Brecht's Tradition

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Introduction to a scene from THE LAST DAYS OF MANKIND. The scene from The Last Days of Mankind gives what is possibly the most memorable diatribe ever aimed at the Germanic world. Since it is a scene of pure commentary, there is really no need to situate it for the reader; and to summarize it is merely to realize how much what Kraus has to say is attenuated by paraphrase. At least, the scene should indicate that those who assert that no modern dramatist, before Brecht, sacrificed drama for commentary as Brecht did are unacquainted with Kraus's epic play. Toward the conclusion of the long dialogue that follows, The Carper—who is always Karl Kraus in the way that Mother Courage is sometimes Bertolt Brecht—reveals the basic principle that determines just about every exchange between himself and The Optimist: The Optimist is merely a provider of cues. And what The Carper attacks is very much what Brecht so often makes the target of his quick-thinking realists: untenable idealisms, war and militarism, the commercialization of modern values, German nationalism, and the egregious hypocrisy of a culture quick to identify itself with a glorious intellectual past and equally quick to arm itself to the teeth. And it is worth noting here that Brecht, the Communist, remained to the end a great admirer of Kraus, even though Kraus saw in communism merely one more symptom of the disease that The Carper diagnoses so apocalyptically in The Last Days of Mankind. For that matter, Kraus seems to have been just as unsympathetic in later years to less radical groups like the Social Democrats. The only man in whom he had any faith during the worsening crisis of the thirties was Chancellor Engelbert Dollfuss. It is as if once face to face with those terribly evil times which he had foreseen long before anyone else, he could not allow himself to recognize how absolutely right he had been in saying: "The returning fighters will break into the hinterlands and there the war will first get started. . . ."