literature*, and many other journals, and he has received awards from the Academy of American Poets, the Illinois Arts Council, and the Swedish Academy. He is professor of English at Lake Forest College (Illinois) and blogs at samizdatblog.blogspot.com.