Review by Paul David Young


The triumphal rhetoric of war repeatedly seduces the public. As it was in Karl Kraus’s Austria, so it is today in the U.S. with the current crop of Republican presidential candidates recklessly advocating military intervention, e.g. Ted “Carpet Bomb” Cruz. I’m afraid Senator Cruz and other warmongers will not take the opportunity to enjoy the very fine work that Bridgham and Timms have done to offer the English-speaking world a complete translation of Karl Kraus’s epic, World War I satire The Last Days of Mankind (Die Letzten Tage der Menschheit). Nonetheless, the translators, and Kraus himself, should be commended for attempting to teach mankind the as yet unlearned lesson of the folly of war.

Though still virtually unknown in the English-speaking world, Kraus was in his time and remains today one of the most famous German-language humorists. In their excellent, brief introduction, the translators sketch Kraus’s career as founder and writer of the influential and popular satirical periodical Die Fackel (The Torch). They bring out Kraus’s singular dedication to exposing warmongers’ lies before, during, and after World War I, while other Austrian writers and journalists mythologized the monarchy, warfare, and nationalism and wrote purple “battlefront” prose from the safety of Vienna or mountain retreats, far from the slaughter they praised.

This is the first unabridged English translation of Kraus’s epochal work. Though Gode and Wright’s 1974 translation holds up well today, it is missing great quantities of the original text. The publisher of that book, Frederick Ungar, notes in his introduction, “I vividly remember the impression made on me when as a young man of twenty I attended one of Kraus’s public readings; I missed only a few of his later readings. On such occasions the hall was filled with a capacity audience electrified by intellectual and emotional excitement.” Like Dickens and Mayakovsky, Kraus was an author/actor who occupied the stage with pleasure. Bridgham and Timms do not match Ungar’s personal recollection, but they do render Kraus successfully for the twenty-first century reader.

The Last Days of Mankind is absurdly long. Bridgham and Timms’ translation runs 560 pages. The dramatis personae alone add some twenty-five pages more.
Kraus opens his own introduction by wryly referring to the length of his play, “The performance of this drama, which would take some ten evenings in terrestrial time, is intended for a theatre on Mars.” The translators note that only the Epilogue was staged during Kraus’s lifetime. Prevented from publishing it because of wartime censorship, Kraus first brought out the play serially in Die Fackel in the 1920s.

Kraus’s sprawling, unorthodox play crackles with his specific ear for Austrians and Germans at various strata of society and in an assortment of contexts. For the most part, the translators of this new English-language edition, like Gode and Wright in their 1974 translation, wisely abandon any attempt to reproduce the infinite gradations of slang and dialect that Kraus, a Mark Twain of German colloquial speech, rendered so faithfully. Reading transcribed dialect can be wearying. Gode and Wright, who had their eye on a broad American audience, used some American slang but mostly stayed with standard English. Since Brits Bridgham and Timms want to make Kraus’s work accessible and relevant, they were right to follow Gode and Wright and stick to plain speech, while sprinkling in some British vernacular.

The play abounds in very particular references to periodicals, events, writers, and military and government figures, then well known but now completely obscure. Instead of explanatory footnotes in the text, the translators provide a helpful glossary at the end. The entries give enough information and substance for the reader to appreciate Kraus’s specificity, without getting lost in arcana. Gode and Wright’s edition did not include such a critical apparatus, presumably not wanting to scare off the American reading public.

*The Last Days of Mankind*, despite its abundance of historical fact, does lift off the page and fly into the present in the uncanniest, or, one might say, singularly depressing ways. One scene mocks the efforts of Austrian patriots to eliminate foreign expressions from speech and storefronts, a ludicrous task, since the well-educated German-speaking elite have always delighted in inducting foreign expressions into the language, and much of the German language, including its grammar, is Latinate. I was reminded of the furor over French fries stirred up by U.S. Republicans who wanted to rechristen the food “freedom fries” because of French opposition to the American invasion of Iraq. The translators point to other similarities, such as the false information used by the Austrians to start the war in 1914 and President George W. Bush’s “weapons of mass destruction” hoax before the Iraq invasion in 2003. The parallels are unfortunately infinite.

Kraus’s genius for literature is matched by the hopeless idealism of his project. *The Last Days of Mankind* relies on actual speeches and documents of the time.
that Kraus used verbatim to ridicule the craven press, the arrogant and indifferent aristocracy, the incompetent and dilettante military establishment, and the stupid and bigoted citizenry that fell for their lies and marched to war. By writing this gigantic, edifying, and funny play, he clearly hoped to teach mankind not to repeat its mistakes. His satire derives, however, from an eagle eye for the shallow intellect and low ethics that are unfortunately the lot of the human race, and he must have known that his effort to teach mankind how to avoid self-destruction was futile.

PAUL DAVID YOUNG’s play *Kentucky Cantata* premiered at HERE in New York in 2015. Lower Manhattan Cultural Council awarded him a five-month Process Space residency on Governors Island for 2015, where he conceived and performed *Curtain Wall Part 3: An Immersive Landscape Theater Performance of Christopher Marlowe’s “Hero and Leander,”* in which he swam across New York Harbor. His translations with Carl Weber of Heiner Müller’s *Anatomy Titus Fall of Rome* and *Macbeth* were published by PAJ Publications as *Heiner Müller After Shakespeare.*