

# Selective Attacks on People Whose Names Begin with *B*\*

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**S**INCE THE TITLE OF THIS PAPER IS AMBIGUOUS, it has to be said at the outset that it does not mean to evoke robberies and muggings but refers to literary attacks: attacks by one writer, the Austrian playwright, poet, essayist, and pamphleteer Karl Kraus. Born in 1874, Kraus flourished as a writer in the first third of our century and died in 1936. Though he wrote poems of unsurpassed beauty, adapted plays, and can be credited with having invented the documentary drama, the bulk of his *oeuvre* consists of polemical writings, and they are both copious and vehement. His literary output was principally a periodical *Die Fackel*<sup>1</sup> that he published and for the most part wrote alone. It appeared irregularly, several slim issues per year. Still, a recent reprint edition (advertised at \$1,360) comes to 23,000 pages.

There Kraus commented relentlessly on anybody who happened to rub him the wrong way, from emperors to small businessmen whose advertising he found objectionable. Most of his articles were attacks, and they were aimed with an uncanny ability at the victim's weakest point.<sup>2</sup> More often than not, that turned out to be a point of language. In his worship of unadulterated language he resembles George Orwell,<sup>3</sup> with whom I think he also shares certain personality characteristics.

Kraus was as freely compared to a yapping dog as to the prophets Isaiah and Jeremiah. A sort of cult grew around him, while the literary establishment diligently ignored him. While he lived, Vienna's leading newspaper never mentioned his name. His death, however, made front page headlines.

His special relation to language and the topical character of most of his work have deterred translators, but an abridged English rendition of his magnum

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<sup>1</sup> The torch. Kraus offered this motivation for the choice of the name: "May this torch give light to a realm over which, in contrast to that of Charles V., the sun never rises."

<sup>2</sup> Auden pointed out that Kraus' criticism was "never generalized but always specific and concrete" (W. H. Auden, "Books—A Russian Aesthete," *The New Yorker*, April 4, 1970, p. 137).

<sup>3</sup> Steiner goes as far as to say that "Orwell's polemics on the theme are, by comparison, pedestrian" (George Steiner, "Books—From the Vienna Woods," *The New Yorker*, July 23, 1973, p. 73). What makes Kraus' relevant writings less "pedestrian" is his stronger tendency to personify language and to eroticize the person so created—a fascinating problem, but outside of our scope.

opus, *Die letzten Tage der Menschheit* (the one that virtually created the genre of the documentary drama) has recently been published.<sup>4</sup> And while the volume of German writings on Kraus has been growing tremendously, increased attention has also been paid to him in American professional literature.<sup>5</sup> A number of books dealing with Austria in the early twentieth century give Kraus his due.<sup>6</sup>

It is not surprising that a personality so unusual attracted the attention of psychologists at an early stage; and we find indeed that the ninety-third meeting of the Vienna Psychoanalytic Society, on January 12, 1910, was devoted to studying him. Dr. Fritz Wittels, who gave the report, mentioned a number of people whom Kraus had attacked and noted the following:

It is striking that all these names begin with B, a fact that [I] cannot explain . . . . One can, on the basis of analogous facts in the life of neurotics, surmise that this conspicuous feature must have a reason.

Freud, speaking in the discussion, treated Wittels with some irony, advocated caution in interpretation, and had this to say about names with *B*:

Such cases are, in fact, frequent in neurosis. For example a patient whose friends' names had to begin with an H, and for whom more than ten instances fulfilling this condition could be shown to have occurred. The explanation was that the person who was the archetype of these friendships had a name with this initial, a fact that the patient himself arrived at. In order to find an explanation in Kraus' case, one would have to be familiar with the family history. It is probable that these manifold enmities go back to the brothers and in particular to one of them.<sup>7</sup>

If speakers at that meeting thought, as it seems some did, that Kraus (who was then in his mid-30's) had already reached or even passed his productive peak so that his life could be viewed as something complete, their crystal ball was clouded. He achieved a great deal of stature by his passionate condemnation of World War I, and his influence was never stronger than in the days of the First Austrian Republic (1918-1933). It struck me that it might be interesting to find out whether that strange pattern of attacking by preference people whose names begin with *B* could be found during the second part of his life as well. I would not attempt to outguess Freud and to venture an explanation *why* Kraus should have done this: I am merely trying to determine *whether* he did.

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<sup>4</sup> Karl Kraus. *The Last Days of Mankind*, ed. by F. Ungar, transl. by A. Gode and S. E. Wright (New York: Ungar, 1975).

<sup>5</sup> Note especially the monograph in the well-known Twayne Series: Harry Zohn, *Karl Kraus* (New York: Twayne, 1971 [Twas 116]). See also article "Karl Kraus" in: *Encyclopedia of World Literature in the 20th Century*, v.2 (New York: Ungar, 1969).

<sup>6</sup> Notably Allan Janik and Stephen Toulmin, *Wittgenstein's Vienna* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1973), and William M. Johnstone, *The Austrian Mind. An Intellectual and Social History 1848-1938* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1972). See also Erich Heller, *The Disinherited Mind* (Cambridge: Bowes & Bowes, 1952).

<sup>7</sup> Herman Nunberg and Ernst Federn, eds. *Minutes of the Vienna Psychoanalytic Society*, vol. II: 1908-1910 (New York: International Universities Press, 1967). The record of the meeting on Kraus is found on pp. 382-393. The quotations are from pp. 384, 391, 392.

This in itself seems to me of some value: if it turns out that during the remaining 26 years of his life Kraus did not especially attack *Bs* this would tend to show that a greater frequency of *Bs* during the first decade or so of his adult life was coincidental—in other words, that the psychoanalysts here did what they are often criticized for doing, namely that they read too much meaning into a really insignificant detail. If, on the other hand, it transpires that Kraus persisted in his bizarre method of selecting victims, that would tend to show that the psychoanalysts here probably did find something significant (though we may not know what precisely the significance would be).

A simple, workable research design had to be developed. It would not do just to count names in Kraus' works—the concept of "victim" is by its nature too vague, and the length and vehemence of the attacks would also have to be weighed, etc. A list of all names found in *Die Fackel* has now been published.<sup>8</sup> This remarkable scholarly effort does not, however, discriminate between names of victims and other names.

I have first tried to determine how often the initial *B* occurs in the population from which Kraus drew his victims. Using various directories,<sup>9</sup> etc., I found the "B ratio," i.e., the number of names beginning with *B* divided into the total number of names, to be about 1:14. This is also roughly the "B ratio" in Bäuml's list. If Kraus chose his victims without regard to their names, we should expect to find among them roughly one in 14 to begin with *B*. Now, how many actually begin with *B*?

Here I have relied chiefly on a questionnaire that I submitted to people who are familiar with Kraus' writings, asking them to list the names of his victims as they recalled them. The rationale is that, although memory of course deceives, it is probable that those whom Kraus attacked with especial bitterness and persistence would be better remembered. I received a total of 81 names (including duplications); 23 of them start with *B*. The "B ratio" here is 1:2.8, a difference so marked that, even allowing for errors and inaccuracies inherent in the method, the significance is not to be denied. Review of the literature, though less productive of names and therefore not as suitable for statistical treatment, confirms the impression.

Let us also consider Kraus' campaign against a then influential editor and publisher, Imre Békessy. Now Békessy may have been the archetype of the "yellow" journalist; but he was, alas, not the only one, and it is hardly self-evident that, of all the evils rampant in the world, yellow journalism is the most important. Yet Kraus lashed into Békessy with unremitting fury; it abated only some time after Békessy had fled from Vienna.

Kraus scholars have been of a divided mind about the episode. Was the object of the attack worth the effort? Weigel, author of the best-known book (in

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<sup>8</sup> Gustav H. Bäuml (†) and Franz H. Bäuml, "Namensverzeichnis zu Karl Kraus' *Die Fackel*," *Modern Austrian Literature* 6:1/2 (June, 1973) 151-182; 6: 3/4 (Dec., 1973) 139-160; 7: 1/2 (June, 1974) 141-173; 8: 3/4 (Dec., 1975) 197-221; 9:1 (March, 1976) 44-83; 9:2 (June, 1976) 10-44.

<sup>9</sup> Notably *Osterreich Lexikon* (Vienna: Osterreichischer Bundesverlag, 1966).

German) on Kraus, deems his main speech against Békessy the high point of his life's work, but notes, with regret, that Kraus' polemics against Békessy are not included in his *Collected Works*.<sup>10</sup> Kraus gave an enormous amount of energy to his fight against a man whose name would surely be totally forgotten were it not preserved in Kraus' writings like the proverbial insect in amber. Zohn tries to explain the discrepancy by saying that for Kraus "Békessy was simply a collective name for the putrefaction of the postwar period."<sup>11</sup> But why would that name serve so much better than any other?

Obviously, when a writer launches an attack, his "selection" of a target is not the result of a purely intellectual process. It involves many emotional factors, both conscious and unconscious. In the case of Kraus, one such factor was that names beginning with *B* stimulated his hostility. We have here an empirical corroboration of the assumption that the psychoanalytic approach to questions of onomastics is promising. We are familiar with the observation that a person's name influences his fate.<sup>12</sup> This normally operates through the person's own emotional processes. Here we have an example that it can also happen when only the emotional processes of another person are involved.

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<sup>10</sup> Hans Weigel, *Karl Kraus oder die Macht der Ohnmacht* (Vienna: Fritz Molden, 1968), p. 277.

<sup>11</sup> Zohn, *op. cit.* p. 102.

<sup>12</sup> Muriel Beadle, "The Game of the Name," *New York Times Magazine*, Oct. 21, 1973, pp. 38 ff., gives an overall view of the state of our knowledge in this field.