

**Jonathan Franzen, ed., *The Kraus Project: Essays by Karl Kraus*. Translated and Annotated by Jonathan Franzen with assistance and additional notes from Paul Reitter and Daniel Kehlmann. Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2013. 318 pp.**

Rarely do the worlds of twentieth-century Austrian modernism and twenty-first-century American fiction so explicitly collide. Yet it is this unlikely marriage that we find in Jonathan Franzen's translations of some of Karl Kraus's seminal writings: *Heine and the Consequences* (1910), the *Afterword to “Heine and the Consequences”* (1911), *Nestroy and Posterity: On the Fiftieth Anniversary of his Death* (1912), *Between Two Strains of Life: Final Word* (1917), and Kraus's last poem, “Let No One Ask...” (1934). Paul Reitter's commentaries provide the necessary historical context and critical insight into the various discourses and polemics to which Kraus was responding (or into which he inserted himself), and the contemporary Austrian writer Daniel Kehlmann aids in both parsing some of the difficult syntax and allusions for which Kraus was known, as well as in providing details about the late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Austrian and German literary landscape. Collectively, this project represents a productive encounter between past and present, fiction and the academy, and one that may have spawned a new literary genre.

In translating these essays, Franzen, along with Kehlmann and Reitter, have undertaken a monumental task. This is not only because Kraus's German—riddled with the dialects of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, and rapidly shifting between higher and lower registers—presents inherent difficulties, but also because Kraus himself made a concerted effort to remain, in a sense, untranslatable to his own contemporaries. But this is precisely Franzen's main point: that Kraus actually has “more to say to us in our own media-saturated, technology-crazed, apocalypse-haunted historical moment than his more

accessible contemporaries now do” (5). Franzen’s reason for publishing these translations today—a project he began in 1983, while he was a student and a struggling writer living in Berlin—is that Fin-de-siècle Vienna and Fin-de-siècle America share more in common than their similar chronological status vis-à-vis a new century. Kraus’s epoch was on the precipice of decline; he was among its most perspicacious chroniclers. The provocative question Franzen implicitly poses to us is whether Kraus’s apocalyptic vision has also prefigured the decline of the American Empire.

The translations succeed at rendering Kraus’s prose (and poetry) into an English that still retains many of the tensions, allusions, and wordplay that inform the original German. Occasionally, however, word choices appear somewhat arbitrary when read in context. The word “Blockhead,” for example, is an odd choice for “Trottel” in Kraus’s playful but acerbic sentence toward the beginning of his essay on Heine: “Glaubt mir, Ihr Farbenfrohen, in Kulturen, in denen jeder Trottel Individualität besitzt, vertrotteln die Individualitäten.” (10-11). In the essay on Nestroy, Franzen has chosen “class feeling” for “Standesbewußtsein” (170-171), and “assimilation of the mind” for the ambiguous term “Vergeistigung” (200-201). Editorial decisions like these are necessary, but they invariably betray a position or an interpretation that is imposed more by the translator than represented by the original author. This is the case for any translation of an author who deliberately resists being placed into a camp, literary or political. Some of these decisions add something to the original; others take something away. Reitter, however, explicitly underscores this problem by pointing to some of the challenges in translating, for example, Kraus’s use of the term “Stoff,” which could refer to the “content,” “material,” or “subject matter” of a particular discourse (15).

A leitmotif throughout the footnotes, which both surfaces (or remains latent) in many of Kraus's early writings and is of central concern to Reitter's reading of Kraus, is Kraus's treatment of German-Jewish identity. Indeed, Kraus's ostensible anti-Semitism counts among the most difficult aspects of Kraus to 'translate' or render intelligible to a contemporary audience. Franzen and Reitter suggest that Kraus's critique of the liberal 'Jewish press' and many contemporary assimilated Jewish writers is a reflection of his "radical performance of German-Jewish identity" (103). This is not meant to justify or apologize for Kraus's offenses, but rather to suggest that Kraus was ashamed of his fellow German-Jewish writers from privileged backgrounds (like himself), who, he felt, did not take advantage of their privilege in their writing, instead resorting to the latest literary fads rather than carve out their own path to the German language. This thorny discourse, however, cannot here be given the attention it deserves. For more, see Reitter, *The Anti-Journalist: Karl Kraus and Jewish Self-Fashioning in Fin-de-Siècle Europe* (Chicago, 2008).

The one distraction in the text are the few footnotes in which Franzen uses Kraus's formulations as a pretext for his own social punditry, which is at times insightful, but at times plodding and aimless. It is left unclear, for example, whether Kraus is to be praised for anticipating platforms such as Twitter and the blogosphere with his montage of quotations, or blamed—like Kraus had done to Heine before him—for practicing the very techniques that Franzen denounces as shallow and symptomatic of cultural decline. Perhaps it is both, and the reader must decide for herself where she stands regarding this polemical figure. What is clear is that these translations will help to restore Kraus's place among the pantheon of great writers who emerged from the Austro-Hungarian Empire.

As the centennial of World War I approaches, Karl Kraus has finally been made at least partially accessible to students and scholars who do not know German but are interested in this period. This collection should also serve as a valuable resource for any scholar working on satire, Austrian and German modernism, media studies, German-Jewish culture, and contemporary American fiction.

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