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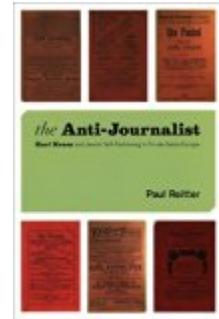
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Paul Reitter. *The Anti-Journalist: Karl Kraus and Jewish Self-Fashioning in Fin-de-siècle Europe*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008. xii + 254 pp. \$35.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-226-70970-3.

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On the Occasion of Linguistic Mimesis

The Viennese writer Karl Kraus (1874-1936) was among the most controversial individuals of his time. Using an extraordinarily rich language full of allusions and cynicism, he constituted a new conception of cultural critique. Kraus's particular linguistic approach was aimed primarily at criticizing a novel kind of journalism, the feuilleton, which was brought from France to German-speaking areas by Heinrich Heine. Kraus chose to refrain from finding employment with established newspapers, preferring to publish his own journal, *Die Fackel* (The torch), in which he criticized, above all, the venality of the then current media, journalists' inaccurate style of reportage and coverage of events, and their errant use of language. In his journal, he also attacked Heine as the source of this very phenomenon. Born into a Jewish family, Kraus converted to Catholicism during the early years of publishing his journal and later preferred a non-denominational religious identity.

Within criticisms of Kraus as writer and person by his contemporaries, two perspectives are detectable. One condemns him as an antisemite, the other attempts to establish his writing as particularly Jewish. Paul Reitter's study, which began as a PhD dissertation at the University of California Berkeley, attempts to avoid this approach by offering a more nuanced exploration that contextualizes Kraus's work in the multifaceted culture

of German-speaking late modernity. Reitter perceives Kraus's writing as neither the product of Jewish self-hatred nor the product of a messianic intent.

In the first part of the book, Reitter introduces the cultural context of Kraus's time, and, more important, reviews the European reception of Kraus in the last two decades. This serves as an appropriate overview of the main tendencies in present-day discussions of Kraus. Following this overview, Reitter analyzes fin-de-siècle's antisemitism—for every reader new to the subject, the book provides a basic discussion of the relevant literature and comes, with regard to Kraus, to some rather unconventional conclusions.[1] To avoid the polarized positions of Kraus's contemporary critics, Reitter suggests that the antisemitic attitudes attributable to Kraus were typical of the times when examined alongside the writings of Richard Wagner, Heinrich von Treitschke, Otto Weininger, and Adolf Bartels. The claim of antisemitism directed at Kraus resulted primarily from his essay "Heine und die Folgen" (Heine and the consequences).[2] Reitter dismisses this reading of Kraus, concluding that what is seen as Kraus's antisemitism is actually better understood as indicative of his anti-Zionist attitude.

According to Reitter, journalism was, in Kraus's time,

largely regarded as a Jewish occupation. In criticizing journalism then, criticism against Kraus was directed not only at the genre as such but also at Jews. A comparison of the preferred style of journalistic activities in Vienna (which Kraus admired) and Berlin (which he despised) illuminates this very issue. However, Kraus used this issue to engage in a critical, although ambivalent, assessment of Jewish acculturation.

Reitter challenges the criticism leveled at Kraus regarding his dismissive attitude to Judaism by pointing to Kraus's support of the Yiddish theater plays in Vienna. Kraus encouraged Yiddish performances by following the preference of Western Jewish audiences. Reitter maintains that "with its mystical 'unity'—'Jargon is everything'—Yiddish holds out transformative, even redemptive possibilities" (p. 116). This suggests that Kraus's own preference of Yiddish theater resulted from operating "in a charged, modernist discourse on form that complained about a growing disjunction between form and content and that longed for the highest possible unity, where form would be nothing less than the visible manifestation of Geist" (p. 117).

Summarizing his own position on this research, Reitter writes: "Unlike [Edward] Timms, I track the ways—the complex, paradoxical, innovative ways—in which Kraus fashions his anti-journalism in opposition to a feuilletonistic writing whose fateful excesses he links to Jewish acculturation. And, in contrast to [Sander] Gilman, I show that in this process of radical self-stylizing Kraus works with antisemitic discourse strategically and even subversively. As we will see, for all his egregious rhetoric Kraus ultimately aligns his *Fackel* with linguistic values and practices that run counter to what Gilman calls 'anti-Semitic views on the nature of the Jew's language'" (p. 95). Hence, Reitter provides a distinct account of anti-Jewish sentiments in fin-de-siècle Vienna by elaborating not only on the gentile antisemitic voices but also on Jewish hostility toward Judaism or, at least, certain phenomena of Jewish acculturation. Reitter undertakes this approach to grasp the intricacies of Kraus's personality.

In support of this view, Reitter's study also identifies influences that tend to be forgotten in today's perception of modern Jewish Vienna. He discusses, for example, the perspective of Vienna's contentious chief rabbi, Adolph Jellinek, who initiated a new gender-related discussion on Jewish identities. His discussion might also be read in an anti-Jewish context. In addition to attributing a certain femininity to Jewry, according to Reitter,

Jellinek "regarded modern Jewish identity as grounded in a weighty ethno-cultural tradition. But, again, by emphasizing the Jews' journalistic, apparently non-creative faculties, Jellinek lent credence to doubts about Jewish self-authorship and thus to doubts about the authenticity of the Jewish self." Hence, Reitter stresses, "moderate antisemites" used Jellinek's work to promote their own perspectives on Jewish identity (p. 39).

Kraus was a man of many contradictions. For example, although in the end he was confessionless (after having converted to Catholicism), he still wrote about his Jewish identity. Hence, as Reitter stresses, "we know from Kraus's utterances about his Jewish identity, and from the bemusement they elicited, that, with impressive results, Kraus flaunted his contradictions in this most sensitive area too" (pp. 76-77). In attempting to unravel the very difficulty of categorizing Kraus, Reitter's approach is to provide a more complex account of him. The book is thus devoted to the mimetic aspect in which Kraus reflects his time as well as Jewish self-fashioning. Reitter points out that "Kraus did not fashion himself as possessing the qualities that deracinated Jewish intellects supposedly lacked, i.e., the mystical unity and authenticity that some German Jews sought in the culture of *Ostjuden*. Rather, he lionized, and developed an extreme form of, what was commonly regarded as German Jewry's 'terrible inner state': journalistic mirroring" (p. 135).

To provide an additional example to highlight Reitter's method, it is helpful to explore one of his foci. The central part of the book investigates Gershom Scholem's and Walter Benjamin's attitudes about Kraus. Both lauded Kraus's extraordinary use of journalistic language. The language Kraus employed might be identified as Jewish, and, according to Scholem, even as a "messianic movement of language," which "finds the most unexpected Jewish provinces" within the German language (p. 138). In this regard, Scholem related Kraus to medieval religious writings of Judaism: the so-called *Musivstil* (musive style).[3] Scholem noted that this "mosaic of verses" was the point of descent for modern journalism. However, it was an "illegitimate child," since journalism itself appeared as linguistic "perversion" to Scholem (p. 151). Yet, according to Scholem, "both: Journalism and Kraus ... are children of the Jewish middle ages. *But* Kraus is an unhappy and therefore worthy child" (p. 150). In this area, only Kraus "has somehow forged a 'legitimate' connection to the musive world"—although "Scholem embraced" Kraus, he never did so "uncritically," as Reitter points out (pp. 153, 148).

In Reitter's reading of Benjamin's essay on Kraus, Benjamin's language shares certain characteristics with Kraus's, for example, with the interaction of "Eros," "Geist," and "Sprache" (p. 162).[4] Reitter's examination of Benjamin's essay brings to the fore some paradoxes. For example, Benjamin described Kraus as the brute "bearer of 'real humanism,'" while simultaneously characterizing him as a "journalistic paradox" in which his "struggles" against the journalistic empty phrase and reified words "sets for itself the opposing neo-biblical 'task' of reporting 'on the history of creation' and delivering an 'eternally new, continuous complaint'" (p. 166). However, it would have been useful for Reitter to include Benjamin's critique of Kraus's language. Reitter neglects Benjamin's dismissive assignment of Kraus's writing into a *Naturzustand*, an original state related to nature, in which even prostitution is regarded as a natural phenomenon.[5] On the basis of reflecting the materiality of language, Benjamin criticized Kraus's antisemitism and described, as well, the constant demonic self-mirroring in his writing as a kind of self-sublimation.[6] Hence, an aesthetic consideration of the linguistic form might have supported Reitter's argument. On the basis of a deep connection between language and justice, Benjamin would have paralleled Kraus and Franz Kafka. As Reitter indicates: "They perform a Jewish leap that is a potential means of breaking down a demonic 'spell,' which, it becomes increasingly clear, Benjamin sees as a function of 'law' and 'mind'" (pp. 167-168). By this means, Kraus can be read with Benjamin as the fulfiller of a messianic aim within linguistic activity. "The 'authentically Jewish *salto mortale*' through which Kraus 'tries to break the spell of the demon'—i.e., worshipping 'the image of divine justice in language'—seems to have reached a kind of completion" (p. 171). For, as Reitter points out, the movement back to an original realm of language can be regarded, as the cultural historian Anson Rabinbach indicates, as a kind of "redemptive restoration." This would serve as a predominant theme in Benjamin's messianic thinking. The principle of coming back to an origin through a destructive process is considered a "redemptive restoration": "Thus the calling back to an origin through destruction results in a rare consummation of language, in which the nonhuman, near-divine language of angels is mirrored" (p. 172).

Benjamin's essay, however, did not excite Kraus in any way. Rather it left him "so unenthused, in fact, that he derided it as an instance of 'abyssal feuilletonism'" (p. 173). In his "cursory, tepid comments," Kraus also mentioned the hope that other readers might un-

derstand Benjamin's text better than he did. Nevertheless, both Benjamin and Scholem defended Kraus after his death in 1936 against the accusation of Jewish self-hatred. Reitter concludes his chapter "Messianic Journalism?" with a revealing public example of Scholem's support of Kraus against Moshe Ungerfeld's respective claim of Kraus's antisemitism in the Hebrew-speaking newspaper *Davar* in 1939: "Scholem's letter-to-the-editor states that Ungerfeld has belittled a 'great and tragic chapter' (presumably in the story of Jews in German culture), and that Ungerfeld has mistaken for broad Jewish antisemitism Kraus's 'hatred for a particular type of Jew.' This 'type of Jew', Scholem continues, was 'unfortunately widespread'" (p. 174).

By pointing out Scholem's exemplary defense and disapproval of a certain "type of Jew," i.e., the "acculturated, Fin-de-Siècle, German-Jewish literati who appeared to be so abundant," Reitter does not intend to reestablish Kraus as a writer beyond antisemitism nor to analyze the accurateness of Scholem's, Benjamin's, or Kraus's construction of Jewishness, but to demonstrate "how, as they established their critical voices, these writers engaged thoroughly and innovatively with the discourse that made German-Jewish journalists especially salient emblems of a 'crisis of modernity'" (p.174). Moreover, as Reitter points out, he tried to build from their implicit question: "Why are there so many Jewish journalists?" This "shaped the searching response of all three authors to an even larger 'Jewish question,' one whose immediacy belongs to the past, but whose poignancy endures in the present" (p. 174). Thus Reitter shows how their critical interaction helped to foster a new kind of journalism.

Reitter's extensive discussion concludes with a chapter on "The Afterlife of Anti-Journalism." Here, Reitter points out that recent scholarship has largely neglected Benjamin's and Scholem's intriguing explanation of Kraus's style as "'profoundly Jewish'" (p. 180). However, this very explanation serves in his study as an exit from the dichotomy of Kraus's reception by his contemporaries, which formed the starting point of the research. The author concludes his book with a quotation from Theodor Adorno as "a suggestive last word" that highlights the aspiration for Reitter's comprehensive study once again: "The convicted took refuge in written language [*im Geschriebenen*] ... in just that language which was ashamed of the mimetic moment, and which was its enemy, until Kraus" (p. 181). Although Reitter's book deals less with the form of language itself, the study provides an innovative account of fin-de-siècle Europe, modern Jewish identities, antisemitism, and cultural critique.

Notes

[1]. Reitter mainly uses the argumentation found in Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer, "Elemente des Antisemitismus," in *Dialektik der Aufklaerung* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 2003); and Theodor Adorno, "Sittlichkeit und Kriminalitaet," in *Noten zur Literatur* (Frankfurt/Main: Suhrkamp, 2003).

[2]. Karl Kraus, "Heine und die Folgen," in *Untergang der Welt durch schwarze Magie* (Wien and Leipzig: Verlag Die Fackel, 1922), 200-228.

[3]. Gershom Scholem, *Tagebuecher* (Berlin: Juedischer Verlag, 2000), 2:586-587.

[4]. Walter Benjamin, "Karl Kraus," in *Walter Benjamin: Gesammelte Schriften*, ed. Rolf Tiedemann and Hermann Schweppenhaeuser (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1991), 2.1:334-367.

[5]. Cf. *ibid.*, 353.

[6]. *Ibid.*, 346.

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