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***Karl Kraus: Apocalyptic Satirist, Volume 2: The Postwar Crisis and the Rise of the Swastika* by Edward Timms. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press. 639 pp. \$50.**

Of the great writers, artists, and composers of fin-de-siècle and World War I Vienna, many of whom—Freud and Wittgenstein, Arnold Schoenberg and Adolf Loos-- he knew personally, Karl Kraus (1874-1936) is probably the most neglected, at least in the English-speaking world. His great journal *Die Fackel* (*The Torch*), which he founded in 1899 and was soon writing entirely on his own, ran to 415 issues or 37 volumes with a total of 23,000 pages by the time of his death. A complete text of this, perhaps the leading political-cultural-literary journal of its day, is now available on CD-ROM (Munich: K. G. Saur, 2002), but for a contemporary audience, it is not only length that makes the journal difficult to digest; much of the brilliant satire found in its pages is inevitably too specific, too rich in local detail, to be understood. The objects of Kraus' scorn—the Viennese press, the courts, the venality of politicians and civil servants whether of the Right or the Left, the sexual hypocrisy of bourgeois Viennese society, and especially the debasement of language—all these are embedded in the most local and complicated particulars of daily life during the last years of the Hapsburg Empire and then in the fragile and short-lived postwar republic.

Kraus's other writings (the 1994 Suhrkamp edition of the complete works collected in book form runs to twenty volumes) are similarly all but unknown in the United States. From time to time, selections from his famous aphorisms and his lyric poems have been published only to go out of print again. His gargantuan (eight hundred-page) play *Die Letzen Tage der Menschheit* (*The Last Days of Mankind*, 1922)—a play performable, as Kraus himself quipped, “only on Mars,” was hailed by Bertolt Brecht and others as one of the great dramatic works of modernism

and it is certainly a remarkable anti-war play. Yet, although there is a complete French translation by Jean-Louis Besson and Henri Christophe (2004), the only English version, abridged and edited by Frederick Ungar (1974), is out of print. Kraus's late satire on Nazi ideology, *Die Dritte Walpurgisnacht* (1933), which begins with the now-famous sentence, *Mir fällt zu Hitler nichts ein* ("Hitler brings nothing to my mind"), has, like *Last Days*, been translated into French-- this edition has a preface by the Wittgensteinian philosopher Jacques Bouveresse-- but there is no English translation of *Walpurgisnacht* or of Kraus's lyric poems—these almost all written in rhyming stanzas or couplets and hence especially difficult to render in an idiom that can convey Kraus's particular mix of High German with Viennese dialect and street-slang.

Given the uncanny relevance of Kraus's political writings—and all his writings whatever their genre, are essentially political—to our contemporary culture, it is high time for a Kraus revival, or at least *arrival*, in Anglo-America. The British historian Edward Timms's monumental biography should do much to pave the way. His is a richly documented account of Kraus's brilliant and merciless exposure of political spin and moral hypocrisy in the early twentieth century; it provides, moreover, extraordinarily detailed information about the cultural and political life of modern Vienna and its interlocking professional and social circles. Indeed, the detail can be irritating: Timms seems to share Kraus's own passion for putting it all in. Volume 1, *Culture and Catastrophe in Hapsburg Vienna* (Yale, 1986) runs to 443 pages, concluding with the end of the Great War and the publication of *Last Days*. Volume 2, *The Postwar Crisis and the Rise of the Swastika*, published a full twenty years later, is the exhaustive but riveting narrative of Kraus's increasing alienation from a cultural scene he had once dominated. And yet,

even in his thousand-odd pages, Timms gives short shrift to the actual biography of Karl Kraus—for example, his childhood, family, and schooling, as well as, at the other end of the story, the circumstances of his death-- and the chronology is not straightforward, the second volume frequently looping back to reconsider incidents and events of the pre-war period that were slighted or incorrectly reported in the first volume. These “corrections” and emendations may confuse a reader unfamiliar with volume 1, especially since the new volume regularly alludes to persons, places, and events that were discussed in the earlier one.

Despite these difficulties, Timms’s book is a goldmine for all who are interested in the complexities and contradictions of European modernism. It begins with a brilliant chapter on “The Post-War German Mentality” that sets the stage for Kraus’s own ultimately hopeless fight against Fascism. Even those familiar with World War I literature will marvel at the account of the crisis and catastrophe confronting Vienna’s citizens, especially its Jews, whether or not, like Kraus, they had been baptized in the prewar years. As late as the summer of 1918, Timms reminds us, the Austro-German coalition thought it had won the war. The news of defeat on the western front, thanks to the American intervention, thus came as a total shock, and the instant dismemberment of the empire, leaving Vienna the capital of an insignificant small rural nation, whose citizens had neither food nor firewood during the winter of 1919, set the stage for the series of political disasters that were, in due course, to propel Hitler to power.

Kraus, who had taken a strong pacifist line from 1914 on, was one of the first to recognize what defeat portended. As early as 1921, he identified Germany as the country where “the swastika rises above the ruins of global conflagration”; in subsequent issues of *Die Fackel*, Kraus exposed

the *Hakenkreuzler* (“Swastiklers”) for what they were, arguing that the postwar economic crisis had created a fertile breeding ground for irrationalism (the Swastika was an occult symbol) and anti-Semitism, especially vis-à-vis the Eastern Jews, now pouring into Vienna. He attributed the incipient Fascism of Germany and Mussolini’s Italy to the defeat at Versailles and hence placed the greatest blame on the Kaiser who had taken Germany into war. At an Innsbruck reading of *Last Days*, Kraus was, not surprisingly, vilified by the reactionary press as dangerously radical and “racially alien” to boot. Thus Kraus, who had converted to Catholicism in 1911, believing that total assimilation and secularism were essential for Jewish survival in Austria, found himself isolated and denounced: he left the church, which he had come to find guilty of serious abuses, in 1923. Caught between the Scylla of the *Socialists* (he had no confidence in Communism as economic system) and the Charybdis of the conservative Christian Democratic party, Kraus tried to steer a middle course, displaying an almost pathological aversion to groups, parties, and movements. “The aim,” writes Timms “was to counteract partisan imbecility (*Parteiverblödung*), slogan-mania (*Schlagwörterwahn*) and . . . the befogging of the brain (*Benebelung der Gehirne*) in whatever quarter they might originate.”

Kraus’s distaste for all identity politics—political, religious, ethnic, sexual—coupled with his emphasis on individual probity and merit, made him a unique and charismatic figure in the Vienna of the 1920s. As Elias Canetti, thirty years Kraus’s junior, remembers the editor of *Die Fackel*, whose public readings he first attended as a student in 1924:

His lectures attacked everything that was bad and corrupt. . . . Every word, every syllable in *Die Fackel* was written by him personally. It was like a court of law. *He* brought the charges and *he* passed judgment. There was no defense attorney: a lawyer was

superfluous: Kraus was so fair that no one was accused unless he deserved it. Kraus never made a mistake; he couldn't make a mistake. . . . He took personal care of every comma, and anyone trying to find a typographical error in *Die Fackel* could toil for weeks on end. (*The Torch in my Ear*, 1977)

As for *The Last Days of Mankind*:

When he read aloud from it you were simply flabbergasted. No one stirred in the auditorium, you didn't dare breathe, He read all parts himself, producers and generals, the scoundrels and the poor wretches who were the victims of the war—they all sounded as genuine as if they were standing in front of you. Anyone who had heard Kraus didn't want to go to the theater again, the theatre was so boring compared with him, he was a whole theater by himself. (*Torch in my Ear*)

The implication is that Kraus was primarily a performance artist, that perhaps *reading* his anti-war play rather than hearing Kraus act it out would be a bore. But *Last Days*, monstrously long as it is, has superbly fresh and vivid scenes like the conversation in Act 1 between local workmen in the Vienna suburbs, who have been commissioned to paint over all placards and shop window signs that “unpatriotically” use “foreign” words or phrases. The irony is that, prior to the war, the Hapsburg Empire was itself wholly polyglot, the workers in question resorting to their native Czech or Hungarian rather than to German. So their newly pious transformation of the Café Westminster to Westmünster and their castigation of a young man heard to say “Adieu” makes for dazzling theater.

Kraus's own involvement with theater, from his youthful desire to become an actor at the Burg Theater to his close ties with fringe theater in the Prater of the Leopoldstadt (the Jewish quarter),

to his quarrels with the famous director Max Reinhardt—all this is carefully laid out in Timms’s narrative. For decades, *Die Fackel* reviewed and commented upon the theatrical and musical events of Vienna, Budapest, and even Berlin with Kraus’s customary rigor and encyclopedic knowledge. He ranged readily between Shakespeare and contemporary cabaret. But theater was also the public face of the Vienna underworld of which Kraus was a citizen as well. Here the emblematic role of Irma Karczeska comes in.

In volume 1, Timms refers to Irma only once as the young “actress” with whom Kraus had a brief liaison, arousing the jealousy of his psychoanalyst friend, the Freud disciple Fritz Wittels. Kraus’s opposition to Freudian theory is legendary: It was he who coined the famous aphorism: *Psychoanalyse ist jene Geisteskrankheit, für deren Therapie sie sich hält.* (“Psychoanalysis is that mental illness of which it believes itself to be the cure. In Kraus’s view, psychoanalysis encouraged in the patient a paradoxical pride in his or her own symptoms (*Symptomenstolz*) and exaggerated the role of the unconscious in childhood sexuality. But the estrangement from Wittels, who was to attack Kraus in a thinly veiled novel, had less to do with Freud than with Irma, a girl from a petit-bourgeois Catholic family who became Kraus’s mistress when she was not yet fifteen. Even then, so Kraus later claimed, Irma had already had other lovers. Kraus gave her a part in his 1905 production of Wedekind’s *Pandora* and, according to Timms, “evidently tried to cast her in a quasi-mythical role—as a ‘Dionysian girl born several thousand years too late.’ He groomed her for a life of love, encouraging her to develop erotic refinements reminiscent of the ‘hetaera’—the glamorous concubine of ancient Greece as described by Lucian and depicted by Gustav Klimt.” But by 1907, tired of Irma’s incessant “chattering,” he passed her on to Fritz Wittels, who promptly fell in love with her and used her as the model for his

paper on *Das Kindweib*. Applying Freud's theory of infantile auto-eroticism, Wittels compares her ability to obtain pleasure from any sexual partner to the infant's uninhibited sucking on whatever object is available.

Freud thoroughly disapproved of this essay, regarding it as the expression of mere fantasy-- a fantasy, moreover, based on the unnecessary victimization of a poor ignorant girl, who was being used in a triangle that signified the displaced homosexual desire between her two lovers. In the recriminations that followed, Kraus and Wittels became antagonists, and the latter was expelled from the Psychoanalytic Society although he later went on to have a very successful career in the United States. Kraus, in the meantime, remained in regular contact with Irma until 1925. By the early '30s, Irma, who had made three unfortunate marriages, was alone, ill, and depressed; she frequently wrote to Kraus, reproaching him for no longer caring for her, and on January 1, 1933, she committed suicide.

This sordid tale is revealing because it shows Kraus, the scourge of hypocrites, himself a hypocrite when it came to sexual mores. In his writings, he was the champion of freedom and equality for women, deploring the Victorian double standard and especially the practice of child abuse. In his private life, however, he remained very much a man of his class, exploiting lower-class girls like Irma. Again, in keeping with the mores of fin-de-siècle Vienna, his more serious love affairs were with aristocratic women: The great love of Kraus's life was the Baroness Sadonie Nadherny von Borutin, at whose family estate in Bohemia, Schloss Janowitz, he was a frequent visitor during the war years. Many love poems to Sidonie survive, but most are heavily

coded so that the baroness would not be “compromised.” Here again, the enemy of bourgeois mores reveals himself to be after all quite bourgeois.

But by 1930, the personal life of the Austrian intelligentsia was pushed into the background by events that even Kraus himself had failed to anticipate. Nazi uprisings were already common in the '20s, but by June 1931, Timms tells us, “thugs on the streets of Vienna were wielding truncheons and screaming ‘Death to the Jews!’” *Anschluss* became the battle cry of both Left and Right, the Left hoping that solidarity with the German Socialists would help their cause. Kraus’s dreams of internationalism and pan-European cooperation, of a democratic republic ruled by reason and law, were thus destroyed. Thus when the peasant-patriot Engelbert Dolfuss, a devoutly Catholic anti-Nazi became chancellor in 1932, Kraus sided with him as the last best hope against Hitler. But Dolfuss was also an autocratic ruler who dissolved parliament and outlawed the Communist party along with its Nazi nemesis. His was, in any case, a losing battle: On July 25, 1934, Dolfuss was openly murdered by Nazi thugs in his chancery on the Ballhausplatz.

The rest is history: In the last years of his life, Kraus could do no more than dissect the Nazi ethos that had already prevailed. He thus turned to one of his pet subjects—the decay of language—contending that it was the combination of “ink, technology, and death,” the combination of modern technological jargon with the cult of mythic heroic death in battle, that made Nazi discourse so intolerable. Goebbels, for example, used “reasonable” business vocabulary like “incorporation” (*Überholung*) and “coordination” (*Gleichaltung*) as euphemisms for the confiscation of property and the suppression of dissent.



Again, Himmler's term *protective custody* really meant imprisonment and potential torture, as in this extract from a World War I newspaper that Kraus collaged into *Die Dritte Walpurgisnacht*: "Some prove to be 'unfit for protective custody' on the way to the camp and have to be rerouted to the hospital."

The last poem of Kraus's to appear in *Die Fackel* -- "Man frage nicht, was all die Zeit ich machte. / Ich bleibe stumm" (One shouldn't ask what I've been doing all this time. / I remain silent)—appeared in October 1933; the last issue of *Die Fackel* itself on June 12, 1936, just a few months before its author's death. In reflecting on Kraus's last days, one wonders whether he could have done more about his country's situation if he had spent less time pursuing enemies like Emmerich Bekessy, the corrupt and vicious owner-editor of the rival journal *Die Stunde*. Kraus's successful campaign against Bekessy, justified and perhaps necessary as it was, took on a monomaniacal cast before it was over. Is revenge on this order really worth it? Do one's fellow journalists deserve this much hatred?

Timms, ever the scrupulous biographer-historian, does not ask such questions. Perhaps the last word, then, should be that of Kraus's contemporary Walter Benjamin, whose 1931 "Karl Kraus" is not only one of his most important essays but one of the best things written on the Austrian writer. When Benjamin, late in the essay, speaks of the "strange interplay between reactionary theory and revolutionary practice that is met everywhere in Kraus," he is referring to the inherent idealism buried beneath the cynical façade of Kraus's work—the faith that if one exposes the evils of, say, the language of journalism or the methods of modern diplomacy, one might be able

to bring the object of attack back to its original, uncontaminated state. But, Benjamin argues, it doesn't work that way.

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. If, however, high capitalism defiles not only the ends but also the means of journalism, then a new blossoming of paradisiac, cosmic humanity can no more be expected of a power that defeats it than a second blooming of the language of Goethe or Claudius.

One needn't be a Marxist to take Benjamin's point: Kraus's confidence in the power of *Die Fackel* to transform the political and cultural ethos of Vienna and of the world beyond it is surely excessive. The system that empowers the individual does, after all, stay in place, whatever the fate of this or that editor or government official. Indeed, writes Benjamin, "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." Accordingly, Kraus "does not stand on the frontier 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."

To which one might reply that such a complaint is already more than anyone has a right to expect "in these great times"—times that, as Edward Timms's important book contends, can be profitably looked at look through the prism of Kraus's aphoristic language. For example:

*Wenn einer sich wie ein Vieh benommen hat, sagt er: "Man ist doch auch nur ein Mensch!" Wenn er aber wie ein Vieh behandelt wird, sagt er: Man ist doch auch ein Mensch!*

When someone behaves like a beast, he says: “After all, one is only human.” But when he is treated like a beast, he says: Ater all, one is human!

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