

# Start thinking

## Michael Wood



DICTA AND CONTRADICTA

by Karl Kraus ([/search-results?search=Karl Kraus](#)), translated by Jonathan McVity ([/search-results?search=Jonathan McVity](#)).  
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Karl Kraus had many enemies, but his friends and admirers are something of a liability too. They insist on his unremitting probity and passion for justice, but his justice was all his own – there was no one else on the bench. ‘His vision was never unsteadied by scepticism,’ Erich Heller wrote. Walter Benjamin asserted that ‘Kraus never offered an argument that had not engaged his whole person. Thus he embodies the secret of authority: never to disappoint.’ It’s easy to see why unsteady, disappointed people would be attracted to such a figure, but the more general virtues of unfailing dogmatism are not so clear. Jonathan McVity, in an afterword to his excellent translation of a volume of Kraus’s aphorisms, says that Kraus ‘miscalculated badly in the Dreyfus Affair’. A remorseless critic in Kraus’s own mould might well argue that if you were wrong about Dreyfus it wouldn’t matter too much what you were right about.

And Kraus could be shallow as well as dogmatic. All his views on the relations between men and women have the scent of old Vienna about them: they are courtly, chivalrous and deeply discriminatory. Of course it’s better to adore women than be a misogynist, just as it’s better to defend prostitutes than to beat your wife, but many women will prefer not to be adored for their lack of brains and their closeness to nature. ‘Love in men may be merely a drive,’ Kraus writes in *Dicta and Contradicta*, ‘but even the most thoughtless woman loves in the service of an idea. Even the woman that merely sacrifices to a stranger’s drives is morally superior to the man who only serves his own.’ Shouldn’t that be ‘the woman who’? McVity is going a little further than Kraus here. In any event this moral superiority, even in the service of an idea, has no intellectual element for Kraus. ‘I enjoy carrying on a monologue with women,’ he writes, ‘but a dialogue with myself is more stimulating’; ‘The best women are those one speaks with least’; ‘A beautiful woman has understanding enough for one to talk to her about everything and with her about nothing.’ At times Kraus’s language on this subject rises to levels of genuine provocation, and it would be absurd to mistake an extravagant posture for a serious proposition: ‘A woman is more than just her exterior. The lingerie is also important’; ‘Since keeping wild animals is illegal and I do not enjoy house pets, I prefer to remain unmarried.’ But Kraus is out to provoke us by expressing his opinions extremely, not by being in any way ironic about them, or by pretending to have opinions he doesn’t have. He’s unsteadied by scepticism, remember. Wasn’t he just being a man of his time? Sure, but not all the men of his time were such men.

This kind of material is all the more tiresome because it occupies most of the first two sections of *Dicta and Contradicta*, entitled ‘Womankind, Fantasy’ and ‘Morality, Christianity’. I do recommend staying with the book, though, or starting in the middle. These are aphorisms, after all; each one has its own plot. And it is truly exhilarating to read Kraus in full form, even on the subject of old Vienna. He is amazed that ‘even jealous men allow their wives to mingle freely at masked balls. They have forgotten how much they could once permit themselves there with other men’s wives, and believe that public licentiousness has been repealed since their wedding.’ ‘If a murder has occurred in a place where two people have met for sex,’ he says, ‘the two would rather bear the suspicion of murder than of fornication.’ And the following miniature story is all the more haunting because of its apparent (and for all I know real) lack of point: ‘It was a flight through the millennia, on the coldest night of winter, as she ran from a masquerade ball out onto the

street, half-naked, into the deepest Prater, with waiters, cavaliers and coachmen in hot pursuit ... a lung inflammation and death brought her back to our century.'

*Dicta and Contradicta* was published in German as *Sprüche und Widersprüche* in 1909 and again in 1914 and 1923. The aphorisms were taken from *Die Fackel* (the 'Torch'), the journal which Kraus founded in 1899, and wrote single-handedly from 1911 to 1936, the year of his death. Before 1911 his contributors included Masaryk, Strindberg, Wedekind, Wilde, Trakl and Heinrich Mann. The journal was meant, Kraus said, to speak to an empire on which the sun never rises. He also published seven volumes of essays, two other volumes of aphorisms, and nine volumes of verse, as well as *The Last Days of Mankind*, a vast satirical play, designed, he said, for a theatre on Mars. He also wrote satirical comedies, reworked Shakespeare's plays and Offenbach's operettas, and translated Shakespeare's Sonnets – from the original Yiddish, he said, because his English was not all that secure. Kraus was born into a Jewish family in Jicin in Bohemia in 1874; the family moved to Vienna when he was three. He renounced Judaism in 1899, converted to Christianity in 1911, and left the Church in 1923. There is an extraordinary moment in *The Last Days of Mankind* when Pope Benedict XV speaks out against the war. Suddenly the scene switches to a newspaper office where the editor is dictating an article in his own style but in the Pope's voice, celebrating the sinking of French and Italian ships: 'And the fishes, lobsters and sea spiders of the Adriatic have for a long time not had it so good as now. In the southern Adriatic they helped themselves to the crew of the *Leon Gambetta* almost to the last man ... In the northern Adriatic the creatures of the sea are feasting at an ever more abundant table.' Whatever he says, the Pope, Kraus suggests, is just the editor-in-chief of the church paper.

*The Last Days of Mankind* is eight hundred pages long, and much of it is intensely local and topical. After many years of refusing even to think of having the play produced, although he read from it at some of his numerous one-man shows, Kraus made a shortened stage adaptation in 1929, which was published in German in 1992, and there is an English-language translation and abridgment by Frederick Ungar, from which I have just quoted. The play offers a merciless cabaret version of history, in which the plot is simply the 1914-18 war, seen from every imaginable angle: the streets of Vienna, government offices, various war fronts, schools, churches, restaurants, submarines, nightclubs, conference halls, hospitals, cinemas and so on. I can't describe the work as a whole and I have to say that much of it is impenetrable to me, but I can illustrate it, and the jokes I do get seem to me magnificent.

'What do you say to the rumours?' a newspaper subscriber says. 'In Vienna rumours are being spread that in Austria rumours are being spread.' The Viennese really know how to stick it out, a patriot says. 'People here put up with all their hardships as if they were pleasures!' His interlocutor says: 'Hardships? What hardships?' The patriot says: 'I mean, if there were any hardships.'

'Unfortunately there aren't any.'

'That's right. There aren't any. But tell me this – if people have no hardships – why do they have to stick it out?'

'I can explain that. There are in fact no hardships, but we take them joyfully in our stride.'

When a pompous general poses for a photograph, pretending to pore over maps because he once looked good in that stance, the photographer asks him to keep still 'only for a historical moment, if you please'. The traditional phrase about the Germans as a people of poets and thinkers ('Dichter und Denker') becomes 'the people of judges and hangmen' ('Richter und Henker'). There is a brilliant submarine parody of Goethe's famous poem which begins 'On all mountain tops/There is peace' ('Über allen Gipfeln/ Ist Ruh'): 'Under all waters/Is U.' Kraus repeatedly represents the rabid wartime chauvinism of his compatriots, but manages to hit other targets at the same time. 'The unattractive thing about chauvinism,' he says in *Dicta and Contradicta*, 'is not so much the antipathy toward other nations as the love of one's own.' In *The Last Days of Mankind*, a little girl refuses to go and play when her mother tells her to because that's what the English do. 'After work the Germans work some more, while the English enjoy themselves at games and sport.' That's why the English are on their way down and the Germans are on their way up. A profiteer says: 'Whoever didn't get rich in this war doesn't deserve to have experienced it.'

You can see why Kraus needed his theatre on Mars. A patient dies while a doctor is talking, a man disappears while a bureaucrat is telling him about the forms he needs, prisoners of war (on both sides) are shot before our eyes. This moment allows Kraus one of his most brilliant pieces of linguistic satire. Austrian soldiers are ordered to kill prisoners, 'as the lying propaganda of our enemies maintains'. The lying propaganda is true, indeed official policy, so the phrase no longer has anything like its ordinary sense. 'Lying propaganda' means either the truths our enemies tell, or whatever our enemies say, true or false. It's a linguistic landmine, or it will be if anyone ever wakes up to the meaning of words again. And of course the play is not all jokes, even fierce satirical ones. There is a chorus of dead, frozen soldiers, and of children who died on the *Lusitania*, and the last words of the play are given to the 'Unborn Son'. The soldiers sing (my translations):

Cold was the night.

Who devised this death?

Oh, you who sleep in beds –

How do your hearts not break?

The cold stars cannot save us,

And nothing will save you.

The children sing:

We rock on the waves,

We are somewhere now,

How bright life is,

How happy the children are.

And the unborn son says:

Please forestall us,

The later witnesses of the horror,

Don't let us be born.

We would betray your shame,

We don't want such heroes for fathers.

For Kraus the war was an instance not only of greed and vanity and folly and many other human qualities; it was the reflection of a deeper commitment to unreality, a life dedicated to denial. And when Heller spoke of Kraus's refusal of scepticism, he was thinking particularly of language, and he underlined what may seem to be a certain naivety in Kraus's views. The 'forms of human culture . . . were self-evidently true if they had the blessing of language, that language of which he naively believed that it could say everything worth saying, and was incapable of deceiving him who spoke it truthfully.' To believe that language can say everything worth saying seems simply narrow, a way of missing too much of the world and our experience of it; but to believe language will not betray us if we do not betray it is a more complicated proposition.

Kraus's naivety did not involve an assumption that living on good terms with language was easy. 'The more you look closely at a word,' he wrote in a sentence that Benjamin quotes, 'the more distantly it looks back.'

And in *Dicta and Contradicta* we read: 'The danger of the word is the pleasure of the thought,' and 'I am not the master of language; but language masters me completely. She is not the servant of my thoughts. I have a liaison with her: I receive thoughts and she can do with me what she wishes.' Both Heller and Benjamin insist on the erotic nature of Kraus's relation to language, but this may be to fall a little too eagerly into the mystery of Kraus's own idiom and to miss his actual implications. He ends the aphorism about the master and the servant in this way: 'Thought is servant and language is mistress; if someone knows how to invert the relationship she makes herself useful in his house but forbids him her privates.' 'Privates' is McVity's perhaps too clever rendering of Schoss, 'lap'. Let's do this in slow motion. A person who masters language will find language useful, but will be barred from a real intimacy with it. For such a person, as Kraus says elsewhere in the book, 'language is merely the husk of an opinion.' A person who recognises that language is not a servant will have thoughts and seek to express them, but language itself will finally decide what happens to them. The danger of the word is the pleasure of the thought because we don't know what thoughts words will bring, and what will happen when we try to put thoughts and words together. For this reason Kraus describes experiences of language, or experiences in language (*Spracherlebnisse*) as 'thrilling to the bone'. And when he says, 'The author has to know all the paths of thought his words could open up. He has to know what will happen to his words,' he is slipping into a fantasy of control, not describing his own practice. Closer to the actual feel of Kraus's work are such aphorisms as: 'There are writers who can express in a mere twenty pages things I sometimes need two whole lines for,' and 'It is often difficult to write an aphorism when you can. It is much easier to write an aphorism when you can't.'

So in spite of his many dogmatism, Kraus does know uncertainty, but it is an uncertainty of achievement or success, not a doubt about the goal or the medium. Kraus is not saying, with Heidegger, that language speaks: on the contrary, he thinks language needs us for its life. But he is saying that language can't be wrong, and that when it sounds wrong, the fault is ours. He is also saying, I think, that language is our past, present and future, and that it remembers things we have forgotten, knows things we don't know. It won't keep us honest, because nothing can do that, but it will allow us to recognise honesty when we see it. This is why Kraus is so savage about the press, because for him it deals in words without believing in words. 'The mission of the press is to spread culture while destroying the attention span.' 'Journalism only seems to serve the moment. In reality it destroys the mental receptiveness of posterity.' The very notion of print comes in for this grandiose bit of sarcasm: 'When you reflect that the same technological achievement served both the *Critique of Pure Reason* and the reportage on the tour of the Vienna Men's Choral Society, all discontent leaves your breast and you praise the Creator's omnipotence.'

Aphorisms are the perfect, although extraordinarily difficult genre for a writer with this view of language. They have to sound authoritative while (discreetly) giving themselves away, mocking their own finality. If they're just authoritative, they become pedantic. They can be true or false, but their verbal form doesn't add anything to their content. If they just give themselves away, they sound sheepish or cute, scarcely aphorisms at all. Kraus doesn't write any of the second kind, but he writes quite a few of the first kind: clever but flat, or true but sententious. The ideal aphorism has a gap in it, a sort of leak which its very tidiness enhances. Wittgenstein writes: 'The philosopher treats a question; like a disease.' Erich Heller calls the punctuation here the most profound semi-colon in literature. I'm not sure what the competition is, but it's clear that the standard translation ('The philosopher's treatment of a question is like the treatment of an illness') loses all the interesting disturbance of the German syntax. Does the philosopher treat a question the way he or she would treat a disease, or is the treatment of it like a disease? Perhaps the whole package, philosopher, treatment and question, is like a disease. It's clear that all these possibilities are in play. Or think of Kafka's 'To believe in progress is not to believe that progress has already occurred. That wouldn't be a belief.' This looks like a simple reminder about the meaning of words, but it has the unnerving effect of making belief seem like an advanced form of doubt, so advanced that we can only deny it.

I mention these examples from Kraus's own linguistic and historical world – Allan Janik and Stephen Toulmin, in their book *Wittgenstein's Vienna*, suggest that Kraus's work is the other, 'unwritten' half of Wittgenstein's *Tractatus* – in order to suggest both that there may be times and places where aphorisms flourish especially and that there is considerable range even within what looks like a small genre. Wittgenstein's aphorisms are usually therapeutic: they give us shocks that help us to see the world better, and often to bring into consciousness what we didn't know we knew. 'If a lion could talk, we could not

understand him.' Well, no, but think of what we do understand when we have understood (or remembered) this. Kafka's aphorisms are like nightmarish logical prisons, although there is perhaps a faint victory in the lucidity with which the prisons are inspected. 'If it had been possible to build the Tower of Babel without climbing, it would have been allowed.' 'The crows claim that one single crow could destroy heaven. That is beyond doubt, but doesn't prove anything against heaven, because heaven just means: the impossibility of crows.'

Kraus is less metaphorical than either Wittgenstein or Kafka, and he is not out to help us. Given the darkness of his worldview we might think he would also construct prisons. He doesn't, though, because his anger is a form of freedom, and because he believes in the truth of language: not what it says but what it is. Sometimes the shape of the sentence produces the surprise: 'It is unjust to reproach Vienna for its faults, since its advantages also deserve blame.' At other times an individual word hangs onto its old meaning like a reproach, and shifts the meaning of a remark: 'You sometimes read that a city has so-and-so hundred thousand "souls", but it sounds exaggerated.' It's not the number that's exaggerated. 'If I must choose the lesser of two evils,' Kraus writes, 'I will choose neither' – meaning not that he won't choose but that he refuses the banal structure of choice on offer. And in what seems to me the most splendid of all the aphorisms in *Dicta and Contradicta*, he tells us: 'In doubtful cases, choose what is right.' This has everything an aphorism needs: confident voice, sharp phrasing, clear instruction. But it also knows that what is right is precisely what is at stake, and pretends to ignore the difficulty, thereby illuminating a whole set of problems behind the apparent problem. We could settle our case by choosing what we know to be conventionally right. Would that do the trick? Not if we had another view of what is really right. We could follow our conscience, but do we know the difference between our conscience and our interests? And why are we in doubt anyway? Are we actually uncertain, or do we find it convenient not to know what the right thing is? The aphorism, in spite of appearances, is not telling us what to do; it is asking us to start thinking.

McVity takes the refreshing view that translation is an opportunity rather than an impossibility, and he has some wonderfully inventive equivalents for Kraus's wordplay. Not all of his choices work, but most do. The fact that 'evil' is 'live' written backwards makes an even more dramatic point about language and morality than Kraus's *Nebel* ('fog') and *Leben* ('life'). 'Eats' and 'it's' are very neat matches for *isst* ('eats') and *ist* ('is'), and 'quotial climber' (for *Zitatenprotz*) is truly inspired. At every point where even pretty sturdy translators might begin to murmur something about unmanageable puns and unbridgeable differences between cultures, McVity thinks something up. Kraus uses the word *Satz*, which means both 'a leap' and 'a sentence'. Nothing to be done with that literally, but McVity proposes 'spin', which has both physical and non-physical connotations. It's not great, but it's the same sort of linguistic gesture. The aphorism in question is itself about aphorisms, and defines what I have been calling a flight, an altogether grander idea, but one still suggestive of multiple possibilities. Truth is overcome but not ignored. 'An aphorism does not need to be true, but it should outwing the truth. It must get beyond it with a spin.'

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