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Karl Kraus

Dedicated to Gustav Glück

1. Cosmic Man [Allmensch]

How noisy everything grows.
—Kraus, Words in Verse II

In old engravings, there is a messenger who rushes toward us crying aloud, his hair on end, brandishing a sheet of paper in his hands—a sheet full of war and pestilence, of cries of murder and pain, of danger from fire and flood—spreading everywhere the Latest News. “News” in this sense, in the sense that the word has in Shakespeare, is disseminated by Die Fackel [The Torch].¹ Full of betrayal, earthquakes, poison, and fire from the mundus intelligibilis. The hatred with which it pursues the tribe of journalists that swarms into infinity is not only a moral hatred but a vital one, such as is hurled by an ancestor upon a race of degenerate and dwarfish rascals that has sprung from his seed. The very term “public opinion” outrages Kraus. Opinions are a private matter. The public has an interest only in judgments. Either it is a judging public, or it is none. But it is precisely the purpose of the public opinion generated by the press to make the public incapable of judging, to insinuate into it the attitude of someone irresponsible, uninformed. Indeed, what is even the most precise information in the daily newspapers in comparison to the hair-raising meticulousness observed by Die Fackel in the presentation of legal, linguistic, and political facts? Die Fackel need not trouble itself about public opinion, for the blood-steeped novelties of this “newspaper” demand a passing of judgment. And on nothing more impetuously, urgently, than on the press itself.
A hatred such as that which Kraus has heaped on journalists can never be founded simply on what they do—however obnoxious this may be; this hatred must have its reason in their very being, whether it be antithetical or akin to his own. In fact, it is both. His most recent portrait, in its very first sentence, characterizes the journalist as “a person who has little interest either in himself and his own existence, or in the mere existence of things, but who feels things only in their relationships, above all where these meet in events—and only in this moment become united, substantial, and alive.” What we have in this sentence is nothing other than the negative of an image of Kraus. Indeed, who could have shown a more burning interest in himself and his own existence than the writer who is never finished with this subject? Who, a more attentive concern for the mere existence of things, their origin? Whom does that coincidence of the event with the date, the witness, or the camera cast into deeper despair than him? In the end, he brought together all his energies in the struggle against the empty phrase, which is the linguistic expression of the despotism with which, in journalism, topicality sets up its dominion over things.

This side of his struggle against the press is illuminated most vividly by the life's work of his comrade-in-arms, Adolf Loos. Loos found his providential adversaries in the arts-and-crafts mongers and architects who, in the ambit of the “Vienna Workshops,” were striving to give birth to a new art industry. He sent out his rallying cry in numerous essays—particularly, in its enduring formulation, in the article “Ornamentation and Crime,” which appeared in 1908 in the Frankfurter Zeitung. The lightning flash ignited by this essay described a curiously zigzag course. “On reading the words with which Goethe censors the way the philistine, and thus many an art connoisseur, run their fingers over engravings and reliefs, the revelation came to him that what may be touched cannot be a work of art, and that a work of art must be out of reach.” It was therefore Loos's first concern to separate the work of art from the article of use, as it was that of Kraus to keep apart information and the work of art. The hack journalist is, in his heart, at one with the ornamentalist. Kraus did not tire of denouncing Heine as an ornamentalist, as one who blurred the boundary between journalism and literature, as the creator of the feuilleton in poetry and prose; indeed, he later placed even Nietzsche beside Heine as the betrayer of the aphorism to the impression. “It is my opinion,” he says of the former, “that to the mixture of elements . . . in the decomposing European style of the last half century, he added psychology, and that the new level of language he created is the level of essayism, as Heine's was that of feuilletonism.” Both forms appear as symptoms of the chronic sickness of which all attitudes and standpoints merely mark the temperature curve: inauthenticity. It is from the unmasking of the inauthentic that this battle against the press arose. “Who was it that brought into the world this great excuse: 'I can do what I am not?'”
The empty phrase. It, however, is an abortion of technology. “The newspaper industry, like a factory, demands separate areas for working and selling. At certain times of day—twice, three times in the bigger newspapers—a particular quantity of work has to have been procured and prepared for the machine. And not from just any material: everything that has happened in the meantime, anywhere, in any region of life—politics, economics, art, and so on—must by now have been reached and journalistically processed.” Or, as Kraus so splendidly sums it up: “It ought to throw light on the way in which technology, while unable to coin new platitudes, leaves the spirit of mankind in the state of being unable to do without the old ones. In this duality of a changed life dragging on in unchanged forms, the world’s ills grow and prosper.” In these words, Kraus deftly tied the knot binding technology to the empty phrase. True, its untying would have to follow a different pattern, journalism being clearly seen as the expression of the changed function of language in the world of high capitalism. The empty phrase of the kind so relentlessly pursued by Kraus is the label that makes a thought marketable, the way flowery language, as ornament, gives a thought value for the connoisseur. But for this very reason the liberation of language has become identical with that of the empty phrase—its transformation from reproduction to productive instrument. Die Fackel itself contains models of this, even if not the theory: its formulas are the kind that tie up, never the kind that unite. The intertwining of biblical magniloquence with stiff-necked fixation on the indecencies of Viennese life—this is its way of approaching phenomena. It is not content to call on the world as witness to the misdemeanors of a cashier; it must summon the dead from their graves.—Rightly so. For the shabby, obtrusive abundance of these scandals in Viennese coffeehouses, the press, and society is only a minor manifestation of a foreknowledge that then, more swiftly than anyone could perceive, suddenly arrived at its true and original subject: two months after the outbreak of war, Kraus called this subject by its name in his speech “In These Great Times,” with which all the demons that inhabited this possessed man passed into the herd of swine who were his contemporaries.

In these great times, which I knew when they were small, which will again be small if they still have time, and which, because in the field of organic growth such transformations are not possible, we prefer to address as fat times and truly also as hard times; in these times, when precisely what is happening could not be imagined, and when what must happen can no longer be imagined, and if it could it would not happen; in these grave times that have laughed themselves to death at the possibility of growing serious and, overtaken by their own tragedy, long for distraction and then, catching themselves in the act, seek words; in these loud times, booming with the fearful symphony of deeds that engender reports, and of reports that bear the blame for deeds; in these un-speakable times, you can expect no word of my own from me. None except this, which just preserves silence from misinterpretation. Too deeply am I awed...
by the unalterability of language, the subordination of language to misfortune. In the empires bereft of imagination, where man is dying of spiritual starvation though feeling no spiritual hunger, where pens are dipped in blood and swords in ink, that which is not thought must be done, but that which is only thought is inexpressible. Expect from me no word of my own. Nor should I be capable of saying anything new; for in the room where someone writes, the noise is great, and whether it comes from animals, from children, or merely from mortars shall not be decided now. He who addresses deeds violates both word and deed and is twice despicable. This profession is not extinct. Those who now have nothing to say because it is the turn of deeds to speak, talk on. Let him who has something to say step forward and be silent!

Everything Kraus wrote is like that: a silence turned inside out, a silence that catches the storm of events in its black folds and billows, its livid lining turned outward. Notwithstanding their abundance, each of the instances of this silence seems to have broken upon it with the suddenness of a gust of wind. Immediately, a precise apparatus of control is brought into play: through a meshing of oral and written forms, the polemical possibilities of every situation are totally exhausted. With what precautions this is surrounded can be seen from the barbed wire of editorial pronouncements that encircles each edition of Die Fackel, as from the razor-sharp definitions and provisos in the programs and lectures accompanying his readings from his own work. The trinity of silence, knowledge, and alertness constitutes the figure of Kraus the polemicist. His silence is a dam before which the reflecting basin of his knowledge is constantly deepened. His alertness permits no one to ask it questions, forever unwilling to conform to principles offered to it. Its first principle is, rather, to dismantle the situation, to discover the true question the situation poses, and to present this in place of any other to his opponents. If in Johann Peter Hebel we find, developed to the utmost, the constructive, creative side of tact, in Kraus we see its most destructive and critical face. But for both, tact is moral alertness—Stössl calls it “conviction refined into dialectics”—and the expression of an unknown convention more important than the acknowledged one. Kraus lived in a world in which the most shameful act was still the faux pas; he distinguishes between degrees of the monstrous, and does so precisely because his criterion is never that of bourgeois respectability, which, once above the threshold of trivial misdemeanor, becomes so quickly short of breath that it can form no conception of villainy on a world-historical scale.

Kraus knew this criterion from the first; moreover, there is no other criterion for true tact. It is a theological criterion. For tact is not—as narrow minds imagine it—the gift of allotting to each, on consideration of all relationships, what is socially befitting. On the contrary, tact is the capacity to treat social relationships, though not departing from them, as natural, even paradisal, relationships, and so not only to approach the king as if he
had been born with the crown on his brow, but the lackey like an Adam in livery. Hebel possessed this nobleesse in his priestly bearing; Kraus, in armor. His concept of creation contains the theological inheritance of speculations that last possessed contemporary validity for the whole of Europe in the seventeenth century. At the theological core of this concept, however, a transformation has taken place that has caused it, quite without constraint, to coincide with the cosmopolitan credo of Austrian worldliness, which made creation into a church in which nothing remained to recall the rite except an occasional whiff of incense in the mists. Stifter gave this creed its most authentic stamp, and his echo is heard wherever Kraus concerns himself with animals, plants, children. Stifter writes:

The stirring of the air, the rippling of water, the growing of corn, the tossing of the sea, the verdure of the earth, the shining of the sky, the twinkling of the stars, I hold great. The thunderstorm approaching in splendor, the lightning flash that cleaves houses, the storm driving the surf, the mountains spewing fire, the earthquake laying waste to countries, I do not hold greater than the former phenomena; indeed, I believe them smaller, because they are only effects of far higher laws . . . When man was in his infancy, his spiritual eye not yet touched by science, he was seized by what was close at hand and obtrusive, and was moved to fear and admiration; but when his mind was opened, when his gaze began to be directed at the connections between things, particular phenomena sank from sight and the law rose even higher, miracles ceased, and wonder increased . . . Just as in nature the general laws act silently and incessantly, and conspicuous events are only single manifestations of these laws, so the moral law acts silently, animating the soul through the infinite intercourse of human beings, and the miracles of the moment when deeds are performed are merely small signs of this general power.¹

Tacitly, in these famous sentences, the holy has given place to the modest yet questionabie concept of law. But this nature of Stifter's and his moral universe are transparent enough to escape any confusion with Kant, and to be still recognizable in their core as creation. This insolently secularized thunder and lightning, storms, surf, and earthquakes—cosmic man has won them back for creation by making them its world-historical answer to the criminal existence of men. Only the span between Creation and the Last Judgment here finds no redemptive fulfillment, let alone a historical overcoming. For as the landscape of Austria fills unbroken the captivating expanse of Stifter's prose, so for him, Kraus, the terrible years of his life are not history but nature, a river condemned to meander through a landscape of hell. It is a landscape in which every day fifty thousand trees are felled for sixty newspapers. Kraus imparted this information under the title “The End.” For the fact that mankind is losing the fight against the creaturely is to him just as certain as the fact that technology, once deployed against creation, will not stop short of its master, either. His defeatism is of a
supranational—that is, planetary—kind, and history for him is merely the
wilderness dividing his race from creation, whose last act is world conflag-
ration. As a deserter to the camp of animal creation—so he measures out
this wilderness. “And only the animal that is conquered by humanity is the
hero of life”: never was Adalbert Stifter’s patriarchal credo given so gloomy
and heraldic a formulation.

It is in the name of the creature that Kraus again and again inclines toward
the animal and toward “the heart of all hearts, that of the dog,” for him
creation’s true mirror of virtue, in which fidelity, purity, gratitude smile from
times lost and remote. How lamentable that people usurp its place! These
are his followers. More numerous and eagerly than about their master,
they throng with unlovely sniffings about the mortally wounded opponent.
Indeed, it is no accident that the dog is the emblematic beast of this author:
the dog, the epitome of the follower, who is nothing except devoted creature.
And the more personal and unfounded this devotion, the better. Kraus is
right to put it to the hardest test. But if anything makes plain what is
infinitely questionable in these creatures, it is that they are recruited solely
from those whom Kraus himself first called intellectually to life, whom he
conceived and convinced in one and the same act. His testimony can deter-
mine only those for whom it can never become generative.

It is entirely logical that the impoverished, reduced human being of our
day, the contemporary, can seek sanctuary in the temple of living things only
in that most withered form: the form of a private individual. How much
renunciation and how much irony lie in the curious struggle for the
“nerves”—the last root fibers of the Viennese to which Kraus could still find
Mother Earth clinging. “Kraus,” writes Robert Scheu, “discovered a great
subject that had never before set in motion the pen of a journalist: the rights
of the nerves. He found that they were just as worthy an object of impasioned
defense as were property, house and home, political party, and
constitution. He became the advocate of the nerves and took up the fight
against petty, everyday imitations; but the subject grew under his hands,
became the problem of private life. To defend this against police, press,
morality, and concepts, and ultimately against neighbors in every form,
constantly finding new enemies, became his profession.” Here, if anywhere,
is manifest the strange interplay between reactionary theory and revolution-
ary practice that we find everywhere in Kraus. Indeed, to secure private life
against morality and concepts in a society that perpetrates the political
radioscopy of sexuality and family, of economic and physical existence, in
a society that is in the process of building houses with glass walls, and
terraces extending far into the living rooms that are no longer living rooms—
such a watchword would be the most reactionary of all, were not the private
life that Kraus made it his business to defend precisely that which, unlike
the bourgeois form, is in strict accordance with this social upheaval; in other
words, the private life that is dismantling itself, openly shaping itself, that of the poor, from whose ranks came Peter Altenberg, the agitator, and Adolf Loos. In this fight—and only in this fight—his followers also have their uses, since it is they who most sublimely ignore the anonymity with which the satirist has tried to surround his private existence, and nothing holds them in check except Kraus’s decision to step in person before his threshold and pay homage to the ruins in which he is a “private individual.”

As decisively as he makes his own existence a public issue when the fight demands it, he has always just as ruthlessly opposed the distinction between personal and objective criticism—a distinction which has been used to discredit polemics, and which is a chief instrument of corruption in our literary and political affairs. That Kraus attacks people less for what they are than for what they do, more for what they say than for what they write, and least of all for their books, is the precondition of his polemical authority, which is able to lift the intellectual universe of an author—all the more surely the more worthless it is, with confidence in a truly prestabilized, reconciling harmony—whole and intact from a single fragment of sentence, a single word, a single intonation. But the coincidence of personal and objective elements, not only in his opponents but above all in himself, is best demonstrated by the fact that he never puts forward an opinion. For opinion is false subjectivity that can be separated from the person and incorporated in the circulation of commodities. Kraus has never offered an argument that did not engage his whole person. Thus, he embodies the secret of authority: never to disappoint. Authority has no other end than this: it dies or it disappoints. It is not in the least undermined by what others must avoid: its own despotism, injustice, inconsistency. On the contrary, it would be disappointing to observe how it arrived at its pronouncements—by fairness, for example, or even self-consistency. “For a man,” Kraus once said, “being right is not an erotic matter, and he gladly prefers others’ being right to his being wrong.” To prove his manhood in this way is denied to Kraus; his existence demands that at most the self-righteousness of others is opposed to his wrongness, and how right he then is to cling to this. “Many will be right one day. But it will be a rightness resulting from my wrongness today.” This is the language of true authority. Insight into its operations can reveal only one thing: that it is binding, mercilessly binding, toward itself in the same degree as toward others; that it does not tire of trembling before itself, though never before others; that it never does enough to satisfy itself, to fulfill its responsibility toward itself; and that this sense of responsibility never allows him to accept arguments derived from his private constitution or even from the limits of human capacity, but always only from the matter at hand, however unjust it may be from a private point of view.

The characteristic of such unlimited authority has for all time been the union of legislative and executive power. But it was never a more intimate
union than in the theory of language. This is therefore the most decisive expression of Kraus’s authority. Incognito like Haroun al Rashid, he passes by night among the sentence constructions of the journals, and, from behind the petrified façades of phrases, he peers into the interior, discovering in the orgies of “black magic” the violation, the martyrdom, of words:

Is the press a messenger? No: it is the event. Is it speech? No: life. The press not only claims that the true events are its news of events, but it also brings about a sinister identification that constantly creates the illusion that deeds are reported before they are carried out, and frequently also the possibility of a situation (which in any case exists) that when war correspondents are not allowed to witness events, soldiers become reporters. I therefore welcome the charge that all my life I have overestimated the press. It is not a servant—How could a servant demand and receive so much? It is the event. Once again the instrument has run away with us. We have placed the person who is supposed to report outbursts of fire, and who ought doubtless to play the most subordinate role in the State, in power over the world, over fire and over the house, over fact and over our fantasy.

Authority and word against corruption and magic—thus are the catchwords distributed in this struggle. It is not idle to offer a prognosis. No one, Kraus least of all, can leave the utopia of an “objective” newspaper, the chimera of an “impartial transmission of news,” to its own devices. The newspaper is an instrument of power. It can derive its value only from the character of the power it serves; not only in what it represents, but also in what it does, it is the expression of this power. When, however, high capitalism defiles not only the ends but also the means of journalism, then a new blossoming of paradisal, cosmic humanity can no more be expected of a power that defeats it than a second blooming of the language of Goethe or Claudius. From the one now prevailing, it will distinguish itself first of all by putting out of circulation ideals that debase the former. This is enough to give a measure of how little Kraus would have to win or lose in such a struggle, of how unerringly Die Fackel would illuminate it. To the ever-repeated sensations with which the daily press serves its public, he opposes the eternally fresh “news” of the history of creation: the eternally renewed, uninterrupted lament.

2. Demon

Have I slept? I am just falling asleep.
—Kraus, Words in Verse IV

It is deeply rooted in Kraus’s nature, and the stigma of every debate concerning him, that all apologetic arguments miss their mark. The great work of Leopold Liegl springs from an apologetic posture. To certify Kraus as
an “ethical personality” is his first objective. This cannot be done. The dark background from which Kraus's image detaches itself is not formed by his contemporaries, but is the primeval world [Vorwelt], or the world of the demon. The light of the day of Creation falls on him—thus he emerges from this darkness. But not in all parts; others remain that are more deeply immersed in it than one suspects. An eye that cannot adjust to this darkness will never perceive the outline of this figure. On it will be wasted all the gestures that Kraus tirelessly makes in his unconquerable need to be perceived. For, as in the fairy tale, the demon in Kraus has made vanity the expression of his being. The demon’s solitude, too, is felt by him who gesticulates wildly on the hidden hill: “Thank God nobody knows my name is Rumpelstiltskin.” Just as this dancing demon is never still, in Kraus eccentric reflection is in continuous uproar. “The patient of his gifts,” Berthold Viertel called him. In fact, his capacities are maladies; and over and above the real ones, his vanity makes him a hypochondriac.

If he does not see his reflection in himself, he sees it in the adversary at his feet. His polemics have been, from the first, the most intimate intertwining of a technique of unmasking that works with the most advanced means, and a self-expressive art that works with the most archaic. But in this zone, too, ambiguity, the demon, is manifest: self-expression and unmasking merge in it as self-unmasking. Kraus has said, “Anti-Semitism is the mentality that offers up and means seriously a tenth of the jibes that the stock-exchange wit holds ready for his own blood”; he thereby indicates the nature of the relationship of his own opponents to himself. There is no reproach to him, no vilification of his person, that could not find its most legitimate formulation in his own writings, in those passages where self-reflection is raised to self-admiration. He will pay any price to get himself talked about, and is always justified by the success of these speculations. If style is the power to move freely in the length and breadth of linguistic thinking without falling into banality, it is attained chiefly by the cardiac strength of great thoughts, which drives the blood of language through the capillaries of syntax into the remotest limbs. While such thoughts are quite unmistakable in Kraus, the powerful heart of his style is nevertheless the image he bears of himself in his own breast and exposes in the most merciless manner. Yes, he is vain. As such he has been portrayed by Karin Michaelis, who describes how he crosses a room with swift, restless bounds to reach the lecture podium. And if he then offers a sacrifice to his vanity, he would not be the demon that he is were it not finally himself, his life and his suffering, that he exposes with all its wounds, all its nakedness. In this way his style comes into being, and with it the typical reader of Die Fackel, for whom in a subordinate clause, in a particle, indeed in a comma, fibers and nerves quiver; from the obscurest and driest fact, a piece of his mutilated flesh hangs. Idiosyncrasy as the highest critical organ—this is the hidden logic of that self-reflection and the hellish state known only to a writer for
whom every act of gratification becomes at the same time a station of his martyrdom, a state experienced, apart from Kraus, by no one as deeply as by Kierkegaard.

"I am," Kraus has said, "perhaps the first instance of a writer who simultaneously writes and experiences his writing theatrically." Thus he shows his vanity its most legitimate place: in mime. His mimetic genius, imitating while it glories, pulling faces in the midst of polemics, is festively unleashed in the readings of dramas whose authors, with good reason, occupy a peculiarly intermediate position: Shakespeare and Nestroy, dramatists and actors; Offenbach, composer and conductor. It is as if the demon in the man sought the tumultuous atmosphere of these dramas, shot through with all the lightning flashes of improvisation, because it alone offered him the thousand opportunities to break out, teasing, tormenting, threatening. In them his own voice tries out the abundance of personae inhabiting the performer ("per-sona": that through which sound passes), and about his fingertips dart the gestures of the figures populating his voice. But in his polemics, too, mimesis plays a decisive role. He imitates his subjects in order to insert the crowbar of his hate into the finest joints of their posture. This quibbler, probing between syllables, digs out the larvae that nest there in clumps. The larvae of venality and garrulity, ignominy and bonhomie, childishness and covetousness, gluttony and dishonesty. Indeed, the exposure of inauthenticity—more difficult than that of the merely bad—is here performed behavioristically. The quotations in Die Fackel are more than documentary proof: they are the props with which the quoter unmask himself mimetically. Admittedly, what emerges in just this connection is how closely the cruelty of the satirist is linked to the ambiguous modesty of the interpreter, which in his public readings is heightened beyond comprehension. "To creep"—this is the term used, not without cause, for the lowest kind of flattery; and Kraus creeps into those he impersonates, in order to annihilate them. Has courtesy here become the mimicry of hate, hate the mimicry of courtesy? However that may be, both have attained perfection, absolute pitch. "Torment," of which there is so much talk in Kraus in such opaque allusions, here has its seat. His protests against letters, printed matter, documents are nothing but the defensive reaction of a man who is himself implicated. But what implicates him so deeply is more than deeds and misdeeds; it is the language of his fellow men. His passion for imitating them is at the same time the expression of and the struggle against this implication, and also the cause and the result of that ever-watchful guilty conscience in which alone the demon is in his element.

The economy of his errors and weaknesses—more a fantastic edifice than the totality of his gifts—is so delicately and precisely organized that all outward confirmation only disrupts it. Well it may, if this man is to be certified as the "pattern of a harmoniously and perfectly formed human
type,” if he is to appear—in a term as absurd stylistically as semantically—as a philanthropist, so that anyone listening to his “hardness” with “the ears of the soul” would find the reason for it in compassion. No! This incorruptible, piercing, resolute assurance does not spring from the noble poetic or humane disposition that his followers are so fond of attributing to him. How utterly banal, and at the same time how fundamentally wrong, is their derivation of his hatred from love, when it is obvious how much more elemental are the forces here at work: a humanity that is only an alternation of malice and sophistry, sophistry and malice, a nature that is the highest school of aversion to mankind and a pity that is alive only when interlaced with vengeance. “Oh, had I only been left the choice / to carve the dog or the butcher, / I should have chosen.” Nothing is more perverse than to try to fashion him after the image of what he loves. Rightly, Kraus the “timeless world-disturber” has been confronted with the “eternal world-improver,” on whom benign glances not infrequently fall.

“When the age laid hands upon itself, he was the hands,” Brecht said. Few insights can stand beside this, and certainly not the comment of his friend Adolf Loos. “Kraus,” he declares, “stands on the threshold of a new age.” Alas, by no means.—For he stands on the threshold of the Last Judgment. Just as, in the most opulent examples of Baroque altar painting, saints hard-pressed against the frame extend defensive hands toward the breathtakingly foreshortened extremities of the angels, the blessed, and the damned floating before them, so the whole of world history presses in on Kraus in the extremities of a single item of local news, a single phrase, a single advertisement. This is the inheritance that has come down to him from the sermons of Abraham a Sancta Clara. Thence the overwhelming immediacy, the ready wit, of the wholly uncommtitative moment; and the inversion that allows his will only theoretical, his knowledge only practical, expression. Kraus is no historic type. He does not stand on the threshold of a new age. If he ever turns his back on creation, if he breaks off in lamentation, it is only to file a complaint at the Last Judgment.

Nothing is understood about this man until it has been perceived that, of necessity and without exception, everything—language and fact—falls, for him, within the sphere of justice. All his fire-eating, sword-swallowing philology in the newspapers pursues justice just as much as language. It is to misunderstand his theory of language to see it as other than a contribution to the linguistic rules of court, the word of someone else in his mouth as other than a corpus delicti, and his own as other than a judging word. Kraus knows no system. Each thought has its own cell. But each cell can in an instant, and apparently almost without cause, become a chamber, a legal chamber over which language presides. It has been said of Kraus that he has to “suppress the Jewishness in himself,” even that he “travels the road from Jewishness to freedom”; nothing better refutes this than the fact that,
for him, too, justice and language remain founded in each other. To worship the image of divine justice in language—even in the German language—this is the genuinely Jewish *salto mortale* by which he tries to break the spell of the demon. For this is the last official act of this zealot: to place the legal system itself under accusation. And not in a petty-bourgeois revolt against the enslavement of the “free individual” by “dead formulas.” Still less in the posture of those radicals who storm the legal code without ever for a moment having taken thought of justice. Kraus accuses the law in its substance, not in its effect. His charge: high treason of the law against justice. More exactly, betrayal of the word by the concept, which derives its existence from the word: the premeditated murder of imagination, which dies of the absence of a single letter and for which, in his “Elegy on the Death of a Sound,” he has sung the most moving lament. For over jurisdiction, right-saying, stands orthography, right-spelling, and woe to the former if the latter should be wanting. Here, too, therefore, he confronts the press; indeed, in this charmed circle he holds his fondest rendezvous with the *lemures*. He has seen through law as have few others. If he nevertheless invokes it, he does so precisely because his own demon is drawn so powerfully by the abyss it represents. By the abyss that, not without reason, he finds most gaping where mind and sexuality meet—in the trial for sexual offenses—and has sounded in these famous words: “A trial for sexual offenses is the deliberate development from an individual immorality to a general immorality, against which dark background the proven guilt of the accused stands out luminously.”

Mind and sexuality move in this sphere with a solidarity whose law is ambiguity. The obsession of demonic sexuality is the ego that, surrounded by sweet feminine mirages “such as the bitter earth does not harbor,” enjoys itself. And no different is the loveless and self-gratifying trope of the obsessed mind: the joke. Neither reaches its object: the ego does not attain women any more than the joke attains words. Decomposition has taken the place of procreation; stridency, that of secrecy. Now, however, they shimmer in the most winsome nuances: in repartee, lust comes into its own; and in onanism, the joke. Kraus portrayed himself as hopelessly subjugated to the demon; in the pandemonium of the age, he reserved for himself the most melancholy place in the icy wilderness lit by reflected flames. There he stands on the Last Day of Humankind—the “grumblers” who has described the preceding days. “I have taken the tragedy, which disintegrates into scenes of disintegrating humanity, on myself, so that it might be heard by the spirit who takes pity on the victims, even though he may have renounced for all time his connection with a human ear. May he receive the keynote of this age, the echo of my bloodstained madness, through which I share the guilt for these noises. May he accept it as redemption!”

“I share the guilt . . .” Because this has the ring of the manifestos—even
if they are finally self-accusations—of an intelligentsia seeking to call to mind the memory of an epoch that seemed to be turning away from it, there is something to be said about this guilt feeling in which private and historical consciousness so vividly meet. This guilt will always lead to Expressionism, from which his mature work was nourished by roots that cracked open their soil. The slogans are well known—with what scorn did not Kraus himself register them: *gebalt, gestuft, gesteilt* [clenched, stepped, steeped]; stage sets, sentences, paintings were composed.—Unmistakable—and the Expressionists themselves proclaim it—is the influence of early medieval miniatures on the world of their imagination. But anyone who examines their figures—for example, in the Vienna Genesis—is struck by something very mysterious, not only in their wide-open eyes, not only in the unfathomable folds of their garments, but also in their whole expression. As if falling sickness had overtaken them thus, in their running which is always headlong, they lean toward one another. “Inclination” may be seen, before all else, as the deep human affect tremulously pervading the world of these miniatures, as it does the manifestos of that generation of poets. But only one, as it were inwardly curved, aspect of this relation is revealed by the front of these figures. The same phenomenon appears quite different to someone who looks at their backs. These backs are piled—in the saints of the adorations, in the servants of the Gethsemane scene, in the witnesses of the entrance into Jerusalem—into terraces of human necks and human shoulders that, really clenched in steep steps, lead less toward heaven than downward to and even under the earth. It is impossible to find, for their pathos, an expression that ignores the fact that they could be climbed like heaped rocks or rough-hewn steps. Whatever powers may have fought out their spiritual battles on these shoulders, one of them, from our experience of the condition of the defeated masses immediately after the end of the war, we are able to call by its name. What finally remained of Expressionism, in which an originally human impulse was converted almost without residue into a fashion, was the experience and the name of that nameless power toward which the backs of people bent: guilt. “That obedient masses are led into danger not by an unknown will but by an unknown guilt makes them pitiable,” Kraus wrote as early as 1912. As a “grumbler” he participates in their lot in order to denounce them, and denounces them in order to participate. To meet them through sacrifice, he one day threw himself into the arms of the Catholic Church.

In those biting minuets that Kraus whistled to the *chassé-croisé* of Justitia and Venus, the leitmotif—that the philistine knows nothing of love—is articulated with a sharpness and persistence that have a counterpart only in the corresponding attitude of décadence, in the proclamation of art for art’s sake. For it was precisely art for art’s sake, which for the decadent movement applies to love as well, that linked expertise as closely as possible to crafts-
manship, to technique, and allowed poetry to shine at its brightest only against the foil of hack writing, as it made love stand out against perversion. “Penury can turn every man into a journalist, but not every woman into a prostitute.” In this formulation Kraus betrayed the false bottom of his polemic against journalism. It is much less the philanthropist, the enlight-
ened friend of man and nature, who unleashed this implacable struggle than the literary expert, artiste, indeed the dandy, whose ancestor is Baudelaire. Only Baudelaire hated, as Kraus did, the satiety of healthy common sense, and the compromise that intellectuals made with it in order to find shelter in journalism. Journalism is betrayal of the literary life, of mind, of the demon. Idle chatter is its true substance, and every feuilleton poses anew the insoluble question of the relationship between the forces of stupidity and malice, whose expression is gossip. It is, fundamentally, on the complete agreement of two forms of existence—life under the aegis of mere mind, and life under the aegis of mere sexuality—that the solidarity of the man of letters with the whore is founded, a solidarity to which Baudelaire’s existence is once again the most inviolable testimony. So Kraus can call by his name the laws of his own craft, intertwined with those of sexuality, as he did in *Die Chinesische Mauer* [The Great Wall of China]. Man “has wrestled a thousand times with the other, who perhaps does not live but whose victory over him is certain. Not because he has superior qualities but because he is the other, the latecomer, who brings woman the joy of variety and who will triumph as the last in the sequence. But they wipe it from her brow like a bad dream, and want to be the first.” Now, if language—this we read between the lines—is a woman, how far the author is removed, by an unerring instinct, from those who hasten to be the first with her; how multifariously he forms his thought, thus inciting her with intuition rather than slaking her with knowledge; how he lets hatred, contempt, malice ensnare one another; how he slows his step and seeks the detour of followership, in order finally to end her joy in variety with the last thrust that Jack holds in readiness for Lulu?

The life of letters is existence under the aegis of mere mind, as prostitution is existence under the aegis of mere sexuality. The demon, however, who leads the whore to the street exiles the man of letters to the courtroom. This is therefore, for Kraus, the forum that it has always been for the great journalist—for a Carrel, a Paul-Louis Courier, a Lassalle. Evasion of the genuine and demonic function of mere mind, to be a disturber of the peace; abstention from attacking the whore from behind—Kraus sees this double omission as defining the journalist.—Robert Scheu rightly perceived that for Kraus prostitution was a natural form, not a social deformation, of female sexuality. Yet it is only the interlacing of sexual with commercial intercourse that constitutes the character of prostitution. It is a natural phenomenon as much in terms of its natural economic aspect (since it is a manifestation of
commodity exchange) as in terms of its natural sexuality. “Contempt for prostitution? / Harlots worse than thieves? / Learn this: not only is love paid, / but payment, too, wins love!” This ambiguity—this double nature as twofold naturalness—makes prostitution demonic. But Kraus “enlists with the power of nature.” That the sociological realm never becomes transparent to him—no more in his attack on the press than in his defense of prostitution—is connected with this attachment to nature. That for him the fit state of man appears not as the destiny and fulfillment of nature liberated through revolutionary change, but as an element of nature per se, of an archaic nature without history, in its pristine, primeval state, throws uncertain, disquieting reflections even on his ideas of freedom and humanity. They are not removed from the realm of guilt that Kraus has traversed from pole to pole: from mind to sexuality.

But in the face of this reality, to which Kraus exposed himself more harrowingly than any other, the “pure mind” that his followers worship in the master’s activity is revealed as a worthless chimera. For this reason, none of the motives for his development is more important than the constant curbing and checking of mind. Nachts [By Night] is the title he gives to the logbook of this control. For night is the mechanism by which mere mind is converted into mere sexuality, mere sexuality into mere mind, and where these two abstractions hostile to life find rest in recognizing each other. “I work day and night. So I have a lot of free time. In order to ask a picture in the room how it likes work; in order to ask the clock whether it is tired and the night how it has slept.” These questions are sacrificial gifts that he throws to the demon while working. His night, however, is not a maternal night, or a moonlit, romantic night: it is the hour between sleeping and waking, the night watch, the centerpiece of his threefold solitude: that of the coffeehouse, where he is alone with his enemy; of the nocturnal room, where he is alone with his demon; of the lecture hall, where he is alone with his work.

3. Monster [Unmensch]

Already the snow falls.
—Kraus, Words in Verse III

Satire is the only legitimate form of regional art. This, however, was not what people meant by calling Kraus a Viennese satirist. Rather, they were attempting to shunt him for as long as possible onto this siding, where his work could be assimilated into the great store of literary consumer goods. The presentation of Kraus as a satirist can thus yield the deepest insight both into what he is and into his most melancholy caricatures. For this
reason, he was at pains from the first to distinguish the genuine satirist from
the scribblers who make a trade of mockery and who, in their invectives,
have little more in mind than giving the public something to laugh about.
In contrast, the great type of the satirist never had firmer ground under his
feet than amid a generation about to mount tanks and put on gas masks, a
mankind that has run out of tears but not of laughter. In him civilization
prepares to survive, if it must, and communicates with him in the true
mystery of satire, which consists in the devouring of the adversary. The
recollection of his origin is not without filial piety, so that the proposal to
eat people has become an essential constituent of his inspiration, from
Jonathan Swift’s pertinent project concerning the use of the children of the
less wealthy classes, to Léon Bloy’s suggestion that landlords of insolvent
lodgers be conceded a right to the sale of the lodgers’ flesh. In such directives,
great satirists have taken the measure of the humanity of their fellow men.
“Humanity, culture, and freedom are precious things that cannot be bought
dearly enough with blood, understanding, and human dignity”—thus Kraus
concludes the dispute between the cannibal and human rights. One should
compare his formulation with Marx’s treatment of the “Jewish question,”
in order to judge how totally this playful reaction of 1909—the reaction
against the classical ideal of humanity—was likely to become a confession
of materialist humanism at the first opportunity. Admittedly, one would need
to understand Die Fackel from the first number on, literally word for word,
to predict that this aesthetically oriented journalism, without sacrificing or
gaining a single motif, was destined to become the political prose of 1930.
For this it had to thank its partner, the press, which disposed of humanity
in the way to which Kraus alludes in these words: “Human rights are the
fragile toy that grownups like to trample on and so will not give up.” Thus,
drawing a boundary between the private and public spheres, which in 1789
was supposed to inaugurate freedom, became a mockery. Through the
newspaper, says Kierkegaard, “the distinction between public and private
affairs is abolished in private-public prattle . . .”

To open a dialectical debate between the public and private zones that
commingle demonically in prattle, to lead concrete humanity to victory—
this is operetta’s purpose, which Kraus discovered and which in Offenbach
he raised to its most expressive level. Just as prattle seals the enslavement
of language through stupidity, so operetta transfigures stupidity through
music. To fail to recognize the beauty of feminine stupidity was for Kraus
always the blackest philistinism. Before its radiance the chimeras of progress
evaporate. And in Offenbach’s operettas the bourgeois trinity of the true,
the beautiful, and the good is brought together, freshly rehearsed and with
musical accompaniment, in its star turn on the trapeze of idiocy. Nonsense
is true, stupidity beautiful, weakness good. This is Offenbach’s secret: how
in the deep nonsense of public discipline—whether it be that of the upper
ten thousand, a dance floor, or a military state—the deep sense of private
licentiousness opens a dreamy eye. And what, in the form of language, might
have been judicial strictness, renunciation, discrimination, becomes cunning
and evasion, obstruction and postponement, in the form of music.—Music
as the preserver of the moral order? Music as the police of a world of
pleasure? Yes, this is the splendor that falls on the old Paris ballrooms, on
the Grande Chaumière, on the Clôserie des Lilas in Kraus’s rendering of *La
vie parisienne*. “And the inimitable duplicity of this music, which simulta-
neously puts a plus and a minus sign before everything it says, betraying
idyll to parody, mockery to lyricism; the abundance of musical devices ready
to perform all duties, uniting pain and pleasure—this gift is here developed
to its purest pitch.” Anarchy as the only international constitution that is
moral and worthy of man becomes the true music of these operettas. The
voice of Kraus speaks, rather than sings, this inner music. It whistles bitingly
about the peaks of dizzying stupidity, reverberates shatteringly from the
abyss of the absurd; and in Frescata’s lines it hums, like the wind in the
chimney, a requiem to the generation of our grandfathers.—Offenbach’s
work is touched by the pangs of death. It contracts, rids itself of everything
superfluous, passes through the dangerous span of this existence and re-
emerges saved, more real than before. For wherever this fickle voice is heard,
the lightning flashes of advertisements and the thunder of the Métro cleave
the Paris of omnibuses and gas jets. And the work gives him all this in
return. For at moments it is transformed into a curtain, and with the wild
gestures of a fairground showman with which he accompanies the whole
performance, Kraus tears aside this curtain and suddenly reveals the interior
of his cabinet of horrors. There they stand: Schober, Bekessy, Kerr, and the
other skits, no longer enemies but curiosities, heirlooms from the world of
Offenbach or Nestroy”—no, older, rarer still, *lares* of the troglodytes, house-
hold gods of stupidity from prehistoric times. Kraus, when he reads in
public, does not speak the words of Offenbach or Nestroy: they speak from
him. And now and then a breathtaking, half-blank, half-glittering whore-
monger’s glance falls on the crowd before him, inviting them to the unholy
marriage with the masks in which they do not recognize themselves, and
for the last time invokes the evil privilege of ambiguity.

It is only now that the satirist’s true face, or rather true mask, is revealed.
It is the mask of Timon the misanthrope. “Shakespeare had foreknowledge
of everything”—yes. But above all of Kraus. Shakespeare portrays inhuman
figures—Timon the most inhuman of them—and says: Nature would pro-
duce such a creature if she wished to create something befitting the world
as your kind have fashioned it, something worthy of it. Such a creature is
Timon; such is Kraus. Neither has, or wants, anything in common with
men. “An animal feud is on, and so we renounce humanity”; from a remote
village in the Swiss mountains Kraus throws down this challenge to mankind, and Timon wants only the sea to weep at his grave. Like Timon's verse, Kraus's poetry stands opposite the colon of the \textit{dramatis personae}, of the role. A Fool, a Caliban, a Timon—no more thoughtful, no more dignified or better—but, nevertheless, his own Shakespeare. All the figures thronging about him should be seen as originating in Shakespeare. Always he is the model, whether Kraus is speaking with Otto Weininger about man or with Peter Altenberg about women, with Frank Wedekind about the stage or with Adolf Loos about food, with Else Lasker-Schüler about the Jews or with Theodor Haecker about the Christians. The power of the demon ends at this realm. His semihuman or subhuman traits are conquered by a truly inhuman being, a monster. Kraus hinted at this when he said, “In me a capacity for psychology is united with the greater capacity to ignore the psychological.” It is the inhuman quality of the actor that he claims for himself in these words: the cannibal quality. For in each of his roles the actor assimilates bodily a human being, and in Shakespeare's baroque tirades—when the cannibal is unmasked as the better man, the hero as an actor, when Timon plays the rich man, Hamlet the madman—it is as if the actor's lips were dripping blood. So Kraus, following Shakespeare's example, wrote himself parts that let him taste blood. The endurance of his convictions is persistence in a role, in its stereotypes, its cues. His experiences are, in their entirety, nothing but this: cues. This is why he insists on them, demanding them from existence like an actor who never forges a partner for denying him his cue.

Kraus's public readings of Offenbach, his recital of couplets from Nestroy, are bereft of all musical means. The word never gives way to the instrument; but by extending its boundaries further and further, it finally deopotentiates itself, dissolving into a merely creaturely voice. A humming that is to the word what his smile is to the joke is the holy of holies of this performer's art. In this smile, this humming—in which, as in a crater lake amid the most monstrous crags and cinders, the world is peacefully and contentedly mirrored—irrupts the deep complicity with his listeners and models that Kraus has never allowed to enter his words. His service to the word permits no compromise. But as soon as the word turns its back, he is ready for anything. Then the tormenting, inexhaustible charm of these recitals makes itself felt: the charm of seeing the distinction between like and unlike minds annulled and the homogeneous mass of false friends created—the charm that sets the tone of these performances. Kraus confronts a world of enemies, seeks to coerce them to love, yet coerces them to nothing but hypocrisy; His defenselessness before the latter has a precise connection to the subversive dilettantism that is particularly prominent in his Offenbach renderings. Here Kraus confines music to limits narrower than were ever dreamed of in the manifestos of the George school.\textsuperscript{10} This cannot, of course, obscure the antithesis
between the linguistic gestures of the two men. Rather, an exact correlation
exists between the factors which give Kraus access to both poles of linguistic
expression—the enfeebled pole of humming and the armed pole of pathos—and
those which forbid his sanctification of the word to take on the forms of the
Georgian cult of language. To the cosmic rising and falling that for
George “defies the body and embodies the divine,” language is simply a
Jacob’s ladder with ten thousand word-rungs. Kraus’s language, by contrast,
has done away with all hieratic moments. It is the medium neither of
prophecy nor of domination. It is the theater of a sanctification of the
name—with this Jewish certainty, it sets itself against the theurgy of the
“word-body.” Very late, with a decisiveness that must have matured in years
of silence, Kraus entered the lists against the great partner whose work had
arisen at the same time as his own, beneath the threshold of the century.
George’s first published book and the first volume of Die Fackel are dated
1899. And only retrospectively, in “After Thirty Years” (1929), did Kraus
issue the challenge. There, as the zealot, he confronts George, the object of
worship,

who dwells in the temple from which
he never had to drive the traders and the lenders,

nor yet the pharisees and scribes,
who therefore—camped about the place—describe it.
The profanum vulgus praises this renouncer,
who never told it what it ought to hate.
And he who found the goal before the way
did not come from the origin [Ursprung].

“You came from the origin—the origin is the goal” is received by the
“Dying Man” as God’s comfort and promise. To this Kraus alludes here,
as does Berthold Viertel when, in the same way as Kraus, he calls the world
a “wrong, deviating, circuitous way back to paradise.” “And so,” he con-
tinues in this most important passage of his essay on Kraus, “I attempt to
interpret the development of this odd talent: intellectuality as a deviation
 . . . leading back to immediacy; publicity—a false trail back to language;
satire—a detour to the poem.” This “origin”—the seal of authenticity on
the phenomenon—is the subject of a discovery that has a curious element of
recognition. The theater of this philosophical recognition scene in Kraus’s
work is poetry, and its language is rhyme: “A word that never tells an
untruth at its origin” and that, just as blessedness has its origin at the end
of time, has its at the end of the line. Rhyme—two putti bearing the demon
to its grave. It died at its origin because it came into the world as a hybrid
of mind and sexuality. Its sword and shield—concept and guilt—have fallen
from its hands to become emblems beneath the feet of the angel that killed
it. This is a poetic, martial angel with a foil in his hand, as only Baudelaire knew him: "practicing alone fantastic swordsmanship,"

Flairant dans tous les coins les hasards de la rime,
Trêbuchant sur les mots comme sur les pavés,
Heurtant parfois des vers depuis longtemps rêvés.

[Scenting rhyme's hazards in every corner,
Stumbling on words as on uneven pavements,
Jostling now and then long-dreamed-of lines.]

Also, to be sure, a licentious angel, "here chasing a metaphor that has just turned the corner, there couplet words like a procurer, perverting phrases, infatuated with similarities, blissfully abusing chaotic embraces, always on the lookout for adventure, impatient and hesitant to consummate in joy and torment." So, finally, the hedonistic impulse of the work finds its purest expression in this melancholy and fantastic relationship to existence in which Kraus, in the Viennese tradition of Raimund and Girardi, arrives at a conception of happiness that is as resigned as it is sensual.11 This must be borne in mind if one is to understand the urgency with which he decried the dancing pose affected by Nietzsche—not to mention the wrath with which the monster [Unmensch] was bound to greet the Superman [Übermensch].

The child recognizes by rhyme that it has reached the ridge of language, from which it can hear the rushing of all springs at their origin. Up there, creaturely existence is at home; after so much dumbness in the animal and so much lying in the whore, it has found its tongue in the child. "A good brain must be capable of imagining each fiber of childhood with all its manifestations so intensely that the temperature is raised"—in statements such as this, Kraus aims further than it appears. He himself, at any rate, satisfied this requirement to the extent that he never envisaged the child as the object of education; rather, in an image from his own youth, he saw the child as the antagonist of education who is educated by this antagonism, not by the educator. "It was not the cane that should be abolished, but the teacher who uses it badly." Kraus wants to be nothing except the teacher who uses it better. The limit of his philanthropy, his pity, is marked by the cane, which he first felt in the same class at school to which he owes his best poems.

"I am only one of the epigones"—Kraus is an epigone of school anthologies. "The German Boy's Table Grace," "Siegfried's Sword," "The Grave in the Busento," "Kaiser Karl Inspects a School"—these were his models, poetically re-created by the attentive pupil who learned them. So "The Steeds of Gravelotte" became the poem "To Eternal Peace," and even the most incandescent of his hate poems were ignited by Hölt's "Forest Fire," whose glow pervaded the anthologies of our schooldays. And if on the last
day not only the graves but the school anthologies open, to the tune of
“How the Trumpets Blow, Hussars Away,” the true Pegasus of the little folk
will burst from them and, with a shrunken mummy, a puppet of cloth or
yellowish ivory, hanging dead and withered from the shoulders of his horse,
this unparalleled fashioner of verses will go careening off; but the two-edged
saber in his hand, as polished as his rhymes and as incisive as on the First
Day, will belabor the green woods, and blooms of style will bestrew the
ground.

Language has never been more perfectly distinguished from mind, never
more intimately bound to eros, than by Kraus in the observation, “The more
closely you look at a word, the more distantly it looks back.” This is a
Platonic love of language. The only closeness from which the word cannot
escape, however, is rhyme. So the primal erotic relationship between near-
ness and distance is, in his language, given voice as rhyme and name. As
rhyme, language rises up from the creaturely world; as name, it draws all
creatures up to it. In “The Forsaken” the most ardent interpenetration of
language and eros, as Kraus experienced them, expresses itself with an
innocent grandeur that recalls the perfect Greek epigrams and vase pictures.
“The Forsaken” are forsaken by each other. But—this is their great solace—
also with each other. On the threshold between dying and rebirth, they
pause. With head turned back, joy “in unheard-of fashion” takes her eternal
leave; turned from her, the soul “in unwonted fashion” silently sets foot in
an alien world. Thus forsaken with each other are joy and soul, but also
language and eros, also rhyme and name.—To “The Forsaken” the fifth
volume of Words in Verse is dedicated. Only the dedication now reaches
them, and this is nothing other than an avowal of Platonic love, which does
not satisfy its desire in what it loves, but possesses and holds it in the name.
This self-obsessed man knows no other self-renunciation than giving thanks.
His love is not possession, but gratitude. Thanking and dedicating—for to
thank is to put feelings under a name. How the beloved grows distant and
lustrous, how her minuteness and her glow withdraw into name: this is the
only experience of love known to Words in Verse. And, therefore, “To live
without women, how easy. / To have lived without women, how hard.”

From within the linguistic compass of the name, and only from within it,
can we discern Kraus’s basic polemical procedure: citation. To quote a word
is to call it by its name. So Kraus’s achievement exhausts itself at its highest
level by making even the newspaper quotable. He transports it to his own
sphere, and the empty phrase is suddenly forced to recognize that even in
the deepest dregs of the journals it is not safe from the voice that swoops
on the wings of the word to drag it from its darkness. How wonderful if
this voice approaches not to punish but to save, as it does on the Shake-
spearean wings of the lines in which, before the town of Arras, someone
sends word home of how in the early morning, on the last blasted tree beside
the fortifications, a lark began to sing. A single line, and not even one of his, is enough to enable Kraus to descend, as savior, into this inferno, and insert a single italicization: “It was a nightingale and not a lark which sat there on the pomegranate tree and sang.” In the quotation that both saves and punishes, language proves the matrix of justice. It summons the word by its name, wrenches it destructively from its context, but precisely thereby calls it back to its origin. It appears, now with rhyme and reason, sonorously, congruously, in the structure of a new text. As rhyme, it gathers the similar into its aura; as name, it stands alone and expressionless. In citation the two realms—of origin and destruction—justify themselves before language. And conversely, only where they interpenetrate—in citation—is language consummated. In it is mirrored the angelic tongue in which all words, startled from the idyllic context of meaning, have become mottoes in the book of Creation.

From its two poles—classical humanism and materialist humanism—the whole world of this man’s culture is embraced by citation. Schiller, admittedly unnamed, stands beside Shakespeare: “There is also a moral nobility. Mean natures pay / With that which they do; noble, with that which they are”—this classical distich characterizes, in the convergence of manorial noblesse and cosmopolitan rectitude, the utopian vanishing point where Weimar humanism was at home, and which was finally fixed by Stifter. It is decisive for Kraus that he locates origin at exactly this vanishing point. It is his program to reverse the development of bourgeois-capitalist affairs to a condition that was never theirs. But he is nonetheless the last bourgeois to claim his justification from Being, and Expressionism was portentous for him because in it this attitude had for the first time to prove its worth in the face of a revolutionary situation. It was precisely the attempt to do justice to this situation not by actions but by Being that led Expressionism to its clenched, precipitous voice. So it became the last historical refuge of personality. The guilt that bowed it and the purity it proclaimed—both are part of the phantom of the unpolitical or “natural” man who emerges at the end of that regression and was unmasked by Marx. He writes:

Man as member of bourgeois society, unpolitical man, necessarily appears as natural man . . . Political revolution dissolves bourgeois life into its component parts without revolutionizing or criticizing these components themselves. It stands to bourgeois society, to the world of needs, work, private interests, private right, in the same relation as it does to the foundation of its existence . . . and therefore to its natural basis . . . The real man is acknowledged only in the form of the egoistical individual; the true man, only in the form of the abstract citoyen . . . Only when the really individual man takes back into himself the abstract citizen and, as an individual man, has become in his empirical life, in his individual work, in his individual circumstances a species-being . . . and therefore no longer separates social power from himself in the form of political power, only then is human emancipation complete.
The materialist humanism which Marx here opposes to its classical counterpart manifests itself for Kraus in the child, and the developing human being raises his face against the idols of ideal man—the romantic child of nature as much as the dutiful citizen. For the sake of such development, Kraus revised the school anthology, investigated German education, and found it tossing helplessly on the waves of journalistic caprice. Hence his “Lyrik der Deutschen” [Lyric of the Germans]:

He who can is their man and not he who must;

they strayed from being to seeming.

Their lyrical case was not Claudius

but Heine.

The fact, however, that the developing man actually takes form not within the natural sphere but in the sphere of mankind, in the struggle for liberation, and that he is recognized by the posture which the fight with exploitation and poverty stamps upon him, that there is no idealistic but only a materialistic deliverance from myth, and that at the origin of creation stands not purity but purification—all this did not leave its trace on Kraus’s materialist humanism until very late. Only when despairing did he discover in citation the power not to preserve but to purify, to tear from context, to destroy; the only power in which hope still resides that something might survive this age—because it was wrenched from it.

Here we find confirmation that all the martial energies of this man are innate civic virtues; only in the melee did they take on their combative aspect. But already no one recognizes them any more; no one can grasp the necessity that compelled this great bourgeois character to become a comedian, this guardian of Goethean linguistic values a polemicist, or why this irreproachably honorable man went berserk. This, however, was bound to happen, since he thought fit to change the world by beginning with his own class, in his own home, in Vienna. And when, admitting to himself the futility of his enterprise, he abruptly broke it off, he placed the matter back in the hands of nature—this time destructive not creative nature:

Let time stand still! Sun, be consummate!

Make great the end! Announce eternity!

Rise up with menace, let your light boom thunder,

that our strident death be silenced.

You golden bell, melt in your own heat,

Make yourself a gun against the cosmic foe!

Shoot firebrands in his face! Had I but Joshua’s power,

I tell you, Gideon would be again!14

On this unfettered nature Kraus’s later political credo is founded, though in antithesis to Stifter’s patriarchal code; it is a confession that is in every respect astonishing, but incomprehensible only in the fact that it has not
been preserved in Die Fackel's largest type, and that this most powerful of
postwar bourgeois prose must be sought in the now-vanished issue of
November 1920:

What I mean is—and now for once I shall speak plainly to this dehumanized
brood of owners of property and blood, and to all their followers, because they
do not understand German and from my "contradictions" are incapable of
deducing my true intention . . .—what I mean is, Communism as a reality is
only the obverse of their own life-violating ideology, admittedly by the grace
of a purer ideal origin, a deranged remedy with a purer ideal purpose: the devil
take its practice, but God preserve it as a constant threat over the heads of
those who have property and would like to compel all others to preserve it,
driving them, with the consolation that worldly goods are not the highest, to
the fronts of hunger and patriotic honor. God preserve it, so that this rabble
who are beside themselves with brazenness do not grow more brazen still, and
so that the society of those exclusively entitled to enjoyment, who believe they
are loving subordinate humanity enough if they give it syphilis, may at least
go to bed with a nightmare! So that at least they may lose their appetite for
preaching morality to their victims, take less delight in ridiculing them!

A human, natural, noble language—particularly in the light of a notewor-
thy declaration by Loos: "If human work consists only of destruction, it is
truly human, natural, noble work." For far too long, the accent was placed
on creativity. People are only creative to the extent that they avoid tasks
and supervision. Work as a supervised task—its model being political and
technical work—is attended by dirt and detritus, intrudes destructively into
matter, is abrasive to what is already achieved and critical toward its
conditions, and is in all this opposite to the work of the dilettante luxuriating
in creation. His work is innocent and pure, consuming and purifying mas-
terliness. And therefore the monster stands among us as the messenger of a
more real humanism. He is the conqueror of the empty phrase. He feels
solidarity not with the slender pine but with the plane that devours it, not
with the precious ore but with the blast furnace that purifies it. The average
European has not succeeded in uniting his life with technology, because he
has clung to the fetish of creative existence. One must have followed Loos
in his struggle with the dragon "ornament," heard the stellar Esperanto of
Scheerbart's creations, or seen Klee's New Angel (who preferred to free men
by taking from them, rather than make them happy by giving to them) to
understand a humanity that proves itself by destruction.15

Justice, therefore, is destructive in opposing the constructive ambiguities
of law, and Kraus destructively did justice to his own work: "All my errors
stay behind to lead." This is a sober language that bases its dominance on
permanence. The writings of Kraus have already begun to last, so that he
might furnish them with an epigraph from Lichtenberg, who dedicated one
of his most profound works to "Your Majesty Forgetfulness." So his mod-
esty now appears—bolder than his former self-assertion, which dissolved in
demonic self-reflection. Neither purity nor sacrifice mastered the demon; but
where origin and destruction come together, his reign is over. Like a creature
sprung from the child and the cannibal, his conqueror stands before him:
not a new man—a monster, a new angel. Perhaps one of those who,
according to the Talmud, are at each moment created anew in countless
throngs, and who, once they have raised their voices before God, cease and
pass into nothingness. Lamenting, chastising, or rejoicing? No matter—on
this evanescent voice the ephemeral work of Kraus is modeled. Angelus—
that is the messenger in the old engravings.

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Notes
2. Otto Stössl, Lebensform und Dichtungsform [Life Form and Poetic Form] (Mu-
nich, 1914). Johann Peter Hebel (1760–1826) was a journalist and author who
developed a number of innovative short prose forms during his work as editor
and chief writer at the Badischer Landkalender, an annual publication not unlike
the American Old Farmer’s Almanach. See Benjamin’s essays on Hebel in Volume
1 of this edition.
3. This quotation by Adalbert Stifter (1805–1868) comes from the introduction to
his Bunte Steine (1853), a volume of short stories. Stifter’s prose is characterized
by an unusually graceful style and a reverence for natural processes. See Ben-
jamin’s essay “Stifter” in Volume 1 of this edition.
4. Matthias Claudius (1740–1815), German poet, was perhaps the most notable
poetic voice between Klopstock and Goethe. He served as editor of the important
journal Der Wandsbecker Bote.
5. Die letzten Tage der Menschheit (The Last Days of Humankind) is the title of
Kraus’s mammoth apocalyptic drama, which sought to expose the bureaucratic
mediocrity and political criminality that he believed had brought Europe to the
Great War. The play was published in its final form in 1923. Due to its length
(it has 220 scenes and approximately 500 characters), it was first performed in
Vienna only in 1964—and even then in a shortened version.
6. “Vienna Genesis” refers to an illuminated manuscript—a copy of the book of
Genesis—in the collection of the Austrian National Library. Its dating (early
Byzantine, perhaps 500–600 A.D.) and place of origin (Constantinople or Syria)
are disputed. The linkage of Expressionism and late Antiquity had been a concern
of Benjamin’s from the time he read Alois Riegl’s Die spätromische Kunst-Indus-
trie (The Late Roman Art Industry) during the years of the First World War; the
linkage plays an important role in Benjamin’s Ursprung des deutschen Trauerspiels
(Origin of the German Trauerspiel).
7. Benjamin refers here to the "Lulu" cycle, two dramas by the German playwright Frank Wedekind (1864–1918). In Erdgeist (Earth Spirit; 1895) and Die Büchse der Pandora (Pandora's Box; 1904), the conflict of a desiccated, hypocritical bourgeois morality with a personal and above all sexual freedom is played out in the fate of the amoral femme fatale Lulu. Alban Berg based his opera Lulu on Wedekind's plays.


9. Johann Schober (1874–1932), a police official, was twice prime minister of Austria (1921–1922 and 1929–1930). He was best-known for his attempts to negotiate a union between Austria and Germany. Alfred Kerr (pseudonym of Alfred Klemperer; 1867–1948) was Berlin's most prominent and influential theater critic. Johann Nestroy (1801–1862), Austrian dramatist and character actor, used satire, irony, and parody as weapons against the newly rising bourgeoisie. His best-known work is Einen Jux will er sich machen (He Intends to Have a Fling; 1842), adapted by Thornton Wilder as The Matchmaker and later turned into the musical play and film Hello, Dolly!

10. "George school" refers to the circle of conservative intellectuals around the poet Stefan George (1868–1933), whose high-modernist verse appeared in such volumes as Das Jahr der Seele (The Year of the Soul; 1897) and Der siebente Ring (The Seventh Ring; 1907). George's attempt to "purify" German language and culture exerted a powerful influence on younger poets.

11. Ferdinand Raimund, Austrian comic dramatist, was—along with Johann Nestroy—among the preeminent playwrights of Vienna in the mid-nineteenth century.

12. Kraus cites this line in Die Fackel and attributes it to an anonymous Belgian soldier. Granat means "pomegranate"; Granate, "grenade" or "shell."

13. This is the conclusion of Karl Marx's 1844 review of Bruno Bauer's "On the Jewish Question."


15. The reference is to Paul Klee's ink wash drawing Angelus Novus (1920), which Benjamin owned for a time. See the discussion under "1921" in the Chronology to Volume 1 of this edition.