**Ethics Beyond the Boundaries of Language:**

**Poetics and Criticism according to Karl Kraus**

**Prospectus**

*Because everyone uses language to talk, everyone thinks they can talk about language*

J. W. von Goethe (quoted as a moto for Kraus’s collected essays *De Sprache* [Language])

This book offers a lesson in reading. More than what it says and the arguments it presents, it raises questions regarding the act, sometimes ‘taken for granted,’ of using language. Before we attempt to deal with the social and ethical criticism of Karl Kraus (1874-1936)—which engages with issues such as suppression and injustice, exclusion and violence, historical events (for instance, World War I and the Nazis’ rise to power) or the way in which literature and theater become spheres of verbal dispute and moral wrangling—we will need first to address the linguistic and communicative medium in which a crisis of representation and signification is inherent. To this end, beyond analyzing the discourse and scrutinizing linguistic manipulations and falsifications of truths, we must understand what constitutes the language of criticism and why it is not intended to communicate content in the regular sense, but instead destabilize the message and thereby providing space for the imagination and thought in a way that its subversive function does not itself become authoritative or dogmatic. With this in mind, we will also attempt to overcome the compulsion to understand, suspend our habit to judge, and be wary of sentimentality. Instead, we will be obligated to question the speaker’s position, destabilize the obvious, scrutinize syntactic and narrative structures, and call attention to the function of the linguistic medium itself. As we will see, when put to critical-disruptive use (by way of paraphrase, quote, or joke, for instance)—the message becomes entangled within the context, and the narrative comes apart and is reassembled, while the skeptical act of reading constructs the readers not as possessing identities and privileges (reader verses text), but as individuals in unstable locations within altering linguistic spheres through which consciousness and worldviews are reconstructed (reader within text). This is what Kraus expresses by way of the phrase “barricades of words against the rule of banality,” in his essay on Johann Nestroy,[[1]](#footnote-1) an Austrian playwright who produced socially critical theater. Put differently, the words function beyond the logic of their usage and contrary to the regimenting social logic. In their semantic force there is something that undermines the social order and in place of ratification and representation, enables language to grasp the political unconscious of the discourse. In Kraus’s words: “To learn to see abysses in commonplaces—that would be the pedagogic mission.”[[2]](#footnote-2)

What is the connection between satire and morality? Why does social criticism require a critique of language? We know that the medium of language is not transparent, that language is not really a representation of the world, that speech produces, and not only describes, reality, and that we not only say but also do things with words. However, when we set out to criticize—to oppose injustice, to protest against policy, to condemn an offensive act—language largely becomes, for us, a mere means to communicate a message: to express complaints and vindications, recruit partners in the struggle, sound the voices of the silenced, denunciate, refute lies, and present an opportunity to “speak truth to power.”

While many make commendable efforts to employ critical thought that denounces and explicates, warns and reproaches, they are not critical of the medium itself, and in many instances substitute the need to say something about reality (petition, demonstration, public statement) for the ability to activate language in a way that impacts reality (coin a term, “launder” words, announce something, authorize someone, etc.). To emphasize, sounding a critical voice is an important use of the language, however it also reflects a limited grasp of the linguistic act: language itself is not perceived as linked to the question of justice, but rather constitutes a mere medium for the consolidation of and demand for what we already believe in. That is to say, our use of language in these cases is based on the assumption that we have a distinct moral standard by means of which we can determine what is acceptable. We believe that our criticism is on behalf of a commonly accepted moral claim, which for its addressee, is meaningful and valid. We assume a common denominator and mutual obligation toward a world of values and norms and then judge those who do not act in accordance with them. We assume that human beings are autonomous agents acting of their own free will in the world, and we activate the instruments of our moral court when they deviate from these norms. We also believe that there is an “us” in the name of which we speak.

From Kraus’s point of view, this is a naïve approach, at best, and a hypocritical one, at worst. Moreover, entrenched within this separation between content and form and between criticism of the act of speech and ethics, is the severe crisis that the critical project of the enlightenment encountered. According to Kraus, not only did this separation enable unsubstantiated values to become means to justify injustice and violence, but also that the very concepts of morality and subjectivity—when detached from the social and linguistic contexts in which they are consolidated—repeatedly become what causes social criticism to fail at fulfilling its purpose. Put differently, the denunciation of violence did not only fail to prevent the horrors of the world war, but the conventional criticism and its covenant with the mass media eventually legitimized the patriotic cooperation rather than objection to the war. Kraus’s project can be defined as an attempt, unprecedented in scope, to produce an anomalous critical position that leans on creative poetics in place of the ostensive obeyance to patriarchal, even universal, values. By way of the unique language he produced, Kraus sought to generate detachment and estrangement between language and power (through polysemy and satirical distortion), and at the same time forge a reconnection of language to morality (through poetics and linguistic performativity). This is a language of rejection, not in terms of its message, but rather in terms of its operative mechanisms “Everything in the world will turn out better with negation. The rejection of evil will bring about good.”[[3]](#footnote-3) In other words, this is an ethical, not only aesthetic, attempt to deviate from the boundaries of language, destabilize the stabilizing apparatus of meaning, and activate the performative mechanisms of language as opposed to its interpellative mechanisms. Thus, what Kraus strived for was a social critique of the linguistic processes that generates identity and autonomy, responsibility and culpability, and more so, to propose a social-linguistic, as opposed to a metaphysical-normative, foundation for ethical criticism.

The extensive literature on Kraus varies in its focus on different aspects of his project: his satirical feuilliton *Die Fackel* [The Torch] which he published between 1899 until his death in 1936, his public appearances at the *Theater der Dichtung*, the manifold polemics he provoked, his political activity, etc. However, these various aspects neither amalgamate into a comprehensive picture of his critique nor do they facilitate a full understanding of his social philosophy. Furthermore, scholars are divided as to what Kraus sought to achieve in his acerbic, and often devastating, critique, which was directed at nearly every ideological movement or public institution: Was he a socialist or a liberal? Conservative republican or radical anarchist? Self-hating Jew or messianic revolutionary? Kraus himself often regarded the different ways in which his project was described with scorn, and disputed those who attempted to classify or define him, referring to them as “those who cannot understand my meaning beyond my contradictions.” Indeed, Kraus was a man of contradictions and paradoxes, however what we will strive to show here is that there is nevertheless an inner logic to his work. While a systematic social doctrine or coherent political theory is not the issue here—Kraus was neither a political philosopher nor sociologist—he certainly produced a methodological-analytical approach and critical-poetic praxis in terms of which he produced a comprehensive body of critique.

As previously implied, Kraus’s ethical critique often evades scholars precisely because it is not founded on any normative standard or already-constituted position, but rather on a linguistic practice whose sole purpose is to **produce** the position from which moral critique is feasible. This involves linguistic skepticism as a condition for morality, as well as ethics beyond the boundaries of the given language. The poetic-critical language, as opposed to communicative-normative language, was not intended to represent the world or the critic’s thoughts, but to constitute a creative deviation that at the same time destabilizes the communicative linguistic act—that which defines and stabilizes meaning—and transform it into an open and diverse poetic space. The word does not express the thoughts, but rather the constant tension between experience and reality, between individual and collective, and between memory and cultural-historical legacy and a concrete moment. Like the poetic text—as opposed to the press’s catchphrases—reality itself is a contentious space of contradicting logics, ambiguous positions, and complexities that highlight the “corporeality” of words. Thus, by way of showing (in the theatrical sense) the gaps, contradictions, wordplay, and heteroglossia of linguistic expressions (like in his readings of Shakespeare or the montage of quotations in his plays), Kraus proposes an alternative idea of language (*Sprachgestaltung*). This idea does not hide the cultural crisis of the time, but rather transforms it—that very same linguistic impasse—into something that calls for a different attitude toward both words and the practices of translation, reading, and quotation. Kraus’s satirical writing, profuse use of quotations, and his adaptation-translation project generate defamiliarization and duality within the language, function to suspend meaning, and bring to the fore what Kraus refers to as “the unsaid” of the world of experience, memory, and associations. The reader must learn that “language includes not merely what is speakable, but… in it all that is not spoken can be experienced.”[[4]](#footnote-4) Poetic language is a form of seeing and hearing and of adding dimensions to utterance, which can be provoked when “actions speak louder than words,” that is, when one listens attentively to the syntax and transforms the quotation into an act of imagination and creation.

What then is Kraus’s project of critique and how can it be viewed as ethical criticism facilitated by crossing the boundaries of language?

First, we will examine the way in which Kraus used the linguistic medium in his feuilleton. *Die Fackel* was not only a platform for critiquing the press in terms of its content, but no less so in terms of its form—the use of formative and syntactical language, cliché adjectives, distorted language, and wordplay, and even the size of headlines and the juxtaposition of articles—all of which for Kraus were expressions not only of poor taste or economic interests, but of an different type of manipulation of the readers. Kraus did not report on or review the press in the regular sense; he quoted and disrupted the articles and reports in order to question processes of reading and comprehension. His aimed to show what the language of the press was covering up and to “immunize the readers.” Reading *Die Fackel* is not like reading a newspaper, it constantly confronts the reader with linguistic impasses in multiple voices and layers; it is, indeed, a lesson in reading.

Second, in terms of questions of morality and ethics, Kraus focuses on legal sensations, which were not only motivated by voyeurism or as a means to satisfy the public’s appetite for excitement, but which facilitated the struggle to maintain the normative boundaries (sexual, status, ethnic) and to enforce and entrench them. Kraus’s critique dealt with questions such as: what is a law and in whose name does it function? How does exercising the law serve the exclusion and discrimination of social groups (woman prostitutes, homosexuals, Jews, low-class citizens)? How did the Darwinist-social discourse render entire groups criminal, based solely on their nature, and justify violence against them? To emphasize, Kraus is not simply denunciating the legal system, but is using literary and theatrical devices (words spoken by the prosecutor alongside quotes from Shakespeare’s plays; describing the persecution of women prostitutes as a modern witch hunt; employing “public opinion” as a manipulation in court). He does not embellish the critique with citations but undermines the journalistic genre and legal discourse while not only demanding that the justice systems function properly but also by challenging the perception of the law itself: the law cannot be based on a perception of abstract normativity, In which case it loses its concrete human drama and becomes an agent of power. On the other hand, Kraus’s focus, although always specific, is not only upon a particular defendant or particular trial, but is always a case study for, or symptom of, the systemic malfunction of the law and its institutions. In place of adhering to the authority of the word of the law, he calls upon judges to become critics of the language of the law. Against the authority of judges and the interests of journalists, Kraus presents the polysemous logic of the literary canon, and the rules of grammar in place of legal norms. The judicial ruling is obligated, like literary interpretation, to set boundaries to meaning and to reexamine the norms and their significance, rather than ratify conventions and enforce principles. The law is required to create the imperative connection between concepts and principles and human experience. We should stress the fact that Kraus is not saying but quoting, not condemning but making use of satirical language in source materials in a manner that they speak for themselves. The defamiliarization of the speaker’s position is an expression of the notion that the moral issue is not the starting point for deliberations but the outcome, which, most often, is not manifested in court. That is, something emerges that could not have been perceived before—the defendant is usually a victim of social circumstances—and therefore generalized accusations and moralistic denunciations are of no help here. The legal sensations of fin-de-siècle Vienna are distinct cases of moral panic—social crises in which the normative implementation of the law and the use of force cannot provide a suitable response (therefore these cases are so provocative). Thus, coping with them calls for other means associated with empathy, understanding the context, dealing with the inevitable contradictions of the human condition, the ability to appreciate the tragic circumstances of those who end up in court, and the recognition that justice necessitates a creative interpretation of the legal language rather than its literal application.

A critique of language is also the focal point of Kraus’s critique of violence, mainly during World War I. Propaganda, for example, does not amount to the dissemination of disinformation about events. It constitutes the manipulative usage of information for the purpose of replacing rational thinking with emotional identification, and the ability to observe reality with the obsessive consumption of fragments of information lacking context supplied in newspapers’ “special editions” (*Extraausgabe*). The reader does not know what is occurring on the front, but is rather inundated with slogans and clichés that destabilize their ability to think or understand, and which render them, as Kraus saw it, an undiscerning marionette. Put differently, even before it is possible to speak in favor of, or against, the war, it is necessary to produce an addressee’s position of ethical discourse. In contrast, on the eve of the world war, the impassioned press caused masses to congregate in the streets yelling: “Serbia must die!”[[5]](#footnote-5) Thus, contrary to the view that language is solely a means of representation, Kraus sees in language itself a conscripting function.

It should be emphasized that the uniqueness of Kraus’s project does not amount merely to his proposing a critique of the conscripting press and war propaganda. He was not a cantankerous pacifist who reprimanded leaders and condemned violence, because “war is not a nice thing.” As a social philosopher, Kraus could not accept such oppositional positions either, because they too are based on a conventional approach to criticism that he rejects (and even satirizes its arguments by way of the cheek-in-tongue character, The Optimist, in his play *The Last Days of Mankind*). For Kraus, war is a “techno-romantic adventure,” a tragic attempt to restore substance to empty symbols and false ideas (the old order of the Austro-Hungarian empire), while becoming intoxicated with power amidst an apocalypse of destruction. In other words, opposition to the war cannot amount to denunciations or displaying its horrors. Instead, the critique needs to deal with the ways in which that experience of power intoxication operates on the senses, how it incites and engorges public opinion, and the ways in which it is not only a means to political ends but a different manifestation of the political order: in the age of manufactured mass culture, ideology is no longer an accumulation of ideas and worldviews but an economic-consumerist logic that functions as if on its own by way of the social institutions and state mechanisms that serve it. However, it is precisely because there is no single responsible figure at which to point the finger of blame, the ideology becomes present nearly everywhere in the social discourse. In other words, this is not an act of communication per se but an ideological discourse.

From a critique of the war’s horrific violence—not, as mentioned, in the sense of a means to an end (protecting the homeland) but as an expression of the shift in the political order whose objectives are different (protecting real estate), and from the understanding of the mechanisms of the ideological discourse, which does not aspire to convince or influence, but to operate on the collective consciousness and construct the citizens in its image—Kraus went on to his most extensive work, *The Third Walpurgis Night*, which was published posthumously. By means of a nightmarish collage of theatrical quotations, newspaper reports, and speeches by and on behalf of court philosophers and intellectuals, Klaus attempts to criticize the discourse of the Third Reich, but more so, to criticize the logic of the sovereignty upon which it was founded: the manner in which the government can speak to the soul of the masses, exploit the magical power of myth, validate the experience, and fill the hollow space of meaning and the vacuum of time.

Kraus’s project, although touching upon different fields and dimensions, is based on a linguistic practice that he forms and develops, and in terms of which he produces an ethical critique that does not scrutinize the extent to which the norms are implemented but rather scrutinizes the norms themselves. It does not question their meaning but tracks the ways in which they generate meaning, and their usage in discourse. Krause does not only contest the communicability of the language but replaces it, as an alternative, with poetic language, the polysemic language that deviates from the representational principle. Poetic language is not a different aggregate of signifiers, expression of opinion or social theory, but a “language-paradigm,” an opportunity to articulate what the ideological discourse silenced, to create a rejuvenated linkage between language and experience, morality, and imagination. In his paper “The Language,” Kraus formulates this notion, in his usual manner, with striking accuracy: “Is it possible to imagine a better defense of morality than linguistic doubt,” and later, “With doubt, which is the best teacher, much would be gained: some things would remain unsaid.”[[6]](#footnote-6)

**The Structure of the Book**

In the Introduction, I will begin by presenting the framework for my discussion on Kraus as a social thinker, then I will explain the terms I use—language, ethics, criticism—and the manner in which I substantiate my readings. Finally, I will outline the methodology in general.

In the first chapter “Barricades of words – the limits of meaning and the criticism of language,” I will offer a brief historical introduction on the crisis of representation as a background for Kraus’s critical project. In the second section, I will present Kraus’s strategies as a satirist, and in the third section, I will analyze his perception of poetic language (a perception of language as a sphere of creation). In the last section, I will exemplify the manner in which Kraus’s critique of language functions as an ethical standpoint by way of comparison with Ludwig Wittgenstein and Paul Valéry.

In the second chapter, “Man of the mirror – a critique of the discourse of identity,” I will discuss the way in which Kraus “languagisizes” the discourse of identity based on gestures and citations, clichés and phrases. We will see how figures, such as Baudelaire and Flaubert, facilitate Kraus’s critique of the discourse of identity in 1900 Vienna. Kraus does not contrast false identity with authentic identity, quite the opposite: he demonstrates how the pretense of authenticity produces the false discourse of identities. The drama of un-identity reaches its peak in Kraus’s polemic with Franz Werfel regarding the latter’s play *Mirror-Man*.

In the third chapter, “Moralism and criminalization – the theater of trial and the language of the law,” I will discuss Kraus’s critique of the law against the background of the re-organization of the centralized state and the development of the criminological discourse in Austro-Hungary, and the legal reforms. Next, I will describe the manner in which Kraus’s critique of language becomes a critique of law, and vice versa: the critique of law as a basis for ethical-public prosecution. In this chapter I will exemplify how Kraus employs his non-normative critique vis-à-vis legal sensations in his time.

In the fourth chapter, “The techno-romantic adventure – a critique of violence and World War I,” I will focus on Kraus’s critique of violence, which navigates speech and silence, critique of the press and propaganda and scrutiny of the ideological discourse and the ways in which it operates. I will highlight the crisis of agency and how Kraus aspires, in his monumental work *The Last Days of Mankind*, to deal with these challenges by bringing language to its threshold states.

In Chapter Five, “Hitler brings nothing to my mind – a critique of the Third Reich,” I will discuss the manner in which Kraus comprehends the discursive mechanisms of the Third Reich and the impasse of his own critique of language in face of what he views as the political conscription of the demonic force of myth, and again: not violence as a means to an end but how it itself becomes the political action. This is what Kraus calls: “non-rational-socialismus.” Coincidingly, Kraus translates, or more precisely, adapts Shakespeare’s sonnets with the intention of enabling a different future to develop after the impending catastrophe passes.

To conclude, I will propose several contemporary insights, which Kraus, had he been a current day blogger, could have contributed, and discuss how his approach can provoke thought and provide inspiration to those who wish to engage in social and moral criticism. Kraus does not offer solutions, but he certainly points to the terms and myths of criticism, and to the depository of the good intentions of too radical or not daring enough social philosophers.

1. Kraus, *Nestroy und die Nachwelt*, F.349:41. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Kraus, A8. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. F. 909:2 [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Kraus, F. 483-84, 41. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. This expression characterizes the way in which newspaper headlines, by turning them into street slogans, become a process of no-thought. These are issues that concerned Kraus and which became major themes in his play *The Last* *Days of Mankind*. See also, Scheichl, *Humanity/Kraus*. **I couldn’t find this title online** [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Mit dem Zweifel, der der beste Lehrmeister ist, wäre schon viel gewonnen: manches bliebe ungesprochen. (S,8). [↑](#footnote-ref-6)