

Laquer: Prelude CL0026-1

The Genius of Language



FIFTEEN WRITERS REFLECT ON
THEIR MOTHER TONGUES

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LUC SANTE

every decision I make in the screen language I employ in order to pass unmolested in the land where I have lived for most of my life without ever shedding my internal foreignness. French is my secret identity, inaccessible to my friends. Sometimes I feel as though I have it all to myself.

GERMAN

Prelude

Thomas Laqueur

I seem to have had a peculiar loyalty to the German language from about as early as a child can articulate views. I was told by my parents that when they urged me as a three-year-old to learn Turkish, so that I might communicate more effectively with my playmates in Istanbul, where they had come in their flight from Hitler, I would have nothing of it. Let them learn German, I supposedly said; Turkish "ist eine hässliche Sprache." My feelings about speaking German, and more generally about being European, have become stronger as what few real connections I had ever had to the language, to Germany, or to Europe have all but disappeared.

German was my mother tongue. I mean this partly in the usual sense—my first language was German. But it is also true that I spoke it almost entirely with my mother, my grandmother and their women friends. Only certain words and phrases are spoken by men or to men in my linguistic fantasy life. German is almost entirely a self-contained family language for me, but it is also the language of a world—real, remembered, and misremembered—that my parents lost, a world that now exists almost entirely in my imagination, but which I maintain as a way of mourning them and theirs.

I spoke only German until we left Turkey in November 1949. A stop in London with relatives was still all German, as were a brief few weeks in New York. My mother's brother—my Onkel Otto—and his wife lived in Manhattan near Fort Tryon Park, in the middle of a German-Jewish ghetto. Later, when we had settled in West Virginia, my mother visited them periodically and came back complaining about how insular their world was. I think I understand what she meant: one could not forget that one was living in exile there, amidst one's countrymen on the cliffs above the Hudson. In contrast, my family's relationship to its native language could not have been more cut off from its roots than ours was in the coal villages and towns where I grew up. I do not think my parents thought of themselves as living in a diaspora because they had no one with whom to share their loss.

After New York, we lived for a few months in my father's sister's boarding house near the University of Texas. She specialized in housing foreign students. My Tante Eli and her husband had gone to Yugoslavia when Hitler came to power. When Hitler attacked Belgrade, they made their way south from Dubrovnik and Mosta to Albania, in the hope of being captured by the possibly benign Italians instead of by the certainly murderous Germans. They succeeded, and spent the war until 1942 in a Cambrian internment camp; then they were liberated by the British Eighth Army and headed north with it as translators. By the time they had to earn a living in Texas, they had Italian and Yugoslav and colloquial English in addition to very good school French—and Latin, in case an ancient Roman turned up. This was my first sustained exposure to English.

I remember being grumpy about learning a new language while in Austin. I do not remember saying what my parents

claimed were my first words in my new language: "me no eat fruit." I find this unlikely, given that I have no memory of ever not liking any fruit, but still, this is family lore.

After three months of crowded living, my mother, paternal grandmother, younger brother and I joined my father in a hollow near Montgomery, West Virginia, where he had secured a job as a pathologist in a private coal-field hospital. A friend from Istanbul, also a pathologist, had found a job near there the year before, through a Jewish relief agency. I have no memory of speaking English during our months in that hollow, just up from a railroad track. I think my mother's English was not very good, so we didn't see much of the neighbors. Tante Biba and Onkel Peter, the friends from Istanbul, lived twenty or thirty miles away, and with them I of course spoke German. Then on to Bluefield, the "air-conditioned city," where coal poured in from the southern West Virginia bituminous coal-fields to one of the Norfolk and Western Railroad's biggest train yards. It was here that I started to learn English seriously. I remember no hostility this time, although I do remember being teased about my German accent for many years to come. Unlike my brother, who is three years younger than I am, I never acquired the mountain accent, and I still sound foreign in those parts.

It was in Bluefield that I discovered German was a language that people other than my parents and a few friends actually spoke. It was not, as I had unselfconsciously assumed, a family code. This revelation came as follows: I was having a screaming fight in German with my brother, in front of the Pen Mar Grocery, a half-block from our house on North Street; he was three and I six. The issue was how much of a two-barrel popsicle I was going to share with him. A lady came up to us and said, in Ger-

man, that she would give us a nickel so that each of us could have a treat of our own. I do not remember buying a second popsicle, but I do remember being very excited at finding someone else of our linguistic species. I rushed home with the big news.

Frau Bressler, as she was called, had asked where we lived; I had told her. She visited. Frau Bressler had married Herr Bressler, who was many years her senior, after a long courtship. He had some sort of a disease that had caused his hands to shrivel into reddish, claw-like appendages, and he worked repairing small electrical appliances and meters. The Bresslers were poor; she was a southern German Catholic. (This I deduced on a visit last summer, from books about a papal visit to Bavaria I saw on the coffee table of her house.) Frau Bressler became one of my mother's close friends despite their very different circumstances. She also became our regular—indeed only—babysitter when my parents were away for more than an evening.

There was a third German in Bluefield, Frau Snelling, who had married—after the war, I assume—an alcoholic West Virginia forester. I associate her, however, not with making German a more public language for me, but rather with my first noteworthy failure in my efforts to be a good little German boy. The traumatic moment came when her mother, Frau Wöppekind, visited from Germany. I did, on meeting her, remember to address her with the formal *Sie*, as I had been told to do. I did not, however, remember to bow. "Mach eine Verbeugung," said my mother, not pleased with my lapse. I do not recall what Frau Wöppekind said, but I do remember that she seemed manifestly taken aback by "der Bube's" ill manners.

So now there were three strangers who spoke German in my world. I knew they were strangers because I addressed

them as Frau or Herr instead of Onkel or Tante, which is what I called almost all other German-speaking adults. The fact that, following local custom, I called American adults who were close friends by their first names made our linguistic isolation palpable. Eddie and Janie and C.O. and Hazel were simply from another universe, where other laws pertained. I was in my late twenties before I could comfortably address grown-up Europeans by their first names, and even then it was not easy. The crisis came when I got a job at Berkeley and was placed on a committee with two older colleagues: Paul Alexander, a saintly, extravagantly learned Byzantinist who was on the fringe of my family circle (the best friend of a cousin by marriage), and Nicholas Riasanovsky, a famous Russian historian. We were to give out money for graduate research projects. I could not call Alexander "Onkel Paul," as I might otherwise have done; "Onkel Nick" was of course out of the question. And I could not address colleagues as "Professor." So "Paul" and "Nick" it was, but not without a mental gulp. I still find this blurring of boundaries difficult.

There were two exceptions to this first-name rule: my mother's closest friends from Istanbul. Both were known by their nicknames. One, still alive, is "Dicke" or "die Dicke" ("the fat one"), who was supposedly once fat; the other was "Schweinchen" ("piglet"), whose nickname is a corruption of her maiden name, Schwerine. Schweinchen was sometimes Tante Paula; Dicke was always Dicke.

German, in other words, constituted a world that I knew intimately but also not at all. I had, growing up, only the vague sense that people outside our family circle actually lived and functioned in our private language. Although I spoke it fluently,

I got things having to do with the public/private distinction seriously wrong. The *du/Sie* question was never easy. In our family, of course, I used the familiar; likewise with family friends. I could use *Sie*, but it did not come naturally. I had to be coached and reminded, a formula for screwing up, a sign not so much of bad character but cultural cluelessness. Dicke's husband, Wiegand, was said to be *vornehm* ("refined," "high class"). I do not know on what this view was based, but when he visited it was said to be important that I, age seven, not *dutzt* him. I think I succeeded. But there were embarrassing lapses. When I was eleven or twelve, we visited Boston and made a pilgrimage to the butcher shop of Herr Thyssen, who was my parents' long-distance purveyor of German food. It came every few weeks to Beckley and Bluefield, packed on dry ice, via Greyhound bus: *Kaiserjagdwurst*, *Leberwurst*, *Blutwurst*, and other wursts I can only say and not spell; *stinkerkäse* (my name for Limburger cheese); every kind of dark bread. At Herr Thyssen's shop, introductions were made and I lapsed into *du*; he was clearly taken aback; my mother was appalled. There was nothing to do but try to disappear.

The same problem came up in regard to tone of voice and distance from one's interlocutor. I seemed to have always been off. "Mami" Putschar, the German-speaking wife of a Hungarian pathologist in Charleston whom we visited occasionally, always said to me that I sounded like a *Feldwebel*. Frankly I did not know what this was (it is a sergeant), because it is not the sort of word that comes up in family life; I did not play soldiers with anyone who knew the language. But it was clear that this was not a good way to sound. In college, where—in the persons of émigré professors—I met my first "stranger Germans," I knew that I

was somehow standing too close to them when I spoke. It took time to get the right range.

My family's and my German was entirely cut off from Germany and from everything that had happened to the language since the 1930s. (The one exception was a pilgrimage to New York when I was in high school, to see the Brucke theater do Schiller's *Don Carlos*. This was the first and I think only German play my parents saw after the mid-1930s.) There were lots of German speakers in my life, but none had had any connections with the real sources of the language for decades. They were an odd assortment of émigrés, some native speakers, others part of the German cultural penumbra. In Beckley, where we had moved in 1956, there was only a Ukrainian orthodox couple who spoke German. He had studied medicine in Germany after escaping from the east; she was a self-consciously romantic sort who spoke a hyperbolic, soulful, Russian-accented version of my mother tongue. During the summers there were also my uncles and aunts, who came to visit our cottage by a lake in southwestern Virginia; there were my mother's buddies from Istanbul, and some even from her late twenties and early thirties in Germany; there was, early on, my grandmother's sister-in-law, who spoke a Polish-accented German; there were several Hungarians, including a voice teacher from Juilliard who had the deepest voice of anyone I knew; there was an Austrian nurse who had somehow linked up with a West Virginia dermatologist named Locksley, who spouted Shakespeare at the slightest provocation. And there were Max and his wife, who owned a bakery in the small town of Pulaski, Virginia, near our lake; both had tattoos on their arms from Auschwitz. Why they wanted to speak German with my mother is unclear. I did not wonder about it at the time. They

also spoke Yiddish with my Onkel Otto when he visited. In any case, this was an eccentric linguistic universe.

I dwell on all of these childhood memories because German is for me the language of memory and loss, a linguistic *Prelude*. My German is, first of all, a connection with a pre-Oedipal me. I have never made love in German; I know no slang words for matters sexual, and few slang words of any sort. I would not know what it would mean to feel sexual in German. The gigantic impact of linguistic adolescence—when one comes to own one's language as a separate person, when it becomes something belonging to one's generation—is lost on me. My German is frozen, amber-like, not only in pre-war history but in childhood; with some few exceptions, it is emotionally fixed. The word for caraway seed, *kümmel*, is an adjective for a kind of bread on which one eats corned beef or chopped liver, i.e. rye bread; for me it describes a man who terrified me as a small child, *der küm-mel Mann*, a beggar with a pox-marked face who stood outside our Istanbul apartment. Too little has happened to me in German to make the regular public uses of words mean what they should.

Powerful German words generally feel like they come from my mother; phrases, dicta, from my dad. *Sanft*—"soft" or "gentle"—I associate with her, although the phrase in which it comes back to me in the first instance is not hers. In my mind's ear it is from Schiller's "Ode to Joy"—... *Wo dein sanfter Flügel weilt* ("where your gentle wing may come to rest"). I think of the word in connection with my birthdays. On the evening of September 6th, from as early as I can remember until I was ten or so, my father and I would lie on a couch, I enfolded in his arms, and listen to a recording of Beethoven's Ninth. For the first years in West Virginia, it was the old 78s of the Furtwängler recording that would

clack-clack-clack down until the whole stack had to be turned. Sometime around second grade, we switched to the Toscanini "long play" version that, miraculously, played for twenty-five minutes without a clack and went by, in its wild tempos, considerably faster than Furtwängler's more Germanic version. The ritual, however, did not change with conductors: lights were dimmed; during *die Neunte* there would be no talking or interruptions by other family members; we were alone. I wonder how, before record-players, Germans of my parents' class and generation learned their reverence for *die Neunte* ("the Ninth")—which, without further modification, can only mean Beethoven's. In German, or at least my parents' German, one puts just a little bit more emphasis on the article *die* and lingers just an instant on the noun *Neunte* than one would in a phrase like "the ninth symphony of Schubert" or "the ninth symphony of Mahler." I know that this work still has considerable cultural clout in Germany, or at least did until recently; the great national work of the nineteenth century, it was what Bernstein conducted at the fallen Berlin Wall. But I have no sense whether men and women of my generation would say the words like my parents did and feel what I learned to feel. Like so much German, I know these two words of the language almost entirely in isolation from all but friends and family.

Geboren—the adjective "born"—is a mother word. She, and only she, and no one since she died, would address me on my birthday with the redundant silliness of *mein einziger Erstgeborener* ("my only firstborn"). The suffix *-lein* that produces the diminutive in German is also my mother's: my father might occasionally have addressed me as Thomaslein—I do not remember—but my mother always did. Tommy, which is what they called me

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grandfather lived for music, which they played four hands. They had heard Brahms conduct, early in their lives together, as well as many of the other great German conductors of the nineteenth century. (I know all this from their concert diary, which I inherited when my father died.) My grandmother could do all sorts of needlework. But she could not—or at least did not, in anyone's memory—so much as boil an egg. She stayed in Germany until December 1939 on the grounds that she did not want to leave her Bechstein grand piano. In America, she dressed and acted like a lady of a distant century, seemingly unaware that the world around her had changed. (She did read about the deaths of her contemporaries in the *Aufbau*, and remained alert until the ninety-fifth of her one hundred years.) The first of my fantasy Germanies is hers. The words I associate with her are *Es geht rapide bergab*—"things are going rapidly downhill"—something she said about herself from when she was in her late seventies to when she went gaga in her late nineties.

With my mother I spoke German exclusively until she died; I have not spoken it regularly since 1992. With my father I spoke only English, the grown-up language, the language in which I talked of science and medicine and politics. He did, in fact, speak English much better than my mother, but it was only much later, when I heard him on a Dictaphone machine summarizing an autopsy, that I realized how heavily accented his English was, almost paradoxically so.

There were, as I said, exceptions to this linguistic segregation. The few bits of really grown-up German I know, and the minimal sense I have of the rhythms of the language, are from sayings or maxims, *Sprichwörter*; that come from my father. (I wish I could rattle off those wonderful torrents of dependent clauses

in West Virginia, has always sounded silly to me; Tom is just a name; Thomaslein is very sweet. *Traurig* ("sorrowful") is a mother word, although I think my mother was in fact far happier than my father. She could not keep a tune for more than two measures but loved to sing a song called "Die Lorelei," the lyrics of which were by her favorite poet, Heinrich Heine. I have her copy of his complete poems that she kept on her night table and read most days of her life.

*Ich weiß nicht, was soll es bedeuten,
Daß ich so traurig bin,
Ein Märchen aus uralten Zeiten,
Das kommt mir nicht aus dem Sinn.*

"I do not know what it means, that I am so sorrowful; I cannot get out of my head a tale of the most ancient of times." This is roughly how I feel about things German in general: a "Märchen" fairy-tale built of projections and fantasies and memories that I cannot erase and that leave me melancholy.

In my family, we spoke German at the dinner table until I left for college because my grandmother claimed that she neither spoke nor understood English. This was clearly false—she read English papers and watched English TV—but feigning ignorance allowed her to maintain the fiction of otherworldly incompetence that she seems to have cultivated all her life and that kept her entirely out of public view. She did not venture outside family circles during her twenty-three years in America. My grandmother was born in 1873, in the waning of the Biedermeier era, the youngest daughter of six children. She went to school long enough to learn French; she played piano well; she and my

and finish up with the verb, as grown-up German speakers do.) Likewise curses come through him. *Mit der Dummheit kämifen Götter selbst vergebens* ("With stupidity the gods themselves fight in vain") was a big one, as was Kant's categorical imperative, which was recited with a special tone of reverence. I loved its sounds and the fact that there was only one such rule, even if it took a while to understand what it meant: *handle nur nach derjenigen Maxime, durch die du zugleich wollen kannst, daß sie ein allgemeines Gesetz werde* ("act only on that maxim by which you can at the same time will that it should become a universal law," which I understood in the still grander form, "act as if the maxim of your action were to become through your will a universal law of nature").

Donnerwetter ("thunder weather") was the prelude to an explosion of my father's anger and was often followed by *noch ein mal* ("once again"). This malediction was frequently associated with the threat that if we continued to misbehave my mother would call my father, who would then say *ein nachtwort*—literally, a "word of power," but really more like the definitive warning of the super-ego. Since one of the other big sayings in my family was *Quod licet Jovi, non licet bovi* (Latin sayings had the authority of German ones), which meant "What is allowed to Jupiter is not allowed to the ox," the "thunder weather / words of power" combo carried a certain mythological terror. The Latin saying itself was used mostly to explain why my reading of the categorical imperative was mistaken in holding that the maxim for some action of my father's included him. So, if it was okay for him to be late when we all knew that lateness was indefensible as a universal principle, the old *Jovi* exception was adduced. I thought that this was fudging on the universality principle but got nowhere with this line of argument.

The only curses I know are my father's, and they are ridiculously quaint. He would reproach my mother with *Was glaubst du das ich bin, ein Dukatenscheisser* ("What do you think I am? Someone who shits ducats?") every month as he was paying the bills. He was terribly anxious about money, having no one to back him up if he failed, but he must have known full well that his wife was frugal and extremely efficient at household management. *Lech mich am arse* (kiss my ass) was another, always attributed to Schiller's Götz von Berlichsen. I have never used any of these phrases in public because I have no idea whether they mean anything in the outside world.

Two words belong to both parents and have universal resonance for me: *Unsinn* and *vernünftig*. Again, I do not know whether other German-speakers my age feel this way about them; for all I know, they resonate as they do for me only in my private language. *Unsinn* ("nonsense," "absurdity") had many applications and was often used as an expletive. But it is one of the few words from childhood that carried over into adolescence. *Mache keinen Unsinn* ("Don't do anything stupid") was the standard caution before my going out on a date. It did not apply to my driving, which was impeccable, but to "parking" on one of the hundreds of miles of strip mine roads around where we lived and necking the evening away. (There was nothing else to do in Beckley, but this nonsense had other things to recommend it.) *Unsinn* and *sei vernünftig* ("act reasonably") are the only German words that have any personal association with sex for me. They have other meanings, of course. Being *vernünftig* meant being governed by reason in all matters and applied to life generally, but in the absence of any other post-pubescent words, they still have a peculiar ring of sexual danger.

Although, as I said, I spoke English with my father, my sense

of German as a language of loss comes through him. I felt strongly as I was growing up that he simply did not get what it meant to live in another culture. My mother, whose English was wildly ungrammatical and full of Germanic neologisms, got on well with the locals. She made a joke of misunderstanding, as when on her citizenship examination she answered that *ja*, *ja*, she "had been and was still a member of the Communist Party." She had been told by friends that if she did not understand a question—she often missed what people said if they spoke quickly or with especially pronounced mountain accents—she should simply answer "yes." Beckley and Bluefield abounded with Toni Laqueur malapropisms. But she fit in. My father was clueless. He somehow translated my high school graduation as *Abitur*, an occasion for much ceremony and for a punch bowl of Champagne and liquor-soaked fruit. This did not go over well with my high school friends. He tried at my parents' New Year's Eve parties to have everyone wear tuxedos and listen to Beethoven's Ninth. This also did not find wide acceptance.

And he seemed to have no sense of what his own past meant after Hitler. We had a recording of German university student drinking songs that we played often. He knew all of them; I even knew them. He had a picture of himself and his university fraternity brothers wearing their uniforms and displaying sabers. He had a small dueling scar above his hair line. None of this struck him as odd or ironic. Perhaps this is just an instance of the strategy my parents shared, attempting to mitigate the pain of having lost their homeland by neither assimilating nor living in a diaspora community, among others who had been displaced. They lived as much as they could in a bubble, eating food and speaking a language and listening to music that no one around

them appreciated or understood. My German has inherited something of their cultural atarachy.

I do not want to suggest that I speak a childish German, or that I cannot get by doing adult things in the language. But whenever I do something grown-up in German, I am self-conscious about doing it; I am aware of the temporal chasm between now and then ("then" being the lives of my parents and my own childhood). My father never went back to Germany; my mother went back once, in 1955, to visit an old friend who had returned. She lucked upon Central Casting's nightmare of a taxi driver, who went on about all the good things the Nazis had done and how Americans misunderstood *die Hitlerzeit*. Never again. So both of them remained passionately German, but without any real contact with Germany. They drank only German wines. They staged an elaborate German Christmas complete with candles on the tree (until neighbors told them that American trees, cut a month in advance, would go up in flames). They listened almost exclusively to German music—*Parsifal* was on for Easter. They thought that the French were wrong to occupy the Rhineland in 1920, and wrongheaded about much else besides. So I lived a childhood produced by the children of nineteenth-century Jews, who imagined the land of Goethe and Schiller with little of its reality or recent history.

I went to Germany for the first time in 1992, when I was forty-seven. I was there as a tourist and spoke of little but rooms, food, and schedules. The first time I actually said anything in German that was neither about travel nor about the sorts of things one talks about in families—that is, the first time I felt that German was for me a public language—was in the summer of 1995 at a conference in Frankfurt. I asked a question in Ger-

man of a journalist; he understood and answered; I asked a follow-up. I translated in whispers the lectures of colleagues for my wife, and found that I was good at it. On subsequent trips I have given my own lectures in German, sometimes at the request of my hosts but sometimes just because I wanted very much to reclaim the language for my parents.

I love being in Germany among my friends; it is a return to a place and a language and a cultural tradition that my parents never ceased to mourn. The people I know there are to a person cultivated, intelligent, liberal and welcoming. But I have no illusions about the phantasmic—arguably delusional—attachment I have to place and language. In 1995, my wife and I visited my mother's hometown, Holzminden an der Weser, a small city of about 30,000 not far from Hanover. It is in what was the heartland of Nazi electoral strength. My grandparents' house looked exactly as it did in pictures, almost entirely unchanged. The river Weser ran swiftly less than a hundred meters from the little meadow where my grandfather, a grain merchant, kept a few cows and chickens.

I knocked on the door of the house, and an old woman appeared at the window. I asked her if she had lived here for a long time. Yes, she had always lived there. Well, I said, my grandparents had once lived there. No, not possible, she said before she relented: who were they? Their name was Weinberg. "*Ach ja, die Juden. Feine leute.*" ("Ah yes, the Jews. Fine people.") Her father, a carpenter, had bought the place from my grandfather in the Hitlerzeit. This must have been in the early 1940s, just before he was deported to Theresienstadt and on to Auschwitz. She shared with me what she knew about where one swam in the Weser (swimming was my mother's great love, and

I had heard a lot about the river's quick currents and what one had to do to navigate it). She told me the location of the Catholic girls' *gymnasium* that my mother had attended. I then asked her whether my wife might take a picture of me in the window in which she was sitting. (I have a picture of the house with my maternal great-grandparents in the top window, my grandparents in the middle window, and my mother and her siblings in the window where my interlocutor was sitting.) Suddenly she ceased to understand my German. The conversation was over; I could reclaim only so much.