

KARL KRAUS: A CRITIC FOR OUR TIMES

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Vienna in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century was one of the birthplaces of modernity. In those remarkable years, Freud was analyzing his patients psyches and Wittgenstein was analyzing the nature of language. Mahler was premiering his ironic symphonies and Schoenberg was experimenting with music beyond harmony. Established truths about human nature, art and society were collapsing on every side, ushering in the radical uncertainty that would define the 20<sup>th</sup> century culture. For all of its variety, Vienna's intelligentsia had one thing in common: They all read Karl Kraus.

Karl Kraus was born in 1874 and died in 1936. He lived in Vienna all his life after his father moved his family there when Kraus was 3. He considered his time in Vienna to be particularly difficult for a satirist because, as he explained, his contemporaries were so ludicrous that they did not realize how laughable they were and had no ear for laughter. He published his writings in a journal called *Die Fackel* or the Torch which first appeared in 1899. Initially, it included many distinguished contributors from Heinrich Mann, the brother of the more famous Thomas Mann, Adolph Loos, the architect, Arnold Schonberg, Franz Werfel and Oscar Wilde. By 1910, he became the sole contributor which he justified by saying: "I no longer have any collaborators. I used to be envious of them. They repel those readers who I want to lose myself." After *Die Fackel* was under Kraus' sole control, its chief object was to expose the mendacity, pomposity and hypocrisy of the Austrian Press, particularly its leading paper, the *Neu Frei Press*, which enjoyed the same prestige in Vienna that the *New York Times* has in the United States.

Modesty was not one of Kraus' virtues as this quote shows: "The least of the ten thousand unprinted letters I have written for *Die Fackel* prompted by the most insignificant occasion contains more character and thoughtfulness than anything in Stefan George's novel." While his professional manner was tough, critical and aggressive, those who knew him socially praised his accessibility and courtesy or *gemutlichkeit*, a term he despised.

Kraus is generally not well known in the English speaking world. There have been efforts to change that, most recently by Jonathan Franzen, a native of Western Springs, who co-translated some of the writings of Kraus. Many scholars consider Kraus' work untranslatable. Erich Heller who taught for many years at Northwestern, argued that the substance and literary technique used by Kraus prevented his work from being translated into another language. As to the substance, many of victims of Kraus' barbs were local officials who have long disappeared into oblivion. As to his style or literary technique, according to Heller, Kraus "did not write in a language but through him the beauty, profundity and accumulated moral experience of the German language assumed personal shape and became the crucial witness in the case this inspired prosecutor brought against his time." Kraus himself did not believe any works written in one language could be translated into another one: "A linguistic work translated into another language is like someone going across the border without his skin and donning the local garb on the other side." The difficulty in translation is more true of Kraus's essays than his aphorisms. As an example, Kraus's barb that psychoanalysis is the disease

which claims to be the cure is as pointed in English as in German. As a side note, this particular remark apparently arose out of personal pique, not a thoughtful study of the movement. The cause of his irritation was a paper providing a psychological analysis of Kraus, which Kraus found to be highly offensive, delivered by a member of Freud's circle to the Vienna psychoanalytic society. Some of Kraus's other aphorisms have less of a history: "Snobs aren't reliable. Some things they like are good;" and "Dogs are loyal, yes, but to us, not to other dogs."

Kraus believed that language revealed the untruth and self-deception of the culture in which the words were written. Or stated another way, language was a source of truth and revealed the essence of the world. Journalists, a favorite target of Kraus, corrupted language by constantly mingling fact with opinion and subjective reactions with objective information. The corruption of language reflected the corruption of thought and action whether public or private. To Kraus, language was the sacred well of inspiration which journalism debased. As mentioned earlier, the importance of language and its meaning became a central theme in the work of another Viennese, Ludwig Wittgenstein, as well as Franz Kafka who lived in Prague. Both Wittgenstein and Kafka were steady readers of *Die Fackel*.

Kraus did not limit his criticism of journalism to its corruption of language. He raged at dehumanizing interviews by narcissistic reporters of soldiers at the front during World War I who would be asked such Oprah-like questions as "What emotions does dropping bombs arouse in you?" He opposed World War I from the beginning and held journalists largely responsible for it. According to Kraus,

journalists don't just manipulate facts or lies. They also pre-empt reader responses by interposing their own reactions. This prevents readers from the ability to create their own responses and judge for themselves. The reader mislays his own ability to imagine what took place. Anything becomes possible since no one can picture reality. Instead, the reader pictures the reality that has been "reported": heroic soldiers' deeds instead of trench war atrocities.

According to Kraus, "the war guilt of the press is not that it set the machinery of death in motion but that it hollowed out our hearts so that we could no longer imagine what it would be like." What can no longer be imagined becomes, more or less, inevitable. It's this kind of detestable journalism – which numbs and limits what the public can and can't envisage – that Kraus documents, satirizes and condemns. Kraus realized that he could not vault above the "noise," as he called it, of daily events. So instead, he plunged into them, determined to yank out any "false roots" in reporting them by journalists and expose what was missing or distorted. His aim was "to listen to the noise of the world as if they were chords of eternity."

To a large extent, Kraus's criticism of journalism doesn't apply as much to print journalism today as to TV journalism. Main stream print media such as the Chicago Tribune, the Wall Street Journal and the New York Times attempt to provide context to the stories they report. TV journalism, especially the local news outlets, can be as shallow as the yellow press of Kraus' day. As the saying goes, "if it bleeds, it leads." Listening to the 5 or 10 o'clock news is often a very depressing

experience. There are close-ups of a grieving mother who has just learned that her child was killed by a stray bullet followed by the truly offensive and idiotic interview questions as to how she feels about the death of her child. This is the type of exploitive journalism that Kraus justly condemned.

Kraus declared war not only on the press but the corruption of expression and taste which infected all levels of Viennese society. According to Kraus, the culture of Viennese society exalted the life of refined feeling and beauty at the expense of masculine virtues of reason, ethics and honest truths contained in ordinary language whether in words or things. Kraus relied on traditional moral values of honesty and fair dealing in contrast to refined feeling, beauty and art which disregarded those traditional moral values. In this sense, Kraus declared war not only on the press but the corruption of expression and taste that infected all levels of Viennese society.

Based on Kraus's moral conservatism, it does not come as a surprise that Kraus was critical not only of the idea of progress but of technology in general. A character in Kraus's play, the Last Days of Mankind, which I will describe shortly, calls for the creation of a new religion based on the idea that God created man not as a consumer or producer but rather as a human being: that the means of life should not be the goal of life; that the stomach should not outgrow the head; that life is not exclusively based on the profit motive; that a human being is allocated time in order to have time and not to arrive somewhere faster with his legs than his heart.

Accepting the fact that Kraus can best be understood by German speakers, it is still possible to have a sense of his biting satire even in translation. One of Kraus' targets was Johann Feigl, the deputy presiding justice of the Vienna District Court. According to Kraus, Feigl was an "Unhold," a monster in judicial robes because he gave a life sentence to a 23 year old purse snatcher who had stood up to him and talked back to him. Kraus suggested that the confessions of Feigl's greatest sin would be "I have spent a lifetime applying the Austrian Criminal Code."

Kraus did not believe his central task was to reform society by becoming involved in politics. He did not use *Die Fackel* for political purposes. He refused to identify with the Social Democrats which was the reform party of Austria or even identify with its critique of Austrian society. Instead, of attacking political figures and movements, his criticism was focused on Viennese culture. His goal was to unmask sins of his time by using the very words the culture produced. He did this by a close study of the newspapers of Vienna, principally the *Neu Frei Press*, which had the same prominence and prestige in Vienna that the *New York Times* or the *Wall Street Journal* has in our own culture. He believed that the corruption of language shown in the Viennese newspapers reflected a corruption of thought and action, whether public or private, which characterized Viennese culture. As an example, he took the word "courage" that appeared in a fawning article about a World War I soldier who was skillful in the use of machine guns in killing enemy soldiers. He noted that there was no moral courage in using a machine to maim or

kill a faceless opponent. The type of moral courage Kraus praised was illustrated by his own conduct in remaining a pacifist throughout World War I, despite the war hysteria that prevailed in Vienna at the time.

During World War I, Kraus became a vocal pacifist and the author of a rarely performed play, the Last Days of Mankind. The play in its book edition consists of 800 pages and a list of characters of 13 pages long. It has no hero and no unity of space, time or action but covers the time period from 1914 to 1919. Not surprisingly, it is rarely performed. It was performed at the Edinburgh festival in English but the performance took over three days. Nevertheless, the play destroys the notion that it is greatness and strength of personalities that account for dramatic events, achievements and catastrophes. Safety, according to this notion, lies only in mediocrity. While we deplore a Hitler or a Stalin, there lurks the suspicion that they were evil geniuses but geniuses nevertheless. We make these judgments by the spectacular consequences of the dominion of a Hitler or Stalin. We believe that the only appropriate partner of the Devil is a genius. It was Kraus who pointed out that a second or third rate leader can also rise to satanic heights. Kraus, in effect, anticipated a Hitler or Stalin long before anyone knew their names.

In addition to his writings, Kraus was also known for his public readings which attracted very large audiences. He gave in all more than 700 lectures and readings to as many as 1,500 people. He not only read from his own writings but also read from Shakespeare in his own translations. In his later years, he recast the libretti of lesser known operettas of Offenbach and sung them to his own piano



accompaniment before large audiences.

Kraus in many respects had the character of an Old Testament prophet. Like Jeremiah, he condemned the actions and conduct of his contemporaries in a biting and direct way. In short, Kraus was able to keep the moral flame bright in what became increasingly dark times at the start of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.