PART I

The biographical imperative

CHAPTER I

The biographical imperative: Karl Kraus

Heine saw himself as the founder of a radically modern school of German poetry. Such claims have been treated to a mixed reception, however; and Karl Kraus provided one of the most intelligent and influential readings. His virulent attack on Heine's innovative effect as a writer set the agenda for many subsequent critics in the twentieth century.[1] The essay remains an embarrassment;[2] but equally Kraus identifies problems in Heine that are still difficult to resolve. Chief among these is a failure of authenticity, which Kraus believes Heine bequeaths to contemporary journalists, and his strategy is to insist on Heine's *personal* responsibility for this effect of modernization. Like many hostile critics before him, Kraus is forced to submit to a biographical imperative which will also guide Adorno's attempt at rehabilitation in 1956. Kraus's critique, cast in the terms of his own transcendental understanding of literature, may be allergic, but his response to the peculiar stylistic expression of Heine's modernity is extremely acute.

HEINE THE PROBLEM

'Heine und die Folgen' ('Heine and the Consequences', 1910) is central to a critical attack extending from 'Um Heine' ('Around Heine'), written for the fiftieth anniversary of the poet's death in 1906, to Kraus's major essay on rhyme of 1927.[3] The continued use and abuse of Heine over this period is striking. Kraus's essay powerfully associates Heine with central issues in modernity, while simultaneously attempting to block his reception. His status within the canon in 1910 is not a matter of great interest to Kraus, though he is well aware of recent new editions. Rather, Kraus takes his stand as an expert on writing ('Schriftsachverständiger') to identify a cultural crisis. He believes that intellectual 'anti-culture' has now taken two forms, each moving away from an unnamed centre. The spatial metaphor soon shifts towards a geographical one in which Germany and France stand at opposite

poles. This confrontation plays a significant part in Heine's critical essays on German literature and thought and on French politics, but for Kraus it is also part of the common currency of his own time. The source of the contrast that identifies France with form and Germany with content is almost certainly Nietzsche's essay 'On the Use and Abuse of History', the second of the *Unzeitgemäße Betrachtungen (Untimely Meditations)*. Nietzsche attacks the German habit of mind that confuses inwardness ('Innerlichkeit') with content ('Inhalt'), eschewing all outward, formal expression.[4] Kraus, taking up the German preoccupation with substance, glosses the tendencies as two varieties of an identical weakness – a vulnerability either to matter or to form.

The relation of 'Form' to 'Stoff' is traditionally that of form to content, but Kraus uses 'Stoff' to include the substance of the world or even 'experience' itself. The Germanic 'defencelessness before the material', in Kraus's terms, concentrates on the content of a work of art. The Romance tendency, on the other hand, finds aesthetic qualities in the substance of experience *already*, prior to the work of form. In May 1917 Kraus added a 'final word' to his polemic in which he asserts his own unqualified allegiance to human values. Taking up a theme already touched on in 1910, he identifies in contrast to such values the corrosive force of the commodity. Whatever else his Franco-German terms may intend, they have little to do with differing national allegiances.

The 'German' dominance of content over form is welcome to Kraus because it frees the imagination and poses afresh the question of beauty. In the Romance preference, 'good taste' and 'culture' have penetrated everyday phenomena so completely that 'any Parisian newspaper-seller has more grace than a Prussian publisher'.[5] The ultimate effect of this, in Kraus's view, is that the well-spring of art in the interior life is obliterated by a universal superficiality. Echoing Richard III's remark about every Jack becoming a gentleman, Kraus observes that when every fool is possessed of individuality, then the real autonomous 'individualities' are bound to be vulgarized.

When Kraus claims that the 'German' mentality makes of art a mere *instrument* for its content, while its 'Romance' counterpart transforms life exclusively into *ornament*, he uses terminology borrowed from the architect Adolf Loos. The instrumentalization of art is the lesser of two evils, Kraus suggests, because it leaves intact the substantial objectivity and priority (both logical and chronological) of 'content'. However functionally it may be conceived, the autonomy of art is preserved, since the relation between

'life' and 'art' can still be understood in terms of reflection or mimesis. The 'Romance' mentality, on the other hand, already experiences the aesthetic in the material from which art might otherwise be made. This is where the complexity of Kraus's argument begins to emerge. If the German mentality recognizes in art only the sphere of its reference – what it is *about* – it must nevertheless concede a kind of epistemological power to the aesthetic as the form in which that field of reference is 'truly' revealed, in the mimetic process. The French preference, the ornamentalization of life, however, dissolves these relations: the relocation of the aesthetic in the sphere of the material itself simply abolishes the mimetic relation. Every Jack becomes a gentleman, and both life and art are equalized in relations of homogeneity. There can no longer be a platform for art because life itself has ceased to exercise any privilege as content. Art ceases to be art because the mimetic distance which makes possible the criteria of adequacy in relations of form and content is closed. 'Every man his own poet' is Kraus's summary, and mimesis has been replaced by mere repetition.

Heine is presented as the symptom and origin of this condition. Yet his dubious achievement is also recognized as the response to a need in the 'German' mentality. Kraus calls it 'a longing that has to rhyme somewhere or other', and the metaphor of rhyme will be cashed in when Kraus discusses Heine's verse technique.[6] To illustrate his case, Kraus describes the German desire for a direct, if subterranean, route from the realm of secular practicality in the accounts office ('Kontor') to the kitsch 'blue grotto' of a decayed Romantic imagination. The separation of the two is familiar from Thomas Mann's contrast between the bourgeois and the artist, in *Tonio Kröger*, for example, or *Buddenbrooks*. Kraus is much more exercised by the immediacy of the connection between them.

Heine not only brings the 'French' message to Germany, he also supposedly seeks to combine the two opposed impulses. Kraus objects to a levelling out of strict distinctions: form and content, in such writing, are merely contiguous and perspicuous – but where there is no conflict, art cannot create true unity either. Just this *confusion* of forces has been inherited by its worst contemporary expression in journalism, the true object of Kraus's polemic. But within the terms of his critique, Heine's crime is to have rejected the fundamental oppositions on which art depends, to have displaced the boundary by taking on the role of a dangerous *mediator* between art and life, and hence, in a further very striking metaphor, becoming parasitic on each. Another way in which Kraus's point can be understood is to see the autobiographical theme which insinuates itself into

Heine's writing as an occupation of the boundary dividing art from life. Writing for Heine, Kraus's essay suggests, dissolves these distinctions and demarcations.

Kraus's polemic recognizably works with two main metaphors, one sexual and the other economic. The 'feuilleton' of Kraus's slogan 'No feuilleton without Heine' is of course a French word, and Kraus suggests that the impressionistic journalism of his day has taken its lead from a certain ease of writing originally imported by Heine from France. Stylistic facility is evidence of the absence of conflict between content and form. Kraus does not believe that the relationship between the two, in language, is obvious or given. Rather the bond between word and essence ('Wesen') must be pursued in a constant process of critical doubt. If the writer should once 'stop calling the connexion into question . . . the association between linguistic form and conceptual meaning becomes attenuated'.[7]

In French writing, then, and in French culture generally, this sense of necessary difficulty is absent. French is simply lazy in matters of thought. Subsequently the French and German languages will be personified as women or Muses, via an image that comes from Kraus's description of the feuilleton as 'the French disease' Heine brought from Paris, where 'you easily get infected'. In fact Heine is implied in each of these images. The French disease Kraus means is syphilis, and Heine's paralysis during his last years in Paris was widely thought to have been syphilitic in character. From this biographical detail Kraus extends the sexual force of his polemic to a systematic comparison of the French and German languages. If French is intellectually idle, she is also 'easy': she gives herself to any rogue, effortlessly, 'with that perfect deficiency of restraint and inhibition which is perfection in a woman but a deficiency in a language'.[8] Contact with French weakens the moral fibre of German *Sprachgefühl* so that the most level-headed writer will start to have bright ideas.[9] German, on the other hand, is a 'companion who only creates and thinks for the man who can give her children'. Here a new element has appeared in the sexual metaphor, perhaps derived from the earlier image of the parasite. It is now clear that the French linguistic and cultural principle is ultimately unproductive. It can produce only phantom pregnancies.

Since Heine, Kraus tells us, German-language journalism, at least in Vienna, can dispense with creativity. Hack-work will achieve the necessary ends: 'German journalists can fetch themselves some talent in Paris as a matter of pure diligence'.[10] The reference to talent alludes to a central theme of Heine's disagreement with his contemporary and friend Ludwig Börne,

who had also claimed that Heine was merely a talent, lacking the moral substance of *character* to give him political direction. For the immediate victims of Kraus's polemic, a trip to Paris is no longer necessary. As he says, parodying the tag 'hic Rhodus, hic salta', 'these days a cripple who stays in Vienna is credited with a cancan'. Nevertheless, a certain exotic remoteness, whether of Paris or of the 'jungles' made popular by Kipling and his German imitators, provides an easy approach to subject matter through 'foreign costume'.[11]

Kraus complains that Paris provided both substance *and* form – like the superficiality of foreign costume – but that this form is 'merely clothing to the body and not flesh to the spirit'. The phantom pregnancies engendered in the French language cannot be the result of truly fruitful intercourse between writer and language. They are the result of a trick. In describing it, Kraus introduces the second of his two metaphors.

> The great trick of this linguistic racket, which pays a lot better than the greatest achievement of linguistic creativity, continues through successive newspaper generations, and provides anyone and everyone who thinks of reading as a pastime with the most agreeable pretext for avoiding literature.[12]

Kraus's argument relates this point to the issue of inauthenticity by observing that modern feuilletons can be written without anyone needing to 'sniff their way to the Champs Elysées personally'. The image of clothing to the body (as against flesh to the spirit) stresses the idea of an assumed appearance, an inauthentic surface, hollowed out and lacking real interiority. This inauthenticity is now focussed in the notion of linguistic fraudulence. An economic metaphor is deployed from the moment this con trick in language is formulated. The journalistic trick substitutes a forgery for real literary value. In a further image Kraus suggests that talent is uncentred and weightless ('schwerpunktlos') in the world, so that writing in the feuilleton makes plausible the false, and indeed impossible, prospect of 'setting curls on a bald head'. Once more Kraus returns to Heine as the origin of all this corruption. Like the magician in Goethe's ballad, he allowed essentially ungifted apprentices to discover how they might come by a little talent.

Here Kraus alludes directly to Adolf Loos's essay on 'Ornament and Crime'. The architect's analysis of contemporary design provides a context in which Kraus's Heine critique can be properly understood. Kraus claims that what Loos identified as the devaluation of practical life by 'ornament' corresponds to the even more catastrophic confusion created

by the admixture of spiritual or intellectual elements ('Geistelemente') in modern journalism. Far from following Loos's policy and removing anything decorative from its efforts, the modern press constantly renovates and updates its ornamental styles and modes of writing. Loos himself parodies such a need for constant renovation in a passage of his essay on ornament and crime which is worth quoting at length:

> The Austrian ornamentalists say: 'We far prefer a consumer who has furnishings that are intolerable to him after only ten years, and who is therefore compelled to get everything redone every ten years, to one who never buys a new thing until the old one is worn out. It's what industry demands. Millions are kept in work by the rapid turn-over.' This seems to be the secret of the Austrian national economy; how often do we hear these words on the outbreak of a fire: 'Thank God, folk will have something to do.' Well, I have a good solution. Let's set fire to a city, let's set fire to the whole realm, and everything will be swimming in money and affluence.[13]

Although Loos was formally attacking the mixture of 'craft', design, and marketing in early twentieth-century art nouveau, he is clearly describing the origins of consumer society with its need for 'built-in obsolescence'.[14] In substance, however, he is addressing an advanced stage of commodity production; and if this line of thought is read back into his argument, the economic metaphors appear in a sharper light.

Literary ornament, says Kraus, is never pulped, it is simply 'modernized'. The element of the *modern* in this process, then, is not a local question of style so much as a matter of the economic and historical conditions of its production. Kraus hence explicitly rejects the modernizing tendencies in industrial society. While allowing a place for the press 'as a social institution . . . in a progressive social order' (as well he might), he sets out to resist the modernizing force of the industrial economy. In a rather precise metaphor, Kraus identifies *usury* as the root cause of the corruption he attacks. Here the parallel with Loos's argument is clear enough – the practical use of various goods is reduced and, in the developing consumer economy, concealed by the fashionable aspect of 'ornamentation'. In the same way, the immediacy of language is lost in writing which needs to 'render the exterior of its bad intention attractive'.[15] The 'insubstantial' wealth produced by usury – the apparent generation of value without goods – is an unnatural creation and so parallels the infertility of the French language in Kraus's sexual metaphor; it specifically recalls the sorcerer's apprentice, and the weightlessness of mere talent.

The ornament generated by 'modernizing' production is reflected explicitly in form: the decorative writing of the Sunday supplement (these are

Kraus's words!) goes hand in hand with the advertisements that accompany it because both are part of an economic system, founded on the circulation of commodities without reference to any practical use. What makes the triumph of this form of 'robbery' in the Viennese press even worse is its ornamentation with the qualities of 'Geist' – its superficial acquisition of artistic characteristics. In this respect, the press shares in the same structure of desire as the circulation of commodities: the vacuum of a 'poverty of the imagination' is stuffed full of 'facts', the fetishized substitute for 'content' which for Kraus, as we have seen, provides the essential substance of reality. In this corrupt ornamentation of the banal and inauthentic, even aesthetes undertake the metaphorical journey to Paris, world capital of the easy and seductive turn of phrase.

Kraus's second, economic metaphor in the drift of his polemic can now be summarized. In the basic opposition of 'Germanic' and 'Romance' cultures, the French pole is thought to see the substance of life itself as mere ornament. Relying on Loos, Kraus develops this view in relation to the connection between a particular kind of writing, in the press, and the development of consumer society. In this context the structure of the commodity is of interest not only because, as in Marx, it conceals the alienated labour of its producer and, in circulation, occludes the actual nature of social relations. Kraus realizes that commodity relations have already affected consumer perceptions, and stimulated a new kind of discourse in the press. Even 'quality newspapers', of the kind attacked by Kraus, produce a 'writing of the commodity' in several important senses. First, and most simply, the feuilleton is perceived to be in a relation of equivalence with the remainder of the advertising section of the Sunday supplement – the paper itself is a commodity and is marked as belonging to the discourses of and about commodities by proximity. Secondly, language takes on a function separate from any direct communication through a concentration on phrase-making for its own sake, which involves a commodification of language itself. And finally 'experience' is transformed into a series of dead, objective (fetishized) 'facts', interchangeable and ultimately unknowable.

The aesthetic attitude associated with this stress on the stylish or eye-catching turn of phrase is well illustrated in Kraus's attack on Hermann Bahr's beard, which he regarded as merely fashionable: 'not an organic necessity, but merely a feuilletonistic prop, an adjective, a phrase. It need not exist.'[16] The colloquial German of journalism and of ordinary social exchange is no more than the reflex of the corrupting capitalist mode of production, which so exploits and occupies the sphere of 'Spirit' that the latter entirely serves the imperatives of the commodity. Walter Benjamin

was among the first to recognize the importance, in Kraus, of this sense of the phrase:

> The empty phrase. It, however, is an abortion of technology . . . The empty phrase of the kind so relentlessly pursued by Kraus is the [brand] label that makes a thought marketable ['verkehrsfähig'], the way flowery language ['Floskel'], as ornament, gives a thought value for the connoisseur. But for this very reason the liberation of language has become identical with that of the empty phrase – its transformation from reproduction to productive instrument.[17]

According to Benjamin, then, the phrase which Kraus tirelessly pursues is both a brand-name and the mark of the commodity *per se* ('Warenzeichen' means literally 'sign of wares') which enables ideas to circulate and 'traffic', just as in classical Marxist economics goods must be transformed into commodities before they can enter into circulation. Benjamin's further remarks may be read as relating this condition of language to advertising. The connoisseur-value to which he refers indicates a sense of specificity conferred by the ornamental distinction of the catch-phrase. Benjamin finally turns Kraus's critique of the phrase on its head: this condition of language must be transformed from the mark merely imprinted ('Abdruck') on an unchanged reality to an instrument of production which might change the world. Nevertheless the extension of Kraus's case, by inversion, still confirms his perception of a commodification of language as practised in the feuilleton of Viennese journalism, and originally, he claims, *in Heine*.

The third and final consequence of this 'writing of the commodity' is neatly summarized by Benjamin. In Kraus's critique, the 'phrase' makes possible the circulation of ideas by giving them 'currency', as it were, and guarantees a (spurious) specificity of reference, the connoisseur-value derived from a supposedly subjective and individual origin. (Once again Heine is cited to take the blame for having prostituted language so that every salesman can have his say. Kraus's imagery is sexual again: Heine, he says, so loosened the bodice ('Mieder') of the German language that every shop-boy ('Kommis') can finger her breasts. The metaphor of prostitution does not itself occur, though it clearly lies close to hand in this mixture of sexual and economic metaphors.) The creation of a personal note in journalistic writing since Heine, Kraus claims, in reality masks an appalling similarity. All such 'talents' are identical, and all experience becomes interchangeable when converted into the common currency of falsely subjective reporting. Kraus's essay reaches a minor climax when he pillories this sense of journalistic indifference:

This type [of new talent] is either an observer who bountifully harvests in luxuriant adjectives what nature has denied to him in substantives, or else he is an aesthete who stands out through a love of colour and a sense of nuance, and perceives as much of the things of the phenomenal world as there is dirt under his finger-nails.[18]

The contrast implied here is identical with the one deployed in the opening of Kraus's essay, between a culture given over to content and one given over to form, the Germanic and the Romance. In each case the dignity of the real is undermined or obliterated, drowned out by an excess of interiority. The last trace of the real, says Kraus, is the grubby remainder of a life with the gutter press, the black ink of the journalist's trade.

The coda of this passage crystallizes the sense of the pre-formed and ready-made nature of such experiences. Kraus complains that such banalities are presented (by their authors) in a tone of discovery which 'presupposes a world which was only created when God made the Sunday supplement and saw that it was good'. The sense of the original creation and its objective validity, which is a constant criterion in Kraus's critical thought, has been replaced by an infinity of journalistic representations. The replacement is total: the very possibility of mimesis falls to the forces of *repetition* unleashed in commodity production. As Kraus remarks bitterly, everything always fits everything else. And in this way experience itself is stripped of its authenticity and becomes part of a generalized series of repetitions.

Kraus illustrates this depletion of experience by comparing reports of a tram-accident in Berlin and in Vienna. What is still specific to a particular incident in the German capital is reduced to a false essence in Viennese journalism, tricked out with registrations of mood, 'scraps of poetry', and colour. The commodification of language in the aesthetics of the phrase entails a parallel process in experience itself, of our knowledge of it and hence of the world. At every level the effects of commodity production are apparent: in the form of the feuilleton as a literary artefact, in its linguistic medium, and in its experiential content. In Kraus's view both Heine's writing and the journalism of his own contemporaries bear the moral responsibility for this impoverishment. The importance for Kraus of the way in which *Die Fackel* was produced emphasizes the awareness of the 'forces of the commodity' which underlies his polemic against Heine. Kraus went to great lengths to guarantee absolute independence from commercial publishing, to the point indeed of ensuring that his paper made less money than it might otherwise have done. Indeed, Pfabigan suggests that Kraus developed anachronistic forms of production derived from the early