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At Home in the Language: The Cases of an Exile and an Immigrant

"Hier kommt man sich vor wie franz von assisi im aquarium, lenin im prater (oder oktoberfest), eine chrysantheme im bergwerk oder eine wurst im treibhaus,"¹ a German writer noted about America, accentuating through witty hyperbole the sense of displacement that characterizes the exile. The immigrant, by contrast, is someone who will find a place, provided he adapts and uses his resources accordingly: "Man wird es ihm [dem Ankömmling] nicht leicht machen; Härten, Hürden und Hindernisse erwarten ihn. . . . Aber man gibt ihm die Chance, sie zu überwinden, und wenn er sie in seiner Weise zu ergreifen versteht, dann kann er einen Platz finden."² Not surprisingly though, both the pain of the exile and the hardships of the immigrant are usually articulated from a male perspective,³ including the invisible separation from the new environment that each—the exile as well as the immigrant—experiences through the language. The exile, however, especially if he is a highly educated male, will continue to suffer from this separation until he returns, while the immigrant, especially the working-class female, will accept and transmute it.

The following two cases are deliberately polarized to illustrate the point. They exemplify two widely divergent ways in which America has been encountered, two ways in which its language has been confronted due to the socio-sexual differences involved. In their juxtaposition, they will also illuminate an implication of the word *Muttersprache* that is usually overlooked: In addition to being one's native language, the language the child learns from the mother, it can also be the language that the mother learns through the child.⁴

The cases in point concern an exile and an immigrant, two Germans who came to this country under different conditions, who were separated by generation, class, and sex, and who responded to their new life with the resources that are part of such differences. One was a financially secure intellectual, the other a poor wife and mother; one lived in Newark and Los Angeles, the other in rural Utah; one stayed

from 1938 to 1949, the other, arriving at the turn of the century, stayed for life. One, though fluent in English, eventually left because of the language; the other, laboriously acquiring it, stayed in spite of it. Yet both, in their differing ways, contributed lastingly to American life: the scholar by introducing a new dimension to the language of cultural criticism, the mother by raising children who would work as Americans and sing—in English.

In a radio speech addressing the question "Was ist deutsch?" the social theorist and former exile Theodor W. Adorno warns his listeners not to accept the false antithesis of *Kultur* and culture: "So verblendet das nützlichkeitsgebundene Lebensgefühl sein mag, das . . . wähnt, alles sei zum besten bestellt, sofern es nur funktioniert, so verblendet ist auch der Glaube an eine Geisteskultur, die . . . die Realität der Macht und ihrer Blindheit preisgibt."⁵ Aware that his own difficult idiom and criticism of America's culture industry could be construed as yet another example of *Kulturhochmut*, Adorno gives a moving defense of his decision to leave the United States, citing homesickness and language as two distinct yet related reasons. He also has harsh words for the adherents of a certain German tradition who believe themselves superior to a culture that has produced refrigerators and cars, while their own culture, supposedly, has produced finer and better, that is, *spiritual* goods. This tradition, he concludes, tends to be anti-social and anti-human. It closes off avenues toward real progress for the sake of an a-historical ideal. At least there is energy and action in America, curbed, to be sure, by the constraints of its capitalist system:

Der energische Wille, eine freie Gesellschaft einzurichten, anstatt Freiheit ängstlich nur zu denken und selbst im Gedanken zu freiwilliger Unterordnung zu erniedrigen, büßt sein Gutes nicht darum ein, weil seiner Realisierung durchs gesellschaftliche System Schranken gesetzt sind. Hochmut gegen Amerika in Deutschland ist unbillig.⁶

In a related essay, published originally in English, Adorno enumerates some of the lessons he has learned during his eleven years of American exile: a healthy suspicion of what is considered "natural," taken for granted; a view of his own culture from the outside; a distrust of the European's deference to spirit (a reflex not just limited to the so-called educated class); an understanding of democracy not only as form but as part and parcel of daily life, and, while recognizing the weight of empirical evidence to the contrary, the experience of the feeling "that all might be possible."⁷

Still, the reason for his return to Germany is the language. Despite his fluency in English, first acquired in Oxford, then practiced in numerous American publications, he feels handicapped without a German-speaking audience, without the living context of his native language—a language for which he claims a special, elective affinity to speculative philosophy. His trust in this language is vast, at times close to the hypostasis of what he considers its peculiar qualities. German is philosophy's most eminent representative. "Das Deutsche ist nicht bloß Signifikation fixierter Bedeutungen, sondern hat von der Kraft zum

Ausdruck mehr festgehalten jedenfalls, als an den westlichen Sprachen der gewahrt, welcher nicht in ihnen aufwuchs." Although he takes his "natural" distance into account, Adorno's careful formulation cannot hide his belief about where the philosopher is at home: "Wer aber dessen versichert sich hält, daß der Philosophie, im Gegensatz zu den Einzelwissenschaften, die Darstellung wesentlich sei . . . , der wird auf das Deutsche verwiesen."⁸

However, his trust in German and its philosophic expressiveness is not simply based on the intimate knowledge of an intellectual tradition; it stems equally from a loving abandonment to the language that mediated his earliest impressions, "wodurch mein Spezifisches bis ins Innerste vermittelt war."⁹ In recognition of this fact, Adorno reflects on the intimate connection between expression and communication in one's native language as compared to what he calls "mere communication" in the foreign language, English in this case. Under the pressure of a foreign language, one easily slips into the communicative mode, wanting to make sure that the others understand and having to compromise on the linguistic stringency of the thought in turn. And Adorno's concern is not so much doing a favor to the audience as it is doing justice to the thing being expressed. Ultimately, the guarantor for intelligibility is the language, not the relation between writer and reader. Only a shared *native* language promises understanding: "In der eigenen Sprache jedoch darf man, wenn man nur die Sache so genau und kompromißlos sagt wie möglich, auch darauf hoffen, durch solche unnachgiebige Anstrengung verständlich zu werden. Für die Mitmenschen steht im Bereich der eigenen Sprache diese selbst ein."¹⁰

Throughout his career, reinforced by his years in America—where the "techniques of adaptation and integration" rule supreme—Adorno shows his own unyielding effort to say the thing (*die Sache*) as uncompromisingly as possible. He insists that the medium is the message, unruffled by whether his readers—American *or* German—will understand. Trusting in the language and his passion for saying it right, for giving concepts and insights together with their socio-historical implications the force of expression, he equates communication with compromise. This position, at odds with that of most writers, cost him many potential readers. As his early collaborator on the Princeton Radio Research Project, Paul Lazarsfeld, angrily wrote to him in 1939:

I implored you repeatedly to use more responsible language and you evidently were psychologically unable to follow my advice . . . you think because you are basically right somewhere you are right everywhere. Whereas I think that because you are right somewhere you overlook the fact that you are terrible in other respects, and the final reader will think that because you are outrageous in some part of your work . . . , you are impossible altogether.¹¹

Although Adorno did make concessions to his American readers with his widely known empirical study, *The Authoritarian Personality* (1950), he did not really change his ways. The central point of his theory of culture is that language itself is increasingly streamlined into the tool

of an instrumental reason that ultimately is interested only in perpetuating social power positions. The practical thrust of criticism, therefore, must come from the inside, must be inscribed in the very language and form of such criticism. Not many readers could, or were willing, to follow him. Adorno recognized that, yet was nonetheless hurt when an American publisher, who had read the German manuscript of his *Philosophy of New Music* (1949), found the English translation "badly organized." Insulted, Adorno concluded that in Germany, in spite of everything that had happened, he would have been spared at least *that*. Fortunately, this myopic reaction stands corrected by his view on the task faced by the returning exile vis-à-vis his language:

Der Zurückkehrende, der die Naivität zum Eigenen verloren hat, muß die innigste Beziehung zur eigenen Sprache vereinen mit unermüdlicher Wachsamkeit gegen allen Schwindel, den sie befördert; gegen den Glauben, das, was ich den metaphysischen Überschuß der deutschen Sprache nennen möchte, garantiere bereits die Wahrheit.¹²

Both in Germany and in America, Adorno was intransigently watchful of cultural and especially linguistic fraud, as works such as *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (1947) and *Jargon of Authenticity* (1964) prove. While in the United States, he wrote many of his studies in English, though not his most important ones. His major critique of American mass culture, for example, the chapter on the culture industry in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, was written in German—true to the premises of immanent criticism, in very difficult German. While the essay indicts the economic mechanisms that make "popular" culture, it equally indicts the forms (the "language") of these cultural products.

The culture industry advocates the consumption of so-called pleasure. It offers organized fun to those who are producers by day and targeted as consumers at night. When they try to escape from their mechanized work into "recreation" (to be renewed for the same work the next day), they find pre-packaged, ready-to-swallow culture that merely duplicates the work process. The industry's entertainment does not provide distraction, it pushes the after-images of already familiar associations instead. The pleasure offered does not liberate alienated, emotionally and experientially starved "individuals"; it does not give nourishment, only "the stone of the stereotype," repetition of the same. The industry's products are designed to increase consumption (hence production and profits), and to reinforce the economic exchange system psychologically. By consuming instead of actively making culture, the individual's consciousness adapts to what Marx called the commodity structure. That is, we buy a thing that is made to sell, whose value lies solely in its exchange.

The critique of the culture industry aims equally at a slick, easily digestible style. As Adorno writes in a work from the same period, *Minima Moralia*, the flow of familiar speech is tempting to both writer and reader—not only because it is easy, but because it is based on an exchange that produces profit, not knowledge:

Der vage Ausdruck erlaubt dem, der ihn vernimmt, das ungefähr sich vorzustellen, was ihm angenehm ist und was er ohnehin meint. Der

strenge erzwingt Eindeutigkeit der Auffassung, die Anstrengung des Begriffs, deren die Menschen bewußt entwöhnt werden. . . . Nur, was sie nicht erst zu verstehen brauchen, gilt ihnen für verständlich; nur das in Wahrheit Entfremdete, das vom Kommerz geprägte Wort berührt sie als vertraut.¹³

The culture industry thus trains people to accept as valid what is meant to elucidate their world and their relations to each other—language. Adorno saw in the ever more refined technology of his host country a psycho-social danger against which he as a native German could not adequately warn. America and English were not home, and for someone without a home, that is, the living context of the language, writing becomes the only place to live—which in the end, Adorno muses in *Minima Moralia*, will become flat and stale. "The writer is not even allowed to live in his writing."¹⁴

But Adorno was not free of a certain, self-indulgent pathos, despite his resistance to sentimentality. While his rigorous style has much to teach writers who are content to "communicate" by processing information, this style also exhibits the stance of the isolationist. Adorno was an exile at heart. For him, form was morality; criticism, first of all, form. When he writes that rigorous formulation imposes on readers "in advance of any content a suspension of all received opinions, and thus an isolation, that they violently resist,"¹⁵ he is right, yet terribly so. One is afraid that he attributes a power to language that it does not have. In a telling image, Adorno compares the properly written text to a spider web: tight, concentric, transparent, well-spun and firm. Here the writer sets up house.¹⁶ Here he also may spin himself in to the point of silence.

Unmoved by intellectual passion, though agitated by her sense of dignity, the immigrant and housewife Katharina Heunsaker resolves not to speak: "Better they think I am dumb than foolish."¹⁷ While we know of Theodor W. Adorno from his own words, we know of Katharina Heunsaker through the words of another. She is the main figure in a novel by Hope Williams Sykes, *The Joppa Door* (1937), based on the life story of an elderly German as told by her to Sykes.

The wife of a Russian-German farmer and the mother of nine, Katharina belongs to the large group of nameless immigrant women who contributed to their new country by laboring both on the farm and in childbirth. Their labor and love provided the matrix for future generations of Americans, in whose aspirations, accomplishments and failures the untold stories of their mothers live on. Katharina Heunsaker's story, of course, has been given language and shape.

It is the story of a working woman. "I look on my hands. Short and wide they are and coarsened from much work. . . . Sure, all my hands know is to glean in the field, to knit, to keep a house, and to cook for my husband and my children" (p. 147). It is also the story of a poor, uneducated immigrant's relationship to the new language: "I can understand this English language, and I know many words in my mind, but I am afraid to speak. I am not sure when I speak them right" (p. 147). One incident in particular confirms her fear. It leads to several years of self-imposed silence, not toward her family, but toward her

neighbors and any visitor or stranger. An English-speaking neighbor comes to borrow a "pick" from her, whereupon Katharina leads him to her pig pen. The neighbor goes away laughing, but Katharina feels humiliated and hurt: "After this when anyone comes to my door talking American, I shake my head and make no answer. Better they think I am dumb than a foolish. But a loneliness fills me. . . . In my heart it is barren" (p. 49).

As a working-class newcomer, she does not have the literacy or "high" culture of her old country to fall back on. A literate scholar like Adorno, even if he had not known English well, could always retreat to the cultural tradition that was his by class and education. He might feel alone in another culture but not lonely. However, Katharina has recourse to something else: the ingenuity that has shaped the material life of her past. During the war years when food is scarce, she gleanes the fields with her children, just as she had been taught as a child. She keeps her head high as she passes the pitying glances of her neighbors, teaching her children that poverty is not a shame. When her husband comes home with extra potatoes, more than they can use, she knows what to do. "I am turning in my bed, thinking of these potatoes, when all at once I think of my mother. I remember how times are hard in Germany and how once my mother is without starch and she grinds the potatoes and pours cold water over and the starch comes out" (p. 92).

Katharina's daily hardships and joys, her pride in her children and her sorrow over the death of her youngest, are not the stuff of which widely known novels or the documents of history are made. Her life story is that of many. Significantly, the novel is not found on many library shelves. We know little of the history that made literary culture possible in the first place. Yet Katharina Heunsaker's story, though not unique, is special and exemplary at the same time. As her children grow, she becomes increasingly aware that her lack of language not only isolates her from her larger environment, but from her family as well:

My familié is growing up, and, as I sit in my chair knitting, a desolate feeling is in my heart. Around the table they are gathered; their heads bent low over their books. Herr Heunsaker sits with them. They show him the things they read. He laughs. He argues. He is one of them. Sure, he is a smart man. He has the good mind. The children have the good heads. So much they all study. In the lamplight their faces are quiet with thoughts that I know not. Sure, I am on the outside, and I can do nothing about it. (p. 146)

Her isolation is that of the first-generation, female immigrant; it stems from the traditional, reclusive role of the mother in patriarchal society. Once the mothering is completed, women like Katharina felt (and feel) useless and lonely. When her last child, Peter, enters school, Katharina decides to learn to read English with him. She senses that this is her last chance to learn with someone she loves. Her husband objects, finding that her German Bible and the German magazine he orders for her each year suffice for her literacy. But, although used to deferring to her husband, she persists. "'I learn with Peter,' I say. I cannot tell him I

have to learn English. Sure, I cannot stay outside my familié. Somehow I have to stay with them" (p. 148).

Katharina learns to read—slowly, with difficulty. Her sense of self, inseparable from her sense of family, grows. While the children are in school and her husband away, she does her work and tries to read their books. The written words are a discovery, a connecting link. "Such happiness is in me when I find a word that I know. Soon I shall be reading these books that my husband and children read" (p. 148). Her energies are tied to the family. When her children leave, she thinks of them constantly, just as she constantly used to care and work for them. In contrast to the man and exile Adorno, who cites homesickness as the subjective reason for his return—the objective being language—Katharina will remain in the new country. In contrast to him, she does not have a choice: neither a position to return to, nor, as Adorno says of himself, a childhood to recuperate. For her, homesickness means being homesick for her children.

But in a curious way the two homesicknesses converge. Both, the one prompted by childhood and the one prompted by children, are intimately tied to a language, an "old" and a "new" one, German and English. Each is a *Muttersprache*. We could put it this way: the child *inside the man*, the exile Adorno, speaks German; the children *outside the woman*, the immigrant Katharina, speak English. The exile returns; the immigrant stays.

Adorno has the language of childhood to return to, a language he was taught in an economically secure, cultivated environment. He learns through this language not only his intellectual tradition, he also learns to criticize it. His inheritance, experienced both cerebrally and emotionally, is large enough to feed his passions, to enrich his host culture, and to draw him home. It is also strong enough to support a professorial position here and abroad. Katharina has no such inheritance, but she generates one. She will speak through her children. Her children are her home, thus the language they speak is a native tongue to her. In her position, language is not an endowment or a weapon (or even a trap), it is a means to stay close to others and survive. One of her daughters becomes a singer. As Katharina listens, she says through the voice of her chronicler: "Near taking my heart out of me, she does. So sweet. So high. . . . Like I could never sing, she sings. In her I live in song" (p. 151). It is perhaps poignant to note that the one thing Adorno loved more than his language was music.

The juxtaposition of these two—the exile and the immigrant—may appear exaggerated because of the two extremes involved, though neither Adorno nor Katharina are constructs but historical figures. To be sure, the spectrum of their respective groups extends from the male scholar who became an immigrant (witness Erich Fromm or Herbert Marcuse) to the female exile who did not stay (for example, Elisabeth Bergner and Käthe Kollwitz). Yet to illuminate an idea such as the language of home, or *Muttersprache*, we must drive our thoughts against the poles of dialectics and perceive the idea within a new constellation. Or, as Adorno understood from a friend who never reached America,

Walter Benjamin, "jene Elemente, deren Auslösung aus den Phänomenen Aufgabe des Begriffes ist, [liegen] in den Extremen am genauesten zutage. Als Gestaltung des Zusammenhanges, in dem das Einmalig-Extreme mit seinesgleichen steht, ist die Idee umschrieben."¹⁸

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Notes

¹ Bertolt Brecht, *Arbeitsjournal 1938-1955* (Berlin und Weimar, 1977), p. 243.

² Carl Zuckmayer, "Amerika ist anders," in Alfred Gong, ed., *Interview mit Amerika* (München: Nymphenburger Verlagshandlung, 1962), p. 386.

³ While this tendency is evident especially in German-American literature, I do not wish to overlook important immigrant novels such as Willa Cather's *My Antonia* or Mela Meissner Lindsay's *Shukar Balan: The White Lamb*.

⁴ My play on the word *Muttersprache* carries a feminist intention, as the essay demonstrates. Whereas the traditional definition refers to the native language of the child, the new point to be made is that an immigrant woman may well learn English solely because she is a mother. To stay in touch with her children's development, she may learn to speak a language other than her native language, thus showing that *Muttersprache* may also be understood as the language the mother learns from (or for) her children. The traditional definition thus is enlarged from being the language originally spoken by the mother to include the language newly learned by her for the sake of those whom she loves most.

⁵ Theodor W. Adorno, "Auf die Frage: 'Was ist deutsch?'" in Theodor W. Adorno, *Stichworte. Kritische Modelle 2* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1969), p. 108.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Theodor W. Adorno, "Scientific Experiences of a European Scholar in America," in *Perspectives in American History*, vol. 2 (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1968).

⁸ Adorno, "Auf die Frage: 'Was ist deutsch?'" p. 111.

⁹ Ibid., p. 107.

¹⁰ Ibid., p. 111.

¹¹ Quoted in Martin Jay, *The Dialectical Imagination. A History of the Frankfurt School and the Institute of Social Research, 1923-1950* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1973), p. 223.

¹² Adorno, "Auf die Frage: 'Was ist deutsch?'" p. 111.

¹³ Theodor Adorno, *Minima Moralia. Reflexionen aus dem beschädigten Leben* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1980), p. 112.

¹⁴ Ibid., p. 96.

¹⁵ Ibid., p. 112.

¹⁶ Ibid., p. 95.

¹⁷ Hope Williams Sykes, *The Joppa Door* (New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1937), excerpts reprinted in Maxine Schwartz Seller, *Immigrant Women* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1981), p. 147. Hereafter cited in text.

¹⁸ Walter Benjamin, *Ursprung des deutschen Trauerspiels* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1978), p. 17.