

Horrors, Hallucinations, Pity and Prostheses: German Artists and the First World War

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The German avant-garde's enthusiastic embrace of war in 1914 soon evaporated when the realities of trench warfare shattered their hope of cultural renewal. Many artists returned from war completely transformed by its unimaginable horrors. For Otto Dix, Conrad Felixmüller, George Grosz and Heinrich Hoerle, art's sole purpose would be revolution. Their interpretations of 'revolution', ranging from the political to the erotic, were inevitably inflected by their sensory responses to the experiences they suffered during the war. Their responses are also useful to consider alongside the gendered reactions to war in the work of female artist Käthe Kollwitz. Although Kollwitz was a non-combatant, she too suffered physical, emotional and psychological loss through the death of her youngest son, nineteen year old Peter, in Ypres in October 1914. All of these artists produced powerful graphic responses to the war from the perspective of a defeated nation. Although Heinrich Hoerle's *Krüppelmappe* (*Cripple Portfolio*) is less well known than either Otto Dix's powerful 50 etching suite of five portfolios *Der Krieg* (*The War*) or Käthe Kollwitz's less ambitious though no less commanding seven woodcut series *Der Krieg* (*The War*), both exhibited in 1924, its sensitive focus on the inner life of the disabled war veteran offers an early sensory account of the bitter after-taste of war that still resonates with audiences today.¹

Germany and the First World War

Historian Deborah Cohen has commented that, 'the First World War was murderous without precedent. More than nine and a half million soldiers died over a period of 52 months; twenty million men were severely wounded and eight million veterans returned home permanently disabled.'² Significantly, the Weimar Republic's response to its disabled War Veterans was to embrace their care through a state sponsored system of rehabilitation and re-employment. Under the *Law for the Employment of the Severely Disabled*, approximately 90% of severely disabled veterans in Germany held down jobs during the 1920s and 1930s, since it was virtually impossible to dismiss them. Nevertheless, the state's largesse unexpectedly resulted in a stand-off between the German disabled and their fellow citizens.

Paradoxically, public antipathy towards veterans – who were more likely to retain employment during the Great Depression than any other sector of the workforce – resulted in the veterans' ultimate hostility towards the Republic, which had supported them.³ However, during the period in which Heinrich Hoerle produced his *Cripple Portfolio*, the reintegration of disabled veterans into society was still in its early stages. It is likely that the title of the portfolio was an ironic jibe at one of the Ruhr valley's largest employers, the Krupp factory, famous for their steel production and for their manufacture of

the ammunition and armaments that helped to produce the casualties of war in the first place.

Print Portfolios and the German Avant-Garde

The concept of the print portfolio amongst the German avant-garde had received considerable impetus in the pre-war era through the activities of Käthe Kollwitz initially and then the German Expressionist artists and in particular *Die Brücke* (*The Bridge*). Modern German artists recognised that print portfolios served several purposes exceptionally well and the genre became extremely popular. They functioned as advertisements for the activities of a particular avant-garde group, they were cheap and relatively easy to produce, print and distribute. They could be more widely disseminated than large-scale canvases, which gave them added political edge over the perceived elitism of the single fine art canvas.

Print portfolios could also be produced in any edition agreed upon by the artists and the printers, although most maintained the balance between wider distribution potential and desirability in the marketplace by restricting the number of editions created. Limited edition print portfolios enabled artists like Kollwitz, Dix and Grosz to work both individually and collaboratively on specific ideas and themes, develop audiences for their works and maintain profitability and the desire for ownership (or indeed 'membership' in the case of *Die Brücke*).⁴ The distribution and sale of print portfolios also enabled many artists to continue to fund their ongoing artistic activities, particularly in the era of hyperinflation and poverty that characterised the economic conditions of occupied Germany in the aftermath of the Treaty of Versailles.

The *Cripple Portfolio* was first advertised on the back pages of the short-lived avant-garde journal *Der Strom* (*The Stream*) in January 1919. It was printed as two editions, each limited to 250 runs per edition; each portfolio contained twelve lithographs individually hand signed and



Heinrich Hoerle
Krüppelmappe (*Cripple Portfolio*) 1919

numbered. The more expensive edition was printed on top-quality Japan paper with an original colour drawing on the title page and retailed for the hefty sum of 780 Marks. The cheaper edition, on less expensive paper, replaced the colour drawing with a black and white woodcut; it was also for sale but at less than half price, at 360 Marks. Either way, both editions were clearly aimed at collectors, in spite of their politicised subject matter, as a deliberate strategy for raising funds for the continuing activities of the Stupid group, an off-shoot of Cologne Dada.⁵

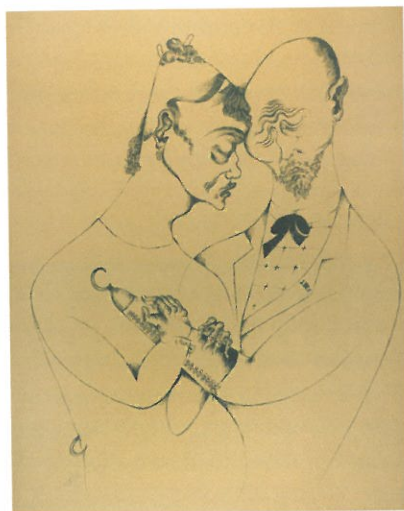
The *Cripple Portfolio*

The *Cripple Portfolio* consists of twelve delicately executed lithographs asking viewers to 'Help the Cripple' and drawing attention to the plight of the individual war-wounded soldiers seeking to re-integrate themselves into a society and an economy unable and unwilling to properly support them after their bitter defeat in the First World War. The portfolio was published by Hoerle's Self Press at his home, the *Dadaheim* (*Dada home*) in Cologne, and its exhibition preceded Otto

Dix's better known graphic response to the First World War, *Der Krieg*, by four years. The titles of each work, when printed together on the front cover, seemed to suggest a prose poem: *Help the Cripple; The Married Couple; The Breadwinner; The Unemployed; The Father; Perpetual Pain; The Man with the Wooden Leg Dreams; Friendly Dream; Hallucinations; Hallucinations; The Tree of Desire; At the End of the Road*.⁶

In the twelve plates (p.104–107), maimed and wounded veterans are shown in different roles: seeking comfort from loved ones; begging on the streets; haunted by missing limbs, mired in nightmares of exaggerated sexual fantasies; engulfed in both physical and psychological loss, and received with fear and horror by those around them. Hoerle also explores the potential of taking sadistic pleasure in other people's suffering (*schadenfreude*), so that deformed bodies occupy fascination, fear and a deep psychological satisfaction that mutilation is the fate of the other, rather than oneself.

As the portfolio unfolds, a clear progression emerges from the first prints to the last. The first



Heinrich Hoerle
II. *The Married Couple*

six plates consist of a politically engaged socialist critique of the daily inequities faced by former soldiers now crippled and reliant on ineffectual prostheses, whilst the second six plates chart the descent into the psychological and sexual hell of the subjects depicted. They map the move from outer to inner, which often characterised the work produced by the Cologne avant-garde during the Weimar era.

The opening print, *Help the Cripple*, immediately sets up the viewer's position of sympathy with a very Christ-like portrayal of the 'victim,' as an 'everyman' figure, depicted like a fallen angel. The exhortation to 'help the cripple' is taken as a universalised plea to all non-abled men as represented by a single male figure who becomes their cipher. As an address to the post-war masculine condition, the cycle is also a specific response to the soldier's plight, which becomes clearer as the narrative unfolds. A visual interplay is established between the different plates across the cycle. In plate II *The Married Couple*, the first hint at the sexual frustrations to come in plate VII onwards are painfully portrayed in the wife's tender caress of one of her husband's two prosthetic hook-ended lower arms and the poignancy of his futile attempts to hold her with his other one. In plates III and IV *The Breadwinner* and *The Unemployed*, the soldier's jacket is most clearly signalled by the military uniform, and in plate IV, a military cross. In plate IV the mutilated stumps of the arms have become phalluses, both recalling similar anxieties of castrated masculinity at play in artist Ernst Ludwig Kirchner's *Self Portrait as Soldier* 1915, as well as anticipating the phallic scenes in plates VII and VIII.

The sensations of pity are continued in the next two plates in which the artist/viewer's gaze is firmly situated as 'outside' the suffering being depicted. However, a shift in this position becomes evident in plate VI, *Perpetual Pain*. The pain has a double-meaning, both the pain of the

condition and the pain of being a constant object of the gaze of others. The trope of windows is very similar to George Grosz's use of the same motif in his many Berlin Street Scenes, dating from 1918 onwards. Both Grosz's and Hoerle's works suggest voyeurism, spectacle and paranoia in the city although in Grosz's works the gaze through the window is explicitly charged with erotic tension. *Perpetual Pain* also marks the end of the first 'stage' of the cycle and the shift to the next more phantasmic, dreamlike stage; as the half-way point of the twelve plate series, it seems to me that a clear caesura is intended.

The portfolio is divided between six plates on disabled veterans' lives and six plates of dreamscapes, the first of which is *The Man with the Wooden Leg Dreams* (plate VII). The work alludes to the site of original sin in the Garden of Eden and man's imminent expulsion from Paradise, triggered by the desires of Eve. *Friendly Dream* (plate VIII) stages the enormous but possibly impotent phallus as a progenitor of life, albeit plants. Interestingly the furniture also takes on organic, plant-like qualities that contribute to the dreamscape effects. In both of the *Hallucinations* plates, missing hands take on terrifying qualities of possession, torment and persecution; whilst still-lives and domestic furniture take on animate, organic roles, referencing the challenges involved in the negotiation of physical space for the physically impaired and echoed in the organicism of the human body with its now dysfunctional ankles. In the final plate of the series, *At the End of the Road*, the 'cripple' encounters a stream he is unable to cross without the fear of drowning. This final work in the series straddles the space between social critique and proto-surrealist fantasy explored in the previous plates. Visually it recalls the very similar pose struck by the sleepwalker Cesare in some of the film posters for *The Cabinet of Dr Caligari*, released at the same time as Hoerle's portfolio.



Heinrich Hoerle
XII. *At the End of the Road*

Reactions to the *Cripple Portfolio*

Hoerle exhibited the full portfolio at the Applied Arts Museum (*Kunstgewerbemuseum*) in Cologne in January 1920, where it attracted critical acclaim from a variety of newspapers, and was reviewed by his fellow artist Franz Seiwert in the Socialist Republic gazette. The leading Cologne daily newspaper reminded its readers of Goya's famous eighty-plate etching cycle, *The Disasters of War* (1810–20), noting that:

Hoerle's work is nothing less than a narrowing of Goya's theme to a particular example, the painful suffering of the cripples as a result of the war. Some people may feel repulsed, some find Hoerle's intention unartistic because it is oppressive and not liberating. Yet it bears witness to a deep compassion, in the way it allows the armless man to dream of his arm and the cripple's lost limbs to blossom towards him, as it were, out of bush and tree...⁷

Art historical comparisons were also favoured in the hyperbole of the *Cologne Daily News* reporter who likened Hoerle's portfolio to a new

'Dance of Death', a perennial favourite amongst German critics; he compares it with:

...a gruesome, grotesque, shattering *danse macabre*. For after all, these people shot to pieces and ripped apart by the war, are nothing more than dead people, who now just live in a dream and in the confused imaginings of fever. Scorn for mankind, which abandoned *itself* in the gruesome madness of self-destruction, flashes out of these pages...⁸

Seiwert's review mockingly entitled 'Krupp's Cripples' used the exhibition as a catalyst for highlighting the suffering of the war-wounded who were daily visible on the streets and for whom society was urged to remember and take responsibility. Seiwert was less concerned with the art historical contexts of the portfolio as a work of art *per se*, than as a springboard for a socialist polemic against the inequities of life and the suffering of the poor, subject matter that he exhorted fellow artists to engage with:

Here is a poor man with a pencil. He saw the monuments and drew them so that you should see them... Let these monuments be a constant wake-up call to you, bringing you to life...⁹

Seiwert's review suggests that the portfolio reveals the psychological horrors of war and appeals directly for both memorialisation and practical help. Yet the viewer is also left with the painful acknowledgement that no amount of practical aid is ever going to compensate for the fundamental psychic trauma endured by surviving veterans.

A Visual Testimony to the Sensory Horror of War
The 'crippled' war veterans of Hoerle's portfolio are ultimately left abandoned by society and haunted by their own psychological traumas and sexual fantasies. The delicate execution of the works belies the trauma of their content producing an affective visual testimony to the horrors of war. Hoerle had served at the Front

for only a brief period from 1917 until the end of the war in 1918 but as with all survivors from this otherwise unimaginably barbarous period, the suffering induced by the war on the soldiers he witnessed in combat, left an indelible mark on his visual imagination and psychic stability. As Hal Foster observes of Max Ernst's immediate post-war Dada work, fragmented bodies serve as signs for 'a bashed ego' hovering between 'evocations of the narcissistic damage incurred during the war' and 'cautions against the reactionary obsession with the body armour' of Fascism that followed.¹⁰ A similar pattern can be discerned in Hoerle's oeuvre from the same period.

We can see how each image operates as much as a sign of lack and absence as it does of presence and as such it haunts Hoerle's subsequent oeuvre in different media and remains one of his most powerful contributions to the genre. As Sabine Kriebel has commented, the work anticipates both the Dadaists' and the Surrealists 'pre-occupation with the unconscious in all its phantasmal, disjunctive, enigmatic and oddly associative forms.' Indeed, 'the physically and psychologically traumatized World War I veteran fell short of the social expectations for the heroic, masculine soldier,' provoking a widespread crisis of masculinity in the post-war period which the *Cripple Portfolio* so expressively and poignantly captures and which was explored relentlessly in the era to follow.¹¹

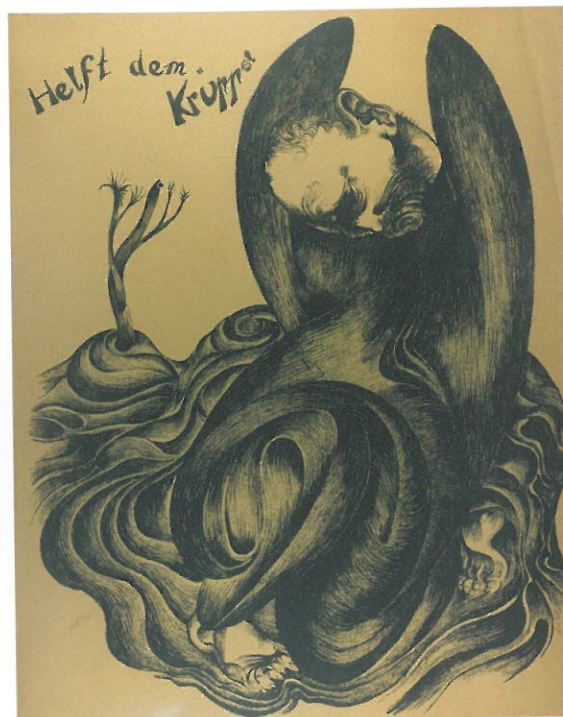
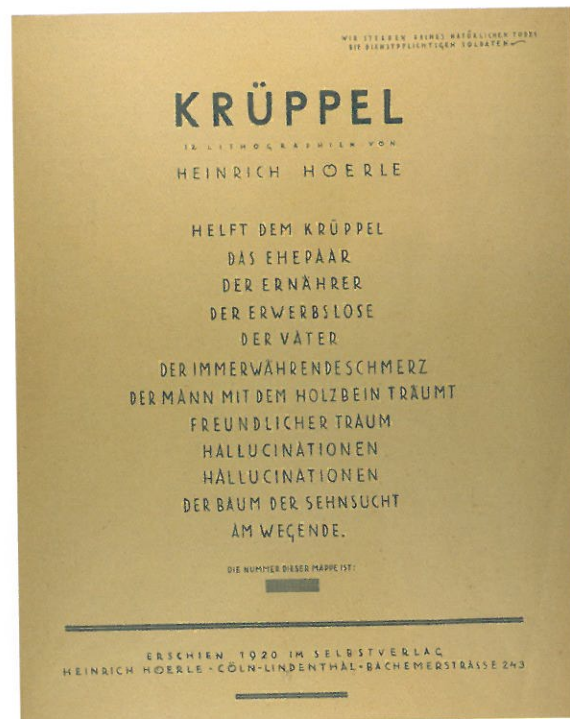
Conclusion

Hoerle's exploration of the traumatic post-war experiences of the horrors of the battlefield in the *Cripple Portfolio* remained a significant theme in his increasingly socially informed artwork in inter-war Germany. By 1930, the sensory realities of mental anguish made explicit in the *Cripple Portfolio* were supplanted in Hoerle's oeuvre by the material realities of the fragmented soldier's body, dependent on prosthetic help and

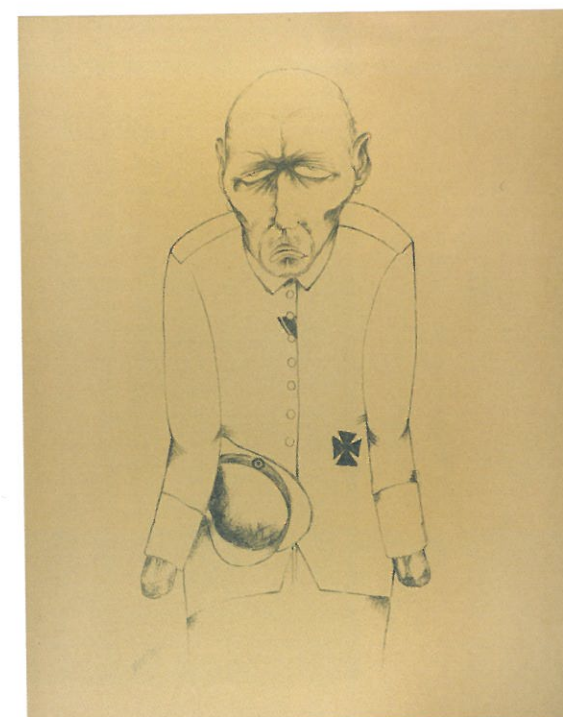
memorialised in two magnificent oil based works *Denkmal der unbekannten Prothesen* (*Monument to the Unknown Protheses*) 1930 and *Drei Invaliden* (*Three Invalids*) 1930.¹² As we see in this exhibition, Hoerle made a marked stylistic shift from the 1919 portfolio to the machinic qualities of the 1930s oil works. In the intervening decade the prosthetic body became a visual paradigm for the era's fascination with man and machine, perhaps represented at its most futuristic in Fritz Lang's epic science fiction film *Metropolis* 1926. Hoerle remained unique in his depiction of the prosthetic body as both a site of empathy and a symptom of the worker's alienation within the mechanized environment of industrial technological labour. If the *Cripple Portfolio* was a passionate moral protest against the inhumanity of war, interpreted through the intimacy of dreams and personal struggles, both *Monument to the Unknown Protheses* and *Three Invalids* were bitter acknowledgements of the sensory losses engendered by the post-war reconstruction of Weimar Germany.

Notes

- 1 I shall use the term 'cripple' here only as it refers to the direct translation of Krüppel within the historical context of Weimar Germany.
- 2 Deborah Cohen 'Will to Work: Disabled Veterans in Britain and Germany after the First World War' in Gerber, David (ed.) *Disabled Veterans in History* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2000), p.295.
- 3 Cohen in Gerber (ed.) 2000, p.296-297.
- 4 See Robin Riesenfeld (ed.) *The German Print Portfolio, 1890-1930: Serials for a Private Sphere* exh. cat. David and Alfred Smart Museum of Art, Philip Wilson Publishers, Chicago 1992
- 5 See Dorothy Rowe, *After Dada: Marta Hegemann and the Cologne Avant-Garde* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2013).
- 6 There are two prints in the series called 'Hallucinations'; the repetition of the same word is part of the lyrical sense of the titles as being like a prose poem. When one reads them out consecutively, they have a deliberately oral and sensory intention.
- 7 Cited in Backes (ed.) p.104
- 8 Cited in Backes, p.104
- 9 F.W. Seiwert 'Krupp-Krüppel' in *Sozialistische Republik*, 1920, reprinted in Bohnen and Backes (eds.) *Franz Seiwert: Schriften* Karin Kramer Verlag, Berlin 1978, p.14.
- 10 Hal Foster, 'A Bashed Ego' in *Prosthetic Gods* MIT Press, Massachusetts, 2004, p.151
- 11 Sabine T Kriebel 'Cologne' in Leah Dickerman (ed.), *Dada* exh. cat. (Washington: National Gallery of Art 2006), 228.
- 12 The painting has been variously called *Three Invalids*, *Workmen*, *Machine Men*, *The Returnees*, and *Prosthesis Wearers*.



I.



IV.

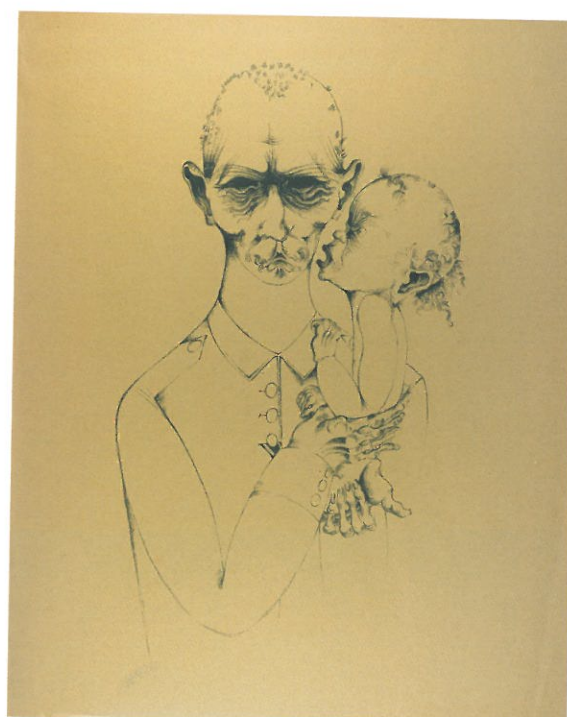
Heinrich Hoerle
Krüppelmappe (Cripple Portfolio) 1919
 Series of 12 lithographs:
 I. *Help the Cripple*
 II. *The Married Couple*
 III. *The Breadwinner*
 IV. *The Unemployed*
 V. *The Father*
 VI. *Perpetual Pain*



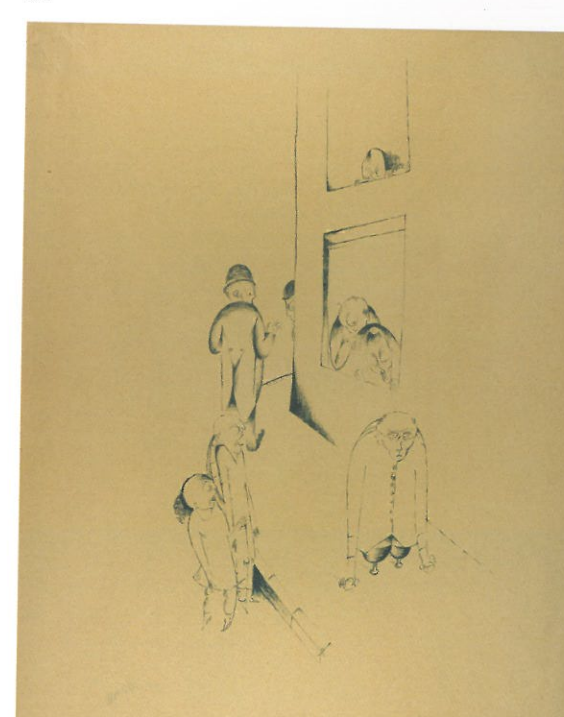
II.



III.



V.



VI.

Heinrich Hoerle

IIIV. *The Man with the Wooden Leg Dreams*

IIIV. *Friendly Dream*

IX. *Hallucinations*

X. *Hallucinations*

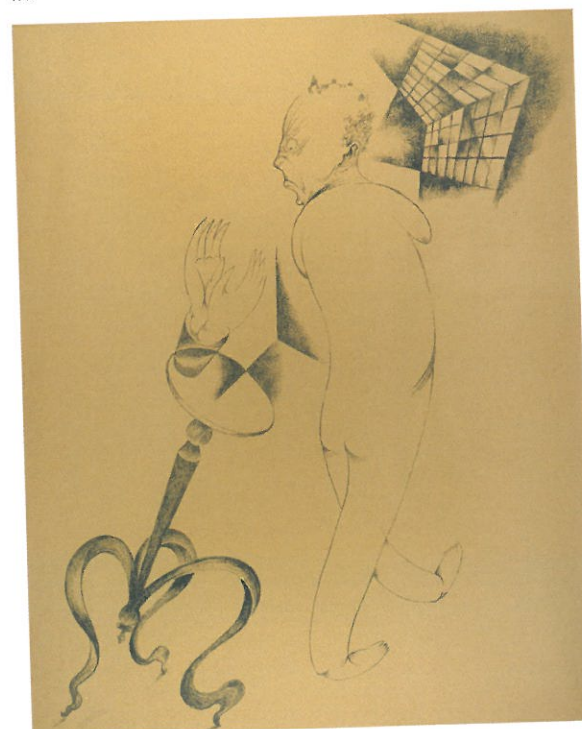
XI. *The Tree of Desire*

XII. *At the End of the Road*

106 Rupture and Rehabilitation



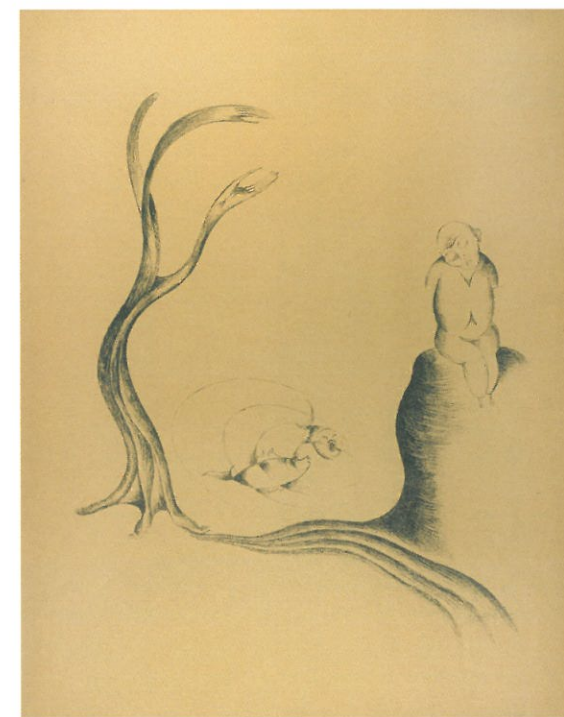
IIIV.



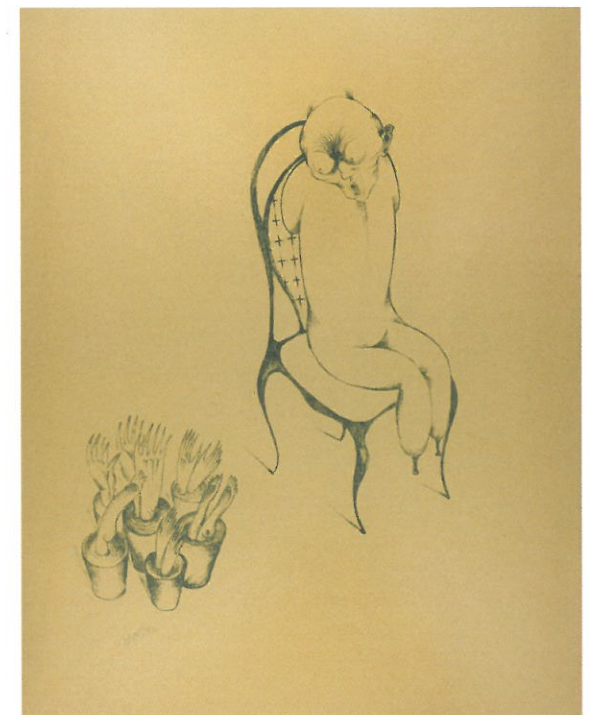
X.



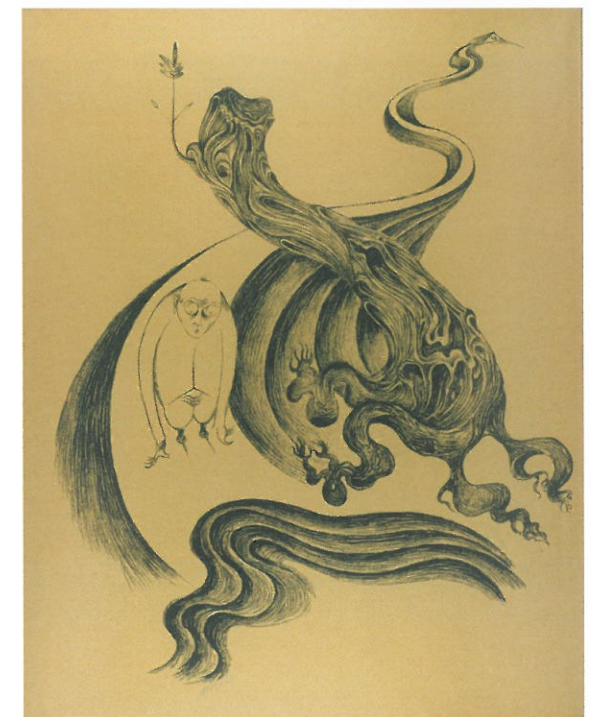
IIIV.



XI.



IX.



XII.