

Edward Timms. *Karl Kraus, Apocalyptic Satirist: The Post-War Crisis and the Rise of the Swastika.* New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2005. xxi + 639 pp. \$50.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-300-10751-7.



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Karl Kraus: Text as Life, Life as Text

“Im Anfang war das Wort,” Faust famously translates. Unsatisfied with the last word, he follows a tortuous path through a series of alternates before settling upon: “Im Anfang war die Tat!”[1] This is a pity, for had the spirit conjurer consulted Karl Kraus, twentieth-century Viennese man of letters, he might have spared himself at least this bit of torment. For Kraus—journalist, essayist, author, playwright, poet, animated lecturer and performer of Shakespeare, Lehar and Brecht—words could be as powerful as deeds. He dedicated his life to words spoken and words written, as well as to their selection and disposition on the page—even to the seemingly insignificant marks of punctuation between words that couple them into phrases and thoughts, one to another. From the age of twenty-five until a few months before his death—and without benefit of a university degree in a city basking in the reputations of such luminaries as Sigmund Freud, Stefan Zweig, Hugo von Hoffmanstahl and Franz Werfel—Kraus wrote and edited most of the numbers of his satirical journal, *Die Fackel*, by himself. When a heart attack felled the indefatigable bachelor on June 12, 1936, he left behind over 27,000 pages written over thirty-seven years. The inquiring reader necessarily comes to the man—and

not a little of his times—through his writings, all subjects with which Edward Timms demonstrates intimate familiarity in this new biography.

Picking up where he left off in his first volume twenty years earlier, Timms begins *in medias res*. [2] The First World War has just ended. Germany seeks someone to blame for its defeat; Austria, with the collapse of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, an identity. Kraus contributes to the discourse through his internationalist literary activities: reciting his own, Goethe’s and Shakespeare’s poems at the Sorbonne (nine of its professors later nominated him for the Nobel Prize in Literature); translating the libretti of Jacques Offenbach’s operettas; writing essays that present the “integrated culture of ancient China as a paradigm for the future” (p. 60). Through epigrams and a play, *Die letzten Tagen der Menschheit*, he continues to expose the misuses and abuses of politics, journalism and technology. The often unhealthy, always symbiotic relationship between the first two has long been a cliché, and Kraus certainly has material aplenty over which to fulminate, with Fritz Haber’s 1914 development of poison gas and the contemporaneous dif-

fusion of cinema throughout Europe. But Kraus goes further, and through adept condensation of arguments and articles that stretch across several issues of *Die Fackel*, Timms allows us to follow. He demonstrates, for example, how the satirist parses the language to criticize the inherent militarism of habitual expressions such as *in die Bresche* and *Schulter am Schulter*. And unlike Faust, who “das Wort so sehr verachtet,” Kraus “aim[s] â to convince us that this unthinking use of language may have apocalyptic consequences” (p. 78).[3]

Through the essays, letters and poems, Timms also portrays Karl Kraus in his relationships to women. We learn that while being a career-long champion of the rights of abused children, Kraus was not above casting a fifteen-year-old Irma Karczewska in one of his plays, enjoying her as one of many lovers in his bed, and then passing her on to his psychoanalyst friend, Fritz Wittels, once her chattiness had outpaced her allure. Timms is at his best when describing the cultural incestuousness of interwar Austria, for this same Irma sits as model for Gustav Klimt’s hetaera sketch and serves as subject for Wittels’s paper, “Das Kindweib,” which borrowed heavily from Freud. Kraus himself later writes a verse play, *Traumstück* (1922), in which he ridicules some of the tenets of psychoanalytic theory, displaying his gift for satire and neologisms by referring to the art’s practitioners as *Psychoanalen* or “anal psychologists” (p. 176).

Timms dedicates the final chapters of his book to countering the prevailing belief that Kraus remained silent about the rise of German fascism. Indeed, he had been busy writing his anti-Nazi polemic, *Dritte Walpurgisnacht*, between March and September 1933, delaying publication out of fear for his own safety and because he felt that the work might “provoke reprisals against helpless victims of National Socialism in Germany” (p. 493). Kraus had little time to change his mind, for within three years he was dead. His lawyer smuggled an almost complete set of proofs out of Austria, but the text did not appear in book form until 1952, too late to serve as a warning. By the end of his life, however, Kraus had so steeped himself in literary and political writings that his seeming need for a clever allusion may have stifled his effectiveness as a harbinger of the apocalypse anyway. Acknowledging that *Dritte Walpurgisnacht* contains “over a thousand excerpts from the political discourse of 1933, interwoven with more than two hundred literary allusions,”

and “refers to about two hundred individuals by name, many of them extremely obscure,” Timms nevertheless offers a revealing synopsis of the piece (p. 496). He then reads closely to show us how Kraus incorporates rhetorical flourishes reminiscent of Shakespeare and Goethe, traces the devolution of German journalism from Heine to Goebbels, and takes Heidegger, Spengler and Benn to task for what he perceives as their verbal espousal of violence.

Kraus’s life contained other chapters, of course, and Timms studiously chronicles all of them: the endless litigations against literary enemies; the conversion from Judaism to Catholicism; the famous responses to racism in both America and Europe following reports of lynchings in the former and the stage appearances of Josephine Baker in the latter. Along the way, however, the author exhibits a spasmodic tendency toward liberal political commentary. For example, while he is certainly free to characterize the “driving force behind the [second Iraq] war” as the “Anglo-American propaganda machine, disgorging misinformation on behalf of political leaders who insisted on their personal sincerity” (p. 81), and to argue that the “photographs of enemy bases, displayed by the American Secretary of State at the United Nations to justify the attack on Iraq, owed more to slick public relations than to reliable intelligence, contributing to a strategy of mass deception” (p. 548), he should devote at least as much analytical capital to justify inclusion of these statements in his narrative as he does to belaboring Kraus’s preference for “Fraktur” over “antiqua” typeface (p. 133). Finally, and less forgivably in a biography of this length, the author writes in a style well adapted to the academy but somewhat tedious for the general reader. Kraus has unarguably found in Timms a knowledgeable and faithful amanuensis, a postmodern Wagner to his modern Faust. He yet awaits his Boswell.

Notes

[1]. Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, *Faust*. vv. 1224, 1237. All citations from the play come from the handy and enduring Philipp Reclam edition, Stuttgart. Faust is, of course, translating John 1:1.

[2]. Edward Timms, *Karl Kraus, Apocalyptic Satirist: Culture and Catastrophe in Hapsburg Vienna* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1986).

[3]. Goethe, *Faust*, v. 1329.

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