

Classic Poetry Series

Karl Kraus
- poems -

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Karl Kraus(28 April 1874 – 12 June 1936)

Karl Kraus was an Austrian writer and journalist, known as a satirist, essayist, aphorist, playwright and poet. He is regarded as one of the foremost German-language satirists of the 20th century, especially for his witty criticism of the press, German culture, and German and Austrian politics.

Biography

Kraus was born into a wealthy Jewish family of Jacob Kraus, a papermaker, and his wife Ernestine, née Kantor, in Jicín, Bohemia (now the Czech Republic). The family moved to Vienna in 1877. His mother died in 1881. Kraus enrolled as a law student at the University of Vienna in 1892. Beginning in April of the same year he began contributing to the paper Wiener Literaturzeitung, starting with a critique of Gerhart Hauptmann's Die Weber. Around that time, he unsuccessfully tried to perform as an actor in a small theater. In 1894 he changed his field of studies to philosophy and German literature. He discontinued his studies in 1896. His friendship with Peter Altenberg began about this time.

Career

In 1896 he left university without a diploma to begin work as an actor, stage-director and performer, joining the Jung Wien (Young Vienna) group, which included Peter Altenberg, Leopold Andrian, Hermann Bahr, Felix Dörmann, Arthur Schnitzler, Hugo von Hofmannsthal, and Felix Salten. In 1897, however, Kraus broke from this group with a biting satire Die demolierte Literatur (Demolished Literature), and was named Vienna correspondent for the newspaper Breslauer Zeitung. One year later, as an uncompromising advocate of Jewish assimilation, he attacked the founder of modern Zionism Theodor Herzl with his polemic Eine Krone für Zion (A Crown for Zion) (1898). On April 1, 1899, he renounced Judaism and in the same year founded his own newspaper, Die Fackel (The Torch), which he continued to direct, publish, and write until his death, and from which he launched his attacks on hypocrisy, psychoanalysis, corruption of the Habsburg empire, nationalism of the pan-German movement, laissez-faire economic policies, and numerous other subjects.

In 1901, Kraus was sued by Hermann Bahr and Emmerich Bukovics, who felt they had been attacked by Die Fackel. Many lawsuits by diverse offended parties would follow in later years. Also in 1901, Kraus found out that his publisher, Moriz Frisch, had taken over his magazine while he was absent on a months-long journey: Moriz Frisch had registered the magazine's front cover as a trademark

and published the *Neue Fackel* (New Torch). Kraus sued and won. From that time, *Die Fackel* was published (without a cover page) by the printer Jahoda & at the beginning *Die Fackel* was similar to journals like the magazine *Weltbühne*, it became more and more a magazine that was privileged in its editorial independence, which Kraus could provide by his funding. *Die Fackel* printed what Kraus wanted to be printed. In its first decade, contributors included many well-known writers and artists such as Peter Altenberg, Richard Dehmel, Egon Friedell, Oskar Kokoschka, Else Lasker-Schüler, Adolf Loos, Heinrich Mann, Arnold Schönberg, August Strindberg, Georg Trakl, Frank Wedekind, Franz Werfel, Houston Stewart Chamberlain and Oscar Wilde. After 1911, however, Kraus was usually the sole author. Kraus' work was published nearly exclusively in *Die Fackel*, of which 922 irregularly-issued numbers appeared in total. Authors who were supported by Kraus include Peter Altenberg, Else Lasker-Schüler, and Georg Trakl. *Die Fackel* targeted corruption, journalists and brutish behaviour. Notable enemies were Maximilian Harden (in the mud of the Harden-Eulenburg affair), Moriz Benedikt (owner of the newspaper *Neue Freie Presse*), Alfred Kerr, Hermann Bahr, Imre Bekessy and Johannes Schober. In 1902, Kraus published *Sittlichkeit und Kriminalität* (Morality and Criminal Justice), for the first time commenting on what was to become one of the main issues in his writings: the allegedly necessary defense of sexual morality by means of criminal justice (*Der Skandal fängt an, wenn die Polizei ihm ein Ende macht*, The scandal starts when the police is stopping it). Starting in 1906, Kraus published the first of his aphorisms in *Die Fackel*; they were collected in 1909 in the book *Sprüche und Widersprüche* (Sayings and Gainsayings).

In addition to his writings, Kraus gave numerous highly influential public readings during his career - between 1892 and 1936 he put on approximately 700 one-man performances, reading from the dramas of Bertolt Brecht, Gerhart Hauptmann, Johann Nestroy, Goethe, and Shakespeare, and also performing Offenbach's operettas, accompanied by piano and singing all the roles himself. Elias Canetti, who regularly attended Kraus' lectures, titled the second volume of his autobiography "*Die Fackel*" im Ohr ("The Torch" in the Ear) in reference to the magazine and its author. At the peak of his popularity, Kraus' lectures attracted four thousand people, and his magazine sold forty thousand copies. In 1904, Kraus supported Frank Wedekind to make possible the staging in Vienna of his controversial play, *Pandora's Box*; the play told the story of a sexually-enticing young dancer who rises in German society through her relationships with wealthy men, but who later falls into poverty and prostitution. The frank depiction of sexuality and violence in these plays, including lesbianism and an encounter with Jack the Ripper, pushed the boundaries of what was considered acceptable on the stage at the time. Wedekind's works are considered among the precursors of the expressionists, but in 1914, when expressionist poets like

Richard Dehmel sold themselves to war propaganda, Kraus will become a fierce critic of them. In 1907, Kraus attacked his erstwhile benefactor Maximilian Harden because of his role in the Eulenburg trial in the first of his spectacular Erledigungen (Dispatches).

After 1911, Kraus was the sole author of most issues of Die Fackel. One of Kraus' most influential satirical-literary techniques was his détournement of quotations. One controversy arose for example with the text Die Orgie, which exposed how the newspaper Neue Freie Presse was blatantly supporting Austria's Liberal Party's election campaign; the text was conceived as a guerrilla prank and sent as a fake letter to the newspaper (Die Fackel will publish it later in 1911); the enraged editor, which fell for the trick, responded by suing Kraus for "disturbing the serious business of politicians and editors". After an obituary for Franz Ferdinand who had been assassinated in Sarajevo on 28 June 1914, Die Fackel was not published for many months. In December 1914, it appeared again with an essay "In dieser großen Zeit" ("In this grand time"): "In dieser großen Zeit, die ich noch gekannt habe, wie sie so klein war; die wieder klein werden wird, wenn ihr dazu noch Zeit bleibt; ... in dieser lauten Zeit, die da dröhnt von der schauerlichen Symphonie der Taten, die Berichte hervorbringen, und der Berichte, welche Taten verschulden: in dieser da mögen Sie von mir kein eigenes Wort erwarten." ("In this grand time, that I used to know when it was this small; that will become small again if there is time; ... in this loud time that resounds from the ghastly symphony of deeds that spawn reports, and of reports that cause deeds: in this one, you may not expect a word of my own.") In the subsequent time, Kraus wrote against the World War, and editions of Die Fackel were repeatedly confiscated or obstructed by censors. Kraus' masterpiece is generally considered to be the massive satirical play about the First World War, Die letzten Tage der Menschheit (The Last Days of Mankind), which combines dialogue from contemporary documents with apocalyptic fantasy and commentary from two characters called "the Grumbler" and "the Optimist". Kraus began to write the play in 1915 and first published it as a series of special Fackel issues in 1919. Its epilogue, "Die letzte Nacht" ("The last night") had already been published in 1918 as a special issue. Edward Timms has called the work a "faulted masterpiece" and a "fissured text" because the evolution of Kraus' attitude during the time of its composition (from aristocratic conservative to democratic republican) means that the text has structural inconsistencies resembling a geological fault. The play was first staged, with more than sixty actors, by Italian director Luca Ronconi in Turin in 1991, soon after the First Gulf War. Also in 1919, Kraus published his collected war texts under the title Weltgericht (World court of justice). In 1920, he published the satire Literatur oder Man wird doch da sehn (Literature or You Ain't Seen Nothing Yet) as a reply to Franz Werfel's Spiegelmensch (Mirror man), an attack against Kraus.

During January 1924, he started to fight against Imre Békesy, publisher of the tabloid *Die Stunde* (The Hour). Kraus accused Békesy of extorting money from restaurant owners by threatening them with bad reviews in his paper unless they paid him. Békesy retaliated with a libel campaign against Kraus, who in turn launched an *Erledigung* with the catchphrase "Hinaus aus Wien mit dem Schuft!" ("Throw the scoundrel out of Vienna"). In 1926, Békesy indeed fled Vienna in order to avoid being arrested. Békesy achieved some later success when his novel *Barabbas* was the monthly selection of an American book club. In 1927, a peak in Kraus's political commitment was his sensational attack on powerful Vienna police chief Johann Schober, also former two terms chancellor, after 84 people were shot dead in the police massacre of the July Revolt. Karl Kraus produced a poster that in a single sentence requested Schober's resignation; the poster was published all over Vienna and is considered an icon of Austrian 20th century history. In 1928, the play *Die Unüberwindlichen* (The insurmountables) was published. It included allusions to the fights against Békesy and Schober. During that same year, Kraus also published the records of a lawsuit that Kerr had filed against him after Kraus had published Kerr's war poems in *Die Fackel*. In 1932, Kraus translated Shakespeare's sonnets. Kraus supported the Social Democratic Party of Austria since at least the early 1920s. And in 1934, estranging himself from some of his followers, he supported Engelbert Dollfuß's coup d'état that established Austrian fascist regime, hoping Dollfuß could prevent Nazism from engulfing Austria. One of his last works, which he declined to publish for fear of Nazi reprisals, was the verbally rich, densely allusive anti-Nazi polemic *Die Dritte Walpurgisnacht* (The Third Walpurgis Night) of 1933. This satire on Nazi ideology begins with the now-famous sentence, "Mir fällt zu Hitler nichts ein" (Hitler brings nothing to my mind). However, lengthy extracts appear in his apologia for his silence at Hitler's coming to power, *Warum die Fackel nicht erscheint* (Why the Fackel Does Not Appear), a 315-page edition of his periodical. The last issue of the *Fackel* appeared in February 1936. Karl Kraus died of an embolism of the heart in Vienna on June 12, 1936 after a short illness. Kraus never married, but from 1913 until his death, he had a conflict-prone but close relationship with the Baroness Sidonie Nádherny von Borutin (1885–1950). Many of his works were written in Janowitz castle, Nádherny family property. Sidonie Nádherny became an important pen-friend and addressee of books and poems. In 1911 he was baptized as a Catholic, but in 1923, disillusioned over the Church's support for the war, he left the Catholic Church, claiming sarcastically that he was motivated "primarily by antisemitism", i.e. indignation at Max Reinhardt's use of the Kollegienkirche in Salzburg as the venue for a theatrical performance. Reinhardt is buried in the Zentralfriedhof cemetery outside Vienna. Reinhardt was the subject of two books written by noted libertarian author Dr. Thomas Szasz. *Karl Kraus and the Soul Doctors* and *Anti-Freud: Karl Kraus's Criticism of Psychoanalysis and Psychiatry*

portrayed Kraus as a harsh critic of Sigmund Freud and of psychoanalysis in general. Other commentators, such as Edward Timms, have argued that Kraus respected Freud, though with reservations about the application of some of his theories, and that his views were far less black-and-white than Szasz suggests.

Person

Karl Kraus has been a subject of controversy throughout his lifetime. This polarisation was undoubtedly strengthened by his immense sense of his own importance. This self-image was not completely unfounded: those who attended his performances were fascinated by his personality. His followers saw in him an infallible authority, someone who would do anything to help those he supported. To the numerous enemies he made due to the inflexibility and intensity of his partisanship, however, he was a bitter misanthrope and poor would-be (Alfred Kerr). He was accused of wallowing in hateful denunciations and Erledigungen. Along with Karl Valentin, he is considered a master of gallows humor.

Karl Kraus and language

Karl Kraus was convinced that every little error, albeit of an importance that was seemingly limited in time and space, shows the great evils of the world and era. Thus, he could see in a missing comma a symptom of that state of the world that would allow a world war. One of the main points of his writings was to show the great evils inherent in such seemingly small age was to him the most important tell-tale for the wrongs of the world. He viewed his contemporaries' careless treatment of language as a sign for their careless treatment of the world as a whole. Ernst Krenek reported the following typical episode: Als man sich gerade über die Beschießung von Shanghai durch die Japaner erregte und ich Karl Kraus bei einem der berühmten Beistrich-Problemen antraf, sagte er ungefähr: Ich weiß, daß das alles sinnlos ist, wenn das Haus in Brand steht. Aber solange das irgend möglich ist, muß ich das machen, denn hätten die Leute, die dazu verpflichtet sind, immer darauf geachtet, daß die Beistriche am richtigen Platz stehen, so würde Shanghai nicht brennen." (At a time when one was generally decrying the bombardment of Shanghai by the Japanese, I met Karl Kraus struggling over one of his famous comma problems. He said something like: I know that everything is futile when the house is burning. But I have to do this, as long as it is at all possible; for if those who are obliged to look after commas had always made sure they were in the right place, then Shanghai would not be burning.) He accused people — and most of all journalists and authors — of using language as a means that they believed to command rather than serving it as an end. To Kraus, language is not a means to distribute ready-made opinions, but rather the medium of thought itself. As such, it is in need of critical reflection.

Therefore, dejournalising his readers was an important concern of Kraus in "a time that is thoroughly journalised, that is informed by the spirit but is deaf to the unity of form and contents". He wanted to educate his readers to an "understanding of the cause of the German language, to that height at which the written word is understood as a necessary incarnation of the thought, and not simply a shell demanded by society around an opinion." Kraus maintained that language may not be entirely subjected to man's wishes. Even in its most maimed state, it will still show the true state of the world. Even war enthusiasts will unwittingly point out the cruel butchery during the war when calling it Mordshetz (an Austrian word for great fun that can also be read as murderous chase). Kraus saw the press as his supreme enemy and the "nether regions" of literature: his views on societal and cultural issues were less clearly defined, and his political preferences were shifting. He sympathized now with Social Democrats, now with Archduke Franz Ferdinand. Kraus's criticism was primarily moral, not political. Moreover, his cultural background was not that of the 'New Left' but instead that of the Austro-Hungarian Empire: his emphasis on precision, and his dislike of rhetoric and the baroque demonstrates links between his views and those of Ludwig Wittgenstein (in his early works) and Adolf Loos, amongst others. Gregor von Rezzori wrote about him, "(His) life stands as an example of moral uprightness and courage which should be put before anyone who writes, in no matter what language... I had the privilege of listening to his conversation and watching his face, lit up by the pale fire of his fanatic love for the miracle of the German language and by his holy hatred for those who used it badly."

Fortuitous Poem

I divide the people I don't greet into four groups.

There are those whom I don't greet in order not to compromise myself
This is the simplest group.

Next, there are those whom I don't greet in order not to compromise them.
This requires a certain amount of attention.

But then there are those whom I don't greet in order not to get into their bad
books.
They are even harder to deal with.

And, finally, there are those whom I don't greet in order not to get into my bad
books.
This takes a particular amount of concentration.

But I've had quite a bit of practice, and by my manner of not greeting people I
manage to express each of those nuances in such a way that no injustice is done
to anyone.

Karl Kraus

Here In This Land

Here in this land no one gets ridicule
but he who tells the truth. He then must stand
defenseless and attract some smirking, cool
disdain. Nothing dishonors in this land.

Here in this land a person's wickedness,
which elsewhere would lead straight to prison's door,
mints him pure gold, brings glory and success,
and garners honor for him evermore.

Here in this land a gauntlet you must run
of petty thieves with deep contempt for you,
who wish to steal your purse and, when it's done,
will try to win, besides, your handshake too.

Here in this land you never will find rest
when fleeing from contaminated schemes,
for to your house the pest comes like the pest
and mercilessly kills your pleasant dreams.

Here in this land you strike an idle blow
if you attempt to hit this wily band,
and every knave will grin and let you know
you're his compatriot here in this land.

Karl Kraus

Unification

This talk of merger gets me upset –
I care for no Austro-German reunion.
With Germany I have no communion –
I have not even joined Austria yet.

Karl Kraus

With Stopwatch In Hand

Berlin, 22 September 1916.

On 17 September one of our
submarines sank a fully
loaded enemy troop transport
in the Mediterranean. The
ship went down in 43 seconds.

This is how Death confronts Technology.
Can bravery contribute still to might?
The clock has stopped. The days have turned to night.
O spare us, god of war, this agony!

That was a sacrifice to the machine
and not to you who hurtled from its hole.
Here stood an instrument without a soul –
your proud accomplice - with victorious mien.

There stands a mortar. He who built that gun
seeks shelter in a trench, a wretched coward.
While giants fall, by midgets overpowered,
the clockwork fights with time to stop its run.

Take heed, and take it easy. Otherwise
you'll see a cripple sit behind a desk
and push a button with a grin grotesque –
and London disappears. Surprise, surprise!

The storm clouds gather with destructive power.
What was the time when all this came to pass?
The eye sees dimly in the poison gas -
but hark the striking of the zero hour.

With pranks like that to blow our world apart,
keep God that god from picking up the pieces
as Progress stalks with warhead and prosthesis,
stopwatch in hand, and glory in its heart.

Karl Kraus

Your Flaw

That flaw of yours, that vent - I love it, dear;
it's part of you
and ranks with me among your finest features.
When I find out that others have it too,
I look for it and almost see you near
and love all similarly wanting creatures.

If I, for want of you, that want should miss - were we to part -
where would I better find my consolation.
than in that flaw I love with all my heart?
And when you're gone, with such a want as this
the homeliest would win my admiration.

Yet if there came the fairest of the fair,
and flawless she,
my thoughts of you would linger and keep haunting.
No matter what her charms and virtues be,
her fault would be the flaw that wasn't there -
I would not want her if your want were wanting. Here In This Land.

Karl Kraus