

Karl Kraus, “The technoromantic adventure,” *Die Fackel* no. 474 (23 May 1918), 41-45.

For my part I have been of the view from the beginning of this offensive that the concussion of human dignity was caused by a brain bacillus, one whose trace only a science that is itself senile could not yet find. The impression that the entire active and passive community participating in the sacrifice consists in particular lunatic asylums is produced, not so much by the daily rising rapidity of the resolve to plunge into disgrace and guilt, as by the total numbness in view of the intellectual and ethical contrasts between which this horrific drama is playing out. One would think that before the system of chance where the just hourly suffer death in fire, water, earth, and sky and at the same time the [Swiss] Engadine sun shines down upon a man who bears on his [provincial] clown costume the insignia “The Tank” as a sign of his affiliation with a “Bob”^{*}; that knowledge of the contemptible nature of the whole enterprise before all the contradictions constantly seen or heard would have to summon a worldwide outcry. But it is even more than through self-understanding of an unjust division by whose dint there is protection from death and a ransom from martyrdom and by dint of which the Furies themselves, who have dogged at the heels of this humanity, have become prostituted, [and] even more will the image of a brain-consuming age be complete through another factor. That is the situation of an epoch which suffers, but no longer senses, the competition of the most heterogeneous temporal characters that meet in it. The phenomenon that I see acting in the direction of victorious decline is that of “simultaneity” [*Gleichzeitigkeit*]. The immediacy with which a modern invention is put into operation, for which at a single blow the poisoning of a front and broad swathes of land behind it is possible [is like] a game of medieval forms; the use of bleached-out heraldry at the start of offensives in which chemistry and physiology have fought shoulder to shoulder—that is what the living organism will bear off more speedily than the poison itself. If the manifesto of the Geneva Red Cross asks:

Shall victory turn into cursing and shame because it no longer has bravery or the honest battle of native subjects [*Kampf der Landeskinder*] to thank? Shall the greeting of returning warriors no longer be worthy of the hero who without hesitation threw himself into the breach for his fatherland, but merely of the man who at no personal danger has dealt with his enemy by means of poison amid the most fearful suffering of his victim?

then it must next be said that the German God not only comes along specially in a gas cloud, but also from the machine; that also in the coincidence of a mine hit, an aerial bomb or a torpedo, in general in all the offensives directed against quantity or the unseen enemy, bravery and honest battle have no share, not in the effect and not in the anticipation; that an excess of martyrdom by the expectant part corresponds to the shortage of bravery by the effective part; that even the breaches appealed to here, the ones you threw yourself into for the fatherland, belong to that war remedy that today most seldom achieves application; and that the sword is altogether no longer drawn at all in this war since that historic Reichstag session of 4 August 1914. Further one might mention in passing that the undying ideology that bases itself on the hero concept could on occasion become pensive about this, even if it did not have to seem problematic in view of the modern methods, whether the old war then was also beautiful enough to prepare the nobleness of heart of generations for it; whether the clash of muscular forces boldly renouncing the progress of technology then represents the noblest human activity, and whether the honest battle of native subjects, itself still practiced now and again today, which summons the native subject to stab another in the ribs or *pollice verso* carefully close its eyes, has commanded

^{*} Pet form of the name *Robert*, here used to signify a member of an artillery company (British usage).

the worthiest foundations of centuries-old training to patriotic ideals. It would nonetheless still be a moral task to teach children that scuffling has a degree of honor ahead of assassination, and first of all for the one whose anonymous author finds his victim in anonymous quantity. But as for gases, the conceptual distance between the instrument and the glory obtained therefrom is surely the greatest and most horrific, and what the Red Cross here so vainly feels is reiterated by me and lastly expressed by mentioning the possibility of dismissing from the association of armies any army that employs poison gases, due to behavior before the enemy which according to the old military concept of honor is the opposite of bravery. In a play on words, this whole abominable contrast is finally undone once and for all by a chlorious offensive [as in “chlorine gas,” playing on glorious/*glorreich*]. A bad pun could bring this chaos under control, but all further horrors will be appeased by the idea that one would like to demonstrate the effectiveness of the chemistry on both sides, not by testing them on the bodies of hundreds of thousands of innocent laymen, but through a scientific clash of laboratories. Ever since bravery has gotten mixed up with technology, she has forgotten that quantity nevertheless has the bounds of madness and that the point must be reached where the prevalence of nonmilitary forces becomes so significant that holding the competition would have to be handed over to them as more proper, in a manner namely which excludes the simultaneous advancement of state interests as well as the destruction of human life. For if one can transmit human voices, and thus also commands, at distances like Berlin-Vienna, why should it not be possible for technology, which makes the miracle of today into the commodity of tomorrow, to invent an apparatus through which someone militarily unfit could manage from a Berlin desk, via a pressure, switching, or winding device, to blow up London and vice versa? If patriotism is the hope for the success of a gas attack and high treason the horror of it [i.e., of such an attack]—making me an example of one of the great traitors of all battles and times—that way the deadly humbug can be settled none other than by the proposal, without mankind immediately perishing of absurdity, that we appraise mutual inventions by theoretical means and make the engineers instead of the field marshals into honorary doctors again, and of philosophy as far as I'm concerned. The disparity between the deed and the ideology it dragged along: from this alone comes this disgusting poison gas in which we are gloriously choking. A colorful costume and the duty to raise hand to brow before one's superior and everything else that goes with this and everything will still be demanded before death—it may be splendid habits and arrangements: but what they have just created with the modern way of dying, insofar as they could advance or hinder them—that even is obscure! ... Into this whole chaos of concepts, duties, sufferings, and challenges a life also not unencumbered beforehand has tumbled upside down, a reality is becoming overgrown as symbol. Who would still have hope who watches a carriage of the Vienna Strassenbahn even only from a distance? This heap of dirt and misery in which the stuff of humanity has in a way become tangled together, where it scarcely has anything to do anymore with the individual distribution of the limbs—you seize on this image and ask yourself now, whether there is still room for “discipline” and even for an “inspection service” that ought to establish if there has been a violation, in that conscripts, old conscripts “do not stand up or yield a place before fellow officers.” For “fellow civil personnel naturally take note of this and express themselves over this undisciplined and provocative behavior of the unit as well.” This was not invented by some infernal Brueghel. The devil himself, were he to see and hear it and already stand squeezed in among them, at the mercy of all the consequences of the soap shortage, he would hear nothing more than the natural wretchedness of humanity and to this a poor woman's voice that constantly calls out: “Please move forward! Anyone need a ticket? Forward, please move forward!” And the rain falls every day, and again a baggage train surges forward from Wallenstein's camp, and now they push the satchels and backpacks in, and—yet reflection has its place, it dominates us all, because in the mysterious human wisdom we have found that life with need, death, and filth is much more beautiful. But stop, if there is still room for discipline, that way there's enough for the honor

concept, too. The poor voice called out to someone who did not want to move forward, although he was a captain, that he did not have any education, for she did not know that he was a captain, because he was not marked as such, but rather wore civilian clothes. Despite this he received instructions from the superior authorities to lodge the complaint. She had called “Forward!”, but he called that he wanted “not to leave the space.” That way she must have noted that the civilian clothing was only a pretense. In the proceedings she said something like this had never happened to her, who “was used to a lot in the war in the electric [railway]”—but she meant the world war. The captain asked her agitatedly whether she had really taken him, since he was in civilian clothes, for a shirker. She responded that such thoughts lay far from her, for “what does the war have to do with the electric [railway]?” The judge pronounced her guilty, for the civilian was a military man. *There will be all of this so long as all of this is!* While in flight a military superior called out from an automobile to an inferior who had an open head wound: “You there! Put on your equipment!” And many who could no longer flee lay in the Drina [river]. In a Krakow hospital saluting exercises were done with the kinds of people who had been laid low by gas poisoning or were even recovering from stomach wounds. Miracle after miracle! These are the old ornaments to the new way of dying. But this one here, freshly sprung from the retort, could not invent any new [ornaments], [while] the powers that be cannot dispense with the old ornaments like this. For it must not be dulce alone, but also decorum! [recall Horace's “dulce et decorum est pro patria mori”] It is only that power needs the new death for its maintenance, only that the old authority would rather not abdicate, while its position has chemistry to thank that the labels on the chemicals are indicated—that is what our victorious culture has irretrievably dedicated to death by poison. Humanity, which has overexerted its imagination on inventions, can no longer imagine their effectiveness—otherwise it would just commit suicide out of regret! But since it has also overexerted its human dignity on inventions, so it lives and dies for all power that serves such progress against it. The unimaginability of things experienced daily, the irreconcilability of power and the means to bring it about, that is the state of affairs, and the technoromantic adventure in which we have gotten ourselves involved, however it turns out, will put an end to the situation.

Translation: KH