

## The Black Book: Karl Kraus's Etiquette

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Each time we leave the protective walls of the private sphere and cross the threshold into the world of social encounters and engagements, we must be prepared to observe standards of correctness without which our interactions cannot be made easy. It would be impossible for us to gain lasting access to the realm beyond the home without our being able to discern and appreciate society's canon of topics and preferred tonalities. To help us along the way, there has always been a wealth of guides, of conduct books, seeking to codify the otherwise tacit rules that govern relations in various spaces of sociability.<sup>1</sup>

These conduct books have a normative character, distinguishing acceptable from improper behavior, thereby marking the boundaries and suggesting the course of any sequence of interactions.<sup>2</sup> To observe the specified rules, to follow the instructions for self-management, is to make possible one's integration into the social formation. There are things one can say or do, and things one should avoid, lest one make oneself impossible in the circles which one wants to enter. Polite conversation is, in most cases, evasive conversation.<sup>3</sup>

Yet perhaps because we enter into this realm of sociable discourse from some other, more sheltered space, or because the pursuit of harmony takes precedence over all other concerns, social existence often seems to demand from us an endless series of impersonations, even a negation of our actual selves. Hence the requirement to cultivate politeness and tactful adaptation rarely fails to provoke the invocation of virtues such as sincerity and authenticity.<sup>4</sup> A society that insists on appropriate demeanor makes itself vulnerable to the critique of radicals who call for the "congruence between avowal and actual feeling," and in such congruence grasps a proof of purity and courage (Trilling 2).

In his journal *Die Fackel*, the Viennese satirist Karl Kraus repeatedly traversed the social sphere of the early twentieth century with its many venues and meeting places, and so he knew something about how people behaved and spoke in the theatre lobbies, in the coffeehouses, and at the art exhibitions. He knew and he published scathing reports, making his discomfort in society a recurrent theme of his writing. At times he also mimicked the standard advice of contemporary conduct books, an-

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nouncing the need for “neue Verkehrsformen” for dealing with the lack of cultivation (“Der Nebenmensch” 1).

The call for discursive regulations fits the disciplining ethos of the conventional conduct book. And yet Kraus in no way supported smooth, sociable interaction. His references to the genre did not amount to a call for the careful delimitation of conversational practice in order to help readers avoid the embarrassment of blunders. Rather, Kraus gravitated towards the abolition of all conversations. Sharpening conduct-book rules to the point of absurdity, a point where bad manners, “schlechte Manieren,” came to include all manners, Kraus set out to close down conversational exchange (1). Clearly fascinated with the requirements of tact,<sup>5</sup> his writings represent a moment when the misanthropic character infiltrates the genre of conversational advice,<sup>6</sup> for which the attack on the hermit is an obligatory element.<sup>7</sup> The result is a conduct book that dissolves rather than facilitates integration.

Of interest here, however, are Kraus’s motivations. What he so violently reacted to in the social sphere was not in any immediate sense the corruption of sincerity and authenticity. Moving around Vienna, he did not observe and castigate the coolness of polished behavior or even deceit and hypocrisy, but rather the assumed agreement between conversational partners. Viennese society, it turns out, did not engage in evasive conversations; its realm was instead completely pervaded by value judgments whose authors, if they could be called authors, did not in any way expect to be challenged. The problem was not society’s avoidance of disruptive conflict in the interests of a pleasant atmosphere, but the constant unreflective and even aggressive presupposition of consent. It was this sinister system of imposed agreement that called for an alternative etiquette.

### Viennese Society

In an issue of Kraus’s *Die Fackel* from 1905, the two authors Peter Altenberg and Egon Friedell delivered the first installment of an inventory of standard conversational phrases, all with the blessing of the editor. The list provides an overview of the common themes and speech habits of Viennese society. It contains twelve entries, but does not pretend to be exhaustive: in an introduction of two short paragraphs, the authors welcome further contributions. The initial three items are sufficient to indicate the tone:

1. Meine Herren! Ich weiß nicht, wie Sie über die Sache denken, aber ich muß Ihnen aufrichtig sagen: Ich halte den Selbstmord einfach für eine Feigheit.

2. Ja,—Nietzsche. Sehr interessant. Aber finden Sie nicht auch: wie er seine letzten Sachen geschrieben hat, war er doch schon nicht mehr ganz bei sich.

3. Ich bitt Sie, die Juden sind auch Menschen. Ich kenne gute Juden und schlechte Christen (13).

The title of this list and the article that briefly introduces it is “Das Schwarze Buch,” the Black Book. The expression is commonly used today to designate an extensively researched overview of the crimes of a particular regime or system, often culminating in an estimate of the numbers of victims.<sup>8</sup> Yet in the case of Altenberg and Friedell’s article, which lists irritating phrases rather than crimes against humanity, another affiliated sense provides a slightly better fit. The expression “das schwarze Buch” can, to begin with, be traced far back. In his lexicon of German historical idioms, Lutz Röhrich notes various related turns of phrase such as “Im schwarzen Buche stehen” (1:274) or “Ins schwarze Register kommen” (3:1436). Here the black book or the black register signifies a list of criminal acts or persons, and, consequently, to have one’s name recorded in this list means to be proclaimed a criminal or, metaphorically, to acquire a bad reputation. Such a proclamation could, however, imply expulsion from the community: a black register is the register of the punished, but also of the excluded. In the societies in which these idioms circulated, criminals risked being outlawed—that is, no longer considered proper members of the community and hence completely deprived of legal protection. To assault and kill such a figure would entail no punishment.<sup>9</sup>

This practice of communal boycott or expulsion is of course present in the term blacklist, which means a record of individuals and groups, or even companies and countries, under suspicion and to be excluded. And this is in fact the sense that Altenberg and Friedell intended. In their short introduction, they explained how their list was to be used. The collection of remarks should serve the identification of individuals to be avoided in society, or better, banished from it: “Wer eine solche Bemerkung von sich gibt, dem hat man unverzüglich den Verkehr zu kündigen; man hat ihn nicht mehr zu grüßen und ihm einen Brief zu schreiben, in dem man ihm eine andere Stadt als Wohnort anrät” (12–13).

To be guilty of advancing one of the comments listed in the Black Book constitutes a grave enough offense to necessitate complete social boycott. Yet when looking at these remarks, one sees that most of them are, if exasperating, at least conventional. Altenberg and Friedell present a number of standard remarks—suicide is cowardice, Nietzsche became crazy towards the end, Jews can also be fine human beings—all of which one could presumably utter in Vienna around 1905 without much risk. The phrase collection could in fact claim another precedent than the “black register,” namely Flaubert’s *Dictionnaire des idées reçues*, a compilation of opinions generally accepted as true, the pronunciation of which would meet no resistance in the surrounding society.<sup>10</sup> These are statements one can expect others to agree with, or at least are so recognizable as to provoke no serious objection. One can even say that they constitute precisely what is shared in a community: its stock of self-evident positions, adopted by everyone without much modification.<sup>11</sup>

The Black Book of *Die Fackel* combines the dictionary of received ideas with blacklisting, or imposes the punishment of exile from the social world on those who rely on its current supply of common views. The Black Book not only spells out

the goal of expurgation, the authors order the enforcement of harsh sanctions on the “gemeingefährliche Menschen” who reveal themselves by statements such as those listed (12). Again the book turns the threat of ejection *from* Viennese society on those who make remarks for which they presuppose easy acceptance *by* society. It is something of an anti-*Konversationslexikon*: not an alphabetically organized encyclopedia serving the common man with the necessary information for cultivated intercourse and hence an indispensable element of every bourgeois household, but a device to reform current conversational practice, to relieve it of its stock phrases and so perhaps to silence it or make it more unpredictable.

### Agreements

Were Altenberg and Friedell—and along with them their editor, Karl Kraus—engaged in anti-bourgeois criticism? One can, in a heuristic move, read the twelve entries of the Black Book as elements in the portrait of a certain type. This would be a person or a class of persons characterized by, for instance, a hostile approach to art that does not conform to established decorum (“Die Kunst soll uns *erheben*. Den Schmutz der Gasse habe ich zu Hause”); unease coupled with voyeuristic curiosity about any hint of deviant behavior (“Ein sehr netter und gescheiter Mensch. Aber sagen Sie mir: *von was lebt der eigentlich?*”); or self-satisfied display of uncultivated taste with the pretense that it is more authentic and robust (“Ich sag Ihnen, ein guter Gespritzter, schön ausgekühlt, ist mir lieber als der beste Champagner”). It is in other words possible to convert the collection of statements into a critique of the smug parochialism manifest in rejections or disparagements of modern art, luxury, madness, or ethnic minorities, of everything that is in some way perceived as outside of the bounds of normality.

Yet to concern oneself exclusively with the often hilarious stupidity of the typical member of the bourgeoisie, the man who has the “dirt of the street at home,” would be to overlook the more elusive and more significant dimensions of the project. The list in *Die Fackel* details not only the values of a certain society, but also the way in which its members presuppose the leisure to articulate them. The gathered phrases all seem to be uttered in a sphere in which the speaker feels that he can count on approval, or in which the mere possibility of disapproval never occurs to him. The listed statements are filled with conversational particles that secure a partner relation,<sup>12</sup> and are introduced or accompanied by some kind of address: “Meine Herren!” or “Sagen Sie, Herr Doktor.” Yet all these appeals do not represent attempted contact with someone whose answer is appreciated or even expected, or whose response is of interest precisely because it is yet unknown and unpredictable. “Aber finden Sie nicht auch ...”—after such an opening phrase, the room for future dispute seems rather narrow.

Even when the comment starts with a theatrical announcement of independent taste or explicit dissent, the daring is inauthentic. The ideas are, after all, received ideas, and the ease with which they are pronounced indicates that nobody is truly

prepared for refutation. The bold claim ultimately relies on the assumption of shared values, and so the speaker who underlines his own opinion—"Ich weiß nicht, wie Sie über die Sache denken, aber ich muß Ihnen aufrichtig sagen"—actually feels fully informed of the opinion of the others. The emphasis on one's private opinion is least of all a gesture of humility, a way of admitting a degree of uncertainty in one's judgment, but serves instead to indicate that the speaker is someone special enough to hold a particular view, or someone courageous enough to state an uncomfortable (but really all too comfortable) truth.<sup>13</sup>

Looking at the comments, then, the Black Book does not simply expose conventional mores and taste, but more the presumptuousness with which they are repeatedly enunciated. The list is the portrait of a space where the participants involve their addressees in preordained tacit agreements. The irritation of the Black Book is directed at the stereotypical views—and at the verbal gestures revealing the presupposition of a community of banter ("Sagen Sie, Herr Doktor, was haben Sie jetzt *unter der Feder*?"). This is captured in an entry that does not expose a received idea, but rather exemplifies the happy and boisterous disrespect of the wish for privacy: "(Im Gasthause:) Sie, was essen Sie denn da für eine merkwürdige Sache? Lassen Sie mich kosten—." To dine in the semi-public space of a restaurant already means, in the Viennese social sphere, to want to participate in cheerful interaction.

Gossip, of which some of the entries are examples, provides the best illustration of how (moral) conventionalism and assumed communality combine. In the tenth entry one reads the following invitation to gossip: "(Über eine Dame, die mit drei Herren sitzt; in vertraulichem Tone:) Sagen Sie, Sie wissen das doch sicher: welcher von den Dreien ist denn 'derjenige, welcher'?" The object of gossip is here as elsewhere alleged attitudes or acts that in some way represent deviations from or transgressions of socially accepted norms, so much so that anthropologists claim that "control of morals operates mainly through gossip and the fear of gossip" (Gluckman 308). In the question "*what does he actually live on?*" quoted above, there is the intimation of some abnormality: does the man who just left the gathering really have a respectable profession? What curious thing keeps him nourished? Indeed, by quickly attaching to anyone who in some way departs from officially sanctioned behavior patterns, gossip, as a subspecies of evaluative talk, "spells out the common grounds of our social life" by letting the speakers "externalize, dramatize, and embody their moral perceptions" (Sabini and Silver 102). Yet the stage direction to the tenth statement of the list reveals the ultimate motivation for banishment: every piece of gossip is transmitted "in vertraulichem Tone." It creates or presumes a warm sense of community around the exchange of special inside information about an absent third person.

The Black Book does not primarily condemn gossip as morally reprehensible or as a sign of a weak or corrupt character, a staple objection found in conduct books detailing the requirements of correct sociability.<sup>14</sup> The main concern is rather that the one who initiates the exchange of gossip takes unproblematic closeness and shared understanding for granted. It is partly because gossip is publicly denounced

and hence must be practiced surreptitiously that one engages in it with people with whom one can speak in a warm and friendly tone. Gossip is a discreetly performed kind of indiscretion, and, as such, an effective tool to generate and sustain social connections.<sup>15</sup> In this regard it is perhaps significant that the entries do not expose someone who imparts gossip, but someone who assumes that the addressed would want to do so. It is this presupposition that the Black Book rewards with expulsion. The list seeks to ostracize precisely those members of society who without reflection deploy strategies of community formation.

### The Philistine

The irritation on display in the Black Book is to no small degree directed at the tendency of the members of Viennese society to annul distance and draw their interlocutors into a pre-established community of agreement. If we can still claim that the Black Book constitutes a portrait, however, of whom could it be? The first item of the list provides a clue. The assertion “Ich halte den Selbstmord einfach für eine Feigheit” has a famous precedent in literary history, namely Goethe’s novel *Die Leiden des jungen Werther*.

In young Werther’s pivotal discussion with his beloved’s husband, the stable and reasonable Albert firmly states his moral disapproval of suicide: “Denn freilich ist es leichter zu sterben, als ein qualvolles Leben standhaft zu ertragen” (47). Werther, of a different opinion, reacts with fervor to Albert’s remark and frantically piles up analogies and stories supposed to remove the stigma of immorality and weakness from suicide, or rather align it with certain affects and medical pathologies in an effort to make it a less shameful capitulation: “[I]ch finde es ebenso wunderbar zu sagen, der Mensch ist feige, der sich das Leben nimmt, als es ungehörig wäre, den einen Feigen zu nennen, der an einem böartigen Fieber stirbt” (48).

In alluding to this well-known exchange, the first entry of the Black Book indicates that the authors behind the list place their project within the framework of a specific literary tradition. It associates the implicit enemy profile with the literary work in which Goethe introduces the figure of the *philistine* as a target of rebellion.<sup>16</sup> Originally a pejorative name for the non-student bourgeoisie in eighteenth-century German student slang, an idiom into which it had migrated from theological polemics against an enemy group of the chosen people,<sup>17</sup> Goethe used the notion of the philistine to designate an ensemble of qualities and attitudes that constitute the polar opposite of the spontaneity and enthusiasm that he represented in Werther. The one who truly creates a work of art or truly loves, Werther expounds, is necessarily impatient with all maxims of moderation and foresight.

Since romantic love can only prove itself through devotion that is excessive, the philistine, whom Werther identifies with the civil servant in the bureaucratic order,<sup>18</sup> remains forever incapable of it: if it is not economically wasteful and does not ruin one’s timetable, it is simply not love. Yet this opening reference in no way implies that the authors in *Die Fackel* wished to import the cultural program of Goethe’s

early works without modification. Rather, the two first entries trace the rudimentary history of philistine criticism. If Goethe was the one who introduced the philistine as the figure insisting on the divisions and demarcation that true art or love must transgress to become visible, Nietzsche, mentioned in the second item, developed the critique of philistinism by coining, or at least picking up, the concept “Bildungsphilister.”<sup>19</sup> This term is the updated name for a curious mutation of the nineteenth century, namely the philistine who does not condescendingly dispense advice to artists and lovers, but instead prides himself on being one of them.<sup>20</sup> The oxymoron works as a pithy summary of Nietzsche's critical review of the “Scheinbildung der Gründerjahre” (Meyer 185), but it also encapsulates a situation where anti-bourgeois critique has become a little more difficult. The philistine does not recognize himself as a philistine but, with the help of the prepared models found in literary history, gladly points to the philistinism of others.

In referring to Goethe and Nietzsche, the first entries of the Black Book thus recapitulate two decisive stations in the development of a vocabulary of cultural criticism. This opening sets up the questions whether the project in *Die Fackel* contributed to its further evolution, whether Kraus and his fellows could mobilize other sources of validity or other means of identification in the struggle against the philistine. In a sense the mention of suicide (as a central motif in *Werther*), and possibly also the hint at Nietzsche's slide into insanity, provide the Black Book with illuminating contrasts to its stated intention. For *Werther*, suicide quite clearly figures as a form of protest against and escape from the rule-governed polite society that views his actions as a series of indiscretions.<sup>21</sup> The Black Book, on the other hand, propagates a more militant anti-social strategy. If *Werther* announces and then also performs his exit from society by suicide, the Black Book opts for an attack on society, declares received ideas to be unforgivable blunders, and demands the expulsion of anyone who commits them.

Yet the development of philistine criticism is most clearly marked by the addition of a name to the canon. The first two Black Book entries gesture towards Goethe and Nietzsche, and the twelfth and final item points to the editor of *Die Fackel*, Karl Kraus. In this entry he figures as the constant victim of impertinent curiosity: “(Zum Herausgeber der ‘Fackel’:.) Sagen Sie mir, ich bitt’ Sie, was haben Sie eigentlich gegen den —?” In his role as a local celebrity, Kraus knew from experience the disturbance of being recognized and addressed everywhere in Vienna.<sup>22</sup>

But the phrase with which Kraus is introduced into the Black Book not only testifies to the annoyances that come with being a local media star, it also indicates the direction that Kraus himself would take in the articles connected to the Black Book published in subsequent issues. The philistine, or what Kraus called “diese ganze fürchterliche Öde des Bildungsphilisteriums” (6), does not so much offend the heart of the lover and the artist as it irritates the constitution of the modern man.

### Neurasthenia

With the introduction of Kraus into the list of philistine remarks, the Black Book underlines the question whether *Die Fackel* and its editor remained bound to the tradition of anti-philistinism, a tradition that, after Nietzsche, could not so easily rely on an outright rejection of the unimaginative middle class in the name of artistic sensitivity. With the list of typical remarks circulating in Viennese society, *Die Fackel* was clearly articulating an aversion to the contemporary condition of sociable discourse, an aversion with a genealogy extending back to Goethe. Yet it is less clear if the dictionary contains some alternative vision of expression and dialogue, one that lies safely beyond the intrusive and formulaic type-statements of the bourgeoisie.

In the following issue of *Die Fackel*, the first of 1906, Kraus published his own continuation of the Black Book and in some sense also provided an implicit answer to the question above. To begin with, he reiterated and sharpened the ban on socializing. In a report on the typical annoyances of the Viennese coffeehouse, he announced that all communicative attempts of the passer-by must be considered barbaric incursions. The fact that two individuals happen to traverse the same public space does not, according to Kraus, give anyone the right to initiate contact, this being the conventional premise of sites of sociability or so-called “open regions” (Cavan 49): “Ins Schwarze Buch gehören jene, die von der Ansicht ausgehen, daß ihr Herantreten an einen Kaffeehaustisch [...] unbedingt als eine willkommene Abwechslung empfunden werden müsse” (2).<sup>23</sup>

In his article, Kraus proposed this harsh revision of contemporary manners with reference to the ongoing discussion of neurasthenia, then the “disorder of the day” (Rabinbach 150). Filling his commentary with talk of the necessary protection of the nerves, Kraus ironically presented the criminalization of all overtures of sociability as an urgent public health reform. Nervous exhaustion was at this point seen as the result of ceaseless exaltation of the functions of the nervous system, leading to a chronic imbalance between the demands of the environment and the resources of the human organism. Kraus intervened in the discourse on this fashionable malady and suggested that such health problems were not only the consequence of an increasingly industrialized life form. Rather than attribute nervous suffering to the shocks and collisions taken to be distinctive of metropolitan modernity,<sup>24</sup> Kraus pointed to endless polite conversations as a series of requirements on the individual, as “obligations without respite” (Rabinbach 158). There was, he claimed with a paradoxical construct, something like a “nervenmordende Gemütlichkeit” particular to Vienna, a city priding itself on having retained an intact context of manners and traditions in an era of mass urbanization (4).

Demands on the nervous system do not only come in the recognizably modern form associated with factory conditions, speedy traffic, and overcrowded streets, but in the insistent joviality of social intercourse thought to cloak the advances of modernity in personable attitudes. When Kraus develops his attack on the Viennese philistines, there is a distinct change of strategy with respect to the ages of Goethe



and Nietzsche. The anti-social semantics are stripped down and relieved of charged righteousness. Kraus does not differentiate himself from the bourgeoisie with the claim to some abused inner richness or beauty, the spontaneous expression of which makes him impossible in society (Goethe). Nor does he articulate a vision of a rejuvenated Germanic culture (Nietzsche). Detached from emotional or ethical passions, the critique is instead ironically delivered as a suggestion guided by exclusively functionalistic concerns.

To judge by the surface argument, then, Kraus was a loner not out of the conviction of the socially induced falsehood or self-congratulatory parochialism of his fellow men, but because a pseudo-traditional sociability was getting on his nerves. The Viennese waiters, to name a favorite example, were so preoccupied with their decorative congeniality that none of them would take orders. And yet below this idiom of mere functionality pitted against the false anachronisms of the surroundings, there is still a vision of a superiority that resides in Kraus's purified language.<sup>25</sup>

### **Barbershop Conversations**

Kraus articulates an aversion to sociable discourse that, when looked at closely, does not simply include smug announcements of conventional taste insulated against dispute, but extends to even the most innocuous examples of phatic communication. And yet at the same time, the explicit rationale for the ban that he endorses seems rather thin in comparison with the visions of the great cultural figures gestured to in the Black Book itself. Why such radical measures? What is to be protected? As the strictures on communication become harsher, it also becomes more difficult to conceive of some alternative, non-debased social discourse or a standard of good speech. Ultimately, Kraus's attempt at the production of an authentic language expends itself in the act of violent rejection of all speech, in the command to silence.

This becomes clear in Kraus's seemingly trivial discussion of the typical Viennese barbershop conversation that follows his plea for the protection of the nerves. To begin with, this section provides another variation on the established theme—Kraus sets out to silence and isolate those who strike up light conversations, with the final aim of arresting social life: “Eine Bemerkung wie: ‘Frisch ist's heut' draußen' ist überflüssig: entweder hat's der Besucher, der ja von außen kommt, selbst gespürt, dann braucht es ihm kein Friseur der Welt zu bestätigen; oder er ist unempfindlich, dann nützt die richtigste Ansicht des Friseurs nichts” (4).

Of course, when Kraus brings up barbershop conversations he might be seen to make an argument for treating a purely commercial relationship *as* commercial. One spends time in a barbershop to purchase a specific service and there is no need to embellish the transaction with the appearance of warm human contact. An observation of the weather conditions does not present an obvious target of ideological or moral censure, which confirms that Kraus is not primarily concerned with illiberal views or conventional taste. As he himself points out, the standard remarks of the hairdresser are devoid of any real informational content.

Yet they are superfluous only if one presupposes that communication consists in the transmission of substantive information. (Kraus maintains that he would only speak to a hairdresser if he wanted to know something about his profession, if he wanted to retrieve some facts for which the barber would be the most obvious source). Such a view clearly rules out forms of communication that do not seek to transport any specific message, but serve instead to secure some minimal commonality between superficially connected people. Meteorology relates to all and offends nobody.<sup>26</sup> For Kraus such deployment of common and reliably non-confrontational themes in barbershop conversations with customers simply slips into the tautological.<sup>27</sup>

Kraus's objection to small talk as completely devoid of content hardly conceals the real motive. The resistance to weather talk is resistance to its eminently integrative function, the way in which it allows for everyone to communicatively link up with everyone else so long as conversations stick to sufficiently universal, or sufficiently empty, concerns.<sup>28</sup> The refusal to accept small talk about weather conditions is related to the opposition to inane opinions: what Kraus rejects is the automatic recruitment into a community. With this further, more encompassing rejection, however, the community is no longer only that of Viennese philistines, but perhaps the community of humans.

### Apocalyptic Speech

Kraus rejects the art of conversation by means of commonplaces practiced without end by the hairdressers, and it is also in the declaration of this rejection that one finds his alternative, his apocalyptic etiquette. In brief, Kraus calls for a regulation that would simply prohibit all conversation in barbershop settings: "Derlei Kalamitäten [empty phrases] wäre einfach durch eine Verordnung beizukommen" (4). To propound such a restriction on talk is entirely in the spirit of the Black Book. A "Verordnung" against barbershop banter would strike at a node of societal traffic. Hairdressers are "connectors" in that their constant contact with a large number of customers makes possible the spread of information and opinions, and Kraus calls for their disconnection by legal means (Gladwell 38, 254). If there were no conversations with hairdressers, Kraus asks, "woher nähmen die meisten Menschen ihre politischen Ideen?" (5).

Kraus's reform seems of course to be a snobbish joke and one that is hardly fair to the Viennese hairdressers, who could be engaging in small talk to defuse the inescapable physical closeness involved in their profession. And yet in the call for regulation, Kraus reveals a fantasy of an absolute authority that would be able to put an end to the easy circulation of statements and judgments for which everyone expects immediate acclamation. The joke tells us of a satirist longing for a definite legal measure that would blast open the idle community resting in its evaluative utterances or "political ideas." He longs for a kind of speech that is all action, hence no longer mere talk. In fact, the proposed ban sets up a scene with archaic precedents.

Moving out of the realm of conduct books with their system of social and pre-legal conventions, Kraus's proposal of a legal measure against chatty barbers follows an apocalyptic logic.

Kraus is often called an apocalyptic satirist, but in reference to events on a more global scale. One of his biographers, Edward Timms, relates how Kraus interpreted a series of ominous pre-war events (the political crisis of 1908 with the threat of war over Bosnia, the earthquake in Messina in 1908, Halley's comet in 1910, and the sinking of the Titanic in 1912) according to a biblical pattern, as stations on the way towards the end of the world: "The history of *Die Fackel* in this period [from 1899 to 1918] is a cumulative process of Revelation. [...] His [Kraus's] vision portrays a whole civilization, poised on the brink of self-destruction" (59).

In his reflections on the apocalypse as a media event, however, Joseph Vogl understands apocalyptic speech less as a message with a specific kind of information, no matter how spectacular, than as the end of messaging. The biblical apocalypse strikes at Babylon, the world city that is nothing but the ultimate emblem for innumerable relations of exchange. It is surrounded by water, packed with goods, populated by prostitutes, sailors, artists, and merchants, all of them involved in some kind of commerce. The judgment that falls on this place of exchange is in an emphatic sense an "Urteil" insofar as it tears apart and separates, that is, destroys the channels of communications (Vogl 138).

What ends in the apocalypse is the world of traffic, which tells us something of the paradoxical character of apocalyptic speech, the communicated message of the end of communication. The apocalypse, the Greek word for revelation, suggests an immediacy of truth and meaning that once and for all annuls the dependence of transmission with its threats of dilution and distortion. But the one who conveys the news of the apocalypse does not so much reveal a previously hidden truth that now becomes accessible to all who have ears to hear or are connected to the system of messaging; it is simply the end. In the apocalypse, message and devastation must coincide since the proclaimed end is precisely the destruction of the broadcasting system: "Die Sendung der Apokalypse ist nichts anderes als das Ende der Apokalypse als Sendung" (Vogl 139).

The Viennese barbershop is a Babylon, and what Kraus calls for in proposing a "Verordnung" is an interruptive judgment. The Black Book project describes a dynamic of connection and disconnection. The fantasy—and its failure—is best captured in a little scene of sudden insight towards the end of Kraus's article, where he concludes his critique of barbershop small talk with an example of how pre-formulated opinions travel from mouth to mouth: "Ich habe es selbst nicht geglaubt, als ich einst Zeuge der folgenden Szene war: Ein gut angezogener Herr, sein Gesicht in einer Waschschüssel abspülend, ruft, da ihm das Wasser über den Mund rinnt, zu dem hinter ihm stehenden Barbiergehilfen: 'Einen Bismarck brauchten wir!'" (5).

The phrase is yet another one of the sound bites that circulate in Vienna, the recounted incident capturing a moment of transfer. Like Babylon, the barbershop is

a harbor, a place of exchange and communication. Not coincidentally, water flows over the mouth of the man, signifying a flow of easy communication that cannot be blocked. The gentleman's call for Bismarck is particularly ironic for Kraus, since the German chancellor is precisely a figure of authority, a figure with the right to issue legal measures and sharpen censorship. Kraus was an ardent admirer.<sup>29</sup>

### Citations

Is Kraus in possession of some counter-language, of a speech forever removed from Viennese banter? One can understand why someone invested in the notion of genius would react to the deployment of clichés in conversation. It is not simply that an individual effaces himself whenever he uses a common phrase. To be the addressee of such a phrase, uttered by someone who seeks to establish contact, is in some ways equally problematic, since it negates one's separateness and draws one into the community of the universal.

Kraus launches a critique of insubstantial talk that not only indicts the presupposition of consensus performed in the airing of prejudice, but also includes harmless commonplaces. He wants to ban weather, or ban the elements (water, air) insofar as they constitute or symbolically represent a medium of communicative contact. But at no point in his article does Kraus make a claim for the special distinction of the exceptional individual (at least not in any other form than the mere implicit, stubborn insistence on it). Nor is the overt complaint about the endless nervous irritations that plague the local celebrity in any direct way a placeholder for such a claim. For Kraus, the assertion of personality is typically Viennese and implicitly rejected as merely ornamental. In Vienna, everyone is an astounding personality.

In the context of the sequence of *Die Fackel* articles from 1905 and 1906, the opposite of the commonplace is not the individual style or the work of art—Goethe would be an exemplary figure to refer to here, but in the Black Book he is gestured to as a predecessor rather than as a solution. Nor does Kraus employ his habitual strategy of “torturing commonplaces to yield a sense,”<sup>30</sup> the basis of so many of his aphorisms, which are paradigms of self-enclosed concision. Rather, Kraus conjures up the (statesman's) authority to block traffic by disconnecting the relays and commanding silence, which is to say that the opposite of the commonplace is the ban that is cast on it, the gathering and blacklisting of phrases performed by means of “das schwarze Buch.” The satirist does not write something that is not commonplace, but repeats the statements once more to tag them and put them out of circulation. Kraus is not an overflowing, eruptive literary genius,<sup>31</sup> but rather, as Walter Benjamin points out, a “mimisches Genie,” one in whose work imitation and condemnation coincide (347).

Yet Kraus does not simply announce a ban on trite remarks. Insofar as he must list each statement to be banned, he has to reproduce them in the form of an index. It is telling that his article begins as an argumentative text with a sequence of claims and scenes but more or less ends with a long list of hackneyed utterances drawn from

the sphere of social intercourse (more specifically, phrases heard in barbershops, where these utterances circulate). It is as if Kraus's own participation progressively thins out, or consists mostly in setting up a frame for the cited remarks that follow. He reduces his contribution to a register, to the delineation of a space in which phrases reveal themselves as vacuous, to the acts of selection and quotation.

But as the platitudes pile up in the article, no longer numbered as in the original Black Book but culled from the letters to the editor, one starts to wonder if the swelling project threatens to turn into a liability: it seems to prolong chatter rather than halt it. And even the most ascetic type of intervention turns out to have weaknesses. Insofar as every ban does require some minimal amount of speech, the public can still seize upon the slogan for the frame, the title that demarcates the quarantined space as the only positive element, and turn it into yet another of its phrases or reveal it as the phrase that it already was. As a (possibly fictive) letter to the editor makes clear in a later 1906 issue, the expression "Das gehört ins Schwarze Buch!" quickly becomes a "Platitude" (23). Kraus does not successfully purge the social sphere of platitudes, but eventually feels compelled to officially close the Black Book and announce disinterest in further contributions, since the project itself has become a mere extension of the Viennese social sphere. He is forced to recognize that he has underestimated society's capacity for linguistic appropriation.

Kraus's attempt to respond to the epidemic spread of phrases includes turning the Black Book into a trap. Everyone who contributes to it with a letter, presumably as an ally in *Die Fackel's* struggle against philistinism, effectively exposes himself as a philistine. But his quick decision to end the purification campaign reveals that he has realized how language use cannot be controlled. As Kraus himself must witness, the Black Book explodes on him because the gesture of registration and banishment is quotable. The injunction against stale remarks captured in the expression "das gehört ins Schwarze Buch!" can easily be integrated into sociable conversation as the joke of the Viennese winter season 1905/06. Kraus's joke is disloyal to him, as all other quotable utterances are—and all utterances can be quoted. The quasi-apocalyptic injunction implicit in the Black Book project thus comes back to haunt Kraus himself. The inescapable linguistic condition on which the project of the Black Book ultimately relies, namely that the ownership of statements is constitutively insecure, that phrases can be collected and exposed, forces him to close the book.

\*

The sequence of *Fackel* articles grouped around the concept of the Black Book presents a minimal repertoire of anti-social strategies or roles which Kraus can be seen to occupy or at least record. The misanthropic figure is either suicidal or completely sovereign; he either withdraws from society (into death) or rules it by dictatorial means. Life in society entails being flooded by barbershop and coffeehouse chatter, and in defense against its pressure there can only be the militant response of a restriction on talk.

Kraus identified a problem: those who frequent the sites of sociability in Vienna tend to speak in a manner that forecloses argumentation. Every address imposed upon someone who enters this sphere effectively involves that person in a pre-established agreement that he is never asked to ratify. In Kraus's journal, the spaces usually termed "(civil) society" and the "public sphere"—to use two positively charged concepts—are not realms where people engage in genuine discussion. Yet around 1905/06, Kraus did not seek ways to promote discursive dissent, but instead set out to violently extricate himself from the agreements he was implicated in. The misanthrope is perhaps too polarizing a figure to look to when seeking to re-imagine social relationships. In the articles surrounding the Black Book, Kraus's exposure of judgmental speech takes the form of a Judgment Day.<sup>32</sup> He lacks, one could say, a vision of conditions in which people could articulate disagreements, and in the medium of those disagreements remain in a relationship with each other. The Black Book evolves into a clash between despotisms: the despotism of the preordained and suffocating harmony of the social realm and the despotism of the dictatorial legal action directed against it.

#### NOTES

1. Since societal rules are mostly in a state of flux, each conduct book that hopes to capture them will inevitably seem anachronistic to the contemporary reader. And yet in a social world which finds itself in transition, there will always be some interest, at least among newcomers and late arrivals to good society, in guides that can help absorb some of the resulting insecurities. See for instance Rudolf Helmstetter's article "Guter Rat ist (un)modern."

2. Klaus Naumann speaks of the typical conduct book as consisting of a list of "Zuträglichkeiten und Ungehörigkeiten" (320).

3. Angelika Linke claims that our view of nineteenth-century bourgeois conversation culture as idle is unfair given the constant and strenuous attempt to avoid troubling topics: "Richtiger wäre: 'vermeidende Konversation'. Und die angebliche 'Leichtigkeit' wäre das Produkt einer ziemlichen Anstrengung" ("Die Kunst der 'guten Unterhaltung'" 141). Perfect triviality is hard work.

4. *Sincerity and Authenticity* is the title of Lionel Trilling's study on the development of a distinctly modern moral idiom.

5. Kraus lived, Walter Benjamin writes, in a world "in der die ärgste Schandtat noch ein faux-pas ist" (339). But if Kraus regarded even the gravest offense as a matter of tactlessness, he also combined an apocalyptic tone with attention to the details of everyday life. Benjamin speaks of the "Verschränkung eines biblischen Pathos mit der halsstarrigen Fixierung an die Anstößigkeiten des Wiener Lebens" (337).

6. That Kraus cultivated the image of himself as a misanthrope is well established in the secondary literature (see Simonis 321–22 or Timms 182). The primary target of this literary figure is a society “schooled in the value of *bienséance*” (Jauss 315).

7. In her review of central texts in the conduct-book tradition, Claudia Henn-Schmölders speaks of the “Einsiedlerschelte” as typical of the genre (29). One can understand this hostility to the loner: if people refused to speak to each other, the authors of conduct books would be out of business.

8. An example of this genre would be *Le livre noir du communisme*, which, in its survey of the terror against civilians under communist regimes, arrives at about a hundred million dead. In a “livre noir,” then, one finds the atrocities that a socio-economic formation or a type of government is responsible for, and the name indicates the nature of the findings.

9. Giorgio Agamben explores the implications of this figure in his study *Homo Sacer*.

10. For an analysis of Flaubert's compendium as an instrument of censorship, putting speakers on guard against their own statements and scaring them into silence, see Shoshana Felman's article “Modernity of the Commonplace.”

11. In *Strukturwandel der Öffentlichkeit*, Jürgen Habermas refers to “Selbstverständlichkeiten” in society—“vorformuliert übernommen, flexibel in der Wiedergabe” (266).

12. Angelika Linke speaks of recurrent “Partnerbezug herstellender Gesprächswörter” (“Die Kunst der ‘guten Unterhaltung’” 131).

13. In his meditation “Meinung Wahn Gesellschaft,” Theodor W. Adorno remarks that someone who emphasizes that he is merely stating his opinion on the topic often wants to suggest “daß er mit Leib und Seele dahintersteht; er habe die Zivilcourage, Unbeliebtes, in Wahrheit freilich nur allzu Beliebtes zu sagen” (574–75). To call an utterance an opinion is thus not always to qualify it or to express doubt about its veracity. It can be a ploy to shift the conversational mode into that of the ostensibly audacious confession.

14. This tradition is remarked on by, for instance, Angelika Linke (*Sprachkultur und Bürgertum* 203), and Jörg Bergmann (29).

15. The formulation is taken from Jörg Bergmann's study *Klatsch: Zur Sozialform der diskreten Indiskretion*.

16. Goethe's importance for introducing the philistine as a target of critique is highlighted by, for instance, Dieter Arendt (34). I thank Georg Stanitzek for drawing my attention to the discourse on the philistine.

17. Georg Schoppe relates the history of this negative label in his article “Philister: Eine Wortgeschichte.”

18. See Dieter Arendt's article on the philistine in the nineteenth century (34).

19. For an analysis of the relationship of Kraus to Nietzsche, see Stanley Corngold's essay “Frères semblables.”

20. The problem with the *Bildungsphilister* is the blurring of types that supposedly were neatly distinguished in Goethe's age: "Er [the *Bildungs*-philistine] wähnt selber Musensohn und Kulturmensch zu sein" (Nietzsche 165).

21. After being reprimanded for a *faux pas* in a noble gathering, the hurt Werther exclaims, "[I]ch möchte mir eine Ader öffnen, die mir die ewige Freiheit schaffte" (71).

22. This Viennese practice incidentally continued in full force after Kraus's death. An example of obtrusion can be found in a recent popularizing account of life in the cultural milieu of the "surprisingly tight-knit city of *fin de siècle* Vienna," where all its "epic figures" frequented the same set of coffeehouses within the confines of the Ringstrasse: "Want a word about a modernist building project with Loos or about twelve-tone music with Alban Berg? Try the Café Museum or perhaps the Herrenhof. Looking to pick a bone with Karl Kraus over one of his coruscating articles in *Die Fackel*? He gives permission to meet him in the Café Central in the evening, when he eats dinner" (Edmonds and Eidinow 58). That Kraus would extend this permission in the way that Edmonds and Eidinow cheerfully promise is doubtful.

23. The Viennese coffeehouse is not a bar or a pub, more paradigmatic "open regions" where mere entrance equals consent to conversations with strangers. As the obligatory presence of newspapers makes clear, one can go to the coffeehouse to read. Yet as the history of coffeehouse literary coteries shows, a history of which Kraus is part, people did also occasionally speak to each other. Perhaps we can say that the coffeehouse, insofar as it can be put to multiple uses, is an ambiguous space and hence an obvious site for a negotiation of when to converse and when not to. For a discussion of the curious space "zwischen Einsamkeit und Geselligkeit," see Andrea Portenkircher's article on the Viennese coffeehouse (34).

24. A *locus classicus* in this context is Georg Simmel's "Die Großstädte und das Geistesleben," where he depicts "die rasche Zusammendrängung wechselnder Bilder, der schroffe Abstand innerhalb dessen, was man mit einem Blick umfaßt, die Unerwartetheit sich aufdrängender Impressionen" (117). Kraus makes fun of the idea that the modern metropolis would somehow be more stressful than the demands of, for instance, sociability.

25. When Kraus speaks of the Viennese love of superfluous decoration, he aligns his critique of sociability with another front in his work: the campaign against ornament. As Adolf Loos, Kraus's ally in this struggle to separate the utilitarian and the unnecessary, formulates it, the ornament supposed to prettify an object of use is all waste: "Ornament ist vergeudete arbeitskraft [...] aber auch vergeudetes material, und beides bedeutet vergeudetes kapital" (Loos 282–83). Although "Gemütlichkeit," just like the ornament, is supposed to provide modern man with a sanctuary, the richly ornamented frame of the *Jugendstil* circumscribing "eine stille Zone" for the soul (Sternberger 17), it is the constant waste of energy on the false promise of personality that exhausts the nervous force. However, Kraus's alliance with the demands of a functional lifestyle often seems disingenuous and is perhaps based more on a



puritanical disposition than on any real insight into the requirements of modernization. In an article on Adolf Loos, "The Proper Subject," Hal Foster argues that the Viennese polemic against the ornament as aesthetic and financial waste betrays an anxiety about excremental waste (80).

26. As a modern introduction to the art of conversation makes clear: "Die Briten reden vor allem über das Wetter, weil es jeden betrifft und so unverbindlich ist" ("Die Kunst der leichten Konversation" 23).

27. And of course Kraus is in some sense right: if the barbershop conversations were not mainly tautological and instead included the exchange of sharper opinions, they would also be more risky and potentially disturb professional relationships: "In the absence of prior information about matters of mutual interest or knowledge, the more innocuous the topic, the greater the probability it can serve as a vehicle for talk" (Cavan 59). Kraus's joke to some extent consists in a misapplication of the expectations we generally have in relation to radically different genres of conversation, or the different expectations we bring to conversations as opposed to literary texts. We demand more wisdom and linguistic excitement from a book of aphorisms than from a barbershop conversation. Kraus refuses to acknowledge such differences.

28. As the romanticist ideologue Adam Müller observes, the first conversation between superficial acquaintances is often about weather, that is, it often thematizes the medium of speech as such and by so doing the possibility of conversation: "Die erste Konversation mit einem neuen Menschen hat etwas Unerfreuliches, Beschwerliches, bis man ein Gemeinshaftliches zwischeneinander gefunden: das Wetter, die Beschaffenheit der Luft wird gern benutzt, als wenn man ahndete, daß jede Verbindung, jede Freundschaft, jedes Gespräch, eine eigne kleine Welt für sich werden müsse, mit ihrer eignen Luft" (54).

29. See Friedrich Rothe's biography (109).

30. Stanley Corngold in private conversation.

31. For a discussion of the aggressively phallic imagery of literary genius in the epoch of Goethe, see David Wellbery's book on Goethe and the Romantics.


32. An interpretation looking more closely at the predicament of the assimilated Jew in Vienna promises perhaps to cover more aspects of the Black Book project. Of course, the third entry in Altenberg and Friedell's initial list, an example of sham tolerance placed immediately after the two items tracing the genealogy of anti-philistinism, at least gestures towards the prevalent mindset of Gentile society. The trick of the Black Book would be that it turns the pariah-status against the members of the habitually discriminatory community. In later articles tied to the Black Book, Kraus effectively directed a customary anti-Semitic stereotype—Jews are characterized by their capacity for mimicry and repetition, their "Anpassungsfähigkeit" (Reiter 101)—against anti-Semitic society. It is in fact this society that is unproductive, seizing every opportunity to copy statements (see "Antworten des Herausgebers: Nebenmensch").

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