



The Man Without Qualities: *Karl Kraus, Adolf Loos and Aestheticism of fin de siècle Vienna*

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In the first documentary volume of the novel *Der Mann ohne Eigenschaften*, or *The Man Without Qualities*, Robert Musil had captured the atmosphere of *Kakania*¹ society with perception and irony. *Kakania* or the Habsburg Vienna during the last years of the Austro-Hungarian Empire had the culture that appears at first sight to be the beginning state of our twentieth century culture. Its culture was represented by such name as Sigmund Freud, Arnold Schoenberg, Adolf Loos, Peter Altenberg, Karl Kraus and more.

Through the eyes of *Ulrich*, the protagonist of the novel, we could see clearly the central weakness of *Kakania* society. That weakness embodied and evidenced itself in the decline and fall of the Habsburg Empire and had afflicted into the lives and experience of the citizens. It shaped and conditioned the central and common preoccupation of artists and thinkers of all fields. In return, the cultural products of *Kakania* shared some characteristic features that could be related back to their social, political and ethical context.

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¹ The name was invented by Robert Musil, and combines two senses on different levels. On the surface, it is a coinage from the initial K.K. or K.u.K., standing for Imperial Royal or Imperial and Royal which distinguished all the major institutions of the Habsburg Empire. But with German nursery language, it carries also the secondary sense of “Escrementia” or “Shitland.” From Allan Janik and Stephen Toulmin. *Wittgenstein’s Vienna*. New York : Simon & Schuster, 1973.





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When the eyes of *Ulrich* looked through political and social character of *Kakania*, he could see the superpower of the Empire being plagued by various problems such the problem of rapid economical change and the problem of racial minorities. Those problems were not only political but also cultural. The established constitutional structure of the Empire was incapable of adapting itself to the new demands of the changing situation. Francis Joseph's Vienna and its physical setting became not just a city but the symbol of a way of life. All the cultural circles took place within the city. It was the society of the bourgeoisie in which reason, order, progress, preservation, and the disciplined conformity to the standards of good taste and action were the values that the society cherished. It was a society with a profound commitment to the order that stability was synonymous with virtue. When vast fortune followed the industrial expansion and rapid economical change, financial success became the basis of the society. But within the money value, the thoroughness of the bourgeois success still demanded another side, an aesthetic side. The bourgeois somehow believed that a man's aesthetic taste could show his social and economical status. In return, a home had become a reflection of a man and his success in the marketplace. A home and the arts in it were desired for more than their essential, intrinsic values. A home and the objects that filled it had a symbolic values as much as, or more than, a function.² Viennese of the generation at the turn of the century were raised in an atmosphere so full of artistic value that they were hardly able to comprehend that any other values existed at all.³ Art became a way of life and it formed a center of their lives.

As *Ulrich* saw, the bourgeois society demanded all the best qualities which made it hard for him or anyone else to maintain those qualities. Within the demand of society, the balance between a man's natural need and his commitment disappeared. All proportions between appearances and realities were destroyed. The problems of identity and communication of the Viennese society arose. With commitment, repression and conflict in the society, a man put himself hopelessly within the fetish of social roles which satisfy his immediate desire but at the same time take away all his hope for a more lasting fulfillment.⁴

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² Janik and Toulmin, *Ibid.* p.43.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 44.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p.63.



Robert Musil was not the only writer who saw these problems. There were also others such as Arthur Schnitzler.⁵ He saw the same and captured all the destructive and dehumanizing forces of the society in his novel *Der Weg ins Freie* and his play *Professor Bernhardt and Reigen*⁶ that showed the crisis of humans relation of the Viennese.

While half of society was incapable of opening itself to another, the other half refused to do so.⁷ Or in Musil's word, "*the notion that people who live like that could ever get together for the rationally planned navigation of their intellectual and spiritual destiny was simply unrealistic; it was preposterous.*"⁸

The problems of identity and communication disturbed Viennese society at every level from individual to international.⁹ Though the political problems of the Empire are too large to be discussed adequately here, the problems can be hinted by the case of the Czechs. By 1907 when, for example, universal manhood suffrage was introduced into the western half of Empire, the Czechs could no longer communicate with the Germans. The reason lay simply in the fact that the Germans failed to recognize the Czech language. For the Czechs and all the minorities language was their means of identifying themselves within the Empire. It was the basis of social and also political identity in their struggle for civil rights before the cataclysm of 1914.¹⁰

The problems of identity and communication had led Viennese society to many different ends. One important end which will be the focus of this essay is the generation of aesthetes. They sought to escape from the bourgeois business world.
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⁵ The work Schnitzler, in relation to political and social background of Vienna 1900 is discussed in Carl Schorske. "*Politics and Psyche. Schnitzler and Hoffmannsthal*" in *Fin-de-Si cle Vienna : Politics and Culture*. New York: Vintage Books, 1981, pp.3-24.

⁶ In *Reigen*, Schnitzler depicted ten characters -from every social classes- with the dynamics of human relationships that were reduced to one single common denominator, in the desire for immediate sexual gratification. All ten characters were depicted in the context of sexual relations with others of the ten and unfolded their misery. There, eroticism became a principle of social dynamics and sexuality is the only kind of personal contact of which the ten characters were capable in *Reigen*, these kind of human relation without love was for Schnitzler, the "dance" motif : a meaningless, mechanical ritual. From Janik and Toulmin. p.63.

⁷ Janik and Toulmin, *ibid.* p.64.

⁸ Robert Musil. *The Man Without Qualities*. Tr. E. Wilkins and E. Kaiser. New York: Capricorn Books, 1965. Vol III, p.188.

⁹ Janik and Toulmin, *ibid.* p.65.

¹⁰ *ibid.*



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They sought to find a more authentic language to communicate which seemed at first sight, to be a possible, hopeful solution. But aestheticism had turned itself to be the fetish of creative life which trapped the Viennese who wanted to escape.

This essay will focus on the way in which a man named Karl Kraus recognized that the aesthetes's way to escape was only a narcissistic pseudo-solution to the problem. Moreover, it created more problems on the face of the existing ones.

In the situation that Musil considered that "everyday language, in which words are not defined is a medium in which nobody can express himself unequivocally."¹¹ Karl Kraus and his work showed that he had found the key to the solution of these problems. Kraus's critique of language was a crucial instrument of thought fighting for individual integrity. Among political deceptions of the hypocritical and corrupt society, he fought against the slovenliness, superficiality and immorality in thought and expression. In his satire, he captured the grotesque and frivolous features of Viennese life. He diagnosed the psycho-pathology of everyday life that reflected in the language of the Viennese especially the jargon of their newspapers.

In Kraus's eyes, his time was the time when all established means of expression from language of politics to the principles of architectural design seemed to lose touch with their intended message. They had been taken away all capacity to perform their proper functions. These common themes and problems engaged attention of Viennese dominant thinkers. Kraus's work had decisive influence on Schoenberg and Wittgenstein, Kokoschka, Loos and also a large number of minor talent.¹² By 1910, he had gathered around an amazing circle of gifted writers and artists who were intimately and consciously related to Kraus's critique of language and society. They all acknowledged the inspiration from the life and work of Karl Kraus. Each of the other dominant personalities also gathered around him a circle of adepts. Example are Wagner's circle of architects, Theodore Herzl's Zionists, Victor Adlor's Social Democrats, Freud's Psychoanalytic Society and Schnitzler's circle of literary acquaintances.¹³ The essential feature that made these circles achieved their contribution to twentieth century civilization and made their Vienna so renowned was that these circles intersected. A rapid circulation of ideas lay in the fact that certain people were usually also members of another circles. Certain people linked one circle

¹¹ Musil, Vol III, p.236.

¹² Edward Timmes. **Karl Kraus Apocalyptic Satirist: Culture and Catastrophe in Habsburg Vienna**. New Haven : Yale University Press, 1986.p.9.

¹³ *Ibid.*,p.7.

with another.¹⁴ By this mean, Kraus's hostility of the journalists of Vienna was able to set the artistic integrity of thinkers like Altenberg, Loos, Kokoschka and Schoenberg. His work had an effective and wider implication in other fields of intellectual and artistic activities. It led to the demand for a critique of the means of expression in each of those fields.

This essay will investigate the influential life and work of Karl Kraus focusing on his fight against the fetish of Viennese creative life. The essay will investigate first, the nature of the city at the time and will look into Kraus's relationship to the city, his point of view towards Viennese society and the crisis of its culture, and finally his critique of aestheticism of the feuilleton writers where his critique of language had transformed itself into a critique of culture and society.

This essay may be more or less able to assist us in reading and understanding Kraus's work and its affiliation with his contemporaries including their views towards society and culture at the turn of the century.

Karl Kraus and his Vienna

Great cities have always inspired satirist, so has Kraus's Vienna. The link between Kraus and Vienna was close though he was not Viennese by birth.¹⁵ He was born in 1874 in northern Bohemia, as the youngest son of a Jewish paper manufacturer. His family moved to Vienna when he was three years old¹⁶. He spent his childhood among the fleeting nature of the metropolis and the tranquillity of the surrounding woods¹⁷. His lifelong attachment to the city had begun there. It was in Vienna, where he began his career as a journalist. It was also there where he wrote and published all his work. The 922 issues of *Die Fackel*, his periodical, began, continued and ended itself there. Vienna at the turn of the century and his life's work cannot be separated. With his loved-hated relationship to the city, his lifelong attachment to Vienna was one of the paradoxes of his career. It was the local affairs of Vienna that provided his theme and defined the nature of his work.¹⁸ In search for the material for his satire, the boundary of his focus did not often go beyond the suburbs of Vienna.¹⁹ In *Die*

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Timmes, *Ibid.* p.3.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁹ *Ibid.*



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Letzten tage der Menschheit, where the focus of his satire lay in the First World War, it was still the streets of Vienna that largely provided its ground.²⁰ His attachment to an apparently eccentric setting nourished his satirical imagination to a more universal perspective that reached out beyond the boundaries of its original setting.

The essay will now turn to the nature of the city:

Kraus's Vienna at the turn of the century.

The historical development of the late nineteenth century brought unprecedented prosperity to the city. The last decade of the Empire are often regarded as the Golden Age of the city.²¹ It was an age of commercial prosperity, Imperial splendor, outstanding social and cultural achievement. The cult of “being Viennese” reached its climax in that age, creating a local mythology immortalized by popular images. The bourgeois world of splendor existed with a strong sense of historical continuity that found visible embodiment in an Emperor who had been on the throne since 1848. But the situation of rapidly accelerating industrial development had effected the image of security and ease of the Viennese.

The population of the city increased from 705,000 in 1880 to 2,000,000 in 1910.²² This remarkable increase in the city's population created a radically new situation. With a large portion of non-German speaking population and a new sense of working class militancy, Viennese social cohesion started to be disturbed.²³ A large number of population lived in destitution with a lifetime of long-hour sweat labor. Viennese working class often lived in their miserable tenements with their multiple-family occupancy which contrasted sharply with the luxurious new apartments along the Ringstrasse.²⁴ In open confrontation, the two world existed side by side. For the bourgeois world, Robert Musil described with his ironic eyes that:

The nouveau riche class, in love with the imposing and grandiose erase of their predecessors, had involuntarily made a fastidious and refined selection.

Whenever a castle had passed into bourgeois possession, it was not merely

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²⁰ *Ibid.*

²¹ Nicolas Powell. *The Sacred Spring : The Arts in Vienna 1898-1918*. New York : Graphic Society, 1974.p.12.

²² Timmes, *Ibid.* p. 15.

²³ *Ibid.*

²⁴ *Ibid.*



provided with modern conveniences, like an heirloom chandelier with electric wiring run through it; but in the furnishing of it, too, what was less good had been cleared out and things of value had been added, either according to personal choice, or on the infallible advice of experts. Incidentally, this process of refinement was demonstrated most expressively not in the castles but in the town houses, which had been furnished in keeping with the times, with all the impersonal luxury of an ocean lines ; but which ----- in this country of refined social ambition ----- still in an ineffable breadth, in a scarcely perceptible widening of the distance between pieces of furniture, or in the dominating position of a picture on a wall, preserved the delicacy clear reflected glint of a great glory that had passed away.²⁵

And at the variance with the picture of the legendary Imperial and Royal Capital, the miserable existence of the Viennese slums was described that :

Most of the house built in the decades after 1880 had three floors. On each floor, a corridor would run along the rear wall facing a small court-yard, and the doors of the individual dwellings (they could hardly be called flats) would give onto this corridor, directly from the kitchen or, as the case might be, the single room. None of the tenants had a water closet or privy of his own; ten or fourteen tenants with their families would share one, either in the passage or across the yard. If there was running water, the top tap too was in the corridor. Otherwise there would be a pump in the yard.²⁶

These two pictures may be able to answer the question of how Vienna, the city of dreams, could turn to be “the proving ground for world destruction.”²⁷ Partly responsible for the myth of the unified city culture were the writers encapsulated themselves in their coffee houses. They devised most of those myths. Even Kraus himself had no contact with the cultural aspirations of the working class until after the Empire collapsed that he gave his support behind the socialist.²⁸ But he certainly

²⁵ Musil, *Vol I*, 1965. p.330.

²⁶ Ilse Barea. *Vienna: Legend and Reality*. London: Seker and Warberg, 1896. Quoted in Powell, p.19.

²⁷ Karl Kraus. *Die Fackel*, 400, Summer 1914, p.2.

²⁸ Timmes, *ibid.* p.16.



saw the problems behind those Viennese paradoxes long before. It was clear that the situation of Vienna before the first World War lent him materials for his satire, with wider implications. Considering the conflict of nationalities and all other paradoxical problems, Kraus came to a conclusion that the problems of the Empire would never be solved by conventional political means. Dynastic loyalty and the law of inertia might help the Empire to resist the problems at some degree, but a definite remedy would be the dissolution of the state.²⁹ In Kraus's point of view, no stable social attachments could be originated from such situation.

This problem of ethnic and class diversity along with the bourgeois repression are what Emile Durkheim saw as the sociological problem of the Empire. With a coating of splendor surface covering the despair-overburdened society, all proportion between appearances and realities had disappeared. Let us turn, for a moment, to Emile Durkheim's classic study of suicide, published in 1897, he wrote :

At any given moment, the moral constitution of society established the contingent of voluntary deaths. There is, therefore, for each people a collective force of a definite amount of energy, impelling man to self-destruction. The victim's acts, which at first seem to express only his personal temperament, are really the supplement and prolongation of a social condition which they express externally.³⁰

With its national, racial, social, diplomatic and sexual problems, the fact that could reinforce Durkheim's view was that the suicide rate of the Empire was correspondingly high.³¹ The long and distinguished list began from Ludwig Boltzmann, Otto Mahler who was also a musical talent himself, Georg Trakl, Otto Weininger, Eduard van der Nüll, three of Ludwig Wittgenstein's elder brothers, Alfred Redl whose story could at best confirm the deceptive surface of the Empire. Even the Imperial-and-Royal House could not escape the nightmare. The story of Crown Prince Rudolph and Baroness Maria Vetsera tells us that the glorious appearance of the Empire could easily turn into miserable reality.

And this is precisely how Kraus saw Vienna as a "*proving ground for world destruction.*"

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²⁹ Kraus, *Die Fackel*, 6, pp 13-16. Cited in Timmes, p.17.

³⁰ Emile Durkheim. **Suicide: A study in sociology**. Tr. J. Spaulding. New York : Free Press, 1951.p.229. quoted in Janik, p.64.

³¹ Janik and Toulmin, *Ibid.* p.64.



Despite those problems that a large portion of the Viennese population did not see, nothing was more important to them than the arts, especially, literature, theater and music.³² In Kraus's view, their tastes in those matters reflected the moral duplicity that existed throughout the society. And it was through literature that Kraus would lay bare the hypocrisy situated under the life in Vienna, the city of dreams.³³ Kraus saw that the Viennese Press was largely responsible for such hypocrisy of Viennese life. There, he began his fight against Viennese journalism and the fetish of their creative life there; in other words it was his battle against the feuilleton writers.

Before going on to Kraus's view towards the hypocrisy of journalism, which created problems of communication and identity, it could be helpful to go back to where those problems started. It seems reasonable to study how the city of dreams had gained its paradoxical and troublesome images, the worldly splendor image of the Empire.

The Politics and Psyche in the fin-de-siècle Vienna:

Aestheticism and the Viennese bourgeois

It is definitely impossible to find a certain point of time, a certain place or a certain event where all the problems originated. But in this case, going back to the reign of the Emperor Francis I where the Habsburg concept of *Hausmacht* began, could be enough for us to understand the situation of Vienna at the turn of the century better.

The Austro-Hungarian Empire, or the house of Habsburg, was one of the acknowledged superpowers with a vast territory, a well-established power structure and a long record of constitutional stability.³⁴ But in 1918, following the military defeat, this superpower collapsed completely. It was not only the collapses of the monarchy's authority, but of all the pre-existing political bonds holding the Empire together.³⁵ The Habsburg power and influence had injuriously survived through the 1848 revolution, the 1886 military defeat by Prussia, and a whole sequence of nationalist movements among Magyars, Czechs, Rumanians and South Slavs.³⁶ The Monarchy and its capital had such

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³² *Ibid.* , p.67.

³³ *Ibid.*

³⁴ Janik and Toulmin, *Ibid.* p.16.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, p.17.

³⁶ *Ibid.*



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ambiguities and paradoxes that if we take a look closely at its surface image, a very different picture will emerge. All those things that made up the myth of Vienna, the city of dreams, were simultaneously components of another, darker side of Viennese life.³⁷ This was the fundamental truth about all aspects of life in the Monarchy.

The factor responsible largely for this state was the unshakable commitment of the ruling dynasty, and the Habsburg concept of *Hausmacht* that it was an instrument of god on earth. The Habsburg concept of dynastic power inseparably linked with the ideas of stability and preservation of the existing order. They were in contrast with the changing situation of that day. For a total of one hundred twenty four years, from the reign of Emperor Francis I to Emperor Francis Joseph's, the Habsburg idea had shaped the policy of the Empire.³⁸ The most infamous manifestation of this policy was the "*Melternich*" system of Francis I. It was the mean to exclude revolution and revolutionary ideas of all kinds from the Monarchy. It was carried out continually by Prince Klemens von Metternich, even after the death of Francis I, during the thirteen-year reign of Emperor Ferdinand (1835-1848). Francis I's goal was *Ruhe und Ordnung* of a police state. He once remarked that "my realm, resembles a worm-eaten house. If one part is removed, one cannot tell how much will fall."³⁹

The result of the fifty six years of this system was the 1848 revolution. The failure of this revolution brought the eighteen-year-old Francis Joseph to the throne. there came with him a whole series of policies which gave the Monarchy an illusory stability throughout his sixty-eight-year reign.⁴⁰ For the sake of stability, the Emperor Francis Joseph had created the most elaborate bureaucracy and the most efficient censorship in the whole Europe.⁴¹ The destiny of the Empire and the physical structure of the capital city were determined by him. He himself was the center of an administrative system which was both complex and totally inflexible.⁴² In the last years of his power, the attitude of the nationalities towards the Emperor was in common with that of the intellectuals. Robert Musil described it clearly that:

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³⁷ *Ibid.*, p.33.

³⁸ Peter Vergo. **Art in Vienna 1898-1918: Klimt, Kokoschka, Schiele and their contemporaries.** London : Phaidon, 1975.p.10/

³⁹ Arthur May. **The Habsburg Monarchy, 1867-1914.** New York : W W Norton, 1968. p.22.

⁴⁰ Janik and Toulmin, *Ibid.* p.38.

⁴¹ Vergo, *Ibid.* p.10.

⁴² *Ibid.*



The Emperor and King of Kakania was a legendary old gentleman. Since that time a great many books have been written about him and one know exactly what he did, prevented, or left undone; but then, in the last decade of his and Kakania's life, younger people who were familiar with the current state of the arts and sciences were sometimes overtaken by doubt whether he existed at all. The number of portraits one saw of him was almost as great as the number of inhabitants of his realms : on his birthday there was as much eating and drinking as on that of the savor; on the mountains that bonfires blazed, and the voices of millions of people were heard vowing that they loved him like a father. Finally, an anthem resounding in his honor was the only work of poetry and music of which every Kakanian knew at least one line. But this popularity and publicity was so convincing that it might easily have been the case that believing in his existence was rather like still seeing certain stars, although they ceased to existed thousands of years ago.⁴³

But somehow, this illusory existence of the Emperor was surprisingly real for the Viennese bourgeois, as real as the city of dreams. Carl Schorske noted that the basic fact distinguishing the Austrian bourgeoisie from the French and English was that it did not succeed either in destroying or in fully fusing with the aristocracy. Because of its weakness, it remained both dependent upon and deeply loyal to the Emperor as a remote but necessary father-protector.⁴⁴ The external splendors of Vienna were largely due to the Emperor himself. This cosmopolitan consciousness was the dynasty's hope for survival.⁴⁵ The rebuilding of the city took place between 1858 and 1888. The city walls and fortifications were replaced by the Ringstrasse, a celebrated sixty-foot-wide boulevard.⁴⁶ With the vast complex of public buildings and private dwellings, the Ringstrasse had become a concept, a characteristic of an era. Twice during Francis Joseph's reign, the city limits were extended, abounded

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⁴³ Musil, **Vol I.** p.93.

⁴⁴ Schorske, **Ibid.** p.7.

⁴⁵ Janik and Toulmin, **Ibid.** p.41.

⁴⁶ For detail about the Ringstrasse see Schorske "The Ringstrasse, its critics and the birth of modernism." In *Fin-de-Siecle Vienna*, pp.24-115.



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with parks and fine statuary.⁴⁷ This was the physical setting of Vienna that became not just a city, but a symbol of a way of life.

Aestheticism of the Viennese bourgeoisies

Vienna was above all, a city of bourgeoisie that acquired its individual character during the third quarter of the 19th century, in the period of industrial expansion. At that time, it was the generation of the *Gründer* that created all the material fortune for the next generation. The *Gründer* held that business was business and art was the ornamentation of business life. A man proved his success by devoting his free time to the arts. But for the following generation, art became a way of life, aestheticism became an alternative to immersion in business affairs. Out of the evolution of the aesthetic culture of the educated bourgeois in the second half of the century, a peculiar receptivity of art into life emerged. Art formed a center of their lives and gave them an odd character. As mentioned before, the Viennese bourgeois did not succeed either in destroying or in fully fusing with the aristocracy. This failure to acquire a monopoly of power left the bourgeois as an outsider seeking integration with the aristocracy.⁴⁸ The direct social assimilation hardly occurred, even for those who won a patent of nobility, they were not admitted to the life of the imperial court. The assimilation must find itself another path, that was a cultural path. This assimilation to aristocratic culture was purely external, something mimetic. It found its way in entering into history to find a pedigree. The new Vienna built from the sixties onward can affirm this point. Most of the buildings were inspired by a Gothic, Renaissance or Baroque past of another culture, not their own.⁴⁹ A path to aristocracy could also be reached through the patronage of the arts. The bourgeois enthusiasm for the arts started as a substitute form of fusing into the aristocracy. By the end of the century it turned to be more of an escape, a refuge from the harsh world and threatening political reality. Literature, music and theater became a way of life. Kraus saw the widened interest in literature and its commercialization as a political product of the time. The sphere of action of Viennese liberalism that constricted to

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⁴⁷ *Ibid.*

⁴⁸ *Ibid.* p.7.

⁴⁹ Schorske, pp.24-115. And for Loos's critique of the Ringstrasse see Adolf Loos. Die Potenkische Stadt. Wien ; Prachner, 1983.



the parquets of theaters on opening night was his example.⁵⁰ Hoffmannsthal once remarked that “*We must take leave of the world before it collapses.*” He , too, saw the increased devotion to art as an anxiety resulting from civic failure.⁵¹ As the civic life turned useless, art became a surrogate for it, art became the source of meaning in life. Carl Schorske explained this state of affair clearly in his essay on Schnitzler and Hoffmannsthal, he wrote :

One must not concluded that, in his absorption of aesthetic culture, the Viennese bourgeois absorbed the collective sense of caste and function which the aristocracy maintained even in its decadence. The bourgeois, whether as fop, artist, or politician, could not rid himself if his individualistic heritage. As his sense of what Hoffmannsthal called *Das Gleitende*, the slipping away of the world, increased, the bourgeois turned his appropriated aesthetic culture inward to the cultivation of the self, of his personal uniqueness. This tendency inevitably led by preoccupation with one’s own psychic life. It provides the link between devotion to art and concern with the psyche.⁵²

When the educated bourgeois had seized the aesthetic, sensuous sensibility in an attempt to fuse into aristocratic culture, what inevitably followed was “narcissism and a hypertrophy of life.”⁵³ It had been managed in a secularized, distorted and above all, highly individuated form. When art was turned form an expression of value to a source of value, combining with such individuated aesthetic form, the aesthetic heritage was converted into an uneasy hedonism, outright anxiety and a culture of sensitive nerves.⁵⁴ It was the situation in which Carl Schorske concluded that “*the affirmation of art and the life of the senses thereby became, in Austria’s finest types, admixed with and crippled by guilt. The political source of anxiety found reinforcement in the individual psyche through the persistent presence of conscience in the temple of Narcissus.*”⁵⁵

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⁵⁰ Kraus, *Die Fackel*, I, p.15. cited in Schorske, p.8.

⁵¹ Schorske, *Ibid.* p.8.

⁵² *Ibid.*, p.9.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, p.10.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵⁵ Schorske, *Ibid.* p.10.



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This was the situation during the last days of the Empire, or *Die Letzten Tage der Menschheit* as Kraus called them. The bourgeois culture of feeling somehow conditioned the mentality of artists and intellectuals. It refined their sensibility but at the same time created the problems of identity and communication. We shall see this matter clearly in the case of the feuilleton.

Against the fetish of creative life

Karl Kraus, the Press, and the Feuilleton.

In the essay letter addressed to Loos, Kraus wrote, “Could there be anything more asocial than beauty, which is always in front of the mirror?”⁵⁶ The phrase echoes Loos’s “*Antiwiener*” fight against the “*Unsittlichkeit des Lebens*” that emerged from the Secessionist abuse of taste. In Walter Benjamin’s essay on Kraus, he made a close connection between Kraus and Loos.⁵⁷ It was an essay attacking the fetish of the creative life which affirms their “elective affinity.” Benjamin saw clearly the close connection between Kraus’s fight against journalism and Loos’s fight against ornamentation. This fight was precisely a topos of Kraus’s journal *Die Fackel*, he wrote “*Die Phrase ist das Ornament des Geistes.*”⁵⁸ In his opinion, the journalists and the aesthetes alike were both *Realpolitiker*⁵⁹.

The essay will now turn to Kraus’s fight against journalism and end with its relationship to Loos’s fight against ornamentation.

Karl Kraus, the Press, the Feuilleton.

During Kraus’s lifetime, the press had gained a larger supremacy over public affairs than any period before. In his view, the daily newspapers was the primary source of mystification. Kraus wrote, “Austria in orbe ultima : in a deluded world Austria is the last to lose its credulity. It is the most willing victim of publicity, in that it not only believes what it sees in print, but also believes the opposite, if it sees

⁵⁶ Kraus wrote in 1915 in an essay-letter addressed to Loos. Kraus. “*Die Schoenheit im Dienste des kaufmanns,*” *Die Fackel* 413-417, 1915. Quoted in Massimo Cacciari. *Architecture and Nihilism.* New Haven : Yale University Press, 1993. p.143.

⁵⁷ Walter Benjamin. “*Karl Kraus.*” In *Reflections.* Tr. E. Jephcott. New York : Schocken Books, 1978. pp.239-276.

⁵⁸ Kraus, “*Tagebuch,*” *Die Fackel* 279-280, 1909.p.9.

⁵⁹ Kraus, *Nachts*, p. 287: “the aesthete is the true champion of Realpolitik in the realm of beauty”: the autonomy of the political as art for art’s sake! Quoted in Cacciari, p.143.



that too in print.”⁶⁰ Advances in technology and mass literacy gave power to the printed world. Unlike the anonymous financial corporation of the later period, the ownership of the press at that time was still individual entrepreneurs.⁶¹ The power lay in the hand of the owner-editor who had controlled both of share capital and of editorial policy. The press, an apparatus belonged to the modern age with its technological sophistication was operated by feudal power of individual owners. they had held a monopoly over the distribution of the news, long before the advent of radio and television.⁶² In Austria-Hungary, the press never attained the degree of critical independence from government influence in the same degree that the British press vigorously attained. The basis of Kraus’s fight against them was their mass circulation that gave the press power without responsibility.

In “The History of the Austrian Press,” Henry Wickham Steed had a comment that, “it is largely the history of a struggle to widen the field of activity that lies between official inspiration and official confiscation.”⁶³ He saw the Viennese newspapers as “instruments working to manufacture public opinion, primarily in accordance with the wishes of the state authorities, and secondarily in the interests of financial and economic cooperation.”⁶⁴ While the press sacrificed its independence to the interest of the government, in return, the government had to make concessions to the vested interests controlling the press.⁶⁵ The result of this kind of collaboration was to sabotage democratic government and falsify public opinion. The outstanding case was the *Neue Freie Presse*, the voice of the economically dominant bourgeois. With its feuilleton section, it put the powerful hold on the culture of Vienna, while its supplement, the “Economist”, dictated the terms of financial life throughout the whole Empire.⁶⁶ On the fact that the *Neue Freie Presse* was the most influential newspapers in central Europe, Wickham Steed noted, “the greater part of what does duty for Austrian opinion is dictated or suggested to the public by the editor-proprietor of

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⁶⁰ Kraus, *Die Fackel* 293, p.1. Quoted in Timmes, p.152.

⁶¹ Timmes, *ibid.* p.30 and see Piers Brendon. *The Press Baron*. London, 1982.

⁶² Timmes, *ibid.* p.30.

⁶³ Henry Wickham Steed. *The Habsburg Monarchy*. London, 1913.pp.182-183.

⁶⁴ *ibid.*

⁶⁵ Timmes, *ibid.* p.31.

⁶⁶ Timmes, *ibid.* p.32.



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the *Neue Freie Presse*.”⁶⁷

Kraus himself was offered, in 1898, a position as the *Neue Freie Presse*'s satirist. This position used to be Daniel Spitzer's, and had been vacant for five years. But it was this former employer of his, that Kraus later launched his attack on.⁶⁸ What provoked Kraus's denunciation was the exalted role that the press had assumed for itself in the bourgeois society. In Kraus's view, the high journalistic standard of the *Neue Freie Presse* were allied to a point of view and presentation that lost its objectivity.

What Kraus found most offensive of all was the aesthetic side of the press. He saw it as a sign of deceit and narcissism of the bourgeois aestheticism. The feuilleton or the cultural essay was often the most important section of the whole paper. For the bourgeois, with their passion for the arts, the feuilleton was certainly the high point of journalism. To publish in the *Neue Freie Presse* was a dream of any would-be journalists. The deliberate aim of the feuilleton seemed to be a general distortion of the news; specific distortion in the free binding of fact and opinion, rational objectivity and subjective reaction.⁶⁹ To describe the nature of the feuilleton, Carl Schorske wrote:

The feuilleton writers, an artist in vignettes, worked with those discrete details and episodes so appealing to the nineteenth century's taste for the concrete. But he sought to endow his material with color drawn from his imagination. The subject response of the reporter or critic to an experience, his feeling-tone, acquired clear primary over the matter of his discourse. To render a state of feeling became the mode of formulating a judgment. Accordingly, in the feuilleton writer's style, the adjective engulfed the nouns, the personal tint virtually obliterated the contours of the object discourse.....the feuilletonist tended to transform objective analysis of the world into subjective cultivation of personal feelings. He conceived of the world as a random succession of stimuli to the sensibilities, not a scene of action. The feuilletonist exemplified the cultural type to whom he addresses his columns : his characteristic were narcissism and introversion, passive receptivity towards outer reality, and, above

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⁶⁷ Wickham Steed, *Ibid.* p.187.

⁶⁸ Janik and Toulmin, *Ibid.* p.78.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, p.79.



all, sensibility to psychic status.⁷⁰

Kraus's view towards the feuilleton was quite the same. In his essay *Heine and the consequences*, he attacked on Heinrich Heine for introducing the feuilleton to Austrian press. To him, the feuilleton destroyed both objectivity of the situation described and the creativity of the writer. While distorting the news, the feuilleton prevented the writer from coming to term with the depths of his own personality by demanding a response to a ready-made situation.⁷¹ The feuilleton was, for Kraus, a perfect journalistic form for the aesthete, an ideal medium for whoever that believed in art for art's sake.⁷² With the feuilleton, the news was distorted and the newspapers became the source of the distorted conception of reality. In his view, the Viennese Press had taken for granted its task of influencing its readers instead of that of transmitting news.⁷³ This state of affair happened largely in large cities, Kraus wrote :

Outside of the large cities where character has not yet been sacrificed to journalism, where ink has not yet blackened the essential being and is nothing more than the existing means of communicating the decent feelings of the private individual, major essays appear before and after every lecture..... almost always on a higher level.....than anything in large cities.⁷⁴

One of the large cities he had in mind was clearly Vienna, his loved-hated city.

On the Critique of Aesthetic Expression

Karl Kraus and Adolf Loos

With his polemics against the hypocritical society, one important fact about Kraus is that he did not pit one school against another as critics often do. He concerned more of the integrity of the individual writer. For him, it was a matter of unity of form and personality rather than a matter of ideology or literary school. His concern was that a work of art should be a true expression of the artist for a man's

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⁷⁰ Schorske, *Ibid.* p.9.

⁷¹ Janik and Toulmin, *Ibid.* p.79.

⁷² *Ibid.*, p.80.

⁷³ Wilma Iggers. *Karl Kraus: A Viennese Critic of the Twentieth Century*. The Hague : Martinus Nijhoff, 1967, p.101.

⁷⁴ Kraus, *Die Fackel* 387-388, p.29. quoted in Iggers, p.101.



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moral character was intimately connected with his art.⁷⁵ So, there was no room for sensationalism or for crowd pleasing. Kraus's respect and admiration for the work of Peter Altenberg along with his opposition to Herman Bahr could explain his view on this matter. The difference between Altenberg and Bahr was that writing was an occupation for Bahr, not at all an organic extension of his personality. Bahr wrote what he thought the public wanted. Bahr the writer and Bahr the man might not necessarily have the same view, they might not be identical.⁷⁶ It was opposite for Altenberg. He was an integral man where his work and himself were always one. There was no part of his life that was not a part of his work. He could capture charm and uniqueness of Viennese life unpretentiously and precisely because of what he was. With his slouch hat, his walking stick and sandals, strolling along Viennese streets, Altenberg the man and Altenberg the writer was a unified one. Peter Altenberg was also an influential writer, thinker to Loos. Altenberg's and Kraus's relation to Loos was exceptionally close. Anecdotes of the Viennese coffee-house pictured Loos and Kraus as companions, with Altenberg as the third member of their circle. For Kraus and Loos, admiration for Altenberg was not just a coincidence. They both shared very much the same view towards Viennese culture at the time. Their affiliation was clear. Kraus's critique of the Secession indicated that he had assimilated the radical ideas of the architect and designer, Adolf Loos.⁷⁷ He was familiar with the articles on functional design that Loos contributed to the *Neue Freie Presse* at the time of the Jubilee Exhibition, in 1898.⁷⁸ In fact, he never expected to find such advanced ideas in that newspapers. In *Die Fackel*, he repeatedly commended Loos for originality of the arguments.⁷⁹ Soon, they became personally acquainted. It was the beginning of an enduring friendship. While other allies of Kraus drifted way or became enemies, Loos was one of the few who remained with a lifelong friendship and support. From the very beginning, their careers ran parallel. In there different spheres, they were fighting against a common enemy which was the anachronistic cultural institutions of Habsburg Austria.⁸⁰ Kraus wrote:

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⁷⁵ Janik and Toulmin, *Ibid.* p.81.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, p.82.

⁷⁷ Timmes, *Ibid.* p.117.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*

⁷⁹ Kraus, *Die Fackel* 32. From *Ibid.*

⁸⁰ Timmes., *Ibid.* p.116.



Adolf Loos and I, he in facts and I in words, have done nothing but show that there is a difference between the urn and the chamber-pot and that culture plays on this difference. The others however, the defenders of positive values, can be divided into two groups: those who takes urn for a chamber-pot and those who mistake a chamber-pot for an urn.⁸¹

With his critique of the feuilleton, the central notion that unified the life and work of Kraus was the creative separation of the two spheres of factual discourse and literary artistry. Loos's lifelong hostility of the *Secessionstil* and the *Wiener Werkstätte* echoed the same view. While Kraus launched his attack on Heine, Bahr and the others of the *Jung Wien*, Loos did the same to Hoffmann, Olbrich, Moser. Around 1910, while Loos traveled and gave his public lecture on *Ornament and Crime*, Kraus was, at the same time, traveling and giving his public reading of *Heine and the Consequences*.

In the second issue of *Das Andere*, Loos told us a story of a saddle maker, a competent good craftsman who made saddles as well as he could. Then one day the Secessionist arrived in town and demanded that objects of everyday use should be made modern. When the Secessionist told him that his saddle was not modern, the saddle maker tried. But no matter how hard he tried, he always ended up with his old saddle. The Secessionist then told him that he had no imagination. And the Secessionist would show him later how imagination could work in making saddles. Finally, when the Secessionist showed him a large number of different saddles of different "styles," the saddle maker looked and realized the truth. He said "Professor, if I know as little of horses, of horsemanship, of leather and workmanship as you do, I would have your imagination."⁸²

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⁸¹ Karl Kraus, *Nachts*, Leipzig, 1916. Quoted in Janik and Toulmin, p.89.

⁸² Adolf Loos, *Das Andere* 2. Wien, 1903. pp.1-2.



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This story of a saddle maker could also be a story of a good and competent journalist. Likewise, if any journalists knew as little of the principle of journalism, of the moral of distributing the news to the public as the feuilletonist, he would have the feuilletonist's imagination. Kraus had a remark that the feuilleton, beside distorting the news, it prevented the writer from being original for the writer could not in any way escape from the ready-made situation of the news. Fusing art onto the object of utility had the same effect on the artist. The result was harmful to both artist's imagination and the capacity to perform the function of an object. For Loos, an idea of forcing art onto any objects of utility was an example of unhistorical invention. It rejected the process of rational transformation of an artifact which Loos remarked that the change did not just occur upon anyone's will.

In the process of development, some specific effects may change over time but the function does not change. Loos began the story by telling that those saddles were unlike the saddle of the past centuries or the Turkish, Japanese saddles. It tells us of an admits of change in time within the realm of rationality in relation to cultures and the way of life that changes. When the saddle maker tried, he always ended up with the same saddle. This affirms Loos's view that the design should be so rational that any artisans faces with the same task would produce identical objects. Since the utensil is to be designed for use in a particular place in a particular time, its design is determined by the context, the mode of life in particular milieu. Loos wrote, "I assert that use is the form of culture, the form which makes objects..... We do not sit in such and such way because a table maker has built a chair in such and such way; rather the table maker makes the chair as he does, because someone wants to sit that way."⁸³

The unhistorical invention means the invention that is independent from culture and tradition. But somehow, this irrational invention occurs over time and interferes with the function. In Loos's and Kraus's view alike, if imagination violates the boundaries of functionality, the object cannot be beautiful, so the highest degree of functionality in harmony with all other part is pure beauty.

In the end, what Kraus did, along with Loos, was that they both tried to differentiate functional artifact and art. They both tried to find the degree in which utility could accept beauty without interfering with the function and how creativity and innovation could reconcile with tradition. In the feuilleton, objective facts were

⁸³ In Paul Engelmann's unpublished collection *Bei der Lampe*. Quoted in Janik and Toulmin, p.99.



view through emotions of the writers who forced their imagination on the reader and regarded their own emotional responses as having a universal perceptiveness and quality. In that case, the sphere of factual discourse and literary artistry were both violated. Likewise, in the design of the *Secessionstil*, the spheres of functional artifact and genuine object of art were both violated. And in the end, fusing art too much upon life would benefit neither of them.

In Kraus's own words. He wrote:

There is no breathing space for culture, and ultimately mankind lies dead besides his works, whose invention has cost so much intelligence that there was none left to put them to use. We were complicated enough to build the machine and we are too primitive to put it to our service. We are operating a world-wide system of communication on narrow-gauge lines of thought.⁸⁴

Accordingly, the question "in which of these artist wants to be roasted" must be retracted in the face of the more pressing conclusion that the human being does not want to be roasted in this hell.....through the corrective insight of the artist himself, who has no longer the right and no longer the possibility of seeking to seal off his inner self securely, but only the duty of recognizing which section of mankind is struggling as he is for the preservation of happiness.⁸⁵

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⁸⁴ Karl Kraus, *Die Fackel* 261-2, p.1. Quoted in Timmes, p.149.

⁸⁵ Karl Kraus, *Die Fackel* 482. Quoted in Timmes, p.360.

