

The author as an actor. Karl Kraus and the scene of writing

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As is well known, one of the basic tenets of the reformation of the theatre in different national contexts in Europe in the course of the Enlightenment was the postulate of the strict predominance of the literary text as the essential basis determining all the details of the theatrical performance. It was not until the turn from the 19th to the 20th centuries, as Erika Fischer-Lichte (2001) reminds us, that this conception of the relationship between text and performance in the theatre became problematic, giving rise to a reversal of the hierarchy between those two terms that manifested itself abundantly not only in new theatrical practices but also in theoretical thinking about the theatre as an art form in its own right, as witnessed prominently e.g. by Gordon Craig's reflections on the art of the theatre (1911). The concomitant rise of the theatre director contributed in turn to the emancipation from the literary text and to the highlighting of a notion of the theatrical conceived as a total practice which was autonomous from if not outrightly at odds with dramatic literature.

Paradoxically, or not, the same context of the turn of the century that saw the rise of theatre as an autonomous art form also witnessed the rise of antitheatrical drama, i.e. of a kind of dramatic writing that was apparently indifferent or even hostile to the idea of the theatre. The new genres of the "ecstatic drama", "lyrical drama", "closet drama", etc., all partake of the often conjured up antitheatrical nature of modernism (Moi, 2004) in that they represent a celebration of writing which shuns any specific reference to theatrical practice. But this is by no means equivalent to an indifference to the theatre. As Martin Puchner reminds us, it testifies, instead, "to the centrality of the theater for modernism, but as something that must be resisted" (2003: 178). Puchner analyses this peculiar constellation with regard to Kafka, arguing that, although Kafka's attitude as a writer is profoundly antitheatrical, his texts cannot be understood without reference to the fact that "Kafka's prose is not so much theatrical as it is antitheatrical, presenting dramatic and theatrical scenes and characters only to decompose and recompose them according to a specifically literary poetics (*ibid.*: 178).

Kafka's example is a quite telling one concerning the deeply entangled web of paradox and contradiction that characterizes this specific constellation. In this essay I propose to approach the issue of the relationship of the modernist scene of writing to an idea of the theatre with reference to another key figure in Austrian literature in the first decades of the 20th century, Karl Kraus. Kraus is arguably the greatest satirist in 20th century European literature. For 37 years, from 1899 to 1936, the year of his death, he published in Vienna a journal entitled *Die Fackel*, *The Torch*, which after 1911 he wrote entirely by himself. The many thousand pages of this journal, which was a major influence on generations of central European writers and intellectuals, from Wittgenstein and Adorno to Elias Canetti, among several others, contain an unparalleled wealth of satirical essays and glosses, poems, aphorisms, polemic interventions, sociological-philosophical reflections, that make Kraus stand out as a central reference in the Viennese and the German-language literary field of the first decades of the century.

Kraus, so it would seem, did write for the theatre, being, as he is, the author not only of the monumental anti-war drama *The Last Days of Mankind*, but also of a few other theatrical pieces, along with several adaptations, namely of a number of Shakespeare's plays. The matter is, however, not that simple. In the preface to *The Last Days of Mankind* – a drama which, to my view, is one of the masterpieces of 20th century German-language literature¹ – Kraus points himself to the incommensurate nature of the text:

The performance of this drama, whose scope of time by earthly measures would comprise about ten evenings, is intended for a theatre on Mars. Theatregoers in this world would not be able to endure it. (Kraus, 1974: 3)

Kraus is referring, of course, to the unbearable content of a drama that documents in painful detail the violence of the World War and that presents one of the most fierce indictments of bellicist ideologies to be found anywhere in European dramatic literature. But the reference is also to the format – not just to the sheer size of the drama, with its some 800 pages, but also to its unconventional structure as a documentary drama essentially alien to the theatre practices of the day. It was, thus, only consequent that in the 20s Kraus would stubbornly refuse to grant any permission for a production of the play, including by such prominent

¹ There is as yet no complete English translation of Kraus's war drama, although there are complete versions available in French, Italian or Spanish. A large selection in my own Portuguese translation has been published in 2003.

directors as Max Reinhardt and Erwin Piscator.²

In Kraus's intellectual and literary trajectory, such a polemic against the theatre establishment was there almost from the start. It would lead too far to follow the entire issue in detail here, but the essential terms of the problem may be briefly summarized as follows: the great tradition of Austrian theatre, in particular of the National Theatre, the Burgtheater, lived from the presence of great actors and from their ability to give full salience to the dramatic text; the very pathos that was a distinctive mark of those actors' style provided an effect of anti-realism that ensured the perception of the dramatic situation as structured by the rhetoric of verbal discourse. Indeed, to act "unnaturally" was, as he repeatedly stresses, the main advice Kraus had to offer to any actor.³ On the contrary, in the modern "Regietheater", the theatre of the director, this has been replaced by an emphasis on the total coherence of a theatrical apparatus that dilutes the role of the actor and, consequently, the salience of the text. There is undoubtedly a component of nostalgia in the celebration of the lost tradition of the old Burgtheater. Notwithstanding, what Kraus is doing is not just to mourn a theatre era that has irrevocably passed; he is also turned towards the future in his defence of a "poor theatre" essentially based on the relationship between the actor and the audience. This is very clear in one of the central pieces of Kraus's sustained polemics against Reinhardt, "Shakespeare und die Berliner" (1916), a polemic-satirical essay on Reinhardt's production of *Macbeth* in Berlin, where Kraus recalls a lost era when

[if] they [the actors] stood at the proscenium, there would fall a curtain where all there was to be seen was a landscape with a goddess carrying a lyre in her hand; and, notwithstanding, the pause between acts was filled with horror at *Macbeth's* deed. (*Die Fackel*, 418-22, April 1916, 96-97)

Pasolini's "Teatro di parola" comes to mind as an apt reference for

² Reinhardt in particular had long been a satiric target in Kraus's journal as the prototype of the modern director, for whom the spectacularity of realistic visual effects had the upper hand against the verbal structure of the play – Reinhardt's 1905 production of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, where the grass in the forest was real grass, is a major satiric motif in the pages of *Die Fackel*. In very much the same vein, the realistic forest in modern productions of Shakespeare's play is an object of derision in Gordon Craig's "Some Evil Tendencies of the Modern Theatre", in a passage where one can read with almost certainty an implicit allusion to Reinhardt (Craig, 1911: 107).

A specific in-depth analysis of Kraus's relationship with the theatre is still missing. Despite all its shortcomings, one may refer to Grimstad, 1982. See also Timms, 2005.

³"[...] people stare at me as if I were a madman because when approaching Offenbach – the same goes with Shakespeare and Nestroy – I start by addressing the actors with: "Be unnatural! Be unnatural in the first place! All else will follow." ("Wortregie", *Die Fackel* 864-67, December 1931, 59).

Where not otherwise stated, all translations are mine.

such an ascetic understanding of a theatrical performance devoid of any realistic effects, essentially anti-illusionistic and fully dependent on the word as a carrier of meanings that the spectator's fantasy has to construe for him or herself regardless of any sensorial stimulation. Over time, as a matter of fact, Kraus would come to defend that dramatic literature and theatrical performance are quite independent and indeed opposed to each other. In his influential essay "Shakespeare und kein Ende", "Shakespeare and no end", Goethe had propagated an interpretation of Shakespearean drama as having much more to offer to the imagination than to the senses, so that a performance of a Shakespearean play, regardless of its quality, would only be a distraction from the poetic meaning of the drama. Kraus would pick up this interpretation and carry it to its logic conclusion. In several of his little known and quite insufficiently studied texts on the theatre, which have to be understood against the background of the crisis of the relationship between text and performance I alluded to at the beginning, Kraus ponders again and again upon the nature of that relationship. In 1908, in the essay "Grimassen über Kultur und Bühne" ["Grimaces on culture and the stage"], he is quite outrightly apodictic:

In the theatrical spectacle, the spectacular supersedes the poetic, since if we are to be moved to tears it is totally indifferent whether the opportunity is provided by Shakespeare or by Ohnet. [...] The theatre is the profanation of the direct poetic idea. (*Die Fackel* 270- 71, January 1909, 8-9)

To cut a long story short, Kraus would extract the logical consequence from this postulate by launching a series of readings he named "Theater der Dichtung" as an alternative approach to the great tradition of dramatic literature. He had for some time already, as was quite common at the time and, to some extent, still is today in the German-speaking countries, been offering widely attended public readings of his own texts. His "Theatre of Poetry", which was inaugurated in 1912 with a reading which included the first three acts of *Timon of Athens*, represented a step further, since it was designed as an experiment in enhancing the materiality of the dramatic text with purely verbal means. Over time, Kraus's repertoire grew quite large, but the central reference would remain Shakespeare, although other authors also figure prominently: non-canonical authors like Johann Nestroy, the leading reference of 19th century Viennese popular theatre, or Jacques Offenbach, whose operettas were given by him as a one man performance. The central pieces, presented in Kraus's own adaptations, were *King Lear*, which was read (or should one say

performed?) 22 times, and *Timon of Athens*, read 17 times; but several other plays by Shakespeare were also in the repertoire, including *Hamlet*, *Macbeth*, *Coriolan*, *The Winter's Tale*, *The Merry Wives of Windsor*, *Measure for Measure*, *Love's Labour Lost*, and a few others.

Several prominent witnesses, like Elias Canetti (1982), testify to the overwhelming impact of Kraus's readings, something that can be partially reconstructed even today by listening to the few extant recordings. We are not speaking of intimate occasions or small audiences, but of public presentations, often in quite large rooms, theatre or concert halls, with audiences up to 1000 people. Kraus would read sitting at a desk in a frontal position to the audience, often with the accompaniment of a piano that would without exception be hidden behind a screen. *Avant la lettre*, Pasolini's demand for a theatrical space that is situated not in a physical environment, but in the heads of the listeners, is here fulfilled. It is a fully verbal and mental space where there are no actors, but one single voice, whose task it is to conjure up with the most ascetic of means the whole dialogic universe of an entire drama.

A most telling episode towards the end of Kraus's career may be briefly mentioned in order to illustrate the peculiar significance of Shakespeare's dramatic universe to Kraus's understanding of himself as a writer and a public person. The polemics against his own audiences build a red thread throughout Kraus's entire career. The Torch reserved for itself explicitly the right to select its own subscribers, anyone whose public behaviour did not comply with the strict ethical demands required being mercilessly eliminated from the list. In the evening of the 16th of November 1930 the satirist would bring this to a peak. He had advertised a reading from his own writings and there was a full house. But he started with an introduction he named "Timon's Meal" where he harshly rebuked the audience for flooding into such readings hoping to get satisfaction from polemic-satirical content with a direct connection to themes of actuality, while neglecting to attend the "Theatre of poetry" and thus forsaking the possibility of the enriching experience of contact with Shakespeare's poetic visions. He then announced that the evening's programme had been changed and that he would read *Timon of Athens*, instead of from his own writings. Anyone not willing to stay would get a full refund of the ticket's price. It is reported that no one left the room and the evening proceeded with the reading of Shakespeare's sombre satiric tragedy.

One may recall that the central scene of Shakespeare's play is set

around the banquet offered by Timon to the false friends that have refused to help him in times of need and now come back thinking he has become an affluent man again. There is, however, no food on the table; the bowls are filled with stones and hot water which Timon throws at the false friends as he drives them away from his house, while hurling the most violent curses at them. Kraus's performative gesture translates this situation into the context of the relationship to his own audience and to Viennese and Austrian society in general. The mimetic gesture is an act of quotation by the means of which Kraus projects his identity as an author against the background of the figure of the Shakespearean misanthrope, thus incorporating Shakespeare's dramatic universe into his own scene of writing. One might thus say, in a sense, that Kraus construes Shakespeare as his own heteronymic counterpart.

Although the summary I have provided is inevitably sketchy, it has, I hope, become evident how the literary space occupied by Kraus is contingent upon a constant reference to theatrical tradition and its texts. This tradition, however, is not simply assimilated within a logic of continuity, it is, on the contrary, always literally translated, i.e. moved and reconstructed within the new framework of the intentionality of Kraus's own discourse. In other words, the reference to the theatre is permanently mediated; it takes place in the mode of quotation, meaning that the tension between Kraus's own writing and the theatrical universe it conjures up never disappears.

This leads me to the final part and, as a matter of fact, the main point of my brief reflections, which has to do with the theatrical nature of Kraus's own discourse. Kraus, after all, once described himself as "perhaps the first case of a writer who experiences his own writing in the way of an actor" (*Die Fackel* 389-90, December 1913, 42). To understand this quasi-programmatic statement one has to bear in mind the distinctive characteristics of Kraus's satire. Elias Canetti once named as one of the central paradoxes of that satire the fact that "this man who despised so many things, who was the most straightforward despiser the world literature had seen since the Spaniard Quevedo and since Swift, a kind of scourge of God to a sinful mankind, let everyone make himself heard. He was not prepared to sacrifice the humblest, most insignificant, most hollow voice. His greatness consisted in the fact that standing alone, literally alone, he confronted, heard, sounded, attacked and scourged the world, as far as he knew it, his world in its totality, in the figure of all its representatives – and they were countless." (Canetti, 1981: 46).

In fact, the commonsensical conception of the genre of satire as essentially monologic, governed by the authority of the single voice of a self-righteous and stern moralist, is totally mistaken. To be sure, such an authority has to be present, if the simultaneously aesthetic and ethic goals of satire are to be reached. But, if it is to be effective, that authority has to assert itself not in the terrain of abstract ideas and principles, but through a permanent confrontation on the concrete ground of the multiple utterances that compose the whole universe of public discourse of its time. So it is that, in the tradition of Menippean satire, theorized by Bakhtin, Kraus's satire is full of voices, it is intrinsically dialogic. This implies that the permanent use of documentary quotation does not simply fulfil the function of making available a set of references and of naming the exact source for Kraus's polemic and satiric indignation; more than that, it has a profoundly dramatic function, in that it provides his essays with a dynamic contrapuntal structure made of the clash of conflictual voices that has often more to do with the theatre than with the conventions of essayistic discourse. Kraus's approach to the scene of writing thus acquires a distinctly performative character, in that his use of language does not rest on the assumption of a pre-established meaning, but, instead, on the dialogic, polyphonic dynamics of a discursive space that is structured as an echo chamber where a multitude of conflicting voices keeps reverberating.

There is yet another important presupposition for Kraus's description of himself as "a writer who experiences his own writing in the way of an actor". In fact, his art of quotation does not simply incorporate fragments of other people's voices in his own discourse, it appropriates those fragments as linguistic gestures, i.e. those voices become part of a dramatic universe where not only meaning, but also accent and intonation define an individual character. It is from this gestural conception of discourse as defining a character that Elias Canetti would derive the concept of the "acoustic mask" he uses to qualify his technique of character composition not only in his plays, but also in his novel *Die Blendung (Auto-da-Fé)*. So, it is not just that Kraus's (and, for that matter, Canetti's) satiric universe is permeated by the topos of the *theatrum mundi*, not just that the theatre offers an apt metaphor for a textual universe in the framework of which the notion that all the world is a stage is literally an object of demonstration, since the business of satire is precisely to expose the multiple disguises under which the different social actors conceal their true selves. Not just that: the characters on the

page become in a way dramatic characters, defined through techniques of composition that belong to a theatrical universe.

A final aspect still has to be highlighted, the scenic character of Kraus's satiric technique. Kraus's main source for his satiric material is the daily press. Among the material he selects there are often daily scenes on the street, which, as he once comments, again with a reference to Shakespeare, allow the "flash-like illumination of a mental landscape" ("Nestroy und die Nachwelt", *Die Fackel* 349-50, May 1912, 10). One such scene is the object of a satiric gloss written in 1916, "Ein Irrsinniger auf dem Einspännergaul" ("A madman on the carriage horse"): in a central street in Vienna, a man dressed in military uniform has taken hold of a carriage horse and forces it to ride with such speed that an accident seems inevitable and can only be avoided because a courageous policeman throws himself upon the horse and manages to make it stop. Kraus simply quotes the newspaper report and adds as an authorial comment: "When, when, when! When will he come, the policeman! When one is needed, of course there is none in the neighbourhood." (*Die Fackel* 418-22, April 1916, 16).

For the reader or the listener, at a time when Austria's situation in the War was rapidly deteriorating, the allusion would be quite evident: the madman stands for Germany, with which Austria-Hungary had entered a fateful alliance that will lead inevitably to disaster, if a strong hand does not take control and puts an end to the folly of war. It is a situation where, as Kraus had written elsewhere, one cannot be sure if "crime and decadence are piling up before the eyes of a Hamlet or if things are already ripe for the arm of a Fortinbras" ("In dieser großen Zeit", *Die Fackel* 404, December 1914, 4).

Such a use of scenic material which, once extracted from its original context, gives way to an explosion of meaning, literally an illumination, brings to mind Benjamin's notion of a "dialectics at a standstill", as the characterization of the gestural technique of Brecht's epic theatre. Indeed, the logics of interruption which allows the extraction from the flux of things of an individual situation singled out as exemplary and paradigmatic, thus setting a process of critical reflection into motion, is clearly a distinctive mark of Kraus's technique. *The Last Days of Mankind* are, in an important sense, but an extended application of this technique of the fictionalization of documentary material that is contingent on its dramatic and scenic presentation. Although the passing of time towards the catastrophe is marked by some discrete signs scattered throughout

the play, there is no linear development, with each scene being fully autonomous and self-sufficient. Thus, several scenes simply present exemplary situations in their own right, in the manner of the 'tableau' of the epic theatre. I give a short scene in the 5th Act as an example:

A side street. In the doorway of a house, a soldier with two decorations on his chest. His cap hangs low over his forehead. Next to him walks his little daughter who has been leading him and who now bends down to pick up a cigarette butt, which she then puts in his pocket. In the courtyard of the house an invalid plays his hurdy-gurdy.

Soldier: That should be enough. *(He pulls out a wooden pipe, and the girl stuffs the tobacco from the butts into it.)*

A Lieutenant *(who has passed, turns around, gruffly)*: Can't you see?

Soldier: No.

Lieutenant: What? Oh... I see.

He leaves. The soldier, led by the child, goes off in the opposite direction. The hurdy-gurdy plays the "Long Live Habsburg" march. (Kraus, 1984: 250)

In its foregrounding of the sheer horror of war and its consequences, of the inhuman character of militarism, but also of the suffering of the innocent victim, here represented by the blind soldier and, in particular, by his little guide, this short scene condenses in a nutshell the eight hundred pages of Kraus's tragedy. Fear and compassion are here concomitant with indignation, an indignation which, however, is fully devoid of pathos. Compassion, which in this case means literally the involvement in that suffering through the power of the imagination, is induced by the pure objectivity of scenic means alone that call for a critically distanced stance; this scenic dimension, however, is present, and, possibly, all the more intensely present, first and foremost in the materiality of the word – of the verbal interaction between the characters, but also of the detailed scenic instructions; thus one can say that the impact of the scene in its full radiance of meaning is no doubt highly theatrical, at the same time that it is in no way dependent on the realization on stage.

We have thus come full circle and this might be a good point to stop: in its complexity, Kraus's relationship to the theatre is fully determined by the ascetic stance of the high modernist writer. His antitheatrical position is, however, concomitant with a notion of the scene of writing as a dialogic, in the end dramatic space of articulation where the

fictional mask of the satiric self enacts his relationship to the others and to the world in a way that cannot disguise its dependence on an idea of the theatre. Such is the paradox of a peculiar constellation within the modernist paradigm that still awaits for further research and more detailed discussion.

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