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One of the most important contributions to German literature during the last fifty years has remained almost unnoticed abroad: the work of the Austrian satirist and poet Karl Kraus, who was born in Bohemia in 1874, lived and wrote in Vienna, and died there in 1936. To discuss the reasons for his obscurity is one way of speaking of his unique achievement.

His work is untranslatable. This seems the more surprising because most of it is written in prose: aphorisms, essays, satirical dramas. The majority of these appeared first in his journal Die Fackel, which he founded in 1899 in Vienna and to which he was, after a few years, the sole contributor. From time to time he collected his writings according to different themes and published them as books. His essays appeared in seven volumes with the titles: Sittlichkeit und Kriminalität (Morality and Court Justice) in 1908, Die Chinesische Mauer (The Wall of China) in 1910, Weltgericht (Day of Judgement) in 1919, Untergang der Welt durch schwarze Magie (The Destruction of the World by Black Magic) in 1922, Literatur und Lüge (Literature and Untruth) in 1929, and, posthumously published in 1937, Die Sprache (Language). Of his dramas the greatest is Die letzten Tage der Menschheit (The Last Days of Mankind), written during the Great War and published in 1919. His other dramatic works are: Literatur (1921), Traumtheater (Dream Theatre) (1922), Traumstück (Dreamplay) (1922), Wolkenkuckucksheim (Cloudcuckooland) (1923), and Die Unübersichtlichen (The Unconquerable) (1927). The rest of his work consists of verse, aphorisms, translations, and adaptations. There are nine volumes of Worte in Versen (Words in Verse), published between 1916 and 1930, and one volume of Epigrams (1927). His aphorisms appeared in three volumes: Sprüche und Widersprüche (Dicta and Contradictions) (1909), Pro Domó et Mundo (1912), and Nachts (1919). He translated Shakespeare's Sonnets (1933), and adapted for his own stage and broadcast performances a
number of Shakespeare's dramas, the most significant adaptation being that of Timon of Athens. In later years he gave more and more time to what may seem a strange anticlimax to his literary preoccupations, and yet was the necessary counterpoise to his weightier themes: he recast the libretti of many of the less-known operettas by Offenbach, which, accompanied only on a piano, he performed, sitting behind a little table, with incomparable artistry, musicality, wit, and profound charm. A volume of Zeitstrophen, topical stanzas added by him to Offenbach's songs, appeared as the offspring of this work in 1931. For the purpose of his own performances he also adapted a number of satirical comedies by Nestroy.

Bibliographies are a dull business.* Yet in the case of Karl Kraus the very titles of his books suggest his range: Day of Judgement — and Offenbach, The Last Days of Mankind — and Language. The historical occasion of his apocalyptic themes is the fall of the Austrian Empire, or rather the gradual corruption of its moral, intellectual, and artistic life. He foretold the end of Austria-Hungary. Yet this fact would not in itself suffice to call him a prophet. He was a prophet in a truer sense. Inspired by an ethical and religious conviction, he was the servant not of any dogma, but of a living spiritual power. No word is primitive and unspoiled enough to describe the almost frightening directness, spontaneity, and naivety with which he himself experienced his calling. There seems to be no place for him in a period of German literature which, on its highest level, was characterized by the quest for a new lyrical idiom to express unheard-of novelties, subtleties, and complexities of inner experience, as in the case of Rilke; or by the gentle cultivation of the autumn flowers of an overripe civilization, as with Hofmannsthal; or by the self-conscious development of a new prophetic style, as with Stefan George; or by the blending of pessimism, music, psychology, and irony, as with Thomas Mann; not to mention the many who, in their more or less refined and respectable mediocrity, made names for themselves more often than not by virtue of the provincial inferiority and the increasing barbarism of the surrounding literary world and the general incompetence and irresponsibility of its critics.

In such a period of literature Karl Kraus arrived like an elemental spiritual force in a beauty-parlour of the soul. Yet the word 'elemental' is misleading; for the elements, too, were a fashion in his time, the dernier cri of nervous sophistication. Naturalists and expressionists alike appeared as advocates of the demons of the depth, and as rebels against the anaemic refinements of aestheticism. But with a few exceptions (among them Hauptmann, Wedekind, and Barlach as the most remarkable) theirs was merely a rebellion of resentment and bad manners. Inarticulateness became the apogee of 'self-expression', intellectual asthma, uttering embryonic sentences, counted as a sure sign of intellectual passion, and crippled souls freed themselves of their inhibitions by noisily throwing about their crutches. In the case of Karl Kraus 'elemental' means something different. Through him and in him the spontaneous strength of a tradition and culture comes to life once more, and, finding itself in an environment of betrayal and decay, gains a highly differentiated consciousness of itself, without for a moment suffering the embarrassments of self-consciousness. This rare fusion of spontaneity and subtlety, of ethical integrity and intellectual complexity, he shares — in different fields of creative activity — with Kierkegaard and, in modern German literature, only with Franz Kafka. In modern English literature something similar is to be found in the work of T. S. Eliot, with the tertium comparationis not, of course, residing in any external aspects of their writings, not in form and content, but in the spiritual and ethical situations from which their works spring.
Both Kierkegaard and Kafka have become known to the world through adequate translations. What is it then that makes the work of Karl Kraus untranslatable? It is due equally to its substance and its literary technique. Karl 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. Thus he does not convey through the written word something which, if needs be, could be conveyed in another medium; he merely confronts with the true spirit of language the representative idiom of his society. And at the mere approach of his words the language-scene of the age is uncannily illuminated, revealing souls and minds corrupted by untruth and self-deception.

In 922 numbers of Die Fackel there is not one polemical essay which does not begin and end with an opposition of this kind. His campaigns are not aimed at hostile opinions or ideologies. In every single case his field of action is the ever-widening no-man's-land between appearance and reality, expression and substance, word-gesture and personality. The tirades of rhetoricians, the pamphlets of politicians, the feuilletons of renowned authors are passed through the filter of language, leaving behind mere dregs of folly and residues of false pretence.

In his satirical work the dead word is resurrected and comes back as a spirit of destruction. Men, having tried to live by insincere phrases, now die of their own clichés. The triumph of medical science is undone by the products of the printing-press, and the effect of the ink used by a generation of irresponsible journalists is shown to be as deadly as that of the Black Death.

For Karl Kraus the word has personal life. Language, passion, and thought are one and the same for him. Language is the name of the activity of his passionate thinking; his passion and his thought are identical with their articulation. This is as much as to say that the objects of his thinking and writing are not concepts, but ideas; and not ideas which he "holds", but ideas by which he is held. Poetry and passionate speech, said Goethe, are the sources of life of every language. In this sense every word which Karl Kraus wrote is alive with the life of language, every sentence the result not of construction, but of creation and growth. This was difficult to grasp for an age which betrayed on every level of intellectual activity a preference for constructed abstractions. A noble conspiracy of hard precision seemed at work everywhere to save us from the embarrassments of emotional vagueness and sentimental inexactitude. But intermingled with this brave renunciation of soul that struggled to express itself in this manner was the terror of an age that had lost its soul and made an artistic and intellectual virtue of a terrible emergency. Karl Kraus did not simply accept the loss. He diagnosed sin where others submitted to fate. He attempted atonement where others resigned themselves to the curse. It is this that makes him a prophet. Others may tell their dreams, their nightmares (as Joyce, Kafka, Picasso do). He was wide awake and was seized by the word. It is a biblical happening in a modern setting: 'The prophet that hath a dream, let him tell a dream; and he that hath my word, let him speak my word faithfully .... For ye have perverted the words of the living God. ...' The word for Karl Kraus was an event, as concrete as the word that 'the Lord sent ... unto Jacob, and it hath lighted upon Israel'.

The work of Karl Kraus is rich in words. And every single word is of the greatest possible precision. It is precise through its infinite ambiguity. He intended it to be like that, in conscious protest against the rationalist superstition that a word could ever create - or convey - a clear-cut concept, and fix, as it were, a definite object in the void of the universe. For Karl Kraus all thoughts are in the world even before they are thought. They are dispersed among the elements of language. The artist gathers them together and welds them into his thought. He once said: 'Language is the divining-rod which discovers wells of thought.' Thus language, for him, is a means not so much of communicating what he knows, but of finding out what he does not yet know. Words are living organisms, not labels stuck to objects. They are at home in a cosmos of the spirit, not in a chance assembly of
'atoms of perception'. Each of them has a range of its own, and once struck, opens up numberless trains of thought. The greater the number of associations into which the word enters, the greater its value in a piece of writing. This again must come as a surprise to intellectuals whose sharpest weapon in dispute is the question: What do you mean by that? It is a double-edged weapon: useful in combating vagueness, it yet may defeat language itself if it will not rest until the linguistic emptiness of mathematical precision is reached. Applied excessively, it destroys all the indefinable and imponderable agreements upon which any cultured community is based; and, indeed, much of modern philosophizing is merely the intellectual symptom of the loss of spiritual community.

Karl Kraus's answer to the stock question would be: 'I mean what I say; yet what I say means the opposite of what you understand it to mean. Therefore I mean what I say and its opposite. Nevertheless, I mean something more exact than your sense of exactitude is likely to grasp. For the world of the word is round, and language is Delphi.'

Textbooks would call Karl Kraus a master of language; but he is its master by being its slave. He has no 'command of words'; he is at their command, avenging their honour upon all who violate them. Thus this implacable enemy of all phrase-ridden traditionalism and nationalism is more deeply steeped in a national tradition than any other German writer of his time.

When in 1899 he founded *Die Fackel* his themes seemed trifling to a reading public which, through its press, had become accustomed to the daily excitements of world politics. Karl Kraus dealt with little themes: with the insolence of office, the corruption of language. He unmasked the sham morality of a society which punished as an offence the prostitution of women, but bestowed high honours on men who habitually prostituted their minds and talents to the interests of power and finance. As a literary critic he defended the autonomous rights of poetry against the erudite insensitivity and philological sterility which had monopolized literary judgement in the universities, as well as against the conceited garrulosity and verbose pretence of the book-reviewers of the journals. As a critic of the theatre he fought against the increasing domination of the stage by 'realistic' actors and producers who sapped great drama of all its poetry and passion by performing it with the bored accents of the drawing-room, covering up the emptiness of the spirit with the thrills and glamour of elaborate stage effects. 'In the past', Karl Kraus would say, 'we had actors who were real, and décor which was of cardboard; now the décor is real and the actor of cardboard.'

Soon he began to 'perform' himself. First he read his own writings in public. Then he included in his programmes the early works of Gerhart Hauptmann, and some of the satirical comedies of Raimund and Nestroy. He also read poetry: Claudius, Goethe, Liliencron. Finally he founded his *Theatre of Poetry*. The theatre of the time abounded with technical innovations, with an inexhaustible variety of styles of production and acting; painters, tailors, electricians, engineers ruled the stage, collectively conspiring to squeeze into insignificance the human individual and the word of the poet. Amidst these ornamental ruins of the stage Karl Kraus's Theatre of Poetry consisted of a platform, a few curtains, and a table; and in it was heard the voice of one man. There was nothing of the claptrap virtuosity one usually associates with such one-man shows. The man who, night after night, alone at his writing-desk, was besieged by the spectres of the spiritual decomposition of his age, which he exorcised through his satirical work, lent his voice to the creations of dramatic and poetic genius. He read *Iphigenie auf Tauris* and *Pandora* by Goethe and, again and again, Shakespeare's tragedies and comedies.

What his spellbound audiences witnessed was not an impersonation of different characters. He neither moved about the stage, nor changed his voice in the manner of the ventriloquist. Yet the scene was alive with a multitude of voices, and full of genuine dramatic tension. It was as though the gulf had been bridged between the dramatic imagination of the
poet and the inevitable inadequacies of the ‘real life’ of his figures on a real stage. Karl Kraus took his listeners to the very centre of poetic creation. The characters which he enacted were not meant to produce the illusion of reality; they had the reality of the poet’s illusions. It was easy enough for the audience to distinguish between the many, dramatic personas; yet they were all creatures of one impulse and one passion, and were not wearied by the long journey through the emptiness of space that stretches, in our society, from the subtle order of artistic creation to the crudity and disorder of public reception. His theatre bestowed upon dramatic poetry the privilege which any competently performed piece of music enjoys: the directness of communication, the freedom from interference by the unwieldiness of matter. The infinite variety of word-experience had found its authentic interpreter in Karl Kraus, on the highest level of poetical beauty as well as in the witches’ cauldron of inferiority which took shape in his satirical work.

Even in the first years of *Die Fackel* when, to a superficial observer, it may have seemed that a brilliant polemical talent had launched out against what was merely a typically Austrian form of corruption, more perceptive minds already recognized that behind every dwarf that Karl Kraus attacked there loomed the shadow of a giant. Indeed, it was an Austrian delirium of the spirit from which his first diatribes took their cue. Yet there was no need for him to change his satirical method when the domestic scene of discontent broadened into a European disaster. Into his language he had gathered the storm at a time when his age was still busy sowing wind. But even after the storm had broken over the whole world, his work still remained untranslatably Austrian in its idiom, untranslatably German in its diction.

Three elements from heterogeneous sources came together to form the character of this son of a wealthy Jewish family from Bohemia, and to make him one of the greatest literary personalities of his time: the ethical radicalism of an Old Testament prophet, the conservatism and the anti-plebeian idiosyncrasies of an Austrian aristocrat of pre-1848, and that mystical relationship to language which characterized some of the German Romantics and enabled them to achieve one of the greatest feats in the history of translation – the rendering in German of Shakespeare’s dramas. Of these three ingredients it is the second which is the most puzzling in a man who was regarded as a destructive revolutionary by the majority of his conservative, liberal, and social-democratic fellow-citizens. And, indeed, his conservatism was different from what an age that knew only of ‘political’ decisions meant by ‘conservative’. For him it was not an ideology. He hated all ideologies. He saw them as they were and are: the intellectual pretence of a spiritually impoverished age, the inflated paper currency of the bankruptcy of culture.

After 1848 ideologies spread in Austria like an infectious disease. They emerged from the stagnant waters of discontent which the unfinished revolution had left behind. Unrealized political desires rationalized themselves into bogus systems of political thought, and emotional frustration developed into mental hysteria. Go-getting journalists stirred Austrian Urgemütlichkeit into paroxysms of discomfort, and the lower strata of Alpine feeblemindedness worked their way to the surface and became politically conscious. Hungarian pig-breeders and Viennese stockbrokers struggled for an intellectual articulation of their demands for greater profits. From the ethnic hotch-potch of the Sudeten Germans sprang the doctrine of racial purity, and racially pure but cosmopolitan Jews became ardent propagandists of the Teutonic mythology of Richard Wagner. In a pandemonium of Gutmütlichkeit and confused political aspirations, where commercial travelers hobnobbed with Geist, priests with corrupt journalists, bankers with savours of the people, and advertising agents with artists, the last remnants of Austrian culture dissolved. And this culture had proved particularly corruptible. Its very generosity and blissful lack of formulated moral convictions, its baroque taste for untidiness, its sense of drama and dramatic upheaval, and its childlike trust in its own everlastingness, made it the more susceptible to the poison of industrialization and commercialization. A people in whom faith had always had preponderance over the intellect enthusiastically embraced political ideologies which offered a
In Karl Kraus's satirical work this dissolute scene is confronted with the integrity of a tradition and culture which in him had preserved itself and retained an amazing vigour. The question may be asked: What precisely was this tradition, and in what accurate historical sense was Karl Kraus justified in denouncing its betrayal by the age in which he lived? This type of question seems to have become the touchstone of 'historical precision' and academic sophistication. But the question itself tolls the bell for something which, if ever it was alive in him, has died in the questioner. In the face of Karl Kraus's work it is as pathetically irrelevant as 'the question, What is truth? once was ill the face of its embodiment. One cannot arrive at a concept of culture or of tradition by adding up certain facts or achievements. One cannot define them by singling out certain values. Nor can one deny their existence by pointing out certain shortcomings of periods claimed as periods of culture, or by drawing attention to the ever-present risk and uncertainty, disunity and foolishness, wickedness and confusion of human nature. Culture and tradition are precisely what is alive in the work of Karl Kraus and dead in the society which he attacked. It is the accumulated religious, ethical, and aesthetic experience of a community which, in spite of all its complexity, diversity, and subtlety, expresses itself spontaneously and unmistakably in the conduct, judgements, beliefs, and creations of its members. An age without any sense of religious, ethical, and aesthetic order has no culture. This does not mean that an age of culture has no experience of disorder. On the contrary, it is only through the sense of order that disorder can be experienced. Ulysses in Shakespeare's Troilus and Cressida is the man of culture. He has that conservative sense of degree and order capable of perceiving chaos:

Take but degree away, untune that string,
And, hark, what discord follows! each thing meets
In mere oppugnancy: the bounded waters
Should lift their bosom higher than the shores
And make a sop of all this solid globe:

Strength should be lord of imbecility,
And the rude son should strike his father dead:
Force should be right; or rather, right and wrong.
Between whose endless jar justice resides,
Should lose their names, and so should justice too.
Then everything includes itself in power,
Power into will, will into appetite;
And appetite, an universal wolf,
So doubly seconded with will and power,
Must make perforce an universal prey,
And last eat up himself.

Any student of history may prove that Ulysses's sense of degree is merely a subjective illusion. He may demonstrate that, at all times, strength is the lord of imbecility, and that all sons, if only sufficiently rude, strike their fathers dead in one way or another. Yet by proving his case he would only show that in him right and wrong have lost their names and that, in some ages, imbecility of imagination can become the judge of strength of vision. There is hope in an age and for an age only so long as there exist in it some individuals who within themselves have retained that order of degree, and denounce its general loss. It was Kierkegaard who said (and Karl Kraus who quoted) that 'the individual cannot help his age; he can only express that it is doomed'. And this is the only way in which he can bring help to it. This paradox links the work of Karl Kraus with the prophecies of the Old Testament, makes The Last Days of Mankind, the last Austrian document of European culture, and its author one of the last genuine conservative spirits in it.
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and hospitals, in the offices of journals, the lecture-rooms of universities, the headquarters of armies, and again and again in the streets of Vienna. The author says in the preface that the drama which, if performed on earth, would last for ten evenings is meant to be enacted in a theatre on Mars. ‘Audiences here would not be able to bear it. For it is blood of their blood, and its contents are those unreal, unthinkable years, out of reach for the wakefulness of mind, inaccessible to any memory and preserved only in nightmares – those years when characters from an opera played the tragedy of mankind.’ That is the all-pervading theme of this incommensurable satirical work: the discrepancy between the stature of the protagonists and the weight and significance of the play which they have succeeded in getting up.

In 1914 it seemed a typically and exclusively Austrian theme. Only in Vienna could it have forced itself upon a satirical mind. With overpowering vis comica Karl Kraus’s satires bring out the incongruity between the kindheartedness and nonchalance of the inhabitants of that country and the ‘iron rule’ of war and conquest, between the soft and sentimental ring of their dialects and the heroic accents of Nibelungenlied, between their excessive admiration for waltz-enchanted soubrettes and the worship of the god Mars. And with equal power this writer conveys the terror and pity of the creature helplessly caught in a tragedy and unable to recognize his own guilt.

This theme, it seems, has ceased to be a provincial one. I know of no other which throws so much light on the particular character of our time. We are imbued with the idea that it is greatness and strength of personalities which account for dramatic events, achievements and catastrophes alike, and that it is in mediocrity that safety lies. In that we are the involuntary heirs of the Renaissance and of Romanticism. We deplore that a man like Hitler ever came to power. But behind our regret may lurk a suspicion that he was a ‘great man’ after all, an evil genius, but a genius nevertheless. For we judge by the spectacular consequences of his dominion. We have not yet grasped the demonic possibilities of mediocrity. We believe that the only appropriate partner of Mephisto is a genius. It was Karl Kraus who discovered to what satanic heights inferiority may rise. He anticipated Hitler long before anyone knew his name.

Thus, through him, the theme of literature has undergone a radical change. In bygone days it was the business of the imagination to create within the world of the senses the image and symbol capable of expressing the wealth of inner experience. It was in art that man, dissatisfied with the triviality of everyday existence, found a reality more adequate to what he felt to be the truth of his life. Today it is different: our task – and difficulty – is rather to find within ourselves something big enough to be charged with the responsibility for the monstrous dimensions of our external reality. In a better age the disaster of the world which we seem to have caused, and the still greater destruction which we face, would have been the doing of mythological creatures, enemies of mankind, hostile gods who tear open the mountains and burn the habitations of men in the volcanic fire; of giants, cyclops, and sinister magicians who have robbed Olympus of its secrets and with them threaten to extinguish life. In our uncanny and more enlightened epoch all this is merely the result of a conspiracy of sobriety, scientific planning, mediocrity, and human insignificance. The demonstration of this terrifying incongruousness fills the pages of The Last Days of Mankind. Its heroes are troglodytes living in the skyscrapers of history, barbarians having at their disposal all the amenities and high explosives of technical progress, fishmongers acting the role of Nelsons, ammunition salesmen crossing Rubicons, and hired scribblers tapping out on their machines the heroic phrases of the bards. And there are, on the more passive and pathetic side, their victims on active service: farm labourers with a few weeks of battle training, honest-to-goodness little people with pensionable salaries and paid holidays, decent folk whose imagination is unable to grasp even a microscopic fragment of the horror which they are commanded to inflict upon the world by faithfully serving machines, pulling levers, and pressing buttons. And the effects are registered by men whose imagination is blunted and whose moral judgement is corrupted by the insidious poison of journalistic
language which has emptied the word of all its reality and meaning.

This is Karl Kraus's thesis: if our imagination sufficed to visualize the reality behind the news column of one morning paper, this reality would not and could not exist. And if one man's imagination were inspired by it and gave expression to it, all the tragedies of ancient Greece would dwindle into idyllic sentimentalities before such a drama of human corruption and human agony. But such an imagination does not exist, and therefore there exists such a reality; there exists such a reality, and therefore no such imagination. This is the last wonder of the world, and compared to it all the others are children's playthings. Man has achieved a technical superiority over himself which threatens him with unavoidable disaster. The combined employment of technique and 'manpower' has got the better of the power of his humanity. Between his technical mastery (which would have terrified Prometheus) and his imagination (which not even pigmies could eke out to make from it fairy tales for their children) he has fixed a gulf spacious enough for Armageddon to take place.

There were in German literature men before, and contemporary with, Karl Kraus who had recognized the immense dangers, indeed the apocalyptic character, of their age and whose works were prompted by this sense of urgency; there were, for instance, Nietzsche and Stefan George. But with them the experience of their time inspired the attempt to transcend it in the dimension of time itself, and to redeem it in the vision of a future which would be greatness itself and purity of spirit. Karl Kraus, on the other hand, insisted upon the timeless significance of the contemporary scene. For him it was not a cacophonous overture, played in the dark, before the curtain rose on a stage of light; it was itself the drama, redeemable not through the expectation of future goodness, but only through the faithful realization of present evil. He spiritualized the raw material of experience which his time offered. His method was quotation. He took the material of experience as it was: the coffee-house conversation of the journalists, the stock exchange rendezvous of the racketeers, the fragments of talk which struck his ear in the streets of Vienna, the judgements of the law courts, the leading articles of the newspapers, and the chatter of their readers — in fact, all that looks like the triviality of daily life — and endowed it with a soul: an anti-soul, as it were. This he achieved not by recasting, shaping, modifying the experience. He quoted verbatim. "The most improbable deeds which are here reported," he says in the preface to The Last Days of Mankind, "really happened; I have registered only what was done. The most improbable conversations which are here conducted took place; exaggerations and inventions are quotations. . . Documents assume a living shape, reports come to life as persons, persons die as leading articles. The feuilleton is given a mouth to deliver itself as a monologue; phrases walk on two legs — men have kept only one. Inflexions of voices rush and rustle through our days and grow into the chorus of the unholy plot. People who have lived amidst mankind and have survived it, the executive organs and spokesmen of an age that has no flesh but blood, no blood but ink, are reduced to shadows and marionettes, that is to the form befitting their busy sham-existences. Cyphers and leumus, masks of the tragic carnival, have living names because this must be so, and because nothing is accidental in this time conditioned by chance. This gives nobody the right to regard it as a local affair. Even the noises of a Viennese rush-hour are directed from a cosmic point. He achieves the effect of satire, drama, tragedy, not merely by effectively arranging the material of experience, but by taking it as it is and transferring it into another medium. This procedure resembles an experiment usually performed by schoolboys by their physics masters. A little balloon, sealed but not inflated, an inconspicuous shrivelled little object, is put under a bell-jar which is then emptied of its content of air. The minute quantity of air which had remained in the shrivelled balloon, now, in the new medium, suffices to make it into a full-blown globe. The material of the balloon has not changed, but its appearance and shape are decisively transformed.

In the work of Karl Kraus something similar takes place.
He transfers his characters, all these leader-writers and leader-readers, shareholders and opinion-makers, war-reporters and truth-distorters, into a medium the laws of which issue 'from a cosmic point'. And there he shows, on a full-blown and transparent object, the diabolic structure of what before looked merely like innocuous mediocrity and banality. Thus his apocalypse has found its appointed executors. In the absence of an accepted mythology it is Tom, Dick, and Harry who charge through the world as apocalyptic horsemen.

What then is that 'cosmic point' with its strange perspective which, seemingly distorting all things, yet makes them appear in their true significance? It is the point of intersection where nature and spirit meet, the crux of the universe and the focal point of the soul of a creature made in God's image. Karl Kraus's satirical work tells the story of the Fall once more in all its fearful actuality.

Through *The Last Days* go, as the chorus of the tragedy, two figures called the Optimist and the Grumbler. The Grumbler is the author himself, and by choosing this denigrating name he has made ironical use of a title bestowed upon him by some of his contemporaries. The Optimist is the reasonable man (and it is important that he is not satirically caricatured, but is throughout the Grumbler's intelligent partner), showing a great deal of common sense, psychological understanding, and historical appreciation. He is balanced, while the Grumbler is desperate. The Optimist always sees both sides of a problem, whereas the Grumbler refuses to learn how to squint. The Grumbler speaks in eschatological terms, the Optimist in terms of history. 'I don't know what you are talking about,' the Optimist would say, 'our situation is far from being unique. Life has always been precarious; there has always been a crisis.' 'Profound, indeed,' the Grumbler would reply, 'if only I did not have the uneasy feeling that you use your knowledge as an excuse to behave as though there were no crisis at all.' 'We have lived in illusory and artificial safety up till now,' the Optimist would assert, 'and what we witness is a return to normal.' 'No,' would be the Grumbler's retort, 'you have lived in illusory and artificial safety, and what I witness is a deadly complication of abnormality.'

The dialectic of these dialogues consists in the perpetual juxtaposition of psychological understanding and moral experience. In a world abounding with psychological penetration and analytical literature, the work of Karl Kraus was of the greatest value for a generation lost in a welter of relativities. He, who spent hours over the decision where to put a comma, would yet be able to decide instantly on a moral issue. His moral word was 'Yea, yea', or 'Nay, nay', but his sentences were complex organisms of the subtlest structure. In the moral sphere where most contemporary writers would lose their way in a tangle of problems he would see none; but he would prove to all of them that they had given too little thought to the sound of their words and to the rhythm and syntax of their sentences. And what, above all, he taught those who were able to hear him was the meaning and extent of moral responsibility. His unfailing and instinctive response to what are 'strictly moral' questions was the result of his having pondered over them endlessly in 'strictly amoral' fields: in the sphere of aesthetics and language.

*Linguage* – the collection of his essays on this subject – is probably the profoundest book that exists on style and the use of German. It is the work of an artist and moralist, not of a pedant and grammarian. There it becomes clear that the ruthlessness of his moral judgement springs from the delicate tact and care which he shows in his dealings with the 'crystallized tradition of the spirit of man'. What corresponds to his impatience with the wrongdoers is his infinite patience with language, and his relentless ethical determination his compassion for the maltreated word. He knew what few critics of his time knew: that the aesthetic judgement is a moral judgement if it is to be more than the diffuse reaction of a vaguely refined sensitivity. For him *de gustibus non est disputandum* was an alarming advertisement of a moral bankruptcy. He saw the connexion between maltreated words and the maltreatment of human souls and bodies, and he avenged lives by restoring words to their state of integrity, health, and vigour in which, of their own accord, they could
The Disinherited Mind

'speak to the yet unknowing world how these things came about'. Through him it is language itself that opens its mouth and speaks to those who use it deceitfully: But ye are forgers of lies, ye are all physicians of no value.

In one of the dialogues with the Optimist, the Grumbler asserts that Germany and Austria were more deeply affected by the corruption of the spirit than the West. The corruption of England, for instance, could not suffice to produce and maintain a satirist.

THE GRUMBLER: There is no English satirist.
THE OPTIMIST: Bernard Shaw.
THE GRUMBLER: Precisely.

The kind of literary work commonly called 'satire' is rather vaguely defined. If, for instance, Heinrich Heine and Bernard Shaw are satirists, then one must find a different name for Karl Kraus. If, however, he is a satirist — and I believe he is the first European satirist since Swift — then Heine and Shaw are merely earnest jesters. The difference lies in the nature of their negative enthusiasm. Is its positive pole love, or sentimentality? Faith, or an expectation? An idea, or an intellectual concept? Is its creation therefore the other side of poetry, or of belles-lettres (though they may be rhymed as in the case of Heine, or concerned with social reforms as in the case of Shaw)? Is the writer of satires a wit thriving on the foolishness of society, or a genius whose soul is wounded by the sinfulness of his age?

Schiller, in his essay Über naive und sentimentalische Dichtung, says of the true satirist that he would have been a great poet had 'the moral perversity of his age not filled his heart with bitterness'. And Karl Kraus did write poetry, published in the nine volumes of Worte in Versen. If there could be any doubt left about the authenticity of his satire, it would be removed by his lyrical utterances. They set in relief the works of hate against a background of light. As the scope of his satirical work widened and the darkness of its world deepened, so his poetic genius gained in simplicity and spontaneity, his lyrical work in tenderness and affection. It shows his satire to be merely the imploring gesture of a lover who seeks to guard what he loves against the evil of the world closing in upon it. He is not a 'modern' poet. His subjects, images, rhymes, and rhythms are traditional. His poems are about love and hatred, memories of childhood and visions of dreams, waterfalls, winter and spring, the green at a dusty roadside, the eyes of an old beggar-woman, the loyalty of a dog, Le papillon est mort, and Ein toter Tag schlägt seine Augen auf.

...But they are made of brittle stuff than their traditional appearance would suggest. Their material seems purified in the purgatory of the satirist's experience, and hardened by the determination of one who was called to defend what is left of the innocence of the world.

Karl Kraus said of himself:

Nicht Gott, nur alles leugn' ich, was ihn leugnet,
Und wenn er will, ist alles wunderbar.

At the end of The Last Days of Mankind the voice of the Lord sounds through the silence of a horribly devastated scene. The voice speaks the words attributed to the old Emperor of Austria who died during the Great War: Ich habe es nicht gewollt. The satirist Karl Kraus brought to life a world whose every breath was a denial of God's designs, and was the chaos that decided that His will should not be done. The poet Karl Kraus praised the order of a universe in which all is well if only He wills it so. It was an Austrian theme with which Karl Kraus began. It was the theme of our world with which he ended: the faith that lies on the other side of despair.