6-2017

The Space of Alterity: Language and National Identity in Theodor Adorno and W.G. Sebald

Agata Szczodrak

The Graduate Center, City University of New York

How does access to this work benefit you? Let us know!

Follow this and additional works at: https://academicworks.cuny.edu/gc_etds

Part of the Comparative Literature Commons, German Linguistics Commons, and the Philosophy of Language Commons

Recommended Citation

https://academicworks.cuny.edu/gc_etds/2118

This Dissertation is brought to you by CUNY Academic Works. It has been accepted for inclusion in All Dissertations, Theses, and Capstone Projects by an authorized administrator of CUNY Academic Works. For more information, please contact deposit@gc.cuny.edu.
THE SPACE OF ALTERITY: LANGUAGE AND NATIONAL IDENTITY IN THEODOR ADORNO AND W.G. SEBALD

by

AGATA SZCZODRAK

A dissertation submitted to the Graduate Faculty in Comparative Literature in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy, The City University of New York

2017
©2017

AGATA SZCZODRAK

All Rights Reserved
The Space of Alterity: Language and National Identity in Theodor Adorno and W.G. Sebald

by

Agata Szczodrak

This manuscript has been read and accepted for the Graduate Faculty in Comparative Literature in satisfaction of the dissertation requirement for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy.

Date

RICHARD WOLIN

Chair of Examining Committee

Date

GIANCARLO LOMBARDI

Executive Officer

Supervisory Committee:

Professor Richard Wolin

Professor Vincent Crapanzano

Professor Caroline Rupprecht

THE CITY UNIVERSITY OF NEW YORK
The German Romantic monolingual paradigm of national identity emerged in the late eighteenth century to establish a mother tongue as a national backbone. This paradigm portrayed multilingualism as destabilizing, impoverishing, and unsuitable for aesthetics. Radicalized by the Nazis and overlooked in postwar debates over German national identity, this paradigm persists in contemporary societies and continues to conceal, belittle, and discredit multilingualism. To oppose that paradigm, this dissertation unveils the enriching and nourishing qualities of foreign languages, presents translingualism as a viable alternative to monolingualism, and reveals how translingual literature creates transnational connectedness. The limitations of the paradigm are traced from the late eighteenth century to contemporary German literature to show how the German Romantics sacralized the concept of the mother tongue through religious and ethical qualities, and to expose how the exaltation of linguistic purity spreads hostility to foreign languages and fuels violence. Theodor Adorno and W.G. Sebald secularize the notion of the mother tongue and rehabilitate multilingualism. Adorno advocates a philosophical and an aesthetic framework with one language open to foreign expressions, whereas Sebald promotes translingual literature that mixes languages to create transnational bridges. This exploration of foreign tongues in Adorno and Sebald adds an ideological and an aesthetic dimension to the scholarship on their multilingualism and refutes the invocations of linguistic purity.
Acknowledgements

This dissertation would not have been possible without the guidance and support from several individuals. I am immensely grateful to my advisor, Richard Wolin, for his mentorship, criticism, patience, and encouragement. Throughout years, he has directed me to invaluable sources and has patiently and thoroughly evaluated numerous papers and drafts of this project. He gave me priceless suggestions, kept encouraging me to trust my intuition, and always took the time to respond to my questions and concerns with courtesy and professionalism.

It has been an honor to work with my reader, Vincent Crapanzano. I thank him for his judicious feedback on my project, for directing me to the field of language ideology, and for his unwavering support and generosity with his time. I would like to thank my other reader, Caroline Rupprecht, for serving on my committee and critiquing my work. I am also grateful to Charity Scribner for her feedback on my research. I thank my department for the Doctoral Student Research Grant, and both Deutsches Literaturarchiv in Marbach and Akademie der Künste in Berlin for access to their archival materials.

I would like to thank my parents, siblings, and in-laws for their encouragement. I would not have completed this dissertation without my husband. As a token of gratitude for his unswerving support, love, patience, and humor, I dedicate this dissertation to him.
# Table of Contents

1. Introduction .................................................................................................................. 1
2. Chapter 1: The “Sacred” Mother Tongue: Herder and Fichte on Language, Ethics, and Religion .................................................................................................................. 17
3. Chapter 2: Adorno on Linguistic Purity and the Manufacturing of Homogeneity ........ 47
   Excursus 1: Adorno on Religious Language in Fascist Propaganda ................................. 81
   Excursus 2: Martin Luther and Religious Stigmatization ................................................. 92
5. Chapter 4: Spectral Identities and Translingual Subjects in W.G. Sebald’s *Austerlitz* .. 124
6. Chapter 5: Panta Rhei: Translingual Aesthetics in W.G. Sebald’s *Austerlitz* ............... 167
7. Conclusion ..................................................................................................................... 211
8. Works Cited .................................................................................................................... 221
List of Figures

Fig. 1. *Pegida Banners in Dresden on January 12, 2015.* 7

Fig. 2. *Pegida Demonstration in Dresden on January 25, 2015.* 91
Introduction

Nationalism today is at once both obsolete and up-to-date.

Theodor Adorno, “The Meaning of Working Through the Past”

Statement of the Dissertation Problem

Contemporary societies invoke the late eighteenth century German Romantic monolingual paradigm of national identity. This paradigm presents a mother tongue as a quasi-sacred foundation of national identity and rejects multilingualism as politically destabilizing, culturally impoverishing, and unsuitable for aesthetics. Although radicalized by the Nazis, this paradigm has been neglected in postwar debates over national identity in Germany. As a result, the paradigm continues to conceal, discredit, and misrepresent the value of multilingualism, thereby making our understanding of multilingual cultures inadequate.

This dissertation explores how Theodor Adorno and W.G. Sebald, eminent German writers of the twentieth century, oppose the German Romantic monolingual model of national identity. This study shows how they use multilingualism to secularize the notion of the mother tongue sacralized by the German Romantics. The scholarship on Adorno and Sebald has examined their multilingual texts biographically and psychoanalytically, but the relevance of multilingualism to national identity in Adorno and Sebald remains unexplored.

This scholarly gap is paradoxical because both writers often contributed to discussions over national identity in postwar Germany. Adorno, a Holocaust survivor who returned to Germany after World War II, sought to debunk Nazi linguistic myths and to foster openness

---

1 In this dissertation, multilingualism is an umbrella term for the use of Fremdwörter (foreign derivations or borrowings), speaking foreign languages, and translingualism (the mixing of tongues). Fremdwörter are non-Germanic words that have partially assimilated to German but remain recognizable to native speakers as foreign (Yildiz 68). This study employs the term das Fremdwort because the expression “a foreign word” can designate a derivation, a loanword (das Lehnwort), or code switching (inserting a word from another language). A loanword is a borrowing that has fully integrated into German and no longer sounds foreign to native speakers (78).
toward foreign languages. His famous statement that Auschwitz had rendered all subsequent writing of poetry barbaric expressed his belief that German required decontamination and revitalization. Sebald, a son of a Nazi soldier, frequently depicted the implications of the Holocaust for postwar generations, portrayed the Nazi linguistic legacy as haunting German, and strove to invigorate German with his literary translingualism that mixes tongues. This dissertation fills the scholarly gap and argues that Adorno and Sebald defy the German Romantic monolingual paradigm of national identity. Adorno endorses a philosophical and an aesthetic framework with one mother tongue open to foreign languages. Sebald, by contrast, promotes translingual literature that mixes tongues to create transnational linguistic and literary bridges.

Background

The German Romantic monolingual paradigm of national identity glorifies language as a quasi-sacred foundation of a nation, expresses hostility toward multilingualism, and originates in Johann Gottfried Herder. Herder celebrates language as a fundament of a nation (Volk) and as the element that demarcates the nation’s linguistic, cultural, and political territory.\(^2\) He describes language as a national treasure and an archive that stores the nation’s history, customs, morals, and culture.\(^3\) For Herder, a nation is linguistically and culturally uniform. He advocates linguistic homogeneity as mandatory to ensure the nation’s stability and strength. Herder argues for one national character and rejects multilingual and multicultural nations by describing them as “fragile machines” that are “wholly devoid of inner life” and doomed to collapse.\(^4\) In this way, Herder delegitimizes multilingualism within the nation.

\(^2\) For a detailed discussion of Herder’s concept of a nation, see Chapter One.
\(^3\) See Über die neuere deutsche Literatur (Ü). Similarly, Humboldt defines language as “the outer appearance of the spirit of a people,” thereby underscoring that language emanates the spiritual essence of a nation (On Language 46).
\(^4\) See Ideen zur Philosophie der Geschichte der Menschheit 368-69.
The German Romantics discourage multilingualism by imbuing the mother tongue with organic and aesthetic qualities. According to Herder and Johann Gottlieb Fichte, foreign languages fail to sustain an organic bond between human and language. Herder seeks to suppress writing in a foreign tongue by arguing that a genuine literary expression is only possible in the mother tongue (Ü 408). He advocates monolingualism as a literary standard by proclaiming that a writer ought to remain “faithful” to his native language and by characterizing works composed in a foreign tongue as mediocre and deformed (Ü 411-12). Herder precludes multilingual literature when he defines the role of poets in political terms as fostering national unity (Bauman and Briggs 182). Hence, Herder’s paradigm ascribes no value to multilingualism.

Johann Gottlieb Fichte reinforces this Romantic exaltation of the mother tongue when he portrays German as pure, superior to other tongues, closest to the divine source of life, and thus the source of German uniqueness. He argues for insulating German from foreign tongues, especially Latin and French, and depicts those languages as corrupt and dangerous to German. Thus, the German Romantic notion of the mother tongue is inimical to multilingualism.

Examining the role of languages in Adorno and Sebald will help dispel the anxiety toward multilingualism that one can see in Germans’ mixed attitudes toward the impact of foreign languages on their own. Several linguists point to widespread fears that English threatens the future of German. For example, linguist Peter Eisenberg observes that almost sixty percent of Germans consider the development of German “alarming or disquieting” and some call German “a dying, a threatened, or at least an endangered language” (122). The increase of

---

5 Similarly, Friedrich Schlegel calls for a homogenous language, claiming that the “moral character of a people” reflected in its language is “sacred” (H. Kohn 184).
6 See Gardt and Hüppauf. Their collection includes essays by linguists, anthropologists, literary scholars, and directors of cultural institutions.
7 Similarly, linguist Rudolf Hoberg notes that many Germans perceive their language as becoming “Denglish” (85).
Anglicisms\textsuperscript{8} is identified as the most negative trend in German (Hoberg 85). The 2013 report by the \textit{Deutsche Akademie für Sprache und Dichtung} on the status of German summarizes those fears in the following way: “Die Sprache erodiere, verflache, verfalle, verarme, verkomme, werde pidginisiert, ausgehöhlt und ihres Ausdrucksvermögens beraubt”\textsuperscript{9} (61). The report links the cause of those fears to the spread of English.

Certain cultural organizations fuel those very fears by portraying English as dangerous to Germany’s national identity. Such claims are most blatant in the rhetoric of the \textit{Verein Deutsche Sprache}, a private organization of scholars and non-academics founded in 1997 to combat the influence of English on German. In its guidelines, the \textit{Verein} views English as invading German and asserts that the ubiquitous presence of English weakens linguistic and cultural sovereignty of European countries.\textsuperscript{10} The \textit{Verein} sees the popularity of English as a symptom of an Americanization that might result in “a loss” of national identity. In this way, English appears as a threat to Germany’s national identity. This rhetoric reiterates the German Romantic paradigm of national identity. To prevent English from infiltrating German, the \textit{Verein} argues for more “loyalty” and “care” for the mother tongue and cautions that speaking German and English might discourage future generations of Germans from using their own language “creatively.” The \textit{Verein} provides an index of English words with their German synonyms and paraphrases.\textsuperscript{11}

\textsuperscript{8} The \textit{Deutsche Akademie für Sprache und Dichtung} defines Anglicisms as words that exhibit English grammar properties that are not present in German core vocabulary (71). Examples include “der Showmaster,” “das Handy,” and “das/der Twinset.”

\textsuperscript{9} “The language erodes, flattens out, decays, becomes impoverished, deteriorated, pidginized, hollowed out, and deprived of its expressive capacity.” Unless otherwise noted, all translations are mine. This is the first report on the status of German. The project was launched in 2008 as a response to debates over the influence of English on German. The report contains a linguistic comparison of vocabulary in literary and scholarly works, press, and everyday written language from 1995-2004 and 1905-1914.

\textsuperscript{10} See “Sprachpolitische Leitlinien.”

\textsuperscript{11} On the one hand, the \textit{Verein} argues for a policy that would make learning two foreign languages mandatory in European schools. The \textit{Verein} admits that every generation updates its vocabulary. On the other hand, the organization’s derision of Anglicisms seeks to suppress language contact.
Numerous linguists have attempted to dispel the fears about the negative impact of English on German. For instance, Eisenberg has argued against calling German “endangered” because the term is used in linguistics for “languages which are in danger of becoming extinct by the loss of native speakers” (122). In a similar fashion, Hoberg has pointed out that, in terms of the number of speakers, German ranks twelfth in the world, second in Europe (after Russian), and first in the European Union, with 101 million speakers worldwide and 91,473,000 speakers in Europe (89-90). From the statistical point of view, the claim of German’s endangerment seems untenable. Most crucially, the report by the Deutsche Akademie für Sprache und Dichtung rejects any visions of a decline of German as unfounded and out of place (115). The report confirms that Anglicisms are the fastest growing group of foreign expressions in German but concludes that those derivations occur by adapting foreign stems to German core grammar, so that English has only a marginal structural impact on German (115). In other words, Anglicisms do not change German structurally. Those studies reveal that cultural factors, and not linguistic ones, drive the animosity to Anglicisms.

The current academic debates over reformulating Germanness confirm that a reevaluation of the German Romantic monolingual paradigm of national identity is long overdue. For example, “Re-Defining ‘Germanness’” through the prism of multilingualism was a panel at the 2015 North East Modern Language Association conference. Similarly, the German Studies Association’s 2015 seminar on the rise and fall of monolingualism, as well as its 2016 session on multilingualism in German studies, reveals a need for re-conceptualizing the relationship between multilingualism and a nation. In fact, the 2015 seminar sought to expose the ways in

---

12 The report suggests that German might be experiencing an early stage of saturation with English words (67). For similar observations on the marginal impact of English on German, see Eisenberg 134. For a discussion of hostility toward English borrowings as a “misplaced fear,” see Crystal 43.
which the German Romantic monolingual conception perseveres in German cultural consciousness. This dissertation contributes to those debates by analyzing how Adorno and Sebald employ languages to disrupt the monolingual model of national identity.

A re-examination of the German Romantic monolingual paradigm of national identity is politically and culturally unavoidable. In 2010, the German Chancellor Angela Merkel described the campaign for a multicultural society (*Multi-Kulti*), with German as the lead culture (*Leitkultur*), as “utterly failed.” The campaign started in the 1970s and replicated the German Romantic monolingual model, envisioning cultures as living next to each other, without intermingling.\(^\text{13}\) The recent migration flow to Germany also necessitates reassessing the German Romantic notion of national identity. Moreover, German right-wing groups invoke the Romantic model to disseminate xenophobia. The rhetoric of Pegida (Patriotic Europeans Against the Islamization of the Occident) becomes a case in point. Formed in October 2014 in Dresden and operating through social media, the group portrays itself officially as open to all nationalities and religions, yet its founder impersonated Hitler on social media and has recently been convicted of inciting hatred.

Pegida’s banners call for a linguistically and culturally homogenous Germany. One example is the following slogan: “*Multi-Kulti stoppen: Meine Heimat bleibt deutsch.*”\(^\text{14}\) The banner projects Germany as culturally and linguistically uniform, rejecting a concept of a multilingual and multicultural country. While urging Germans to protect their uniformity, Pegida portrays Islam and foreign cultures as dangerous. This prejudice is flagrant in the following slogan: “*Islamisierung bekämpfen / Überfremdung stoppen / JETZT!!*”\(^\text{15}\) Here, the suggestion is

\(^\text{13}\) For examples of *Multi-Kulti* initiatives, see Yildiz 206. For attitudes toward the *Multi-Kulti* campaign, see Kimmich 63-65.

\(^\text{14}\) “Stop multiculturalism. My homeland remains German.”

\(^\text{15}\) “Fight back Islamization / Stop over-foreignization / NOW !!!”
that foreigners endanger Germany’s identity and that the country is over-foreignized. This
dissertation will help detect similar forms of discrimination and reveal possibilities for cultural
cooperation as this work uncovers the ideological stakes in the German Romantic model of
national identity.

Fig. 1. Pegida Banners in Dresden on January 12, 2015. Digital image. Bundeszentrale für

Dissertation Overview

This dissertation explores the following questions: What is the relation between language
and national identity in Adorno and Sebald? How do they challenge the German Romantic
paradigm of national identity? What models of national identity emerge from their images of
language and their multilingual writing techniques?

To answer those questions, this project conducts a textual analysis of literary and
theoretical sources and synthesizes Adorno’s *Minima Moralia* with his understudied essays on
*Fremdwörter*, and his lesser-known English essays on fascist propaganda. This work examines
Sebald’s masterpiece *Austerlitz* in conjunction with his literary essays and interviews and draws
on history, psychoanalytical theories of self, and linguistic research on language ideologies, memory, and *Nazi Deutsch*.

This study focuses on Adorno and Sebald for several reasons. Since the 1960s, the Frankfurt School fascinated Sebald, who considered Adorno one of his crucial literary authorities. Language is central to both authors. They explore how language was, is, and can be used to create perceptions, ideas, and standards. Both writers address the German Romantic paradigm of national identity through their reflections on German, which, though largely triggered by *Nazi Deutsch*, reach back to the ideas of the German Romantics. Adorno engages with the Romantic model in his essays on *Fremdwörter* and through his practice of incorporating foreign expressions into his texts. Sebald grapples with the Romantic paradigm through his literary portrayal of *Nazi Deutsch* and through his literary translingualism, the mixing of languages.

Adorno, a Holocaust survivor, and Sebald, a son of a Nazi soldier, share an ethical concern about the role of language in postwar reality. For both authors, one cannot commemorate Holocaust victims and prevent totalitarianism without exposing ideology in *Nazi Deutsch* and analyzing the Nazi misappropriation of the Romantic paradigm. Adorno performs this task in a philosophical and an aesthetic fashion through defending foreign traces within the mother tongue and through demystifying linguistic myths in Nazi Germany and the Romantic model. In his novel, Sebald accomplishes this task when he ridicules and condemns *Nazi Deutsch* and advocates translingual literature.

---

16 Adorno and Sebald never met in person but exchanged a few letters. Sebald’s second letter remained unanswered due to Adorno’s death in 1969. Adorno (1903-1969) began writing on language already in the 1930s. His main philosophical sources were Kant, Nietzsche, Lukács, and Benjamin. Sebald (1944-2001) did not theorize on language but conveyed his ideas in his fiction.
Adorno and Sebald seek to make language evocative and to pluralize meaning. Both writers employ foreign expressions to revitalize German, yet Sebald advocates the mingling of languages more adamantly than Adorno. Both authors emphasize the importance of the form of presentation to aesthetics, employ anti-schematic writing techniques, and utilize Walter Benjamin’s writing models. Sebald’s knowledge of Adorno and Max Horkheimer’s critique of capitalism seeps into his reflections on translingual aesthetics. Since Adorno and Sebald provide different responses to the German Romantic paradigm of national identity, and since several decades separate the two writers, analyzing the images of language in their works will show how the idea of national identity and the valorization of the mother tongue evolved in postwar German literature.

**Significance**

This dissertation has broad political, cultural, and scholarly implications. Contrary to the celebratory readings of the German Romantic monolingual paradigm, this work examines the advantages and limitations of the Romantic model and enhances our understanding of mechanisms of prejudice by showing how attribution of religious and ethical qualities to the mother tongue might further animosity toward foreign languages. Those insights can be applied in designing language policies that prevent linguistic discrimination and rehabilitate dialects and minority languages. This study refutes the charge that multilingualism impoverishes, threatens, or destabilizes by showing how literary multilingualism bridges literature with history, linguistics, and ethics, alters reading strategies, and transcends literary genres and canons. In addition, this dissertation contributes to the debates over Germanness by demonstrating that multilingualism can generate a more inclusive and flexible transnational paradigm of identity.
Lastly, this study advances the scholarship on multilingualism in Sebald and Adorno through transcending the theoretical and biographical approaches to their multilingual texts.

**Relevant Literature**

This dissertation connects the linguistic and historiographical research on German Romantic nationalism to the scholarship on multilingualism in Adorno and Sebald. Linguists and historians have demonstrated the importance of language to German Romantic nationalism, but the relevance of language to postwar conceptions of German national identity remains understudied. Adorno scholars have analyzed his language philosophy and interpreted his multilingualism biographically without connecting it to his idea of national identity. Similarly, the psychoanalytical and biographical readings of Sebald’s multilingualism in *Austerlitz* have failed to address his transnational perspective.

As linguistic anthropologists Richard Bauman and Charles Briggs explain, Herder perceives language as “the touchstone of a people” and politicizes literature by describing it as “the authoritative basis for the cultural cohesion” of a nation (173, 198). They discern a “homogenizing tendency” in Herder’s rejection of linguistic diversity (182). However, they neglect the issue of international hatred that Herder views as strengthening the nation. Historian Hans Kohn discusses the German Romantic concept of a nation as a living organism, “not a mechanical and ‘dead’ concept” (171-72). Kohn observes that the German Romantics intertwine religion with nation and points to cultural outlets of nationalism, such as language societies and gymnastic organizations, but his scope is too broad to examine how the German Romantics sacralize the notion of the mother tongue.

The postwar discussions of national identity addressed either the issue of responsibility for the Nazi past or the need to purify German of Nazi vocabulary. However, they neglected to
examine how language functions in postwar notions of national identity and how the Nazis instrumentalized the German Romantic notion of the mother tongue. In *Die Schuldfrage*, Karl Jaspers called for acknowledging the guilt for the Nazi past on a national level. In *Die Unfähigkeit zu trauern*, Alexander and Margarete Mitscherlich argued in psychoanalytical terms that the repression of the Nazi past served as a defense mechanism and resulted from people’s reluctance to face the loss of a beloved leader. Neither Jaspers nor Mitscherlichs questioned the Nazi linguistic legacy in German.

In the 1950s and 1960s, many intellectuals pointed to the need to decontaminate German for developing a new notion of national identity. Writers gathered in *Gruppe 47* insisted on removing the Nazi terminology and imagery from the literary scene (J.W. Müller 41). Paul Celan, a German-Jewish poet and a Holocaust survivor, sought to revive German through his literary style filled with paradoxes, coinages, archaic words, syllable-reversals, and puns. Similarly, Adorno perceived uncovering the Nazi legacy in German as essential for a new national identity. Hannah Arendt claimed that German cannot be blamed for the Nazi past but did not address the Nazi perversion of language.

Surprisingly, neither the *Historikerstreit* in the 1980s nor the cultural debates after the 1990 re-unification of Germany discussed the role of language in shaping national identity. The historians’ debate centered on the question whether the Holocaust was unique or comparable with other genocides and ended with Jürgen Habermas’ concept of a post-conventional identity that prioritizes justice and morality. However, the debate focused solely on history. In the 1990s, literary scholar Andreas Huyssen famously diagnosed a lack of an “emphatic sense of national identity” in the post-unification Germany (142). He argued that the marginalization of the East
German literature as “polluted” and “obsolete” revealed intellectuals’ reluctance to widen the concept of national identity, but language was not a theme in those discussions (125).

The publication of Victor Klemperer’s book *LTI: Lingua Tertii Imperii* revived the scholarship on *Nazi Deutsch*. Klemperer, a Holocaust survivor, documents not only the Nazi language of contempt for the Jews but also Nazi euphemisms and buzzwords like *Rasse* (race) and *ewig* (eternal). Genocide scholar Karin Doerr analyzes the official Nazi communication and language policies, such as the renaming of institutions and the replacing of foreign terms in the public sphere with Germanizations. She demonstrates that passive voice, euphemisms, and code words helped the Nazis camouflage their crimes. While Doerr analyzes the Nazi official language historically, this work examines how literature portrays *Nazi Deutsch*. Historian Robert Michael argues that Martin Luther contributed to the “vocabulary for Nazi Jew policy” through his “consecrated attack-language” in his anti-Judaic speeches (2, 3). This study extends this point by analyzing the use of religious language in fascist propaganda.

Adorno scholars focus on his language philosophy but overlook his English works and his use of *Fremdwörter*. Martin Jay shows that Adorno rejects the myth of an authentic language as “sacred gibberish” (23). Jay’s philosophical study explains that Adorno draws on Walter Benjamin’s notion of aura, a unique character of an artwork. However, Jay does not discuss Adorno’s use of *Fremdwörter* and foreign languages. Timothy Bewes argues that Adorno seeks to prevent language reification, the ossification of words into empty sayings. This dissertation extends this insight by showing how Adorno employs foreign languages to make his texts evocative.17 Robert Hullot-Kentor explains Adorno’s application of the musical principle of

---

17 On Adorno’s critique of Immanuel Kant’s overemphasis on conceptuality, see Jarvis. On Adorno’s concept of expression and his attempt to secularize Walter Benjamin’s mystical conception of language, see Foster.
dissonance to his writing but does not demonstrate how Adorno creates dissonance with foreign expressions.\textsuperscript{18}

Shierry Weber Nicholsen accurately observes that Adorno strives to make his language musical through his use of foreign derivations; however, she fails to analyze instances of foreign expressions in his works.\textsuperscript{19} Thomas Levin summarizes Adorno’s English expressions and argues that they reveal his ambivalence toward America but offers no close reading of Adorno’s English phrases and texts. Yasemin Yildiz evaluates Adorno as neither a monolingual nor multilingual writer, explaining that he employs foreign derivations to invalidate language purism and enhance his texts, yet she omits his English expressions and works.

Sebald scholars analyze multilingualism in \textit{Austerlitz} biographically and psychoanalytically while leaving out its aesthetic relevance in the novel. Jo Catling examines Sebald’s multilingualism as an expression of his desire for a state of homelessness, but her analysis overlooks foreign languages in \textit{Austerlitz}, where translingualism—the crisscrossing of languages—enables the protagonist to surmount his sense of hollowness. Jessica Dubow and Richard Steadman-Jones argue from the psychoanalytical perspective that the protagonist’s multilingualism reveals his psychic breaks, but they focus on the main character and omit other multilingual sections in the book. Stefan Willer reads the protagonist’s multilingualism as expressing his pain and speech deficiency but fails to observe that the suppression of the protagonist’s Czech language causes his pain. Stephen Clingman shows how foreign languages

\textsuperscript{18} On music and language in Adorno, see also Grenz. On Adorno’s strategies for making his language musical, see Bayerl.
\textsuperscript{19} For a comparison of Adorno’s idea of national identity to Habermas’ concept of constitutional patriotism, see Stögner and Höpoltseder. For Adorno’s rejection of Richard Wagner’s notion of an unchangeable German language, see Bernstein.
navigate the novel’s main character by triggering his memory, but he does not explain how they bridge national literatures in the book.

The scholarship on Sebald’s literary style has neglected the role of foreign languages in the novel. In his *W.G. Sebald*, Ben Hutchinson explains Sebald’s literary models and dialectic writing strategies but does not discuss multilingualism in the novel. Similarly, Gunther Pakendorf scrutinizes Sebald’s style but overlooks foreign tongues in his texts. Andreas Kramer claims that Sebald uses foreign languages to convey his language skepticism. However, Kramer does not examine any multilingual instances in the novel. Matthias Zucchi focuses on Sebald’s stylized language, neologisms, anachronisms, grammatical deviations, and Bavarian and Austrian expressions. While Zucchi points out that foreign languages indicate geographical settings in Sebald’s fiction, he does not analyze foreign expressions in *Austerlitz*, where they fulfill various functions. Rob Kohn reads foreign language sections in the novel as revealing the unreliability of the narration but leaves the narrator’s multilingual reflections on the theme of language unexamined.

**Dissertation Outline**

Chapter One analyzes how Johann Gottfried Herder and Johann Gottlieb Fichte sacralize the concept of the mother tongue. Herder portrays loyalty to the mother tongue as an ethical imperative. Fichte sacralizes German, ascribing to it a living character (proximity to the divine source of life), truthfulness, virtue, and an ennobling power. This chapter concludes that Herder and Fichte sacralize the idea of the mother tongue and promote a linguistic isolation of German, thereby making it hostile to foreign languages.

Chapter Two examines how Adorno challenges the Romantic paradigm of national identity through debunking the myth of linguistic purity and through rehabilitating *Fremdwörter*. 
His critique of language purism is analyzed against the background of the Nazi cult of the mother
tongue, their anti-Fremdwort rhetoric, and their idea of Umvolkung (linguistic assimilation). The
next section discusses Adorno’s use of Fremdwörter and relates his reflections on linguistic and
racial purity to Nazi race theory. The final section connects Adorno’s metaphor of a linguistic
Eintopf (a one-pot stew) to the Nazi notion of societal uniformity and to Adorno’s work on
authoritarian mindsets, persons susceptible to ideologies. The chapter concludes that Adorno
repudiates the idea of linguistic purity and advocates a philosophical and an aesthetic paradigm
with one mother tongue open to foreign languages. Excursus One analyzes Adorno’s work on
American fascist propaganda in the 1930s and shows how fascist propagandists used biblical
imagery to promote religious homogeneity and condemn religious diversity. Excursus Two
discusses how Martin Luther employed biblical references to vilify Judaism in the sixteenth
century.

Chapter Three analyzes how Adorno pluralizes meaning in his works through his
redemptive writing techniques, which destabilize the existing theories and suggest alternate
approaches. His techniques include open literary forms (configurations), critique,
defamiliarization (estrangement), contradiction, oxymoron (incongruous words), irony, and
dissonance (opposing voices). The theoretical part analyzes Adorno’s secularization of Walter
Benjamin’s language mysticism, Adorno’s thoughts on the arbitrary (conventional) nature of
words, and his refutation of the Romantic notion of transcendental music. The aesthetic part
scrutinizes Adorno’s inversion of Hegel’s notion of totality and examples of Adorno’s
redemptive writing techniques, connecting his strategies to George Steiner’s idea of “falsity”
(imaging the world differently). The chapter concludes that Adorno’s redemptive writing
strategies pluralize meaning by questioning the existing conceptualizations and pointing to their alternatives.

Chapter Four analyzes a translingual subject in Sebald’s *Austerlitz* from the literary angle, showing that the protagonist’s translingualism, speaking French and Czech, allows him to overcome his sense of hollowness or spectrality. This hollowness results from the suppression of his French-Czech self and his Czech language by his foster parents, English educational system, and his own evasion strategies. The chapter concludes that the protagonist’s translingualism enables him to reinvent himself and build a symbolic home in-between French and Czech cultures.

Chapter Five discusses two models of German in Sebald’s *Austerlitz*: Nazi Deutsch and Sebald’s translingual model that blends German with other tongues. Nazi Deutsch is associated with grandiosity and misdirection (illusory precision), whereas Sebald’s literary translingualism opposes Nazi Deutsch and seeks to rejuvenate German through mixing it with other languages. The chapter concludes that Sebald’s translingual paradigm endorses literary and linguistic flexibility and advocates translingual literature that creates transnational links rather than serving national interests.

The concluding section summarizes the results and implications of this dissertation and discusses future research avenues.
Chapter One

The “Sacred” Mother Tongue: Herder and Fichte on Language, Ethics, and Religion

This section explores the German Romantic notion of a “sacred” mother tongue, according to which a native language exhibits ethical and religious qualities. Contemporary understanding of national identity often takes this German Romantic concept for granted, but the concept is under-researched. The German Romantics view religion and ethics as tied to national languages and indispensable for national character. This chapter aims to uncover religious and ethical values attributed to the mother tongue in early German Romanticism.

This chapter argues that Johann Gottfried Herder and Johann Gottlieb Fichte sacralize the concept of the mother tongue. Herder initiates this process when he describes loyalty to one’s native language as a moral imperative. Fichte sacralizes the idea of the mother tongue through ascribing to German a living character (proximity to the divine source of life), truthfulness, virtue, and a salvific mission of ennobling other cultures. The first part of this study examines Herder’s call for loyalty to one’s native language and his portrayal of multilingualism as sinful, destabilizing, and aesthetically mediocre. The second part of this chapter analyzes religious and ethical qualities that Fichte attributes to German. This study draws on linguistic research by Elizabeth Ellis, Susan Gal, and Judith Irvine. The chapter concludes that the ascription of religious and ethical qualities to the mother tongue surrounds it with a nimbus of sacredness, which delegitimizes foreign languages, endorses linguistic isolation, and spreads prejudice against multilingual cultures.

The scholarship on German Romantic nationalism has overlooked how Herder and Fichte integrate ethics and religion into their notions of language. Linguistic anthropologists Richard Bauman and Charles Briggs detect a “homogenizing tendency” in both Herder’s rejection of
linguistic diversity and his view that literature ought to foster “the cultural cohesion” of a nation (198).\textsuperscript{20} They point out that Herder criticizes his compatriots for their indifference to their national culture but neglect to discuss Herder’s remarks on ethics and international hatred (190). Historian Hans Kohn explains how the German Romantics intertwine religion with the concept of a nation.\textsuperscript{21} He analyzes both Fichte’s notion of a Christian state and his claim that cultural differences between nations result from their languages. Kohn notes that Fichte’s glorification of German disseminates the fear of the foreign but does not show what religious and ethical qualities Fichte imputes to German (239).

Herder scholar Karl Menges characterizes Herder’s notion of language as “a self-referential loop” but overlooks Herder’s reflections on the interaction between the mother tongue and foreign languages (206). Menges admits that Herder invokes hatred to stir solidarity among German speakers but does not discuss the implications of Herder’s idea of hatred. According to Herder specialist Jürgen Trabant, Herder perceives all languages as progressing toward humanity, a state of perfection and mutual cultural respect. Trabant confirms that Herder seeks to overcome the supremacy of French in German culture but does not analyze Herder’s anti-French comments.

**Herder on Loyalty to the Mother Tongue**

For Herder, language is an instrument to awaken the German national spirit. In the late eighteenth century, Germany did not exist as a single, unified country. Instead, German territories included hundreds of secular and ecclesiastical states, duchies, counties, and Free Imperial Cities, with Prussia and Austria being the most powerful countries. While politically independent of each other, those German entities belonged to the Holy Roman Empire. Their

\textsuperscript{20} On Herder’s view on German national literature, see also Koepke.

\textsuperscript{21} On German Romantic nationalism, see also Yıldız 6-14.
political ties to the Empire were weak, and the Empire dissolved in 1806. Those German states favored local interests and exhibited no sense of national feeling. The only shared element of those entities comprised their language.

To stimulate national spirit among those German states, Herder, the founding father of German Romantic nationalism, bases his notion of a nation (Volk) on the idea of language. He describes language as a linguistic, cultural, and ethical backbone of a nation. In his 1784-91 Ideen zur Philosophie der Geschichte der Menschheit (I), Herder argues, “Denn jedes Volk ist Volk: es hat seine Nationalbildung wie seine Sprache” (251). Here, Herder characterizes the nation as a linguistic community, indicating that German states constitute one nation because of their shared language. In his Über die neuere deutsche Literatur (Ü), Herder stresses that language reflects the ethics and the culture of the nation when he claims that “jede Nationalsprache [bildet] sich nach den Sitten und der Denkart ihres Volks” (559). As the quote suggests, Herder perceives language as mirroring the culture and the ethical standards of the nation. From his perspective, a nation represents a linguistic community with shared cultural and ethical values.

Herder endorses monolingual states and discredits multilingual ones on political and ethical grounds. He claims that politically strong nations are monolingual. In his view,

der natürlichste Staat ist . . . ein Volk, mit einem Nationalcharakter. Nichts scheint also dem Zweck der Regierungen so offenbar entgegen als die unnatürliche

Vergrößerung der Staaten, die wilde Vermischung der Menschengattungen und

---

22 “For every distinct community is a nation having its own national culture as it has its own language” (Barnard 284).
23 In his Abhandlung über den Ursprung der Sprache (A), Herder highlights the importance of a national language by claiming that its formation is an inevitable natural law (104).
24 “each national language forms itself in accordance with the ethics and manner of thought of its people” (50).
25 Similarly, Wilhelm von Humboldt argues that language constitutes “the outer appearance of the spirit of a people” (On Language 46).
Nationen unter einen Zepter. Der Menschenzepter ist viel zu schwach und klein, daß so widersinnige Teile in ihn eingeimpft werden könnten; zusammengeleimt werden sie also in eine brechliche Maschine, . . . ohne inneres Leben und Sympathie der Teile gegeneinander. . . . Wie trojanische Rosse rücken solche Maschinen zusammen. . . .26 (I 368)

In this passage, Herder employs the imagery of life and death. He attributes life to monolingual nations and describes life as strength, affective ties, and naturalness. He associates death with multilingual states and presents death as fragility, unnaturalness, and the lack of national character. Moreover, Herder forecasts the doom of multilingual nations because they are products of human pride. He argues, “daß diese Werkzeuge des menschlichen Stolzes von Ton sind und wie aller Ton auf der Erde zerbrechen oder zerfließen”27 (369). In this way, Herder delegitimizes multilingualism as both presumptuous and destabilizing.

Herder’s reference to the inner life of the nation is in line with the Romantic concept of a state. For the German Romantics, a state is not a political entity but a living organism, “a personality overflowing with life and pulsating with movement, not a mechanical and ‘dead’ concept” (H. Kohn 172).28 Herder aligns himself with this notion of state, describing its life as “bonds of sentiment” between the state’s members. Their emotional tie emerges from shared linguistic, cultural, and ethical standards that “cannot be interfered with from without” (H. Kohn 178). By Herder’s criteria, multilingual nations seem superficially alive because their values are

26 “the most natural state is . . . one nation, an extended family with one national character. . . . Nothing, therefore, is more manifestly contrary to the purpose of political government than the unnatural enlargement of states, the wild mixing of various races and nationalities under one sceptre. A human sceptre is far too weak and slender for such incongruous parts to be engrafted upon it. Such states are but patched up contraptions, fragile machines . . . devoid of inner life . . . [and] bonds of sentiment. Like Trojan horses these machines are pieced together” (91).
27 “that these instruments of human pride are formed of clay, and, like all clay, they will dissolve or crumble to pieces” (91).
28 For example, Novalis claims, “The state is a person like the individual” (qtd. in H. Kohn 173).
Herder concludes that a nation can preserve its inner life by remaining uniform and resisting foreign influences. In this respect, he espouses a political framework with “a national language resistant to the penetration of foreign tongues” (Bauman and Briggs 199). Thus, Herder’s concept of the nation is inimical to foreign languages.

Paradoxically, Herder’s arguments are deployed in the twentieth century against monolingualism. As linguist Elizabeth Ellis observes, monolingualism is often depicted as a pathological and dangerous state through metaphors of sickness, disease, dysfunction, and disability (185). Those contemporary charges resemble Herder’s remarks but are directed against monolingualism. In his eyes, multilingualism seems pathological because it destroys the inner life of the nation, making it dysfunctional, lifeless, and weak. In brief, multilingualism represents for Herder a national threat.

Herder depicts monolingualism as an ethical norm of writers. He advocates loyalty to the mother tongue with his dictum, “Der Dichter muß seinem Boden getreu bleiben” (Ü 412). For him, those who write in their native tongue are faithful while those who do not write in their mother tongue are disloyal. To justify his demand, Herder claims that people must remain loyal to their native language because they were brought up in it (409). Despite being a pastor, Herder seems to neglect the pedagogical role of parents, educators, and priests; in particular, he suggests that the native language serves as the educator of its people rather than the instrument of its education. Moreover, Herder seeks to establish monolingualism as a national literary standard when he argues that “die Literatur eines Landes, die ursprünglich und national ist, [muß] sich so nach der originalen Landessprache einer solchen Nation formen, daß eins mit dem andern

---

29 Monolingualism is also portrayed as an “unmarked case” or “an absence of skills” (Ellis 177-180). Monolingualism is unmarked when taken for granted in certain beliefs or practices. Monolingualism implies a deficiency when it is described as a limitation of human cognitive, communicative, social, or vocational capabilities.

30 “the poet . . . must remain faithful to his soil” (210).
zusammenrinnt. Die Literatur wuchs in der Sprache, und die Sprache in der Literatur”31 (559). In this passage, Herder makes explicit that he regards literature as a national product that one must compose in German.32

In Herder’s view, only the mother tongue possesses pedagogical value and determines human personality. As he explains, a man’s language is the one in which he is raised (erzogen) (408). With this claim, Herder excludes a possibility of a multilingual childhood. His fixation on the language of childhood betrays Herder’s perception of people as monolingual throughout their lives. In disregarding the tongues that people acquire as adults, Herder strips those languages of educational merit. If human personality derives exclusively from one’s childhood language, then languages learned in adult life have no value.

Herder’s disrespect for languages of adulthood exemplifies what linguistic anthropologists Gal and Irvine term an erasure mechanism. As practices and conceptualizations that “are suffused with the political and moral issues pervading the particular sociolinguistic field” (35), language ideologies influence the evolution of languages through the process of erasure. Erasure works through eradicating, suppressing, or rendering a certain linguistic phenomenon invisible (37). This mechanism is visible in Herder’s description of human personality as resulting from one’s native tongue, which renders languages of adulthood worthless.

Herder equates writing in a foreign language with immaturity and contempt for the mother tongue. He explains his point in the following way: “Zuerst der in einer fremden Sprache

---

31 “a country’s literature which is original and national must form itself in accordance with such a nation’s original native language in such a way that the two run together. The literature grew up in the language, and the language in the literature” (50).

32 Herder imagines one language for German national literature and hence has no interest in preserving German dialects.
schreibt, muß doch eine Muttersprache haben, in der er erzogen ist. Verachtet er diese Mutter: so muß er von ihr übel erzogen sein, daß die ersten Eindrücke der Bildung gar nicht bei ihm zur Reife gekommen [sind]"^{33} (Ü 409; emphasis in the original). Here, Herder characterizes multilingual writers as immature and lacking in proper morals, thus discouraging multilingualism. By implication, the proper conduct means monolingual writing.

Most importantly, Herder portrays writing in a foreign language as a sin. As he explains, “[Ich] sündige unaufhörlich wider die Sprache”^{34} through writing in a foreign tongue (410). In this quote, Herder indicates that using a foreign language disrespects one’s mother tongue and violates the principle of loyalty to one’s native language. In this regard, Herder’s call for faithfulness to the mother tongue delegitimizes foreign languages.

Herder’s notion of conditional multilingualism does not rehabilitate foreign languages. He concedes that German contains “Lücken und Wüsten”^{35} that can be remedied by “fremden Schätzen”^{36} (408). In this way, he associates borrowings with nourishment and appears to approve of foreign languages. To exemplify his idea of conditional multilingualism, Herder compares learning a foreign language to walking through foreign gardens. According to him, one strolls through foreign gardens only to gather flowers for one’s mother tongue. Switching to an I-perspective, Herder insists that “ich gehe bloß durch fremde Gärten, um für meine Sprache . . . Blumen zu holen”^{37} (408-09). With this statement, Herder reveals his belief that foreign language acquisition bears no intellectual benefits. Rather, that acquisition only exists as a means

---

^{33} “He who writes in a foreign language must have, after all, a mother tongue, in which he was raised. Should he despise this mother, then she must have raised him badly, so that the first impressions of growth in him did not reach maturity at all” (207).
^{34} “I sin uninterruptedly against the language” (208).
^{35} “voids and deserts” (207).
^{36} “foreign treasures” (207).
^{37} “I walk through foreign gardens only to gather flowers for my language” (207).
to rectify gaps in one’s mother tongue. His criteria make it unacceptable to learn foreign
languages to discover new customs or to gain a new state allegiance (408).

Furthermore, Herder’s conditional multilingualism legitimizes an exploitation of foreign
languages. He depicts foreign tongues as sources of booty by quoting from Ewald Kleist’s 1749
poem “Der Frühling,” which describes bees that fly “in zerstreuten Heeren, / . . . und fallen auf
Klee und blühende / Stauden / Und denn heimkehren zur Zelle mit süßer Beute / beladen / und
liefern uns Honig der Weisheit”38 (409). For Herder, learners of foreign languages are like the
bees delivering to hive the “sweet booty” collected in foreign territories. However, “the honey of
wisdom” is reserved for language, not its speakers, which renders the edifying potential of
multilingualism invisible. Herder conjures the sense of exploitation with the word “booty”
(Beute), through the bees’ active plundering of the passive flowers, and in his omission of what
the bees leave in return. Herder restricts the movement of speakers: Like the bees, foreign
language learners operate under the expectation of returning to their origin. In this regard,
Herder’s conditional multilingualism is explicitly nationalistic.

As Herder abruptly shifts from the register of nourishment to one of death, he devalues
foreign languages. His description of foreign tongues as dead (tot) renders them unsuitable for
aesthetics and, moreover, deprives them of their previous nourishing qualities (409). He calls
foreign language writers “mißratene Schriftsteller”39 and their texts “unförmlich”40 (411). The
adjective “tot” implies here a deficient expression, not death in the linguistic sense. In linguistics,
a dead language means a language that has vanished due to the disappearance of its speakers.41

38 “in dispersed swarms / . . . fall upon clover and / flowering shrubs, / to return, thereupon, to the cell with sweet
booty, / and bring to us the honey of wisdom” (207).
39 “misbegotten writers” (209).
40 “deformed” (209).
41 See Eisenberg 122.
Herder employs the word “tot” to indicate the aesthetic mediocrity of foreign language compositions. To bolster this pejorative meaning of the word “tot,” Herder shifts to a religious tone and urges his readers to sacrifice (opfern) their treasures to their mother tongue (409). In a similarly elevated manner, he describes himself as lying prostrate before his mother tongue and embracing it as his muse (Muse) (413). Those references to rituals of offering and submission embolden and color Herder’s call for loyalty to the native language with the religious undertone.

Herder’s conditional multilingualism conflicts with his notion of humanity (Humanität). In his view, all languages develop toward a state of humanity where they retain their separateness while converging into one “living voice of mankind itself” (Menges 208). Herder’s notion of humanity relies on an epigenetic theory of evolution, which postulates that a spiritual force, such as God or pure being, drives the progress of the world (205). According to this theory, all entities, including language, differentiate themselves from the structuring spiritual force and develop immanently, that is, from within. Yet, Herder’s conditional multilingualism reveals that language does not advance immanently but borrows from other tongues. For this reason, his notion of the mother tongue seems neither immanent nor “self-referential” (206). Rather, Herder portrays the native language as self-fixated and insulating itself from foreign tongues while extracting certain beneficial elements from them.

Herder’s depiction of hatred as reinforcing people’s attachments their native languages propagates linguistic isolation. He observes that hatred of other nations is the status quo, whereas the goal of evolution is humanity, a state of peace and mutual cultural respect. Herder admits both the positive and the adverse effects of hatred in the following way: “Dieselbe

---

42 On Herder’s idea of humanity, see also Trabant 122.
43 In his Abhandlung, Herder locates the origin of language not in a divine source but human ability to reflect (Besonnenheit).
Familienneigung, die, in sich selbst gekehrt, Stärke der Eintracht eines Stammes gab, macht, außer sich gekehrt, gegen ein andres Geschlecht Stärke der Zwietracht, Familienhaß. Dort zogs viele zu einem desto fester zusammen; hier machts aus zwei Parteien gleich Feinde”44 (A 109). Herder acknowledges here that hatred of other nations intensifies human attachment to one’s native language while creating international antagonisms. As Menges argues, Herder understands hatred as a feeling that can “unite people and make them happy on the basis of collective sentiment” (197). However, Herder relativizes hatred by describing it as “mehr edle menschliche Schwachheit als niederträchtiges Laster”45 (A 109).

In relativizing hatred, Herder reaffirms the negative image of foreign cultures. On the one hand, he confirms that a foreigner tends to be perceived as an ignoble barbarian (Barbar) (109). On the other hand, Herder neither qualifies his remark nor suggests ways of rectifying this perception of foreigners, thereby reiterating the status quo. Against this background, his notion of humanity seems utopian and aporetic: Mutual cultural respect loses its feasibility when people endorse international hatred as a way of stimulating affection for a mother tongue. By not qualifying his remarks on international hatred, Herder promotes the separateness of languages and accords multilingual cultures no room.

One can view Herder’s antipathy toward the foreign as part of a late eighteenth century movement in German letters; in particular, the drive to rid German culture of French supremacy. During this period, German aristocracy spoke French and endorsed French literary models. For example, Frederick the Great, King of Prussia, favored French standards while complaining that

---

44 “The same liking for family, which turned inward on itself, gave strength to the harmony of the single tribe, turned outward from itself, against another race, produces strength of dissension, familial hatred! In the former case, it drew many all the more firmly together into a single whole; in the latter case, it makes two parties immediately into enemies” (152).
45 “more noble human weakness than base vice” (152).
German was “half-barbarous” and that German writing was developing meagerly (Elias 12). He criticized Prussian theaters for presenting works by Shakespeare (in German) because he regarded Shakespeare’s plays as offending French rules in the theater (14). By contrast, the German intelligentsia, including Goethe, Schiller, Klopstock, Lessing, and Herder, condemned “Frenchifiers” and advocated writing in German and liberating German literature from the French spirit, which they found too cold, aristocratic, and rigid (16-17). They emphasized Bildung (an intellectual formation of an individual), emotions, nature, and German folk tradition. Those writers portrayed French manners in court life as superficial and insincere while linking the German middle-class life with intellectual depth and virtue (26-27).

In this section, Herder portrays multilingualism as an undermining force to the nation’s strength. He promotes loyalty to the mother tongue as an ethical principle. To inhibit multilingual literature, Herder characterizes writing in a foreign language as sinful and mediocre and describes multilingual writers as immature. His observations on international hatred further endorse monolingualism.

**Fichte on the “Sacred” German Language**

Whereas Herder employs religious overtones sparingly, Fichte surrounds the German language with the religious sense of sacredness. Those religious nuances are most explicit in his *Reden an die deutsche Nation*, an 1807/08 series of lectures delivered in Berlin to stir German resistance to Napoleon. Fichte’s addresses count as one of the foundational documents of German Romantic nationalism because he depicts the German nation as unified against Napoleon. At the time, German territories entailed forty-one states, including Prussia, Austria, the Confederation of Rhine, and a few states outside the Confederation (Moore xii). After his victory over Austria and Russia at the 1805 Battle of Austerlitz, Napoleon formed the
Confederation, which consisted of German states loyal to France. When Fichte lectured in Berlin, Prussia, the last great German power, had already fallen to Napoleon at the 1806 Battle of Jena (xi). To awaken a sense of German unity, Fichte portrays Napoleon as the enemy of German states and the cause of their suffering.

Fichte considers Napoleon an incarnation of evil. Fichte expected that the 1789 French Revolution would bring a new world order of equality. In his view, Napoleon had betrayed the aim of the French Revolution through his conquest of Europe, thereby causing the French to fail in their mission of establishing equality worldwide. Because the French had failed in this mission, Fichte ascribes it to the German nation (xxii). According to him, the Germans can fulfill this task because they have a superior culture resulting from their language.

According to Fichte, German’s sacredness stems from its proximity to the divine source of life. He bases his claim on a belief that all Western languages come from a mythical protolanguage that split into tongues and continues to evolve. He perceives Teutonic (ancient Germanic) tribes as descendants of those mythical ancestors. Most crucially, Fichte maintains that the protolanguage was a living language that had contact with the Divine. He describes life in the following terms: “Zuvörderst, indem hier vom Leben . . . geredet wird, so ist darunter zu verstehen das ursprüngliche Leben, und sein Fortfluß aus dem Quell alles geistigen Lebens, aus Gott, die Fortbildung der menschlichen Verhältnisse nach ihrem Urbilde, und so die Erschaffung eines Neuen”⁴⁶ (76). This passage shows that Fichte, who studied theology, understands life as hope for eternal life through a union with God, the source of “Leben, und Licht, und Seligkeit”⁴⁷ (45). Fichte equates God with the source of all natural and spiritual life and then characterizes

---

⁴⁶ “In the first place, when we speak here of life . . . we mean original life and its onward flow from the source of spiritual life, that is, from God; we mean the continued development [Fortbildung] of human relations according to their archetype [Urbild] and thus the creation of something new” (61).
⁴⁷ “life and light and blessedness” (36).
the lack of immediacy with God as leading to “Tod, Finsternis, und Elend”\(^\text{48}\) (45). Evidently, Fichte’s notion of life conveys the religious desire for eternity.\(^\text{49}\)

Fichte’s assessment of the value of languages depends on their distance from the protolanguage. In his view, German’s preservation of an uninterrupted link to the protolanguage accounts for its sacredness. He explains the difference between German and other tongues in the following manner: “Die Verschiedenheit . . . besteht darin, daß der Deutsche eine bis zu ihrem ersten Ausströmen aus der Naturkraft lebendige Sprache redet, die übrigen germanischen Stämme eine nur auf der Oberfläche sich regende, in der Wurzel aber tote Sprache. Allein in diesen Umstand, in die Lebendigkeit, und in den Tod, setzen wir / [sic] den Unterschied”\(^\text{50}\) (72).

Here, Fichte elevates German above other languages. Specifically, he depicts German as the only living language that has a direct link to the protolanguage. By implication, other tongues seem to have lost their connection to the protolanguage and thus exist superficially. By his standard, they possess no living core. In this way, Fichte portrays the living character of German as its iconic feature. As Gal and Irvine explain, language ideologies inform the evolution of languages through the process of iconization. Iconization occurs when a certain linguistic feature becomes perceived as representing the essence of a group or entity (37). For Fichte, the iconic trait of German is its living character, i.e. the proximity to the divinely inspired protolanguage. In elevating German above other tongues, Fichte establishes a fixed hierarchy of languages, with German at the top, which then renders other tongues inferior.

\(^\text{48}\) “death, darkness and misery” (36).
\(^\text{49}\) See Joseph 111.
\(^\text{50}\) “The difference . . . consists in this, that the Germans still speak a living language and have done so ever since it first streamed forth from nature, whereas the other Teutonic tribes speak a language that stirs only on the surface yet is dead at the root. In his circumstance alone, in the life of one and in the death of the other, do we posit the difference” (58).
Fichte argues that German has retained its living core through its failure to mix with languages. He emphasizes that the crucial difference between the Germans and other tribes consists in the fact, “[daß] die ersten die ursprüngliche Sprache des Stammvolks behielten und fortbildeten, die letzten eine fremde Sprache annahmen, und dieselbe allmählich nach ihrer Weise umgestalteten”\(^{51}\) (60). In this passage, Fichte suggests that a language loses its living core when it mingles with other tongues. According to his logic, all Romance languages are “dead” because of their Latin traces; only German is “fully alive.” Simply put, “French or Italian, English or Spanish tongues were dead in their roots” (H. Kohn 239). The implication then is that German must remain linguistically pure to preserve its living core.

Fichte endorses linguistic purity when he portrays foreign languages as detrimental to the living core of German. He cautions that mixing German with Neo-Latin would produce a dead language because Neo-Latin words would destroy the living root of German (54).\(^{52}\) Fichte warns, “Obwohl eine solche Sprache auf der Oberfläche durch den Wind des Lebens bewegt werden . . . mag, so hat sie doch tiefer einen toten Bestandteil, und ist, durch den Eintritt des neuen Anschauungskreises, und die Abbrechung des alten, abgeschnitten von der lebendigen Wurzel”\(^{53}\) (68). As the passage indicates, Fichte considers foreign languages lethal to the living core of German. In this way, he advocates its linguistic isolation and discourages multilingualism.

---

\(^{51}\) “the former retained and developed the original language of the ancestral race, whereas the latter adopted a foreign language and gradually modified it after their own fashion” (48).

\(^{52}\) The Protestant Reformation (1520-1580) eliminated Latin from liturgies in German-speaking territories. Martin Luther translated the Bible into German in 1522. Neo-Latin remained in the Roman Catholic Church. Since the eighteenth century, the importance of Latin in academia and diplomacy was declining. Interest in Latin as the language of the Romans was briefly renewed around the beginning of the nineteenth century. French became the lingua franca of diplomacy. For details on relations between French and German, see Elias.

\(^{53}\) “Although such a [new] language may on the surface be stirred by the breeze of life, . . . deeper down it is dead and cut off from its living root by the admittance of the new sphere of intuitions and the abruption of the old” (54-55).
According to Fichte, the German nation displays a divine quality. He maintains that the Germans reflect the Divine most perfectly because of their language. His claim presupposes that the Divine reveals itself in a nation (H. Kohn 242). The quality of the reflection depends on the proximity of the country’s language to the protolanguage. In Fichte’s view, the Germans mirror the Divine most purely because their language falls closest to the protolanguage. His argument is recursive in the sense of Gal and Irvine who describe recursivity as a transposition of certain linguistic traits to a different register (37). As Fichte transfers the “sacred” quality of the protolanguage to the German nation, he imbues it with a similar sense of sacredness.

Fichte shares with Herder the same point of departure. Like Herder, Fichte presents language as demarcating the territory of a nation. He does so when he states that “allenthalben, wo eine besondere Sprache angetroffen wird, [ist] auch eine besondere Nation vorhanden”54 (200). Unlike Herder, Fichte evaluates the worth of a nation based on its language. For Herder, languages advance toward the state of humanity. For Fichte, German is already superior to other tongues, and its evolutionary goal is to protect itself from foreign intrusion. In this sense, Fichte advocates a linguistic isolation of German.

To ensure that German develops in isolation, Fichte claims that nations reflect the Divine appropriately if they develop separately (214). He argues, “Nur wie jedes dieser letzten [Völkern], sich selbst überlassen, . . . sich entwickelt und gestaltet, tritt die Erscheinung der Gottheit in ihrem eigentlichen Spiegel heraus, so wie sie soll”55 (214). Here, Fichte asserts that countries distort their reflection of the Divine when they interact with each other. Since Fichte defines nations through the prism of their language, the separation of nations translates into the

---

54 “wherever a particular language is found, there exists also a particular nation” (161).
55 “Only as each of those peoples, left to itself . . ., develops and takes shape, is the appearance of divinity reflected in its proper mirror, as it should be” (172).
disconnection of languages. In this way, Fichte uses religious arguments to justify his call for making German resistant to foreign tongues.

According to Fichte, the preservation of the value of a country requires linguistic purity. He prohibits engaging with foreign cultures in the following statement: “Nur in den unsichtbaren . . . Eigentümlichkeiten der Nationen, als demjenigen, wodurch sie mit der Quelle ursprünglichen Lebens zusammenhängen, liegt die Bürgschaft ihrer gegenwärtigen und zukünftigen Würde, Tugend, Verdienste; werden diese durch Vermischung und Verreibung abgestumpft, so entsteht Abtrennung von der geistigen Natur, aus dieser Flachheit”\(^{56}\) (214). In this quote, the value of a nation derives from its ability to resist foreign languages. The worth of the country diminishes when its language accepts foreign admixtures because they taint the link of the national language to the divine source of life. This passage implies the detriment of language contact to the nation’s value. Fichte illustrates the impact of foreign elements on language through the metaphor of flatness, with flatness denoting spiritual death. Hence, Fichte delegitimizes multilingualism under the pretext of protecting the link of the mother tongue to the divine source of life.\(^{57}\)

Fichte’s demand for linguistic purity extends beyond theoretical to include practical consequences for every state’s subject. He views human fate as aligned with the national fate and portrays this alignment as an ethical imperative. According to him, a noble person (\textit{ein edler Mensch}) is loyal to his nation and recognizes that his permanence depends on “die selbständige Fortdauer seiner Nation”\(^{58}\) (130). In other words, the life of the individual and the nation are tied, and state subjects must honor and implement national principles. Fichte reminds his audience

---

\(^{56}\) “Only in the invisible particularities of nations . . ., as that which connects them with the source of original life, lies the guarantee of their present and future dignity, virtue, and merit. If these particularities are dulled by adulteration and friction, then this flatness gives rise to a separation from spiritual nature” (172).

\(^{57}\) A similar claim appears in Fichte’s 1800 \textit{Geschlossene Handelsstaat}, where he asserts that linguistic isolation is the proper environment for developing a distinct national character. See H. Kohn 237.

\(^{58}\) “the independent perpetuation of his nation” (104).
that the national law is the development “ohne Einmischung und Verderbung durch irgendein Fremdes,” thereby urging his listeners to implement linguistic purity through their linguistic choices (129). At this point, as linguistic purity becomes a norm for all state subjects, it delegitimitizes and suppresses multilingualism. Here again, Fichte associates foreign tongues with corruption.

In this section, Fichte sacralizes German as the only living language on earth. For him, a living language means one that has a direct link to the divine source of life. Fichte condemns multilingualism as lethal to the living core of German.

**Salvation and Slavery**

Fichte marshals the Christian doctrine of salvation to reinforce the halo of sacredness around the German language. He asserts that only the Germans can save the world, and must see that salvation as their mission. According to him, the world needs such redemption in the wake of Napoleonic wars and the failure of the French Revolution to establish a world order of equality. By salvation, Fichte means a Christian renewal of the world, an age of God. Fichte sees Christianity as a true religion capable of animating the world because it contains “ein[en] Grundbestandteil, in dem Wahrheit ist, und der ein Leben . . . sicher anregt” (93). He clarifies that the renewal denotes a sanctification of the culture of antiquity. The task of Christianity is thus, “diese Religion in die vorhandene Bildung des Altertums zu verflößen, und die letzte dadurch zu vergeistigen und zu heiligen” (101). Fichte assigns this mission to the Germans.

Fichte envisions that the sanctification of the culture of antiquity would pave the way for the Christian state of equality. According to him, the whole of humankind strives toward this

---

59 “without admixture of and corruption by some alien element” (104).
60 “a kernel of truth that is sure to stimulate life” (75).
61 “to transfuse this religion into the prior culture of antiquity and thereby to spiritualise and sanctify it” (81).
goal. Fichte’s notion of the Christian state lacks clarity in his *Reden* but becomes explicit in 1813 *Staatslehre*, where he hopes that Christianity will replace traditional forms of government (H. Kohn 244). Christianity, Fichte avows, “must become the principle of constitution. We must arrive on this earth at a point where God alone and all-inclusively may rule as an ethical substance through free will and understanding, so that . . . all other rule over man may simply and clearly disappear . . . [and all men] enter the general state of equality” (qtd. in H. Kohn 232). Here, Fichte posits that Christianity will create human equality and an egalitarian political structure worldwide. However, in declaring Christianity the true religion, he discredits other faiths.\(^6\) Since he describes the age of God as the objective of the entire world, one can infer that Fichte advocates a global hegemony of Christianity.\(^6\)

According to Fichte, the Germans’ language entitles them to their salvific mission. As the people with the only living language, the Germans are the most suitable nation for this task. He then adds that the Germans can redeem the world because their language has contributed to their superior culture. From his perspective, only a culturally superior nation is entitled to lead the world to salvation. As a demonstration of the Germans’ cultural superiority, Fichte states that they have perfected (*vollendet*) philosophy (100). To set them further apart from other nations, he observes how the Germans’ penchant for philosophy relies on their language. It is natural, Fichte explains, “daß das Volk der lebendigen Sprache Fleiß und Ernst haben, und Mühe anwenden werde, in allen Dingen, dagegen das der toten Sprache die geistige Beschäftigung mehr für ein genialisches Spiel halte”\(^6\) (84). Here, Fichte evidently derives the cultural differences between nations based on what languages they speak. For him, the Germans’

---

\(^6\) For instance, Robert Michael observes that Fichte’s notion of Christianity delegitimizes Judaism (7).\(^6\) Interestingly, Fichte’s notion of the Christian state is the opposite of French secularism and anti-clericalism.\(^6\) “that the people speaking a living language shows diligence and earnestness and effort in all things, whereas the people speaking a dead language looks upon intellectual activity more as an ingenious game” (67).
philosophical inclination results from their living language, whereas other nations are less intellectually disposed because they lack a language with the living root. Since German is the sole living language, only the Germans have “a true culture” (H. Kohn 239). In this way, Fichte creates a rigid cultural and linguistic hierarchy and locates German at its pinnacle.

By extolling German philosophy, Fichte casts the word “German” as an icon for intellectual perfection. According to Gal and Irvine, the process of iconization establishes a particular linguistic feature as encapsulating an essence of a group (37). To create such an icon, Fichte repeatedly associates the word “German” with philosophical superiority and the concept of cultural excellence with linguistic purity. With that assumption, German must continue resisting foreign elements to remain culturally paramount. In this manner, Fichte reaffirms his norm of linguistic isolation.65

At first, the salvific mission of the Germans may seem ennobling. Fichte explains that his goal, the elevation of other cultures to a higher status, begins with teaching them German. As he underscores that they will acquire German morals along with language, he clarifies his aim: to impart German values to foreign cultures. However, Fichte’s model of education implies the inferiority of foreign cultures. To begin with, he argues that foreigners do not speak in a proper way and then defines the task of the Germans as showing foreigners, “wie sie, der Stammsprache . . . gemäß, sprechen sollten”66 (73). Here, Fichte wants to instill in foreigners an appreciation for their ancestral language. Given that he portrays German as the only living language, the appreciation of ancestral languages would entail that foreigners recognize the inferiority of their

65 In addition, Fichte claims that the Germans are entitled to save the world because of their religiousness. He praises Martin Luther for exposing corruption within the Church and for stirring religious interests in the Germans (95). Since Christianity was the prevailing religion in Europe in Fichte’s time, his description of the Germans as the most spiritually inclined people is at odds with his ostensible goal of equality. In prioritizing the Germans over other Christians, Fichte suggests that non-German Christians are either second-rate believers or not religious enough.  
66 “how they ought to speak, in accordance with their ancestral language” (59).
tongues to the German. Next, Fichte asserts that the German’s predisposition to educate others rests on their excellent knowledge of language matters and their ability to understand foreign tongues “weit gründlicher . . . denn jeder selbst, der sie redet”\textsuperscript{67} (73). Fichte concedes that nonnatives can acquire German, albeit with great difficulty (73). In exaggerating the linguistic competence of the Germans, Fichte suggests that one can learn nothing from foreigners. Like Herder, Fichte dislikes French and seeks to curtail its presence in German culture. Unlike Herder, however, Fichte’s negative depiction of foreign languages aims not to foster the development of German literature but to bolster the sense of German cultural superiority.

Fichte’s notion of education resembles a master-slave relation. To be ennobled by German, one must remain silent until the German language fully reshapes one’s mentality. Fichte elucidates that education reaches its perfection when “[das Volk] sich der Einwirkung dieser fremden Sprache [Deutsch] ganz frei hingebe, und sich bescheide, sprachlos zu bleiben, so lange bis es in den / [sic] Kreis der Anschauungen dieser fremden Sprache hineingekommen [ist]”\textsuperscript{68} (67). Here, he makes explicit that foreigners must willingly submit to German and remain without a voice in the society until German molds them anew. By demanding that nonnatives remain silent, Fichte demotes them to slaves and, in the process, suggests their lack of value and their inability to contribute to German culture. In the end, this suggestion only serves to reinforce the image of German superiority. Moreover, Fichte’s model seems to eradicate the heritages of foreigners because it forces them to embrace the German worldview without preserving their own. The end product of such an education is a copy of a German man. In this sense, Fichte’s model promotes the master-slave relation rather than equality.

\textsuperscript{67} “better . . . than the foreigner himself who speaks them” (58).

\textsuperscript{68} “the people submits entirely freely to the influence of this foreign language [German] and is content to remain speechless until it has entered the sphere of intuitions of this foreign language” (54).
Fichte’s concept of education conflicts with his ideal of equality. He endorses the law of the mightier when he allows the Germans (the original people) to enslave other nations. He says, “Ein der Natur treu gebliebenes Volk kann, wenn seine Wohnsitze ihm zu enge werden, dieselben durch Eroberung des benach/barten [sic] Bodens erweitern wollen, . . . und es wird sodann die früheren Bewohner vertreiben; . . . es kann endlich die früheren Bewohner des eroberten Bodens, als eine gleichfalls brauchbare Sache, wie Sklaven der einzelnen unter sich verteilen.”69 Nothing could be further from the ideal of a benevolent edification than conquering other nations to expand the German territory. In this passage, Fichte devalues other countries as mere commodities and sources of booty. In this regard, his concept of education strives for the perpetuation of German supremacy instead of equality.

Fichte’s distinction between tolerant and imperial nations inadvertently exposes the hegemonic aspirations in his notion of education. According to him, tolerant countries cultivate their values while treating other cultures with respect (218). He underscores that the Germans belong to this category (218). By contrast, imperial nations seek to conquer others and maintain that “es gebe nur eine einzige Weise als gebildeter Mensch zu bestehen, . . . [und] alle übrigen Menschen in der Welt hätten keine andere Bestimmung, denn also zu werden, wie sie sind, . . . sie wollen nur alles Bestehende vernichten, und außer sich allenthalben eine leere Stätte hervorbringen, in der sie nur immer die eigne Gestalt wiederholen können”70 (218). In this quote, when Fichte condemns imperial nations for their hegemonic ambitions, he has France in mind. However, his education model matches the imperial type. Just as imperialist countries seek to

---

69 “A people that has remained true to nature can, if its territories have become too narrow, desire to enlarge them . . . by conquering neighboring lands, and then it will drive out the former inhabitants; . . . it may, finally, treat the former inhabitants of the conquered territory as a likewise useful commodity and share them out among its members as slaves” (167).

70 “there is only one possible way to exist as a man of culture, . . . [and] the rest of humanity has no other destiny than to become just like them, . . . They want merely to annihilate all that exists and, beyond themselves, to create everywhere an empty space in which they can only ever reproduce their own form” (175).
subjugate other political entities, Fichte’s notion of education aims at reformatting societies in the German fashion, thereby affirming German culture as the proper one.

An example of such colonization by language is the Kulturkampf, the Germanization campaign implemented in territories acquired by Prussia during the 1772–1795 partitions of Poland. Ethnically Polish, the population there had spoken Polish for centuries and fiercely guarded its language. To Germanize those regions, Prussia introduced policies removing Polish from the administration, the press, artistic organizations, and the courts. Throughout 1872 and 1873, the Prussians imposed German in school instruction and, in 1876, made the German language mandatory in all public communication. To stifle the Polish language, the Prussians resettled Polish-speaking teachers to other parts of Prussia and imprisoned clergy members who propagated the use of Polish. In 1885, Prussia conducted mass expulsions of ethnic Poles and banned Polish immigration (Brubaker 133). To prevent Poles from settling in those regions, the 1898 government order urged clerks to discriminate against Poles seeking to acquire land. In 1908, Prussia legitimized confiscating Polish estates to enable their assignment to German owners (132). Sadly, those historical events correspond to Fichte’s model of education. For the Prussian authorities, German was the desired language. To give Poles the Prussian mold, the Prussian government delegitimized their language, forced them to speak German, and sought to eradicate Polish by removing Polish teachers. The Prussian government created no structures to mediate between Polish and German speakers. Poles responded to those Germanization efforts in several uprisings, which did not put the country back on the map but emboldened the desire among Poles to preserve their language.72

---

71 The only exception was the city of Poznan, where religion could be taught in Polish (Brubaker 129).
72 For a detailed account of the Kulturkampf, see Brubaker 128-37.
In this part, Fichte sacralizes German by ascribing to it a salvific mission. He affirms the Germans’ entitlement as world-redeemers because of their living language and superior culture. He posits that German will ennoble other cultures by giving them the German mold.

**Truthfulness and Virtue**

Fichte attributes truthfulness to German as a way to intensify the nimbus of sacredness around it. He maintains that German is never a means of deception precisely because it is a living language. He cautions, “daß eine . . . im Grunde tote . . . Sprache sich auch sehr leicht verdrehen zu allen Beschönigungen des menschlichen Verderbens misbrauchen läßt, was in einer niemals erstorbenen nicht also möglich ist”\(^{73}\) (68). Here, he conveys that a living language equates to a language of truthfulness. In a similar vein, Fichte avows that German is formed \((gebildet)\) “zum Ausdrucke des Wahren”\(^{74}\) (227). Evidently, Fichte stylizes German as the language of honesty and truth. However, he inadvertently undercuts his image of German when he asserts that German speech can fall prey to malice \((Tücke)\) (71). If German can serve to deceive people, then, it falls to reason that it no longer counts as the language of truthfulness. With this in mind, Fichte urges his audience to avoid malicious statements in German (71).

According to Fichte, the ethical substance of a language diminishes with its distance from the protolanguage. He regards the protolanguage as an epitome of morality because of its closeness to the Divine. Fichte maintains that the ancient Germanic tribes inherited those moral standards from the original people through language. With this description, Fichte reveals that he perceives ethical values as hereditary and transmissible through language (67). In his view, language shapes one’s mentality. Like Roman historian Tacitus in his *Germania* (ca. 98 CE),

\(^{73}\) “that a language at bottom dead . . . also lends itself very easily to perversion and misuse in white-washing human corruption, something that is impossible in a language that has never become extinct” (55).

\(^{74}\) “to give expression to the truth” (181).
Fichte describes the ancient Germanic tribes as simple, virtuous, sincere, and the speakers of a pure language. To stylize them as ethical archetypes, he repeatedly imputes to them “Treue, Biederkeit, Ehre, Einfalt” (102). Most importantly, Fichte argues that the Germans in his time have the same ethical standards as their ancestors precisely because they speak the same language. The Germans, according to his logic, inherited the exact ethics of their ancestors because German did not mix with any tongues. Put another way, here Fichte deploys his previous remarks on the purity of German to stylize his German contemporaries as heirs to the ancient Germanic moral code. With this move, he conflates the ancient Germans with his contemporaries.

Fichte portrays foreign languages as morally corruptive, accusing Latin of having degraded the morals of ancient languages (69-70). He indicates that Neo-Latin words vitiate the ethical standards in German when he states, “Wer nun den Deutschen dennoch dieses fremde und römische Sinnbild künstlich in die Sprache spielen wollte, der würde ihre sittliche Denkart offenbar herunterstimmen” (69). Here, Fichte uses the word *künstlich* (artificial) to suggest the unnaturalness of Neo-Latin borrowings. Unlike Herder, Fichte accords no merit to such borrowings. In his eyes, Neo-Latin words are superfluous. For example, Fichte describes the Neo-Latin word *Humanität* (humanity) as unworthy of being transplanted into German because the word means *Menschlichkeit*, that is, being a human rather than an animal (69). He conceals that the word *Humanität* also implies philanthropy, thus depriving the term of its positive

---

75 “loyalty, integrity, honor, simplicity” (82). Fichte consistently praises the Germans for their piety, honesty, and modesty (103). Decades later, Richard Wagner portrays the Germans in similar terms as honest and virtuous, albeit naïve. Like Fichte, he associates the French with superficiality and low morals. On Wagner’s comments on the Germans and the French, see Bernstein 72.

76 “Whoever nevertheless wished to smuggle this foreign symbol of Roman origin artificially into the language of the Germans would obviously degrade their moral way of thinking” (55-6).
connotation and diminishing its overall meaning. Clearly, Fichte seeks to insulate German from Neo-Latin.

Moreover, Fichte associates foreign languages with vice, downgrading them even further. He mistranslates the word *Popularität* (popularity) by stating that it connotes a vice. For him, *Popularität* means flattery, that is, “Haschen nach Gunst beim großen Haufen”\(^77\) (70). In this way, Fichte re-signifies the term *Popularität* and expunges its connotation of prominence. Additionally, Fichte portrays the existence of the word *Popularität* as evidence of the debasement of Roman culture. One can sense this suggestion in the following comment: “Dieser [der frühere Römer] sahe alle Tage die schmiegsame Höflichkeit des ehrgeizigen Kandidaten gegen alle Welt”\(^78\) (70). In this passage, Fichte stigmatizes Roman culture by portraying flattery as characteristic of the entire Roman culture. Next, he claims that German does not have an equivalent for the word *Popularität* (in Fichte’s sense of flattery) and treats this absence as proof that the Germans have impeccable morals. Fichte concludes that the Germans are not even able to form a clear image (*ein klares Bild*) of what the word *Popularität* means because of their unfamiliarity with flattery (70). Clearly, Fichte mistranslates Neo-Latin words to glorify German culture and to condemn Roman culture.

Fichte depicts German and Latin in sharply contrasting terms to associate German with morality and Latin with contamination. He argues that the goal of importing Neo-Latin words into German is, “Laster und Tugend also durcheinander zu rühren, daß es kein leichtes Geschäft ist, dieselben wieder zu sondern”\(^79\) (71). In this quote, Fichte associates Neo-Latin with vice and German with virtue to suggest that German must be protected from the contamination with Neo-

\(^77\) “currying favor with the mob” (56).
\(^78\) “Every day the latter [the Roman] witnesses with his own eyes the ambitious candidate’s supple courtesy to one and all” (56).
\(^79\) “stir together vice and virtue so that it is no easy task to separate them again” (57).
Latin. Again, he perceives Neo-Latin words as polluting German. For this reason, Fichte advises replacing Neo-Latin words with German equivalents, but, instead of the actual counterparts, he chooses words with explicitly positive connotations. He replaces *Humanität* (humanity) with *Menschenfreundlichkeit* (philanthropy) and *Popularität* (popularity) with *Leutseligkeit* (affability, a friendly disposition), thereby underscoring the disparity between Neo-Latin and German (71).

To discourage multilingualism, Fichte describes foreign languages as fashionable yet worthless. He stresses, “Was in diesen Sprachen man nur vom Ausländer selbst lernen kann, sind meistens aus Langeweile und Grille entstandene neue Methoden des Sprechens”\(^8\) (73). Here, Fichte links foreign tongues with fashion, fancy, and boredom to suggest that they represent fanciful decorations without lasting merit. He deprives foreign languages of worth, connecting them to boredom and whim. With this in mind, Fichte admonishes the Germans to teach others that speaking foreign languages has no value and offends “die althergebrachte gute Sitte”\(^9\) (73). In this way, Fichte again advocates protecting German from foreign tongues.

Fichte mobilizes the idea of linguistic purity for the unification of German states against Napoleon, and not to promote or develop German. Since the seventeenth century, German purists had been arguing for the development of German vernacular and against the presence of French and Latin in German culture.\(^10\) By contrast, Fichte’s political agenda—and not his linguistic concerns—motivate his attack on foreign languages. He imbues German with religious and ethical values to portray German culture as an ideal worth defending by all German states. He

\(^8\) “In these languages, all that can be learned from the foreigner himself are new fashionable locutions, which are mostly the products of boredom and caprice” (59).

\(^9\) “traditional good manners” (59).

\(^10\) The first German purist organization was established in 1617 (Russ 15). On language purism in Germany, see Russ.
utilizes religion and ethics to gain the support of all social classes and describes foreign languages in adverse terms to enhance the attractiveness of his idealized image of German culture. His picture of that culture serves to consolidate German states against France. It is worth noting that Fichte’s examples, including *Humanität* (humanity) and *Liberalität* (liberality), evoke the ideas of the French Revolution (70). In condemning the use of those words, he indirectly attacks the French.

Fichte stylizes the Germans as a bulwark of Europe, stressing that linguistic isolation catalyzes international peace. He emphasizes this connection in his depiction of the German nation as an oasis of peace:

> So saß die deutsche Nation, durch gemeinschaftliche Sprache und Denkart sattsam unter sich vereinigt, . . . in der Mitte von Europa da, als scheidender Wall nicht verwandter Stämme, zahlreich und tapfer genug, um ihre Grenzen gegen jeden fremden Anfall zu schützen, . . . durch ihre ganze Denkart wenig geneigt, Kunde von den benachbarten Völkerschaften zu nehmen, in derselben Angelegenheiten sich zu mischen, und durch Beunruhigungen sie zur Feindseligkeit aufzureizen.\(^83\) (207)

The passage underscores that linguistic seclusion stimulates international peace. Again, foreign cultures appear as intruders. Fichte adds that the linguistic isolation of the Germans had made them disinterested in colonizing other continents (207). The underlying message is here that German must remain resistant to foreign intrusion to ensure international peace. Multilingualism is thus undesirable.

---

\(^83\) “Thus lay the German nation, sufficiently united by a common language and a way of thinking . . . in the middle of Europe, as a wall dividing unrelated tribes. It was numerous and brave enough to protect its frontiers against any foreign incursion . . . and little inclined by its whole way of thinking to take notice of the neighboring peoples, to meddle in their affairs or provoke their hostility by harassing them” (167).
Fichte’s image of the peaceful German nation is questionable for two reasons. First, historical records show that German states, such as Prussia, had colonies in Africa since 1682. Second, his portrayal of foreign cultures as intruders disseminates xenophobia (H. Kohn 241). In this sense, Fichte’s idealized image of the isolated German nation provides a malleable ground for ideological exploitation. In particular, the idea of a peaceful bulwark reinforces the validity of linguistic purity.

Fichte’s description of the German language propagates prejudice against foreign tongues. By restricting moral and religious qualities to German, he elevates it above other tongues and thus devalues them. Similarly, by portraying foreign languages as corrosive of German’s living character, he mandates linguistic purity and discredits multilingualism in toto. However, his demand for linguistic purity conflicts with his belief in the Germans’ mission to edify other cultures. If language contact is lethal to the living core of German, then the Germans cannot teach their language to other cultures. An imposition of German upon foreign cultures would in turn contradict Fichte’s goal of equality. In this regard, his notion of education endorses silencing foreigners to ensure the hegemony of German culture. One might argue that Fichte’s call for protecting German from foreign influences reveals not its greatness but weakness.

In this part, Fichte glorifies German by attributing to it truthfulness and virtue. To suppress multilingualism, he links foreign languages with moral corruption, vices, boredom, and caprice. To promote linguistic purity, Fichte describes linguistic isolation as conducive to international peace.

**Conclusion**

Herder and Fichte pave the way for German Romantic nationalism when they define a nation through the prism of language. They sacralize the notion of the mother tongue through
imbuing it with ethical and religious values. In Herder’s eyes, loyalty to one’s native tongue is a moral imperative, whereas using foreign languages is a sin against one’s native tongue. Fichte surrounds the concept of the mother tongue with an aura of sacredness through stylizing German as honest, virtuous, ennobling, and possessing the living core. Both writers advocate shielding German from foreign languages. In Herder’s view, foreign tongues undermine the strength of the nation. For Fichte, foreign languages are morally corruptive and endanger the living root of German. By ascribing ethical and religious qualities to the mother tongue, Herder and Fichte create the quasi-sacredness of the native language. Through their disparaging portrayals of foreign languages, both writers discredit multilingualism and embed hostility to foreign languages within the Romantic concept of the mother tongue. In this way, Herder and Fichte grant multilingualism no space. By attributing religious and ethical values to the mother tongue, both writers produce the nimbus of sacredness around both the native language and the idea of linguistic purity, thereby discouraging multilingualism and advocating linguistic isolation.

Herder and Fichte define a nation as a linguistic community with a shared culture. Throughout the nineteenth century, however, nationalism takes an ethnic turn, as nations become increasingly defined as communities of descent. German states begin to emphasize blood relations and introduce the principle of *jus sanguinis* (right of blood), according to which nationality depends on neither one’s birthplace nor length of residence, but on the citizenship of one’s parents. This principle aims to make the connection between state and citizen much stronger. Descent becomes perceived as preserving “the identity and the substance of the nation” more efficiently than language, birthplace, and length of residence (Brubaker 123). In France and

---

84 On the Nazi misappropriation of Herder, see Schneider.
the United States, by contrast, nationality law operates on the principle of *jus soli* (right of soil), which makes citizenship available to people born in the country’s territory.

The German Romantic veneration for the mother tongue continues throughout the nineteenth century, in parallel to ethnic nationalism. For example, Wagner formulates his notion of Germanness in geographical and linguistic terms. He celebrates the Germans for living in the same territory for centuries and for speaking their unique and unchanging language. For him, Germanness is unalterable and German is the mother of genius. Moreover, language purism and racial discourse progressively inform the German Romantic concept of the mother tongue. Both language purism and racial discourse will be discussed in the following chapter.

---

85 For a discussion of Wagner’s notion of Germanness, see Bernstein.
Chapter Two

Adorno on Linguistic Purity and the Manufacturing of Homogeneity

The preceding chapter examined how the German Romantics sacralize the notion of the mother tongue by imbuing it with ethical and religious qualities. The analysis of Herder’s works demonstrated that he advocates loyalty to a mother tongue as a moral imperative. The examination of Fichte’s speeches revealed that he stylizes German as truthful, virtuous, ennobling, and having a living core, that is, a unique link to a divine source of life. The Romantic sacralization of the idea of the mother tongue served to stir the German national spirit while endorsing linguistic purity and hostility to foreign languages and multilingualism.

This chapter explores how Theodor Adorno opposes the German Romantic paradigm of national identity. The central argument here is that Adorno debunks the myth of linguistic purity and rehabilitates foreign languages by employing *Fremdwörter* (foreign derivations) in his texts and by advocating the use of *Fremdwörter* as a means of revitalizing German. *Fremdwörter* are borrowings that have assimilated to German but remain recognizable to native speakers as foreign (Yildiz 68). In the first part of this chapter, Adorno’s critique of language purism is analyzed against the backdrop of the Nazi cult of the mother tongue, their anti-*Fremdwort* politics, and their concept of *Umvolkung* (linguistic assimilation). The next section explicates Adorno’s use of *Fremdwörter*. The following part examines Adorno’s remarks on an affinity between linguistic and racial purity against the background of the Nazi race discourse. The final section relates Adorno’s metaphor of a linguistic *Eintopf* (a one-pot stew) to both the Nazi idea of societal uniformity and Adorno’s reflections on authoritarian personalities, that is, subjects susceptible to ideologies. This chapter concludes that Adorno refutes the myth of linguistic
purity and employs *Fremdwörter* to rejuvenate the postwar German but prioritizes his native tongue over other languages.

Adorno’s essays on *Fremdwörter* remain understudied. Martin Jay describes how Adorno rejects the notion of authenticity in language but omits to discuss Adorno’s use of borrowings. Similarly, Timothy Bewes explains how Adorno seeks to avert language reification that means an ossification of words into empty sayings. However, Bewes does not analyze Adorno’s reflections on *Fremdwörter*. Shierry Weber Nicholsen observes that Adorno utilizes *Fremdwörter* to make his texts more musical, but she does not scrutinize any instances of his borrowings. Thomas Levin argues that foreign expressions enable Adorno to counteract linguistic nationalism, that is, the cult of language for nationalistic purposes. Levin summarizes Adorno’s English expressions and interprets them biographically but analyzes neither Adorno’s *Fremdwörter* nor his English works. Literary scholar Yasemin Yildiz aptly describes Adorno as a post-monolingual writer, neither monolingual nor multilingual (108). She explains how Adorno deploys *Fremdwörter* to refute language purism, to illustrate social alienation, and to heighten the intensity of his texts. However, Yildiz neither relates Adorno’s observations on *Fremdwörter* to the Nazi language ideology nor discusses his thoughts on the healing qualities of borrowings. Yildiz overlooks Adorno’s English works.

**Language Purism and Organicity**

Throughout his writings, Adorno emphasizes the relevance of language in shaping postwar German society. He characterizes language as one of the most essential reasons

---

86 As Jay argues, Adorno views the idea of an authentic language as “sacred gibberish” (“Taking on the Stigma of Inauthenticity” 23).

87 For a feminist reading of Adorno’s *Fremdwörter*, see Cheng. She criticizes Adorno’s sexual portrayal of the human relationship to language. Cheng claims that Adorno’s use of *Fremdwörter* reveals his desire to reconnect with his origin, thereby undercutting his idea of homelessness (76).
motivating his return from his American exile to Germany after World War II. In his correspondence with his friend Siegfried Kracauer, Adorno insists on the need to cultivate German in postwar reality, despite German’s established association with the Nazis. He repeatedly urges Kracauer to write in German, “Du weißt, wie starsinnig ich in dieser Hinsicht bin, trotz des Geschehenen, . . . uns selber das nochmals nicht anzutun, was der Hitler ohnehin uns angetan hat” (475). In this quote, Adorno suggests that only writing in German can prevent the Germans from expropriating themselves again of their language. Noting that the Nazis deprived the Germans of their language by perverting German, Adorno outlines that the task of intellectuals includes the revival of German.

In Adorno’s view, revitalizing German requires first removing animosity toward Fremdwörter. In his 1959 essay “Wörter aus der Fremde” (WF), Adorno points to the symptoms of a long-term hostility (Feindschaft) to Fremdwörter in German society (222). He recollects that, during World War I, teachers would admonish students to avoid “überflüssige Fremdwörter” (217). He discerns similar anti-Fremdwort attitudes after World War II. For instance, many German listeners criticized his radio lecture on Proust for its excessive use of foreign vocabulary (216). Similarly, many faulted his speech at a German émigré association in the United States as overburdened with foreign expressions, even though he had refrained from using them (216). Due to the magnitude of those incidents and a wave of protest letters he received, Adorno frames hostility to Fremdwörter as a societal problem and locates its source in

88 See “Auf die Frage: Was ist deutsch?” (AF) 699.
89 “You know how stubborn I am in this respect, despite everything that had happened, . . . not to do to ourselves again what Hitler had already done to us.” Unless otherwise indicated, all translations are mine. Throughout his 1950s and 1960s letters to Kracauer, Adorno repeatedly underscores the need to write in German (482-588). On various postwar attitudes toward German, see Arendt 13 and Steiner, “The Hollow Miracle.”
90 “unnecessary foreign words” (186). Adorno attended the Kaiser-Wilhelm-Gymnasium in Frankfurt from 1913 to 1921 (Claussen 57).
the German tradition of language purism, a movement originating in the seventeenth century to promote German by curtailing the use of foreign languages in German culture.

Adorno condemns German purists for two reasons. He reproaches purists for disseminating the myth of an organic language that develops immanently. He delivers his most explicit criticism in his lesser-known 1930s essay “über den Gebrauch von Fremdwörtern” (ÜGF), published posthumously but thematically related to his 1959 article on Fremdwörter. As Adorno explains, German purists erroneously postulate that language evolves from within, without contact with other tongues (642); in this way, purists endorse linguistic isolation. In his view, the German Romantic concept of Ursprache, a primordial language that flows like a stream from a prehistoric origin, encapsulates the purist notion of language (640). Adorno disapproves of the notion of the prehistoric language when he describes the idea of Ursprache as a “romantische Wunschidee”91 (640).

To debunk the myth of organic and immanent language, Adorno draws attention to the etymology of several German words. He argues that German is neither organic nor immanent because it contains Fremdwörter and Lehnwörter (loanwords), namely borrowings that have fully assimilated into German and no longer sound foreign to native speakers (Yildiz 78). Among loanwords, Adorno includes the Italian borrowing “die Bank” (a bank) and the Latin borrowing “das Siegel” (a seal) (ÜGF 640). He mentions several Fremdwörter, such as the Greek-derived word “das Symbol” (a symbol) and the Latinate term “der Komplex” (a complex) (640). For him, those examples represent instances of “internal difference” within German (Yildiz 71). Neither Fremdwörter nor Lehnwörter would materialize if German were evolving...

91 “romantic fantasy” (286). For the German Romantic concept of the primordial language, see Chapter One.
from within. In this way, Adorno invalidates the German Romantic idea that language develops organically and immanently.\textsuperscript{92}

Adorno’s second charge holds that German purists disseminate a fear of foreign languages. As he observes, purists stigmatize foreign tongues by depicting \textit{Fremdwörter} as contaminants, “eiserne Male,” “wandernde Geschosskugeln,” and “Fremdkörper [, die] den Sprachleib bedrängen”\textsuperscript{93} (ÜGF 642). According to him, such descriptions insinuate that foreign languages are polluting, dangerous, and burdensome. He condemns the purists’ recommendations to excise foreign vocabulary from German because they falsely suggest that those vocabularies endanger the mother tongue (642). Such adverse images of \textit{Fremdwörter}, Adorno concludes, generate a misprision of foreign languages. It is worth noting that the German adjective “fremd” has several meanings, including “foreign,” “alien,” “strange,” “unfamiliar,” and “different.”\textsuperscript{94} As Adorno indicates, the word “fremd” acquires the connotation of “dangerous” due to the continuous descriptions of \textit{Fremdwörter} as a threat and pollutant.

The history of language purism in Germany validates Adorno’s observations. Since the seventeenth century, German purists coined German equivalents for French and Latin words and encouraged people to use German as a means of fostering the development of German vernacular. The first German purist organization emerged at Weimar in 1617 under the title “Fruchtbringende Gesellschaft” (Russ 15).\textsuperscript{95} To establish German in literature, purists promoted a literary style free of foreign expressions. Throughout the seventeenth century, German purists would publish in French and Latin, the most powerful languages at the time, and advocate the

\textsuperscript{92} For the German Romantic notion of language, see Chapter One.
\textsuperscript{93} “iron stigmata,” “wandering cannonballs,” and “foreign bodies assailing the body of language” (288).
\textsuperscript{94} See \textit{Duden} 574.
\textsuperscript{95} The first German dictionary of \textit{Fremdwörter} appeared already in 1571 and contained over two thousand entries, mainly from Latin (Russ 15).
use of German. For example, Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz composed his texts in Latin and French while promoting writing in German (Yildiz 72).

Purist tendencies intensified in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries when linguistic purity began to function in the service of the nascent German national spirit. In this period, linguistic purity became increasingly associated with national belonging and often found expression through “the biological and organicist imagery” (74). Concomitantly, *Fremdwörter* became gradually stigmatized as exemplified here in 1816 remarks by German purist Friedrich Ludwig Jahn:

Foreign-derived words as such never go into the blood, even if they are called naturalized citizens a hundred thousand times. A foreign-derived word always remains a mere mongrel, without generative power; or else it would have to change its essence and become an originary sound and an originary word.

Without becoming an originary word, it goes through language ostracized. (qtd. in Yildiz 73)

Here, Jahn associates organicity with a generative power, nativeness, and the relation of blood. He depicts *Fremdwörter* as impotent, tainted, and forever non-native. As Yildiz puts it, Jahn interprets *Fremdwörter* as “biologically inassimilable outcasts” (74). In addition, here Jahn presents national belonging as a blood tie: A citizen must have indigenous blood. For him, *Fremdwörter* can never become “citizens” in the linguistic sense.

A similar emphasis on purity occurred in linguistic and literary trends in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries when language was portrayed as organic. In this period, German linguists claimed that languages evolve organically and produce separate and distinct cultures.
For example, Wilhelm von Humboldt insisted on the distinctness of tongues. German Romantic writers often depicted language as an organic nourishment and a cultural archive that must be kept pure. This association of purity with organicity continued until the early twentieth century.

Jahn’s case illustrates how the idea of linguistic purity turns into a social practice. He vilified foreign tongues, chiefly French, as poisonous and recommended physically combating their enthusiasts. Jahn transplanted his belief in linguistic purity into academia in 1810 when he launched the first German gymnastic association (Turnerschaft), which combined military training with training in linguistic purity. He not only required the members of his association to speak German without any French, Latin, or Polish traces, but also projected his contempt for foreign languages onto their speakers. Jahn characterized Latin and Slavic allies of Prussia as “welsche und wendische Helfer” who ruin Prussia. In Jahn’s time, the term “Wende” indicated a Slavic person, and the pejorative word “Welsch”—meaning “foreign”—denoted speakers of Latin and Romance languages. In this way, Jahn managed to disseminate fear of foreign languages and cultures through his organization.

In this part, Adorno invalidates the myth of linguistic purity. Pointing to the presence of Fremdwörter in German, he exposes that it does not evolve immanently. He cautions that the belief in linguistic purity spreads fear of foreign languages.

---

96 See “Einleitung zum Kawi-Werk.” Humboldt has no interest in stirring the German national spirit.
97 See H. Kohn 178.
98 See H. Kohn 276-278.
99 “Romance and Slavic helpers.” Jahn’s statement appears in H. Kohn 278. According to Jahn, a “polished” style serves to “hide the truth” (H. Kohn 271). He associates refined language with French and Latin.
100 In contemporary usage, the word “Welsch” is neutral and refers to French-speaking Switzerland. See Duden 1798.
101 In 1885, the central purist body became the Allgemeiner Deutscher Sprachverein that led aggressive anti-Fremdwort campaigns until 1940 (Yildiz 75). On the situation in the Austro-Hungarian Empire, where writers objected to the anti-Fremdwort agitation, see Yildiz 75-76.
The Nazi anti-Fremdwort Politics

Adorno discerns a close relationship between linguistic purity in German education during World War I and violence in Nazi Germany. In Minima Moralia (MM), a collection of aphorisms written predominantly in his American exile, Adorno outlines a trajectory from linguistic to physical violence. He states, “Von den Dienstboten und Gouvernanten . . . über die Lehrer aus dem Westerwald, die ihnen [Kindern] wie den Gebrauch der Fremdwörter so die Lust an aller Sprache austreiben, . . . geht es schnurstracks zu den Folterknechten der Gestapo und den Bürokraten der Gaskammern”¹⁰² (208). The Gestapo means Geheime Staatspolizei, the Secret State Police in Nazi Germany. In the quote, Adorno suggests that prohibiting the use of Fremdwörter amounts to a linguistic form of violence, fueling physical abuse. Just as the Westerwald teachers restrained the rights of their students when forbidding them to use Fremdwörter, Nazi officials violated human rights by torture and murder. Hence, Adorno’s image suggests that linguistic violence can lead and morph into physical abuse.

Adorno warns that anti-Fremdwort policies serve to homogenize language. He observes that nationalists rely on such policies to level language and create “in der Sprache das Eintopfgericht”¹⁰³ (218). An Eintopf is a thick stew that consists of various ingredients (usually vegetables) cooked together in one pot. As a metaphor for language, the Eintopf means a discourse made uniform through the removal of foreign vocabulary. German-Jewish philologist Victor Klemperer confirms that the Nazis homogenized language through eliminating foreign

---

¹⁰² “From the domestic servants and governesses . . ., by way of the teachers from Westerwald extirpating in them [children], along with the use of foreign words, all joy in language, . . . there is a straight line to Gestapo torturers and the bureaucrats of the gas chambers” (183).
¹⁰³ “one-dish-meals . . . in language” (187).
terms and inundating it with Nazi phrases. Like the *Eintopf*, the Nazi language was poor, “eintönig,” and “fixiert,”104 namely fixated on Nazi buzzwords (31).

Historical sources corroborate the importance of the cult of linguistic purity to Nazi techniques for the homogenization of language. For example, Wilhelm Frick, Minister of the Interior, condemned *Fremdwörter* in his 1933 speech:

> Our mother tongue . . . belongs to the noblest of values, whose preservation lies close to our heart. Unfortunately, its purity is not always cared for as much as is desirable. Even government offices employ superfluous *Fremdwörter*, which plainly endanger the comprehension of language among wide sections of the people. The school has in this respect important tasks to fulfill so that we can hand down the precious treasure of the German language pure and unadulterated.

(qtd. in Levin 118-19)

Frick’s comments reveal that he treats the mother tongue in a dignified fashion as a unique national treasure. Like German purists, he justifies the need to keep German clean by depicting *Fremdwörter* as contaminants and obstacles to understanding. Frick clearly ascribes the task of sanitizing German to educators.

Indeed, Nazi Germany broadly encouraged linguistic purity. Foreign languages remained in school curricula but without wide support. As Klemperer points out, after Hitler’s 1933 seizure of power, most students disappeared from Klemperer’s French course not only because he was a German-Jewish professor but also because learning French was deemed unpatriotic (52).105 Similarly, foreign literature did not vanish from syllabi but was taught in a way that reflected the Nazi ideology. For instance, Shakespeare’s works were interpreted as conveying

104 “monotonous” and “fixed” (20).
105 For attitudes of Nazi educators toward French, see Hutton 46-47. For Nazi education models, see Hutton 31-32.
anti-Semitic messages (Hutton 41). French classical dramas were seen as stressing societal cohesion and confessional unity (46-7). Without being banned, foreign languages remained in use for various purposes but no longer enjoyed broad public approval. Foreign tongues belonged to a humanistic style of education, whereas the Nazis preferred a völkisch model that stressed human devotion to homeland.

As Adorno notes, the Nazis purified the official language. For example, several institutions were renamed. The word “das Schrifttum” (scribing, written texts) replaced the Latin-derived word “die Literatur” (literature) in institutional names, such as Reichsschrifttumskammer (MM 193). Numerous foreign terms in public discourse were Germanized. For instance, the Greek-derived term “das Photo” (a photo) became “das Lichtbild” (a photograph, literally a light-image). The noun “der Fernsprecher” (a phone, literally a long-distance speaker) replaced the Greek derivation “das Telephon” (a phone) (Doerr 28). German products could only bear German names, and foreign names for textiles and colors were Germanized. For example, the adjective “beige” (beige), most likely borrowed from French, was changed to “sandfarben” (sand-colored), and the French-derived term “die Melange” (a mélange, a blend) was replaced with the word “die Mischung” (a mix).
Interestingly, Adorno observes that Nazi language practices sometimes fell outside of their official cult of linguistic purity. He points out that the Nazis used foreign terms to present themselves as “feine Leute” (WF 222). Indeed, linguistic and philological studies have shown that the Nazis employed *Fremdwörter*, mostly military terminology and fashionable words (Doerr 42). Such foreign expressions were deployed for “linguistic distancing” and “the effect” and included the Latin derivation “liquidieren” (to liquidate) and the Greek-derived word “gigantisch” (gigantic) (28). Klemperer adds that the Nazis occasionally used foreign expressions that sounded more sonorous and impressive than their German equivalents to manipulate public opinion. He illustrates, “Garant klingt bedeutsamer als Bürge und diffamieren imposanter als schlechtmachen. (Vielleicht versteht es auch nicht jeder, und auf den wirkt es dann erst recht)” (19). Here, he makes explicit that the Nazis sought to manipulate people through words that sounded fancy.

In fact, Nazi language practices were at odds with the rules of the *Deutscher Sprachverein*, the leading German purist organization. Purists welcomed Hitler’s seizure of power with a letter expressing hope for “the removal of offending foreign words and ugly or confusing jargon” (Hutton 43). They recommended replacing Nazi terms, such as “Nationalsozialismus,” with their German counterparts like “Volksgenossentum” or “Volksgenossenschaft” (43). The Nazis rejected those recommendations, excoriated purists, and, in 1938, prohibited discussing language purification in German press. Hitler’s 1940 order directed purists to close their organization (Yildiz 76).

---

109 “genteel folk” (191).
110 “Garant [guarantor] sounds much more persuasive than Bürge [supporter], and diffamieren [defame] far more impressive than schlechtmachen [run down]. (Perhaps some people won’t understand such words; they are precisely the ones who are most vulnerable)” (9).
111 In 1937, Goebbels excoriated purists for “not understanding that ‘Germanness’ comes from the essence of the people and is not derived from some dreamed up theory” (Hutton 43). The official Nazi line was that Hitler disliked artificially replacing the established *Fremdwörter* (Straßer 399). The Nazis explained why they rejected the purists’
In this part, Adorno cautions that linguistic purity enables regimes to homogenize language. He points to Nazi efforts to purify German. He also detects a discrepancy between the Nazi language ideology and Nazi language practices.

**The Nazi Cult of the Mother Tongue**

Adorno’s reference to the disparity between the Nazi language politics and their language practices reveals two tendencies in Nazi Germany: the cult of the mother tongue and the prioritization of race over language. Both currents were conceptually indebted to the German Romantic view that language formed the sole foundation of a nation and reflected its distinct character. The German Romantics translated the geographical distribution of languages into a geopolitical map with “autonomous authentic national essences living side by side but preserving their distinctness” (Hutton 288). Several linguists collaborating with the Nazis espoused this Romantic notion of language. For example, Leo Weisgerber propagated the view that language boundaries differentiated the non-Germans from the Germans, who survived the period before their 1871 unification “through the will to language” (Hutton 5). In his eyes, language was the glue of the nation.

However, the Romantic definition of the nation became incompatible with Germany’s internal linguistic shape in the early twentieth century. For instance, Germany included Polish territories that Prussia obtained during the 1772–1795 partitions of Poland, regions that spoke Polish despite the Prussian Germanization efforts. Furthermore, German was spoken in several countries. For example, German constituted one of the official languages in the multilingual Austro-Hungarian Empire that existed until 1918. In brief, the geographical distribution of

---

recommendations: “Die Durchführung dieser Bestrebungen würde eine babylonische Sprachverwirrung und eine Verarmung der deutschen Sprache zur Folge haben” (qtd. in Straßner 399).

112 See Brubaker 128-37.
languages did not reflect political borders, which indicates the insufficiency of identifying
nations through the prism of language.

Several linguists responded to this challenge by reinforcing the conceptual link between
the mother tongue and the nation. Those scholars shared a vitalistic-\textit{völkisch} inclination. For
instance, Georg Schmidt-Rohr disseminated the notion that language creates a uniform national
body. In his words, “Volk ist die aus der Kraft der Sprache gewachsene Gemeinschaft
einheitlicher Geistigkeit und einheitlichen Seelentums, es ist die Gruppenpersönlichkeit von
Eigenprägung”\textsuperscript{113} (qtd. in Thierfelder 258). Here, the nation appears as a uniform personality
sustained by its language. Schmidt-Rohr considers his idea of the nation as alternative to both the
Romantics and the race-based theory of the nation. Contrary to the Romantics, he insists that
language creates the national essence rather than mirroring it. Unlike racial theorists, Schmidt-
Rohr maintains that blood ties can neither generate nor sustain national commitment (Thierfelder
258). In his view, language alone can produce a strong sense of national belonging.\textsuperscript{114}

The vitalistic-\textit{völkisch} linguists continued the German Romantic project of sacralizing the
concept of the mother tongue. In his 1939 “Die zweite Ebene der Volkserhaltung” (ZE),
Schmidt-Rohr depicts the mother tongue as a national sanctuary when he argues, “Von da her
muß die Sprache . . . als Volksheiligtum verehrt werden, als Volkstum darstellende und
Volkstum erhaltende Macht. Sie muß als Königin gesehen werden und nicht . . . als das allzu
alltägliche Aschenbrödel”\textsuperscript{115} (88). In this quote, he conveys that the native language ought to be

\textsuperscript{113} “Nation is a community of a uniform spirituality and uniform souls growing from the force of language; it is a
group personality of its own character.”

\textsuperscript{114} Schmidt-Rohr prioritizes language over race only initially (Thierfelder 258). When the Nazis launch a procedure
to remove him from the Nazi party due to his views on language, he acknowledges the primacy of race over
language. In 1943, he becomes the head of the “Political Language Bureau,” a secret entity within the SS
(Schutzstaffel), the elite military unit of the Nazi party.

\textsuperscript{115} “Accordingly, language must be worshipped . . . as a national sanctuary, as a force constituting and sustaining the
nationhood. It [language] must be seen as a queen and not . . . the far too ordinary Cinderella.”
enshrined due to its nationhood-sustaining quality. The mother tongue’s ability to support nationhood forms its most crucial trait. In other words, Schmidt-Rohr exalts the mother tongue as the “sacred” energy of the nation. The contrast between the low register (Cinderella) and the high sphere (a queen) underscores the magnificence of the mother tongue, elevating the native language to a royal status—“a female deity” (Hutton 294).

To consecrate the idea of the mother tongue, Schmidt-Rohr employs religious overtones. In his 1939 “Rasse und Sprache” (RS), he claims, “So müssen denn, um der lebendigen, volkserhaltenden Kräfte willen, die von der tiefgegründeten, unerschütterlichen Liebe zur Muttersprache ausstrahlen, auch die heutigen [Einzelglieder] schon die Mutter Sprache [sic] als das Mysterium unserer Deutschheit achten und ehren lernen”116 (168). Here, Schmidt-Rohr portrays the mother tongue as the cultic essence of Germanness, with mystery evoking both religious rites and enigma. He underscores that the native language deserves a profound veneration because it represents the quintessence of Germanness. By linking language with religious rites, he endows the mother tongue with a quasi-religious halo.

Schmidt-Rohr advocates an international cult of the mother tongue when he suggests that all German citizens should adore it to affect the Germans abroad. He appeals, “Erst wenn wirklich das ganze Volk von einem selbstverständlich sicheren . . . Wissen um Heiligkeit und Größe der Muttersprache erfasst ist . . ., dann vermag dieses Wissen als eine wirkliche Kraft über die Grenzen hinweg zu den bedrohten Brüdern zu wehen”117 (ZE 88-89). He imagines here that the cult of the mother tongue flows from Germany to the Germans abroad. His admiration for

---

116 “Therefore, for the sake of the living and nationhood sustaining forces that radiate from a deeply rooted, unwavering love of the mother tongue, [the contemporary members] must also learn to respect and honor the mother tongue as the mystery of our Germanness.”

117 “Only when the entire nation is indeed seized by a self-evident, steady . . . knowledge of the sanctity and the magnitude of the mother tongue, then the knowledge can blow like a real force across borders to our endangered brothers.”
German may at first appear patriotic because, after all, he seems to promote devotion to one’s native language.

However, the cult of the mother tongue has serious ramifications for multilingual Germans. To uncover those consequences, one must relate Schmidt-Rohr’s idea of the mother tongue to the Nazi concept of *Umvolkung* (linguistic assimilation). Nazi linguists regarded race and language as not equally relevant to the *Volk*-identity. Schmidt-Rohr summarizes, “Wir Deutschen von heute verlangen im Grundfall zweierlei als Mindestforderung: erstens der Rasse nach deutschgültiges Blut, zweitens die deutsche Muttersprache”¹¹⁸ (RS 166). Nazi linguists consider race more primeval (*urtümlich*) than language and thus a precondition for belonging to national community (161). In other words, race governs people’s eligibility for the *Volk*-identity. In Schmidt-Rohr’s eyes, human linguistic practices verify national belonging: To maintain one’s *Volk*-identity, one must speak German. As Hutton evaluates, Schmidt-Rohr perceives language as a “decisive” factor because “race determines who is a potential member of Volk, but . . . language determines who actually is a Volksgenosse”—that is, a national comrade (291-92). Thus, one must speak German to retain one’s national identity. By implication, using other languages implies a loss of the *Volk*-identity.

According to Nazi linguists, the Germans experience *Umvolkung* and change their national loyalty when they permanently switch to foreign languages.¹¹⁹ Such people no longer count as national comrades. Schmidt-Rohr alludes to this issue when he complains that the Germans are losing their national identity, clarifying: “Überall auf der Welt . . . verlieren junge Einzelglieder deutscher Familien ihr deutsches Volkstum und werden zu Franzosen, Russen,

---

¹¹⁸ “We Germans of today require in principle minimum two different things: first, a valid German blood depending on the race, and second, the German mother tongue.”

¹¹⁹ See Michael and Doerr 405.
Amerikanern, indem die fremde Sprache zu ihrer Muttersprache wird”\(^{120}\) (ZE 82). He evidently expects multilingual Germans to commit to German and considers the Germans abroad “endangered” precisely because they are exposed to foreign tongues (89). In this way, Schmidt-Rohr construes foreign languages as a national threat. The implication for multilingual speakers is that they must choose German to maintain their Volk-identity. In this respect, the notion of Umvolkung becomes a conceptual tool for quashing foreign tongues and multilingualism.

Against this background, the Nazi cult of the mother tongue translates into an imposition of monolingualism.\(^{121}\)

To enforce monolingualism, the Nazis vilified the Jewish relationship to language as disloyal. As Hutton explains, the Jews were accused of lacking in “a sense of loyalty to their mother tongue, and were therefore regarded as having an ‘unnatural’ relationship to language” (5). Loyalty meant being monolingual. The Nazis portrayed the Jews as disloyal because the Jews were often multilingual and their sacred language, instead of German, was the language of Scriptures (5). For Nazi linguists, switching between German and another language amounted to infidelity toward the mother tongue. For this reason, they denounced the linguistic flexibility of Jewish speakers as unnatural.

Indeed, the Nazis stigmatized the Jewish manner of speaking and depicted Jewish utterances as lies. For example, Hitler writes that language, for a Jew, “is not a means of expressing his thoughts, but a means of concealing them. When he speaks French, he thinks Jewish” (qtd. in Hutton 300). Here, Jewish speech is associated with deception. Klemperer notes that German schools would often display derogatory slogans, such as, “Wenn der Jude deutsch

\(^{120}\) “Everywhere in the world . . . the young members of German families lose their German nationhood and become the French, the Russians, Americans when a foreign language becomes their mother tongue.”

\(^{121}\) For Nazi linguists, linguistic assimilation counted as “a moral crime” (Hutton 288). Like Schmidt-Rohr, Weisgerber reminds the Germans abroad that “to give up one’s language is to renounce oneself” (Hutton 121).
schreibt, lügt er” (43). Furthermore, Hitler describes the Jew as “stammering” and “jabbering
German with a Jewish accent” (qtd. in Hutton 300-301). Those images aim at discrediting Jewish
voices by suggesting that “Jewish” words are either dishonest or distorted.

Moreover, the vitalistic-völkisch linguists mythologized the notion of the mother tongue
in several ways. For instance, Weisgerber spread the view that language holds human
understanding spellbound. By the spell of language, he meant that it controls the human ability
to comprehend the world and that people become “mastered” by language as they internalize
grammatical structures and mental maps of generations (Hutton 122). Admittedly, language
influences the human capacity to express ideas. However, Weisgerber’s description of language
as transmitting a certain worldview fails to acknowledge the human ability to alter and fashion
worldviews and thus implies that people are ensnared in one linguistic mindset.

To mythologize the idea of the mother tongue, Weisgerber invokes the concept of
destiny. He claims that the Germans have a special destiny because of their language. In his
view, only the German nation is “named after its mother-tongue, and that shows that the destiny
of the German people is inextricably bound to its language” (qtd. in Hutton 125). Clearly, one
could make a similar claim about various nations: Poles are named after Polish, and French is the
language of French people. Thus, it is dubious to base a claim about national destiny on the
similarity between the name of the nation and its language. Weisgerber’s choice of the noun
“destiny” instead of the term “history” or “evolution” is telling because, unlike “history” and
“evolution,” the term “destiny” connotes something predetermined and, in contrast to “history,”
is future oriented. By associating the German language and people with the concept of destiny,

122 “When a Jew writes German he lies” (29).
123 See Steiner, After Babel 90.
Weisgerber inscribes both things within some predetermined historical trajectory and endows them with a mythical quality.

A pseudo-scientific veneer also helped to mythologize the idea of the mother tongue. For example, Weisgerber insists that the noun “die Muttersprache” (the mother tongue) is of pure Germanic origin and that its very emergence reveals that the Germans have a “direct emotional bond with their language” (Hutton 125). Weisgerber does not seem to notice that other languages also have their equivalents for the word “Muttersprache.” He neglects to mention that the noun “Muttersprache” is believed to be a calque of the Latin term “lingua materna.” In essence, Weisgerber tampers with etymology to project his ideal image of the mother tongue onto the history of German.

Moreover, the cult of the Volksgeist (national spirit) had contributed to the mythologization of the concept of the mother tongue. As political philosopher Erich Voegelin elucidates, the Volksgeist was the political religion in Nazi Germany. Voegelin claims that secularization and the rise of science in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries had undermined the status of religion and resulted in the “Dekapitierung Gottes” (56). In the wake of this process, human spirituality did not vanish but, instead, was channeled to secular ideas, such as humanism and the Volksgeist. Voegelin clarifies that “wenn Gott hinter der Welt unsichtbar geworden ist, dann werden die Inhalte der Welt zu neuen Göttern; wenn die Symbole der überweltlichen Religiosität verbannt werden, treten neue, aus der innerweltlichen

---

124 See Duden 1111.
125 Similarly, linguist Jost Trier claims that the word “Germanen” (Teutons) is indigenous (Hutton 125). In reality, the noun “Germane” is borrowed from the Latin word “Germanus” that is believed to have originated in the Celtic language (Duden 636).
126 “decapitation of God” (66).
Wissenschaftssprache entwickelte Symbole an ihre Stelle”⁵¹ (51). He indicates here that profane ideas replace religious symbols so that spirituality functions under the secular banner. In a sense, the Volksgeist becomes the new Godhead.

Voegelin argues that the cult of the Volksgeist draws on the Christian notion of “Ekklesia,” a collective body of believers. “Die christliche Idee,” Voegelin writes, “versteht die Ekklesia, die Gemeinde als den mystischen Leib Christi. . . . die Ämter der Ekklesia . . . ergänzen sich zur Einheit des irdischen Leibes, dessen Pneuma Christus ist”⁵² (33). In this passage, Voegelin explicates that the “Ekklesia” symbolizes the spiritual participation of believers in the body of Christ. When this image of the “Ekklesia” is applied to the notion of the Volksgeist, the idea of national spirit becomes sanctified and national community begins to resemble a religious congregation (57). Voegelin explains the result of this process in the following way: “Das Volk ist ‘das Volk der Vielheit’ als Gemeinschaft von Sprache, Brauchtum, Kultur, wirtschaftlichem Handeln, und es wird zum ‘Volk der Einheit’”⁵³ (57). In this quote, he conveys that national community becomes an integrated collective body, with participation in the Volk simulating a union with God.

The implications of the cult of Volksgeist for language are twofold. First, the mother tongue acquires a mystical radiance because the idealized image of national community sanctifies its language. Second, multilingual Germans are, in theory, precluded from participating in the mystical experience of the Volksgeist. If, according to the concept of Umvolkung, multilingual Germans’ choice of other languages relinquishes their national loyalty,

---

⁵¹ “when God has become invisible behind the world, then the things of the world become new gods. When the symbols of transcendental religiosity are banned, new symbols, developed out of the intramundane scientific language, take their place” (59).
⁵² “The Christian idea . . . understands Ekklesia to be the community as the mystical body of Christ. . . . the offices of the Ekklesia . . . complement one another to form the unity of the earthly body whose Pneuma is Christ” (34).
⁵³ “The ‘People’ are the ‘people at large,’ a community of language, custom, culture, economic trade. They become the ‘people of the union’” (67).
then they lose their spiritual connection to the national body. In this respect, foreign languages and multilingualism appear to block Germans from participating in national community.

In this section, Adorno’s comments on the inconsistencies between the Nazi language ideology and language practices are situated within the Nazi cult of the mother tongue. The tendency of Nazi linguists to sacralize and mythologize the native language exposes their drive toward linguistic purity. The cult of national spirit is shown as a factor bolstering the idea of linguistic purity.

**Adorno’s Rehabilitation of *Fremdwörter***

In sharp contrast to German purists and the Nazis, Adorno rehabilitates the status of *Fremdwörter* by praising their liberating effect on the human mind. He argues that the use of *Fremdwörter* constituted a form of a symbolic opposition to nationalism during World War I. Adorno clarifies, “Die Fremdwörter bildeten winzige Zellen des Widerstands gegen den Nationalismus im Ersten Krieg”\(^{130}\) (WF 218). In this way, Adorno implies that human linguistic practices can serve to resist nationalistic tendencies on a micro-scale. While it is questionable how much adolescent Adorno might have used foreign phrases to defy nationalism, his essential point remains that using *Fremdwörter* in speech and writing may serve as a symbolic act of opposing nationalism. Furthermore, he ascribes an emancipatory function to *Fremdwörter* by arguing that they may lead to “[einer] unnachgiebigen und weiterdrängenden Erkenntnis”\(^{131}\) (224). Here, he suggests that exposure to *Fremdwörter* may sharpen human perspicacity and alertness to language politics, thereby making people less susceptible to ideological manipulation. In stressing the edifying role of *Fremdwörter*, Adorno argues against any anti-*Fremdwort* attitudes.

---
\(^{130}\) “Foreign words constituted little cells of resistance to the nationalism of World War I” (186).
\(^{131}\) “a form of cognition that is unyielding and penetrating” (192).
In contrast to German purists and Nazi linguists, Adorno describes *Fremdwörter* as capable of reinvigorating German. He claims that they facilitate “eine Art Exogamie der Sprache”\(^{132}\) (218). Exogamy means marrying a person outside of one’s family or social circle. In this way, Adorno indicates his support for the mixing of languages and his conviction that linguistic homogeneity leads to the stagnation of language. He portrays *Fremdwörter* in affective and sexual terms as similar to the “exotischen Mädchen”\(^{133}\) that stir human curiosity through their otherness (218). As he explains, *Fremdwörter* shock and seduce people, stimulating their desire to use language creatively (218). Adorno emphasizes that *Fremdwörter* bring languages into contact, causing tensions conducive to innovation (218). Nothing could be further from the anti-*Fremdwort* rhetoric of purists, the Nazis, or the German Romantics than Adorno’s emphasis on the fruitful quality of borrowings.\(^{134}\) Whereas those three groups perceive foreign influences as dangerous and undesirable, Adorno views borrowings as essential to revitalizing German.

Furthermore, Adorno ascribes healing powers to *Fremdwörter*. To exemplify their curing potential, Adorno borrows a metaphor of a silver rib from Walter Benjamin’s 1928 “Poliklinik,” a surrealist piece describing a writer who performs surgery on the body of language. The writer implants “als silberne Rippe ein Fremdwort”\(^{135}\) into language to help it recuperate (47). As Adorno accentuates, the patient recovers thanks to the implant (ÜGF 645). In this way, Adorno suggests that the benefit of the foreign addition consists in its ability to disrupt the body of language and to energize it with new juices. In other words, his image of the silver rib demonstrates that using *Fremdwörter* might have a transformative effect on language. With his

---

\(^{132}\) “a kind of exogamy of language” (187).

\(^{133}\) “exotic girls” (187).

\(^{134}\) For the German Romantic attitudes toward foreign languages, see Chapter One.

\(^{135}\) “a foreign term as a silver rib” (76).
positive portrayal of derivations, Adorno once again challenges the anti-\textit{Fremdwort} attitudes of German purists, the Nazis, and the German Romantics.

Moreover, Adorno recommends using foreign expressions to make texts compact and suggestive. Specifically, he advises employing foreign phrases when they render contents more faithfully and decisively than their German equivalents (WF 225). Adorno explains that he employs \textit{Fremdwörter} to emphasize ideas. For instance, he uses the Latin-derived word “suspendiert” (suspended) instead of its German counterpart “außer Kraft gesetzt” (put out of force) to elicit the idea of suspension (225). He opts for the Latin borrowing “Sexus” (sex) instead of the German word “Geschlecht” (sex, race, and gender) to preserve the illicit quality inherent to the Latin word (228). Adorno often inserts French, Latin, and Greek derivations into his philosophical and literary texts to amplify irony, contrast, and the “affective as well as emotional intensity” (Yildiz 107). With his use of borrowings, Adorno opposes anti-\textit{Fremdwort} campaigns of German purists, the Nazis, and the German Romantics. Unlike those three groups, he portrays \textit{Fremdwörter} as enriching, curing, and evocative. It must be noted that, for personal reasons, Adorno prefers to write in his native German than in other tongues.\footnote{Commenting on his language preferences, Adorno observes that, in a foreign tongue, he can communicate (\textit{mitteilen}) his ideas rather than expressing them accurately (AF 700). On Adorno’s preference for German, see Kimmich 66 and Jenemann xxi. For Adorno’s remarks that learning languages expands human intellectual horizons, see “Erziehung zur Mündigkeit.”}

In this part, Adorno stresses the edifying function of \textit{Fremdwörter}. He advocates using foreign vocabulary to revitalize German. He also celebrates \textit{Fremdwörter} for their evocativeness.

\textbf{Linguistic and Racial Purity}

Adorno frames the issue of racial purity through the prism of language. In his \textit{Minima Moralia}, Adorno reflects on Nazi Germany and poignantly states, “Fremdwörter sind die Juden
der Sprache” (125). In this passage, he underlines the relation of identity because the verb form “sind” (are) serves to equate ideas. The phrase “wie” (like) would indicate the relation of resemblance. In this way, Adorno equates linguistic purity with racial purity, implying that similar conceptual mechanisms operate in the Nazi language theory and the Nazi race discourse. However, Adorno does not further explore this correlation in his aphorism.

To unveil the connection between linguistic and racial purity, one needs to refer to the Nazi race discourse. The Nazis stylized themselves as the offspring of the Aryans, whom they considered the superior race. The word “Aryan” derives from the Sanskrit term “ārya,” meaning “a noble one,” and was re-signified by the Nazis to mean “Nordic” and “non-Jewish” (Hutton 281). Their turn to the Sanskrit word had to do with the discovery of the Indo-European language family. Linguists demonstrated that Indians and Europeans had the same linguistic origin in the Sanskrit that was deemed more refined than Latin and Greek. The notion of the Aryans accounted for the kinship between Indians and Europeans. The Aryans were believed to “have conquered India, and then declined into decadence through interbreeding with the inferior indigenous population” (Hutton 12). The Nazis exalted the Aryans as culturally superior, which rendered other cultures inferior. Put another way, the Nazis employed the word “Aryan” to create a hierarchy with the Aryans at the pinnacle and other races and cultures in subordinate positions.

---

137 “German words of foreign derivation are the Jews of language” (110).
138 In 1786, Sir William Jones conjectured the kinship between Indian and European languages. “The Sanscrit language,” he argued, is “more perfect than the Greek, more copious than the Latin, and more exquisitely refined than either; yet bearing to both of them a stronger affinity . . . than could possibly have been produced by accident; . . . There is a similar reason . . . for supposing that both the Gothick and the Celtic . . . had the same origin with the Sanscrit” (qtd. in Hutton 12).
139 In 1853-55 Essay on the Inequality of Human Races, Joseph Arthur Comte de Gobineau associated the Aryans (the ancient Germanic people) with cultural superiority.
Accordingly, Nazi racial theorists defined the *Volk*-identity in racial terms. By their standard, a *Volksgenosse* (national comrade) must have the required blood ties. The primacy of race is explicit in Hitler’s *Mein Kampf*, where he excludes the Jewish people from “Germanism,” that is, the *Volk*-identity. Hitler states, “Since . . . he [the Jew] possesses really nothing [of Germanism] but the art of stammering its language . . ., his whole Germanism rests on the language alone. Race, however, does not lie in the language, but exclusively in the blood” (qtd. in Hutton 300-301). In this quote, Germanism appears as blood descent. For Hitler, the Germans are those who have the proper blood ties, whereas language is insufficient for the *Volk*-identity. He indicates that the knowledge of German does not make one a member of national community. He clearly prioritizes race over language.\(^{140}\)

The primacy of race over language explains why the Nazis did not completely purify German of *Fremdwörter*—a fact Adorno alludes to in his earlier comment that the Nazis used foreign expressions.\(^ {141}\) Since Nazi racial theorists gained the upper hand on Nazi linguists, the concept of the *Volk* became construed as a racial community. Language proved insufficient for racial segregation because it did not enable differentiating the Aryan-Germans from the non-Aryan Germans. The prioritization of race over language helped restrict membership in the *Volk* to racially convenient subjects. The same ideology of purity connects Nazi linguists to Nazi racial theorists. Just as Nazi linguists insisted on sanitizing German, Nazi racial theorists emphasized racial purity. Adorno’s previous characterization of *Fremdwörter* as “the Jews of language”\(^ {142}\) points to this parallel.

---

\(^{140}\) For a similar view that the Jews cannot assimilate to German culture, see Wagner 85.

\(^{141}\) See also Yildiz 77.

\(^{142}\) For Nazi racial stylists, see Hutton 48.
Furthermore, the Nazis discouraged contact between languages. For instance, Hitler maintained that verbal communication jeopardized the purity of the Aryan race. He described how the interaction with other populations had initiated the decline of the ancient Aryans. He explained, “As soon as the subjected peoples . . . approached the conqueror in language, the sharp dividing role between master and servant fell. The Aryan gave up the purity of his blood, and therefore, lost his sojourn in the paradise which he had made for himself. He became submerged in the racial mixture, and . . . lost his cultural capacity” (qtd. in Hutton 301). This passage casts language contact as detrimental to the colonizer’s power, racial purity, and cultural excellence. The underlying message here is that verbal contact with the colonized subjects harms the conqueror’s status. In this regard, Hitler endorses linguistic isolation, revealing language as a vulnerable element in maintaining hegemony.

Public language in Nazi Germany was systematically racialized to disseminate the notion of racial purity. Racial terms like “Blut” (blood), “Volk” (nation), and “Rasse” (race) inundated the radio, the press, and other public outlets. The literary market was restricted to the völkisch literature that propagated Nazi ideas under the banner of literature of the people and for the people.143 The Nazis blocked, ostracized, and silenced inconvenient voices. After the 1933 burning of the un-German books, the Nazis called Jewish writers “corrupters of the German soul” and barred them from publishing.144 Only Aryans and those who declared loyalty to the Nazi party were allowed to publish.145 From 1930 to 1945, the Nazis issued fifty literary histories that denied and condemned Jewish influences on German literature while urging the Germans to honor their “German Volkstum, purify it, deepen it, [and] keep it sacred.”146

143 For example, Klemperer could not publish his texts because they lacked völkisch aspects (48).
144 See Schoeps 43.
145 See Schoeps 40.
146 See Schoeps 56.
Social policies were equally infused with racial terminology and designed to reinforce the norm of racial purity. The 1935 Nuremberg Laws prohibited marriages and sexual relations between Aryans and non-Aryans and disseminated Nazi racial jargon, including “Blutschutz” (protection of German blood) and “Rassenschande” (racial defilement) (Doerr 29). To extend the cult of race to genealogical research into family trees, the Nazis reintroduced the archaic word “die Sippe,” which meant “a clan” and referred to close and extended family (29). A proof of the Aryan heritage eventually became necessary for access to public offices and services (Klemperer 106). All those examples show that the Nazis racialized official language to bolster the rule of purity.

The Nazi doctrine of racial purity owes a conceptual debt to Carl Schmitt’s works. Schmitt counts as the Heidegger of political science because of his prominence as a jurist and a Nazi-supporter. As Richard Wolin argues in “Carl Schmitt, Political Existentialism, and the Total State,” Schmitt’s account of racial homogeneity is “a distinct precursor” of the Nazi concept of racial purity (403). Schmitt extols homogeneity as a pseudo-democratic principle. “Democracy,” he asserts, “requires first homogeneity and second . . . elimination or eradication of heterogeneity” (qtd. in Wolin 403). In this passage, Schmitt imagines a uniform state and understands homogeneity in the racial sense (402). To stress the importance of ethnic homogeneity, Schmitt describes it as “the most indispensable presupposition and foundation for the concept of political leadership of the German Volk” (qtd. in Wolin 389). By presenting racial uniformity as crucial to a state, Schmitt casts racial diversity as undesirable.

Schmitt’s notion of an enemy exposes how the concept of “der Fremde” (a stranger, a foreigner) becomes re-signified as the enemy. For Schmitt, an enemy is a group that profoundly disagrees with the majority of society. In his Der Begriff des Politischen, Schmitt argues, “Der
politische Feind braucht nicht moralisch böse, er braucht nicht ästhetisch häßlich zu sein; . . . Er ist eben der andere, der Fremde, und es genügt zu seinem Wesen, daß er in einem besonders intensiven Sinne existentiell etwas anderes und Fremdes ist “147 (27). In this statement, enmity means an extreme difference of opinions. In labeling dissidents as enemies, Schmitt equates those two categories and connotes dissidents with danger. According to him, the state has the authority to eliminate its domestic enemies as a way of ensuring normality (46).148 By permitting the authorities to remove any groups deemed domestic enemies, Schmitt forecloses the possibility of diversity and reinforces the uniformity of opinion across the nation. His ideas provided the conceptual ground for enabling the state to excise the undesired subjects.149

In this section, Adorno’s observation on the affinity between linguistic and racial purity is examined against the backdrop of the Nazi race discourse. Central to the Nazi racial theory is the belief in the primacy of race over language. Nazi racial terms are discussed to demonstrate how the Nazis utilized language to disseminate the idea of racial purity.

The *Eintopf* and Societal Uniformity

Adorno cautions that linguistic uniformity serves to homogenize society. To illustrate his point, he observes that the Nazis homogenized language to create a uniform society. His metaphor for Nazi efforts to level language is a linguistic *Eintopf* (a thick one-pot stew) (WF 218). The image of the *Eintopf* conveys the sense of homogeneity because the *Eintopf-*

---

147 “The political enemy need not be morally evil or aesthetically ugly; . . . But he is, nevertheless, the other, the stranger; and it is sufficient for his nature that he is, in an especially intense way, existentially something different and alien” (27).

148 According to Schmitt, the state can remove its enemies by physical force or legislation (46-47). He participated in drafting Nazi legislations.

149 To exclude the Jewish people from German citizenship, the Nazis modified German citizenship law but preserved the principle of *jus sanguinis* (right of blood), according to which children of German citizens were eligible for German citizenship. See Brubaker 166-68.
ingredients lose their distinct shapes from being cooked long in one pot.\textsuperscript{150} Since 1933, on a designated Sunday monthly from October to March, the Nazis had ordered German families to eat a frugal \textit{Eintopf} instead of their usual meal. The money saved in this way was a required donation to the Nazi Party \textit{Winterhilfswerk} as a sign of solidarity (Schmitz-Berning 173). The noun \textit{Eintopf} exemplifies how the Nazis re-signified words to propagate their vision of societal uniformity. Klemperer notes that the efficacy of \textit{Eintopf} relied on its evocation of noble values. He comments, “Das gleiche Gericht für alle, Volksgemeinschaft im Alltäglichsten und Notwendigsten, gleiche Simplizität für reich und arm zugunsten des Vaterlandes, und das Bedeutendste im schlichtesten Wort eingekapselt! Eintopf – wir essen alle nur, was frugal in einem Topf zusammengekocht ist, wir essen alle aus ein und demselben Topf”\textsuperscript{151} (310-311). In the passage, Klemperer explains that the word \textit{Eintopf} was imbued with the sense of simplicity, equality, and solidarity so that the activity of eating the stew became a ritual with a profound meaning. Nazi propaganda\textsuperscript{152} promulgated this ceremonial meaning of the \textit{Eintopf} through the \textit{Eintopf}-recipes, posters showing Hitler consuming the stew with his guests, and photographs of communities eating the stew together.\textsuperscript{153} In this regard, the Nazi cult of societal uniformity subsumed the re-signification of words.

The notion of sacrifice was essential to re-signifying the noun \textit{Eintopf}. The Nazis presented eating the \textit{Eintopf} as a sacrifice for the community to elicit a feeling of solidarity.

\textsuperscript{150} The idea of \textit{Eintopf} differs from the American self-description as a “melting pot.” The American idea stresses the mixing of cultures and their assimilation. The Nazi concept emphasizes a nationwide uniformity.

\textsuperscript{151} “The same dish for everyone, a national community [Volksgemeinschaft] rooted in the most everyday and essential of things, a uniform simplicity for rich and poor in the service of the fatherland, the most momentous thing encapsulated in a plain and simple word! Eintopf – all of us eat what has been frugally cooked together in a single pot, we all eat from one and the same pot” (250).

\textsuperscript{152} Propaganda means systematic efforts to manipulate human perceptions, cognitions, and behavior to achieve the goals of the propagandist (Jowett and O’Donnell 7). For the idea of \textit{Eintopf} in school primers, see Michael and Doerr 476.

\textsuperscript{153} See Welch 228.
among the members. The sacrificial aspect of the meal is perceptible in its name change during World War II from the *Eintopfsonntag* (*Eintopf*-Sunday) to the *Opfersonntag* (sacrificial Sunday) (Schmitz-Berining 174). In reality, Nazi collectors forced the *Eintopf* contributions, going “from door to door putting pressure on people to make their ‘donations’” (Peukert 49). In essence, the façade of sacrifice served to stir the sense of unity in the community.

To fully understand the ideology of *Eintopf*, one must relate the noun *Eintopf* to the Nazi model of *Volksgemeinschaft* (national community). Historian Detlev Peukert describes this model in the following way:

> The National Socialist utopia of the Volksgemeinschaft had a double thrust: its ‘internal’ aim was to engineer the conversion of a society of fractured traditions, social classes and environments into an achievement-oriented community primed for self-sacrifice; its ‘external’ aim was to segregate and eventually ‘eradicate’ (ausmerzen) all those who, on real or imaginary grounds, could not be allowed entry into the Volksgemeinschaft – ‘aliens’, ‘incurable’ political opponents, the ‘asocial’ and the Jews. (209)

As the passage indicates, the Nazis imagined their national community as entirely homogenous, uniform and without internal fractures. They deemed unwanted subjects dispensable. The category of “aliens” included people deemed “a burden or danger to the community” (221). The label “asocial” denoted people considered “inimical to the community” (211). Adorno condemns this Nazi notion of uniformity in his reflections on the *Eintopf*. He exposes that the

---

154 See also Klemperer 311. For penalties for disobeying the *Eintopf*-policy, see Schmitz-Berining 696.
155 The category of “asocial” included “beggars, vagrants [sc.gypsies], prostitutes, drunks, persons with contagious diseases, especially persons with sexually transmitted diseases” and persons “who evade the obligation to work and who are dependent on the public for their maintenance” (211). In 1944, the “asocial” people became considered “community aliens” (221). For the Nazi theory that asocial traits are hereditary, see Schmitz-Berining 263-65.
Nazis implemented their concept of uniformity and homogenized language through removing foreign vocabulary, racializing public discourse, and re-signifying words.

To alert the public of political systems that espouse uniformity, Adorno and Horkheimer explain in their Dialektik der Aufklärung (DA) that totalitarianism suppresses otherness as a way to exert control. Adorno and Horkheimer both clarify, “Für die Faschisten sind die Juden nicht eine Minorität, sondern die Gegenrasse, das negative Prinzip als solches; von ihrer Ausrottung soll das Glück der Welt abhängen”156 (192). Here, the authors convey that the Nazis, seeking to remove instances of otherness, vilified the Jews as “the negative principle,” the source of evil. For Adorno and Horkheimer, the Jews represented “the most resolute repository of otherness and difference in the Western world.”157 To achieve their goal, the Nazis continuously maligned the Jews as materialists, hagglers, and thieves (DA 197-98). Similarly, the Nazis denigrated Jewish customs—including clothing style, the ritual of circumcision, and the concept of kosher (clean) food—because they conflicted with the Nazi rule of uniformity (211). In other words, the existence of Jewish tradition was a reminder that uniformity was not natural but contrived by power holders to control citizens. For this reason, Adorno and Horkheimer caution that state powers can stigmatize any subject or group as “the negative principle” (207).158

According to Adorno and Horkheimer, totalitarian states homogenize language and societal life to secure power. The authors elucidate, “Sie [faschistische Hetzredner und Lagervögte] reproduzieren die Unersättlichkeit der Macht in sich, vor der sie sich fürchten. Alles soll gebraucht werden, alles soll ihnen gehören. Die bloße Existenz des anderen ist das

---

156 “For the fascists the Jews are not a minority, but the antirace, the negative principle as such; on their extermination the world’s happiness depends” (137).
157 See Jay, Adorno 39.
158 On the idea of national uniformity, see also Butler Parting Ways 100. She criticizes the exclusionary tendencies in states that endorse homogeneity.
Ärgernis”\textsuperscript{159} (207). In this quote, the authors explain that the basis of fascist hostility to difference lies in its potential threat to their power. For this reason, fascists eliminate divergent ideas and impose uniformity nationwide. As Adorno and Horkheimer observe, in the end, the Nazis propagated uniformity to change people into the “Feinde der Differenz”\textsuperscript{160} (233). In other words, totalitarianism reinforces uniformity to make people less tolerant of difference and diversity.

The psychological effect of uniformity forms the central theme in Adorno’s Studies in the Authoritarian Personality (AP), part of the 1940s “Studies in Prejudice” project conducted by social theorists from the Institute of Social Research and psychologists from the Berkeley Public Opinion Study Group.\textsuperscript{161} The project claims that homogenization processes produce “authoritarian personalities,” subjects susceptible to fascism. Their character traits include conventionalism, submission, and authoritarian aggression understood as a propensity “to be on the lookout for, and to condemn, reject, and punish people who violate conventional values” (194).\textsuperscript{162} Authoritarian personalities are compliant, think in stereotypes, and strictly adhere to conventions. Those features were deemed “symptomatic of an anti-democratic character structure.”\textsuperscript{163} Authoritarian subjects perceive divergence as an error rather than an opportunity, whereas non-authoritarian personalities are autonomous, non-dogmatic, and tolerant of

\textsuperscript{159} “They [fascist rabble-rousers and camp commanders] reproduce within themselves the insatiability of the power of which they are afraid. Everything must be used, everything must belong to them. The mere existence of the other is a provocation” (150).
\textsuperscript{160} “enemies of difference” (172).
\textsuperscript{161} For a summary and critique of “Studies in Prejudice,” see Jay, Dialectical Imagination (DI) 219-252.
\textsuperscript{162} Participants were evaluated using the following F-scale (fascism scale): “conventionalism,” “authoritarian submission,” “authoritarian aggression,” “anti-intraception,” “superstition and stereotypy,” “toughness,” “destructiveness and cynicism,” “projectivity,” and “exaggerated concern with sexual 'goings-on’” (194).
\textsuperscript{163} See Jay, Adorno 40.
diversity. Put another way, they reject stereotypes, think independently, and are open to a plurality of views.

Adorno depicts a nascent authoritarian mindset in his 1935 aphorism in *Minima Moralia*, where he draws on his childhood experience of being bullied for his manner of speech. Linguistic uniformity appears in the bullies’ tendency to ridicule his style. Adorno reads their behavior as an indication of their authoritarian leanings, reflecting:


In this quote, Adorno observes that the bullies derided his use of long sentences because they differed from student lingo. He infers that his bullies, like fascists, displayed animosity toward linguistic difference. Just as his bullies strove to homogenize his style, fascists sought to

---

165 “In a real sense, I ought to be able to deduce Fascism from the memories of my childhood. As a conqueror dispatches envoys to the remotest provinces, Fascism had sent its advance guard there long before it marched in: my schoolfellows. . . . The five patriots who set upon a single school fellow, thrashed him and, when he complained to the teacher, defamed him a traitor to the class -- are they not the same as those who tortured prisoners . . .? . . . They who could not put together a correct sentence but found all of mine too long – did they not abolish German literature and replace it by their ‘writ’ [Schrifttum]? . . . they . . . dispossessed me of my past life and my language . . .” (192-93).
“normalize” language. Adorno describes his tormentors as the harbingers of fascism, implying that the tendency to homogenize language signals totalitarian inclinations.

Indeed, Adorno interprets school bullying as a symptom of an authoritarian character, “an omen of the latent receptivity to the ideology of National Socialism” (Müller-Doohm 33). Like authoritarian personalities, his bullies adhere to the student lingo and punish those who deviate from the standard. His tormenters display violence toward the weaker students but submission to the teacher. Most crucially, they abhor divergence. Adorno perceives those similarities between bullies and authoritarian subjects as signs that bullies may develop authoritarian mindsets.

Adorno’s depiction of his school bullies as nascent authoritarian personalities harbors several limitations. His anecdote is not representative of the entire pre-World War I Germany. Nor does he clarify whether his aggressors are real. Although they are teenagers, he treats his bullies as adults. While it is true that Adorno’s schoolmates “envied” him and teased him with his nickname “Teddy,” their school pranks had no ideological or anti-Semitic underpinning (Claussen 57). Nonetheless, Adorno’s crucial insight remains that linguistic uniformity is a type of violence and may make people inimical to diversity.

In this part, Adorno draws a connection between linguistic purity and societal uniformity. His reflection is analyzed against the background of the Nazi notion of societal uniformity. He evaluates linguistic uniformity as giving rise to authoritarian personalities, people vulnerable to ideologies.

---

166 One schoolmate recollects, “We all knew that he [Teddy] was Jewish. But the uproar in the playground was not an anti-Semitic demonstration. . . . It was a stupid boys’ trick” (Müller-Doohm 34).
167 In his 2009 drama “Das weisse Band,” Michael Haneke offers a similarly provocative, yet inconclusive approach to the issue of children’s receptivity to fascism in the pre-World War I Germany. In the movie, children are regularly exposed to physical violence and the invocations of religious virtue symbolized by the white ribbon.
**Conclusion**

Adorno invalidates the myth of linguistic purity by showing that German contains foreign traces, such as *Fremdwörter*. In this way, Adorno challenges both the Romantic image of the mother tongue resistant to external influences and Nazi attempts to purify German of foreign expressions. By casting *Fremdwörter* as instruments for re-energizing German, Adorno refutes the Romantic perception of foreign languages as dangerous, mediocre, and impoverishing.

Through his insistence on cultivating German, and through his use of *Fremdwörter*, Adorno indicates his support for a philosophical and an aesthetic framework with one mother tongue open to foreign languages. His observations on the similarity between linguistic and racial purity expose how the Nazis instrumentalized linguistic myths to spread ethnic prejudice. His remarks on the linguistic *Eintopf* (the one-pot stew) reveal that the homogenization of language belonged to the Nazi strategy for societal uniformity and can engender authoritarian mindsets, subjects receptive to ideologies. In this sense, Adorno’s reflections on *Fremdwörter* show that linguistic purity constitutes a linguistic form of violence that can fuel other types of violence.

The next chapter discusses Adorno’s redemptive writing techniques for amplifying and pluralizing meaning in his works.
Excursus One
Adorno on Religious Language in Fascist Propaganda

This section examines how American fascist propaganda in the 1930s utilized biblical imagery to propagate religious homogeneity. This part treats religious homogeneity as a form of purity and argues that biblical references served fascist propagandists to both glorify religious uniformity and vilify religious diversity. Central to this excursus is Adorno’s *The Psychological Technique of Martin Luther Thomas’ Radio Addresses*. The analysis concludes that fascist propagandists promoted religious homogeneity through favorable biblical images while projecting religious diversity as the enemy through adverse biblical references. This section draws on propaganda research by Garth Jowett and Victoria O’Donnell.

Adorno wrote *The Psychological Technique* in English as part of the 1940s “Studies in Prejudice” project carried out by the Institute of Social Research and the Berkeley Public Opinion Study Group. In his study, Adorno analyzes the rhetorical strategies of Martin Luther Thomas, a well-known Presbyterian pastor from the Christian right in the 1930s. Thomas founded a fascist-style entity called *Christian American Crusade for God, Home, and Native Land*. His sermons appeared on daily public radio and targeted Presbyterian believers in Los Angeles, California.\(^{168}\) Religious language was both his medium and cover. He veiled his propaganda in biblical allusions and so managed to stay under the radar while having a local impact. By contrast, radio propaganda in Nazi Germany could reach the entire nation because radios with loudspeakers were mandatory in most public places, such as restaurants and market places.

---

\(^{168}\) In the late 1930s and throughout the 1940s, anti-Semitism was on the rise in the United States. More than a hundred anti-Semitic organizations were active at the time (Jowett and O’Donnell 275).
squares (Jowett and O’Donnell 265).\textsuperscript{169} Even though the Nazis invigilated German churches and persecuted several priests, Nazi officials often employed biblical language to “sanctify” their speeches.\textsuperscript{170} American fascist propaganda imitated Nazi rhetorical techniques, including the religiously colored style.

Adorno categorizes Thomas’ radio speeches as an “indirect, semi-hidden fascist and anti-Semitic propaganda” (30). Propaganda means “the deliberate, systematic attempt to shape perceptions, manipulate cognitions, and direct behavior to achieve a response that furthers the desired intent of the propagandist” (Jowett and O’Donnell 7). In other words, propaganda seeks to influence people and change their attitudes and behavior in a way that satisfies the propagandist. As defined already in 1937, the salient propaganda techniques are the following:

Name calling. Giving an idea a bad label and therefore rejecting and condemning it without examining the evidence.

Glittering generality. Associating something with a “virtue word” and creating acceptance and approval without examination of the evidence.

Transfer. Carries the respect and authority of something respected to something else to make the latter accepted.\textsuperscript{171} (258)

As the quote indicates, “bad labels” serve propagandists as denigrations of their rivals. By contrast, “virtue words” and statements from renowned sources glorify the propagandists’ cause.

Drawing on this 1937 definition, Adorno notes that propagandists invent a fixed opposition between their cause and their opponents. As he explains, Hitler’s propaganda

\textsuperscript{169} The Nazis encouraged the German population to buy a one-channel radio set, the so-called \textit{Volksempfänger}. During the war, Nazi functionaries would even check whether people were listening to the correct stations (Jowett and O’Donnell 265).

\textsuperscript{170} See Klemperer 142 and 153. For the Nazi appropriation of religious imagery, see also Adorno, “Anti-Semitism and Fascist Propaganda” 405.

\textsuperscript{171} For a complete list of propaganda techniques, see Jowett and O’Donnell 258.
followed this rule by painting “the adversary as the arch enemy and one’s own group as invested with everything noble and admirable” (85-6). Here, Adorno exposes that propagandists idolize their cause and demote their opponents through presenting those two groups in extremely contrasting terms. Contrast serves to make the propagandists’ cause more persuasive (85). Hence, creating contrasts is essential to propaganda.

The above-mentioned propaganda techniques can be found in Thomas’ sermons. He portrays his Presbyterian community as “a kind of microcosm of the nation” (83). To lend credibility to his church, Thomas insists on treating the entire United States of America as a Christian country. For example, he argues, “Listen, America began as a Christian nation . . ., and when you speak of America, you have got to speak of Christianity because they are both commensurate” (101). By casting the entire country as endorsing Christianity, Thomas endows his local community with national significance. To convince his followers that issues concerning his community have national relevance, he regularly invokes Christianity and—except for Judaism—never discusses the multireligious, multicultural, and multiethnic character of America.

Thomas depicts Christianity as the only legitimate religion. To discredit Judaism, he refers to the biblical account of Jewish exodus. On June 16, 1935, Thomas states that “for 2000 years they [the Jews] have been a homeless and a wandering people. . . . In the meantime God has been speaking and has given the authority to the Gentile nations” (122). In this passage, Thomas restricts the religious authority to Christianity and, in delegitimizing Judaism, abases all other religions. Furthermore, he envisions a victory of Christianity over Judaism:

---

172 For Hitler’s propaganda precepts, see also Jowett and O’Donnell 261.
But, my friend, the hour is not far away, when the armies yonder of the Gentile worlds in that great battle of Armageddon, which will come in my opinion in the close of the next great world war, the Jews . . . shall be besieged upon every hand, and they shall fall upon their faces, and . . . Jesus Christ, whom they have rejected, their elder brother, shall come with a mighty delivering power. (122)

In this quote, Thomas transposes the religious doctrine of Christ’s coming to his historical reality in order to validate Christianity at the expense of Judaism. Without discussing it in depth, he invokes this religious tenet to suggest that Christianity will govern the world. In this way, Thomas renders non-Christian denominations meaningless.

Thomas secures his authority by stylizing himself as St. John the Baptist. Thomas professes, “John recognized that he had his own gift, but it was not to step into the light of the cross of Jesus. . . . Now, I am the messenger of God to the world; so are you” (16). The biblical role of St. John the Baptist was to announce Christ’s arrival. By comparing himself to St. John the Baptist, the announcer of Christ’s arrival, Thomas transfers the authority of the biblical prophet to himself. In the final line of the quote, he extends this power to his followers when he calls them God’s emissaries, thus surrounding himself and his community with religious validity.

As Adorno observes, Thomas employs “virtue words” (positive labels) to glorify ideas that fit his agenda. For example, he evaluates nations as either moral or immoral. Adorno comments on Thomas’ evaluation strategy, “Nations are treated by him [Thomas] as if they were subjects. Moral concepts are immediately applied to them and moral dichotomies are used to explain national political issues” (129). Here, Adorno indicates that Thomas applies “virtue words” to prejudge ideas. To discard certain concepts, Thomas labels them as immoral. Hence, positive tags enable him to propagate his ideas.
Thomas’ self-descriptions abound in such positive labels. As Adorno summarizes, Thomas characterizes himself as an honorable yet persecuted leader and persistently mentions his “personal integrity,” “honesty,” “innocence,” and his “irreproachable and unselfish character” (11-12). At the same time, Thomas describes himself as a victim. As Adorno explains, “It is just because of his higher moral qualities that he is subject to permanent persecution” (11). Indeed, Thomas confides that he has received death threats and warnings that his church will be burned (11). In this manner, Thomas stylizes himself as an innocent yet imperiled leader.

According to Adorno, Thomas utilizes biblical references to insinuate that his entire community faces a danger. For example, Thomas admonishes his followers, “Listen Christians, do you remember what he [Christ] said: *if they have persecuted me they will also persecute you*” (12). The italicized part derives from The Gospel of John, where Christ warns his disciples of their future tribulations. By citing the biblical scene, Thomas instills in his followers an expectation of persecution. As Adorno concludes, it is precisely this biblical context that enables Thomas to veil his rabble-rousing (12).

Thomas uses the sermonizing style to advocate a religious revival in America. He laments, “I compare this great nation of ours, what she has been yonder through the years and what she is at the present hour and of the future and of the change which she is now undergoing. . . . Great tears run down my face as I think of what my nation has been, can be” (79). In this comment, Thomas seeks to stir nostalgia for what he perceives as America’s past glory. This plaintive tone arises in his “great tears.” Throughout his sermons, Thomas blames the Jewish people for America’s decline.  

---

173 Interestingly, a similar technique surfaced in Donald Trump’s 2016 presidential campaign. His slogan “Make America great again” suggested a need to reinvigorate American economy but its decline was attributed to, among others, foreign workers and Mexicans.
Thomas maintains that a spiritual rebirth of the country will restore its greatness. He exhorts his followers, “Oh, brothers, let us seek the holy God and the blessings of the holy God. If we will do that, our nation will be saved. If we will do that, the church will have a mighty revival of God” (80). Here, Thomas argues clearly for the spiritual revival. To accentuate its importance, he employs a Capuchin style full of excoriating tones. He complains, “Where are the men that should be raising the banners? . . . Why is it that we have not great evangelical revivals? . . . what has become of the evangelical fires in America?” (80). Here, he chides his followers for lack of religious zealotry. Considering that Thomas only approves of Christianity, his call for spiritual renewal is a call for religious homogeneity.

To condemn the Jewish people, Thomas persistently uses pejorative “labels” for them and picks those labels from biblical sources. He focuses on the “imagery of the Christ-killers, of the Pharisee, of the moneychangers in the temple, [and] of the Jew who forfeited his salvation by denying the Lord and not accepting Baptism” (77). For example, Thomas associates the Jewish people with Satan when he refers to the biblical story of Judas, a disciple who betrays Christ. Thomas explains:

Satan knows that it is useless to make a direct attack . . ., but he always attempts to reach that individual by someone that is close to that man or woman. Now, that was true of Judeah. . . . If you turn over to the book of Luke, you will find yonder in the hour when the Last Supper was being held, Satan came and entered into Judas Iscariot. He said, I cannot reach him directly, but I must ask the death of Jesus Christ through someone that is close to him. (97)

Here, Thomas links Satan with Judas. When he extends this association to the whole region, Thomas implies that Judas represents all Jewish people. The heinous nature of Judas’ act is
emphasized by the fact that he was “close” to Christ. Yet, Thomas never mentions that Judas regrets his actions and commits suicide. Through this omission, Thomas presents Judas one-sidedly as a satanically inspired traitor. In fact, Thomas regularly describes the Jews as “diabolical plotters” (125). Not a single positive image of a Jewish person appears in his speeches.

To depict the Jews as disrespectful of sacred places, Thomas alludes to a scene in The Gospel of Matthew where Christ rebukes moneychangers for desecrating the Temple in Jerusalem.174 Here again, Thomas ignores the biblical fragment but chooses the image of “moneychangers in the temple” as a tag for the entire Jewry, suggesting that the Jewish people fixate on material interests and disrespect sacred sites (77). Given that Thomas’ sermons stem from the period of the Great Depression, he might have linked the Jews with money to channel public frustration caused by the financial crisis onto them (108).

Furthermore, Thomas describes the Jewish believers as unable to attain redemption. Addressing them as “people,” he preaches that salvation is only possible through Christ: “Now, you people, you see that Jesus Christ was a good man, that he was a chief rabbi of his day, . . . but you refuse to acknowledge that he was God in human flesh. . . . There is no way by which any man or woman may be saved except through Jesus Christ, and unless you honor the Son, you cannot honor the Father” (96-97). In this speech, Thomas postulates that salvation depends on the belief in Christ. By Thomas’ criterion, Judaism cannot lead to salvation because, unlike Christianity, it disapproves of Christ. Thomas regularly recapitulates differences between those two religions to discredit Judaism. He reiterates his point about salvation, “There cannot be any immortality of the human soul according to the standard of the New Testament . . . apart from

the revelation and the work that Jesus Christ of Nazareth accomplished upon Calvary cross” (97). Here, he indicates that salvation requires the acceptance of the New Testament. Given that Judaism adheres to the Old Testament, it seems precluded from redemption. Interestingly, Thomas never mentions that Christianity regards both covenants as co-dependent (97). Hence, he bases his denunciation of Judaism on a paradoxical “denial” of the Old Law, an integral part of his religion (97). In addition, Thomas refrains from dwelling on Christ as a Jewish figure, preferring instead to magnify the differences rather than similarities between those two faiths.

The negative tags in Thomas’ sermons are illocutions. As J.L. Austin argues, illocutions and perlocutions are speech acts or utterances that perform actions rather than making statements. Austin elaborates that “the illocutionary act . . . has a certain force in saying something; the perlocutionary act . . . is the achieving of certain effects by saying something” (120). In other words, illocutions have an officiating quality if they come from an authorized person who activates the required linguistic or social conventions. For example, the wedding officiant validates marriages with a statement “I pronounce you husband and wife” because he has the required authority. By contrast, perlocutions do not necessarily rely on conventions, and their effects might be deferred. A perlocution occurs, for instance, when someone asks someone else to open a window by saying, “It is stuffy here.” Thomas’ descriptions of the Jews are illocutionary insults.175 His comparisons of the Jewish people to Satan, the “moneychangers,” and the irredeemable believers are illocutionary precisely because they come from a pastor who delivers sermons. In essence, Thomas uses his religious authority to legitimize his insults. Since he never analyzes religious passages but regularly applies the toxic biblical phrases to the Jews, he evidently intends to slander them. Considering that Thomas perceives Christianity as the only

175 On injurious speech, see also Butler, Excitable Speech 16-17.
valid faith, his condemnation of Judaism seeks to ensure the supremacy of Christianity and, by implication, religious homogeneity.

Thomas’ injurious labels serve to solidify his religious community by inciting hatred against a particular target. He targets the Jewish people. In his 1951 essay “Freudian Theory and the Pattern of Fascist Propaganda,” Adorno discusses hatred as a “negatively integrating force” that binds people together through the construction of a shared enemy (424). He quotes Sigmund Freud’s insight, “Hatred against a particular person or institution might operate in just the same unifying way, and might call up the same kind of emotional ties as positive attachment” (424). That is, positive emotions create bonds between people as effectively as negative emotions do. People likely feel united when they share an enemy because it focalizes their negative emotions.

With this in mind, Adorno cautions that uniformity facilitates intolerance of diversity. He observes that hatred reassures the group members of their value. As they become united and homogeneous, however, their tolerance of divergence decreases. Adorno explains that fascist propaganda

suggests continuously . . . that the follower, simply through belonging to the in-group, is better, higher and purer than those who are excluded. At the same time, any kind of critique or self-awareness is resented as a narcissistic loss, and elicits rage. It accounts for the violent reaction of all fascists against what they deem zersetzend, that which debunks their own stubbornly maintained values. (424)

In this excerpt, Adorno emphasizes how hostility to criticism and difference increases with a stress on homogeneity. The more unified and homogeneous a group becomes, the more it opposes diversity. Thomas’ speeches exemplify this process. His glorification of Christianity and his attacks on Judaism encourage prejudice against all non-Christian religions.
One can discern a contemporary tendency toward homogenization in the rhetoric of
Patriotic Europeans Against the Islamization of the Occident (Pegida), a German right-wing
group, whose leader impersonated Hitler and was recently convicted of inciting hatred.\textsuperscript{176} The
group propagates cultural homogeneity by vilifying Muslims. For instance, the slogan
“Islamisierung bekämpfen / Überfremdung stoppen / JETZT!!”\textsuperscript{177} suggests that Muslims are
enemies and reactivates the Nazi term “Überfremdung,” which denoted foreign infiltration in the
spiritual and racial sense (Schmitz-Berning 615-17).\textsuperscript{178} The banner exudes a sense of an
overwhelmed and oversaturated country because the prefix “über” signifies a moment beyond a
certain threshold. The slogan “Stoppt die wirklichen Volksverhetzer!”\textsuperscript{179} simulates a plea to stop
agitators. Since Pegida’s members regard Muslims as agitators, Muslims become the target of
religious discrimination. Pegida cloaks its xenophobia as a desire to protect Germany’s cultural
integrity through banners like “Multi-Kulti stoppen: Meine Heimat bleibt deutsch.”\textsuperscript{180} This
banner advocates cultural uniformity and rejects the idea of multiculturalism. While Pegida’s
catchphrases testify to anxieties caused by the recent inflow of refugees to Germany, the group’s
rhetoric mixes religious insults with Nazi terminology, thus precluding any debate over
Germany’s future and propagating homogeneity.\textsuperscript{181}

\begin{footnotesize}
\begin{footnotes}
\footnotetext{176} Similar developments occur in Europe and the United States. In France, the right-wing party National Front
vilifies Muslims and immigrants. The government of Poland refuses to accept Syrian refugees by claiming that they
are inapposite to Poland’s Catholicism. In January 2017, President Trump has banned citizens of six predominantly
Muslim countries from entering the United States.
\footnotetext{177} “Fight back Islamization / Stop over-foreignization / NOW!!!” For the image of the banner, see Introduction 7.
\footnotetext{178} On the Nazi word “Überfremdung,” see also Michael and Doerr 403.
\footnotetext{179} “Stop the real rabble-rousers!”
\footnotetext{180} “Stop multiculturalism. My homeland remains German.”
\footnotetext{181} For a discussion of an emancipatory effect of shifting from religious to secular language, see Habermas, \textit{The
Theory of Communicative Action} 77-111. Habermas explains that “the linguistification of the sacred” emancipates
people: In the process of replacing the authority of the sacred with a secular consensus, people learn how to
rationalize and communicate with each other. For Adorno’s view on maturity, democracy, and education, see
“Erziehung zur Mündigkeit” and “Erziehung nach Auschwitz.” Adorno bases his reflections on Kant’s concept of
maturity (\textit{Mündigkeit}) as personal autonomy. One could argue that religious language in modern propaganda serves
to auraticize certain concepts. For aura as the uniqueness of artwork, see Benjamin, “Das Kunstwerk im Zeitalter
seiner technischen Reproduzierbarkeit.”
\end{footnotes}
\end{footnotesize}
Conclusion

Adorno’s analysis of Thomas’ radio sermons exposes that Thomas exploits biblical imagery to exalt religious homogeneity and condemn religious plurality. Thomas portrays homogeneity (exemplified here by Christianity) as desirable through “virtue words,” positive biblical references and labels. He projects diversity (embodied here by Judaism and non-Christian faiths) as evil when he takes antagonistic tags from biblical sources and applies them to diversity. In other words, positive biblical depictions enable Thomas to manufacture a favorable image of homogeneity, whereas adverse labels allow him to construe diversity as an enemy. In this sense, Adorno’s analysis reveals that homogeneity and diversity have no implicit value, but their meanings and valorizations are dynamic and contingent upon human perception. Pegida’s example illustrates how contemporary right-wing groups utilize similar religious insults to spread prejudice and foreclose intra- and international dialogues.
Excursus Two

Martin Luther and Religious Stigmatization

This section discusses antagonistic religious language in Martin Luther’s 1543 Von den Juden und ihren Lügen and argues that Luther employs adverse biblical images to condemn Judaism. Luther is known for his 1517 anti-papal theses that precipitated Protestant Reformation and for his 1522 translation of the Bible into German. His anti-Judaic works informed the Nazi anti-Jewish rhetoric. This part concludes that Luther maligns Judaism by associating the Jews with Christ-killers, diseases, dirt, and devil. The analysis draws on Robert Michael’s historiographical research on theological anti-Semitism.

As Michael argues, the Nazis did not invent biblical images of the Jews but reactivated those that circulated in religious tradition (9). The Nazis revived the “consecrated attack-language” that existed in religious texts (2). In particular, Luther’s anti-Judaic works “helped establish the groundwork and vocabulary for Nazi Jew policy” because he was a religious authority (3).¹⁸² However, Luther’s aversion to Judaism was religious and not ethnic.¹⁸³ Luther maintained that the Jews were “satanically inspired enemies of the people of God.”¹⁸⁴

To denigrate Judaism, Luther employs religiously colored “evil tags.” For example, he mentions the biblical image of a Jew as a Christ-killer to reproach Gentiles for failing to take revenge on the Jews. Luther stresses, “So ists auch unser schuld, das wir das grosse unschüldige Blut, so sie [the Jews] an unserm Herrn und den Christen bey dreyhundert jaren nach zerstörung Jerusalem, und bis daher, an Kindern vergossen (welchs noch aus jren augen und haut scheinet)

¹⁸² For the Nazi appropriation of Luther’s style, see also Klemperer 297.
¹⁸³ See Miller 428.
¹⁸⁴ See Miller 428.
nicht rechen, sie nicht todschlagen” (522). In this passage, Luther justifies his rabble-rousing through his allusion to the biblical Passion of Christ: The Jews capture and crucify Christ. Luther also refers to the persecution of Christians in the early stages of Christianity. Without elaborating on those two references, he uses them to validate his call for violence suggested by the imagery of blood. Luther’s utterance offends because he writes his comment as a priest in his religious treatise.

Luther resorts to another injurious label when he compares the Jewish people to gangrene. He instructs rulers to treat the Jews as a disease:

Unsern Ober Herrn, so Jüden unter sich haben, wünsche ich und bitte, das sie eine scharffe barmherzigkeit wolten gegen diese elende Leute ube, . . . Wie die trewen Erzte thun, wenn das heilige Fewr [Rotlauf, Brand] in die bein [Knochen] komen ist, Faren sie mit unbarmherzigkeit und schneiten, segen, brennen fleisch, adern, bein, und marck abe. Also thu man hie auch. Verbrenne jr Synagogen, . . . Zwinge sie zur erbeit, Und gehe mit jnen umb nach aller unbarmherzigkeit, wie Mose thet in der Wüsten und schlug drey tausent tod. . . . Sie wissen warlich nicht, was sie thun, Wollens dazu, wie die besessen Leute, nicht wissen, hören noch lernen. Darumb kan man hie keine barmherzigkeit ube, sie in jrem wesen zu stercken. Wil das nicht helffen, So müssen wir sie, wie die tollen hunde aus jagen, damit wir nicht, jrer greulichen lesterung und aller laster teilhaftig, mit jnen Gottes zorn verdienen und verdamp werden. (541-42)

185 “So we are even at fault in not avenging all this innocent blood of our Lord and of the Christians which they [Jews] shed for three hundred years after the destruction of Jerusalem, and the blood of the children they have shed since then (which still shines forth from their eyes and their skin). We are at fault in not slaying them” (267).
186 The Nazis cited Luther in their journal Der Stürmer and displayed the book during their rallies (Michael 6-7).
187 Luther frequently characterizes the Jews as a burden and a plague (520).
188 “I wish and I ask that our rulers who have Jewish subjects exercise a sharp mercy toward these wretched people. . . . They [our rulers] must act like a good physician, who, when gangrene has set in, proceeds without mercy to cut,
In this quote, Luther describes the Jews as a disease that one must eliminate. By “sharp mercy,” he means not compassion but burning synagogues, forced work, and expulsion.\(^{189}\) To justify his instructions, Luther warns that passivity toward Judaism amounts to a blasphemy, which was punishable by death.\(^{190}\) However, Luther’s call for “sharp mercy” is at odds with his doctrine of grace, according to which good deeds have no impact on human salvation. If, by Luther’s standard, kindness yields no salvation, then mercy is a vain effort. In this respect, his reference to “sharp mercy” calls for violence. He bolsters his call by commenting that the Jewish people do not want to convert.

Luther’s instigations to violence contain biblical allusions. His remark about the Jewish lack of understanding refers to a section in The Gospel of Luke, where Christ asks God to forgive soldiers for mistreating him and states that they are unaware of his status.\(^{191}\) While the biblical scene is a request for forgiveness, Luther appropriates the scene to urge his followers toward revenge. His reference to Moses alludes to an event in the book of Exodus, where Moses requests killing those people who, in worshipping a golden calf, broke the covenant with God.\(^{192}\) By not explaining those biblical references, Luther uses them to legitimize the stifling of Judaism for the sake of Christianity.

Another toxic label is the image of a Jewish pig. For Luther, the Jewish pig symbolizes a Jew learning the Talmud “by kissing, sucking the teats, and eating the feces of a pig” (Michael saw, and burn flesh, veins, bone, and marrow. Such a procedure must also be followed in this instance. Burn down their synagogues, . . . force them to work, and deal harshly with them, as Moses did in the wilderness, slaying three thousand . . . They surely do not know what they are doing; moreover, as people possessed, they do not wish to know it, hear it, or learn it. Therefore, it would be wrong to be merciful and confirm them in their conduct. If this does not help, we must drive them out like mad dogs, so that we do not become partakers of their abominable blasphemy and all their other vices and thus merit God’s wrath and be damned with them” (292).

\(^{189}\) Luther also recommends confiscating Jewish books, prohibiting the Jews from practicing their religion, and razing their homes (268-72). His suggestions are reminiscent of Nazi anti-Jewish measures.

\(^{190}\) See Arnhold and Lenhard 9.

\(^{191}\) See Luke 23.34.

\(^{192}\) See Exod. 32.28.
4). Luther rants, “Pfu euch [Schande über euch] hie, pfu euch dort, und wo jr seid, jr verdampten Jüden. . . . Seid jr doch nicht werd, das jr die Biblia von aussen sollet ansehen, schweige, das jr drinnen lesen sollet. Jr sollet allein die Biblia lesen, die der Saw unter dem Schwanz stehet, und die buchstaben, so da selbs heraus fallen, fressen und sauffen”\textsuperscript{193} (478). Here, Luther denigrates Judaism by linking its sacred texts with excrement. Furthermore, he denies the Jewish people access to Scriptures but fails to explain why a Jewish person is “not worthy” of reading the Bible. This exclusion is relevant because Christianity and Judaism share the Old Testament, the primary part of Scriptures. By connecting Judaism with filth, Luther glorifies his religion.

Luther triangulates Judaism, filth, and the devil. He associates the Jewish people with dirt and devilish qualities in the following manner: “Recht ist jnen geschehen, die sie die Warheit Gottes verworffen, das sie dafür solche schendliche, tölpische, nerrichte Lügen musten gleuben, und fur das schöne angesicht Göttliches Worts dem Teufel ins schwarze, finster hinder Lügenloch kucken musten, und seinen stank anbeten”\textsuperscript{194} (513). Here, Luther tries to elicit disgust when he contrasts “the beautiful face of the divine word” with the devil’s dark back and stench. He evidently reviles Judaism for “rejecting the truth of God,” thus implying the legitimacy of his religion. In other words, Luther’s rationale for condemning Judaism is its difference from the Gentiles. He does not seek a dialogue between religions. Given that Christianity was the dominant religion in sixteenth-century Europe, one could argue that Luther’s vilification of Judaism advocates the hegemony of Christianity and, in turn, religious homogeneity.\textsuperscript{195}

\textsuperscript{193} “Shame on you, here, there, or wherever you may be, you damned Jews. . . . You are not worthy of looking at the outside of the Bible, much less of reading it. You should read only the bible that is found under the sow’s tail, and eat and drink the letters that drop from there” (212).

\textsuperscript{194} “It serves them right that, rejecting the truth of God, they have to believe instead such abominable, stupid, inane lies, and that instead of the beautiful face of the divine word, they have to look into the devil’s black, dark, lying behind, and worship his stench” (256).

\textsuperscript{195} Luther’s Protestant Christianity was directed against Catholicism, a papal branch of Christianity.
Conclusion

Luther propagates Christianity through his antagonistic descriptions of Judaism, interlaced with biblical references. He connects Judaism with the biblical image of Christ-killers. He also characterizes Judaism as a disease and links it with dirt and devil. Luther employs biblical allusions to justify his appeals for eliminating Judaism. In this regard, his biblically colored rhetoric endorses religious homogeneity.
Chapter Three

Creating Difference: Adorno on Language, Redemption, and Dissonance

The previous chapter examined how Theodor Adorno challenges the German Romantic paradigm of national identity by both disproving the myth of linguistic purity and advocating the use of *Fremdwörter*, borrowings perceptible to native speakers as foreign. The analysis also explicated Adorno’s reflections on affinities between various forms of purity, especially between linguistic and racial purity and between linguistic purity and the Nazi idea of societal uniformity. The section concluded that Adorno rejects the concept of linguistic purity and promotes a notion of the mother tongue open to other languages.

This chapter examines Adorno’s notion of language from the theoretical and aesthetic perspectives and argues that his redemptive writing strategies pluralize meaning in his works. His strategies create conceptual potentialities through challenging the existing theories and indicating their alternatives. His redemptive writing tools entail open literary forms (configurations),¹⁹⁶ critique, defamiliarization (estrangement or alienation effect), contradiction, oxymoron (incongruous words), irony, and dissonance (contrasting voices). The theoretical part of this chapter analyzes Adorno’s secularization of Walter Benjamin’s mystical conception of language, Adorno’s reflections on the arbitrary (conventional) character of words, and his critique of the Romantic prioritization of transcendental music over language. The following aesthetic section explicates Adorno’s inversion of Hegel’s concept of totality, Adorno’s redemptive writing techniques, and their proximity to George Steiner’s notion of “falsity,” envisioning the world differently. The chapter concludes that Adorno’s redemptive writing

¹⁹⁶ For Adorno, writing in configurations (or constellations) means presenting a central idea from various perspectives. This notion will be discussed in detail in the aesthetic part of this chapter.
strategies construct semantic vistas by destabilizing and refuting the existing paradigms and suggesting alternatives.

Scholars tend to examine Adorno’s notion of language philosophically and theoretically, with little attention to the textual analysis of his anti-systematic writing strategies.197 Roger Foster explains that Adorno seeks to secularize Benjamin’s mystical conception of language and that Adorno espouses a mode of writing that makes words expressive and less abstract through stressing relations between them (72-74). However, Foster does not analyze any textual examples that would show what types of relations Adorno creates.198 Robert Hullot-Kentor argues that the musical principle of dissonance (contrasting voices) occurs in Adorno’s writing, but he presents neither textual instances of such structures nor how Adorno creates them through foreign languages. Martin Jay argues that Adorno rejects the idea of authenticity in language but does not relate this point to Adorno’s use of foreign languages. Timothy Bewes discusses Adorno’s view on language reification, the decreasing expressiveness of words, but fails to examine how Adorno’s writing strategies—including his use of foreign languages—serve to invigorate German. Shierry Weber Nicholsen aptly notes that Adorno strives to musicalize his texts, but she does not elaborate how foreign languages contribute to this process.199

**Adorno on Benjamin’s Language Mysticism**

Adorno draws on Benjamin’s mystical theory of language while also secularizing it. Benjamin discusses the paradisiacal biblical language as a communication between human and God while Adorno portrays language as a communication between people. Benjamin seeks to

197 On Adorno’s dislike of schematic writing, see Rose 136.
198 On Adorno’s relation to Hegel, see Foster 9-30. On Adorno’s critique of Kant’s overemphasis on conceptuality, see Jarvis. On Adorno’s critique of Heidegger, see Hohendahl, Palamarek, and Jay, “Taking On the Stigma of Inauthenticity.” On Adorno’s relation to Nietzsche, see Bayerl. For a critique of Adorno’s notion of language, see H. Müller.
199 For a biographical reading of Adorno’s English expressions, see Levin.
revivify the lost paradisical tongue and describes the act of naming as a human spiritual task. Adorno, by contrast, secularizes Benjamin’s discussion of naming through his emphasis on human intellect rather than divine powers. Unlike Benjamin, Adorno aims to use the arbitrary nature of words to make them more expressive, and to generate new meanings, rather than to regain their primordial ones.

Benjamin formulates his notion of language in his 1916 essay “Über Sprache überhaupt und über die Sprache des Menschen,” where he sets his reflections on language within the context of the biblical creation account. He describes language as “eine letzte, nur in ihrer Entfaltung zu betrachtende, unerklärliche und mystische Wirklichkeit” (38). For him, language is not a collection of arbitrary signs but a spiritual and inscrutable reality, a realm for connecting with God. According to Benjamin, people convey their spirituality to God when they name things because “im Namen teilt das geistige Wesen des Menschen sich Gott mit” (34). In this quote, Benjamin asserts that people express their spiritual being to the Divine in the act of naming things. Contrary to Benjamin, Adorno views language as an instrument of communication between people.

For Benjamin, God, the epistemological pillar of the world, knows its meaning and can name things adequately. Benjamin explains, “Die Dinge haben keine Eigennamen außer in Gott” (47). He indicates here that only God’s word genuinely conveys the meanings of things. He shows the incommensurability between divine and human utterances through the following relation between name and knowledge: “Das absolute Verhältnis des Namens zur Erkenntnis besteht allein in Gott, nur dort ist der Name, weil er im innersten mit dem schaffenden Wort

---

200 “an ultimate reality, perceptible only in its manifestation, inexplicable and mystical” (67).
201 “in the name, the mental being of man communicates itself to God” (65).
202 “Things have no proper names except in God” (73).
identisch ist, das reine Medium der Erkenntnis. Das heißt: Gott machte die Dinge in ihren Namen erkennbar. Der Mensch aber benennt sie maßen der Erkenntnis" (39). In this passage, Benjamin argues that God’s word creates things, whereas people only name things but are unable to produce them instantaneously through speaking. As a result, people know what Immanuel Kant calls the appearances of things but not their essences—their genuine meanings. Kant distinguishes between noumenal and phenomenal knowledge, claiming that people comprehend the world to the extent they perceive and experience phenomena and hence have knowledge of appearances or “phenomenal knowledge.” People fail to know things in themselves (noumenal knowledge) because the human mind fails to fully access and experience the essences of things. In other words, human knowledge derives from the subjective and empirical experience of phenomena, not from the understanding of phenomena in themselves. Like Kant, Benjamin perceives human knowledge as limited and dependent on human cognition.

Benjamin views human cognition as a limitation because it prevents people from naming things accurately. He describes human cognitive limits in the following way:

Gott ruhte, als er im Menschen sein Schöpferisches sich selbst überließ. Dieses Schöpferische, seiner göttlichen Aktualität entledigt, wurde Erkenntnis. Der Mensch ist der Erkennende derselben Sprache, in der Gott Schöpfer ist. . . . Alle menschliche Sprache ist nur Reflex des Wortes im Namen. Der Name erreicht so wenig das Wort wie die Erkenntnis die Schaffung. Die Unendlichkeit aller menschlichen Sprache bleibt immer eingeschränkten und analytischen Wesens im

---

203 “The absolute relation of name to knowledge exists only in God; only there is name, because it is inwardly identical with the creative word, the pure medium of knowledge. This means that God made things knowable in their names. Man, however, names them according to knowledge” (68).

204 For Benjamin’s critique of Kant’s concept of experience, see “Über das Programm der kommenden Philosophie.”
Vergleich mit der absoluten uneingeschränkten und schaffenden Unendlichkeit des Gotteswortes. 205 (40)

Here, Benjamin underscores that human language imperfectly imitates God’s words. Despite their efforts, people cannot name objects appropriately because the human mind has limited analytical capacities and lacks the divine power to generate things instantaneously. As Richard Wolin puts it, human words never name things adequately but are “merely cognitive” (Walter Benjamin 41).

In Benjamin’s view, human cognition leads to a semantic confusion in the world because language becomes overprecise and things “überbenannt” 206 (47). The prefix “über” (over) evokes here the sense of oversaturation. For Benjamin, the excess of meaning evinces not so much human productivity as the fact that meaning becomes diluted because words move away from their primeval semantic integrity. According to him, linguistic diversity exacerbates the semantic profusion because an object receives various tags, but none is adequate. 207 Unlike Adorno, Benjamin strives to recover the original semantic integrity of language instead of amplifying its semantic potentialities. Adorno, by contrast, portrays language in the process of losing its expressive qualities rather than semantically oversaturated. He intends to intensify the expressiveness of words and to engender meanings. Linguistic diversity is one of his instruments for achieving this aim.

Unlike Adorno, Benjamin displays nostalgia for the paradisiacal biblical language, the language before the first people’s sin of eating an apple from a forbidden tree. He avows, “Die

---

205 “God rested when he had left his creative power to itself in man. This creativity, relieved of its divine actuality, became knowledge. Man is the knower in the same language in which God is the creator. . . . All human language is only the reflection of the word in name. The name is no closer to the word than knowledge is to creation. The infinity of all human language always remains limited and analytic in nature in comparison to the absolutely unlimited and creative infinity of the divine word” (68).

206 “overnamed” (73).

207 Benjamin assesses the semantic profusion as tragic (47).
paradiesische Sprache des Menschen muß die vollkommen erkennende gewesen sein; während später noch einmal alle Erkenntnis in der Mannigfaltigkeit der Sprache sich unendlich differenziert, auf einer niederen Stufe"208 (43-44). Here, he depicts the prelapsarian language as immediate and capable of expressing meaning perfectly. By contrast, the postlapsarian language is arbitrary (conventional). Benjamin emphasizes that since the fall of man “das Wort soll etwas mitteilen (außer sich selbst)”209 (44). That is, words no longer genuinely convey meaning but rely on conventions. He complains that the biblical sin pushed language “in den Abgrund der Mittelbarkeit aller Mitteilung, des Wortes als Mittel, des eitlen Wortes”210 (45). The arbitrary nature of language dissatisfies Benjamin to the point that he characterizes the emergence of linguistic arbitrariness as “der Verfall des seligen [adamitischen] Sprachgeistes”211 (44). Clearly, for Benjamin, the prelapsarian language was the ideal language.

Benjamin ascribes a profound significance to naming. In his view, naming things is a uniquely human task. Naming, Benjamin writes, is “[eine] Aufgabe, die Gott ausdrücklich dem Menschen selbst zuschreibt”212 (42). For him, naming surpasses a stylistic exercise and becomes a divinely imposed obligation necessary for the completion of the biblical process of creation. Benjamin says, “Gottes Schöpfung vollendet sich, indem die Dinge ihren Namen vom Menschen erhalten”213 (35). Here, Benjamin maintains that naming is a human contribution to the providential plan. A man fulfills his task, “[indem] er die stumme namenlose Sprache der Dinge empfängt und sie in den Namen in Lauten überträgt”214 (42). That is, one accomplishes the task

---

208 “The paradisiacal language of man must have been one of perfect knowledge, whereas later all knowledge is again infinitely differentiated in the multiplicity of language” (71).
209 “The word must communicate something (other than itself)” (71).
210 “into the abyss of mediateness of all communication, of the word as means, of the empty word” (72).
211 “the decay of the blissful Adamite spirit of language” (71).
212 “the task that God expressly assigns to man himself” (70).
213 “God’s creation is completed when things receive their names from man” (65).
214 “[in] receiving the unspoken nameless language of things and converting it by name into sounds” (70).
by naming objects, which remain mute and receive their voice by being named. This process ennobles objects because it “redeems them from a fate of speechless anonymity” (Wolin, *Walter Benjamin* 42). In this respect, Benjamin sees naming as a religious duty inscribed within the providential plan.

Benjamin’s orientation toward the paradisiacal language also reveals itself when he refers to the Judaic doctrine of redemption. As Martin Jay explains, redemption means the end of history, when humanity enters “a state of grace in which words once again were similar to the things they named” (*Adorno* 76). Put another way, redemption implies the restoration of the paradisiacal state and, by implication, the reunification of languages with the divine one. Benjamin maintains that traces of the divine language, existent in literary works and nature, can be retrieved through studying those two phenomena. Evidently, Benjamin seeks to recover the primal shape of language rather than engender meanings.

Contrary to Benjamin, Adorno endorses a secular notion of language. He displays no nostalgia for the paradisiacal language and considers it irretrievably lost. In his 1930s essay “Über den Gebrauch von Fremdwoörtern” (ÜGF), published posthumously, Adorno argues that the restoration of the paradisiacal language (“die reine kreatürliche Sprache”) is impossible. He elaborates, “Die reine kreatürliche Sprache ist den Menschen verborgen oder verloren, weil ihr Inbegriff nichts anderes wäre als der der dargestellten Wahrheit” (642-43). He conveys here...

---

215 In the Kabbalah, as George Steiner explains, salvation means a day when all “human tongues will have re-entered the translucent of that primal, lost speech shared by God and Adam” (*After Babel* 499). On redemption in Benjamin, see also Butler, *Parting Ways* 103. On the Kabbalah in Benjamin, see Wolin, *Walter Benjamin* 31-47.

216 See Wolin, *Walter Benjamin* 43. On Benjamin’s view that translation brings one closer to the divine language, see Steiner, *After Babel* 67.

217 Adorno’s father was an assimilated Jew, and his mother was a Catholic. Adorno received baptism but did not commit to any religion and had “a kind of sober, secular attitude towards everything religious” (Müller-Doohm 19-20).

218 See Hohendahl 224.

219 “Pure creaturely language is hidden from human beings or lost to them, because its quintessence would be nothing but the quintessence of represented truth” (288).
that the recovery of the pure language would mean returning to the unity of a word and a thing. In other words, the restoration of the paradisiacal language would create a reality in which words would embody things. Such reality is, from his perspective, utopian and would mean the end of linguistic arbitrariness.

Unlike Benjamin, Adorno reads the biblical scene of naming in a secular fashion and highlights human intellectual capacities rather than the divine power. For him, naming is not a religious task but a human mental activity that propels the evolution of language. In contrast to Benjamin, Adorno puts a positive stress on human intellectual efforts:


In this passage, Adorno marks his distance from Benjamin when he claims that “the true words” are not the primeval words (“Urworte”) but “the made words” (“die gemachten Worte”), namely

220 "This is why the life of language is . . . lived . . . with naming as the enigmatic ur-phenomenon in between grasping thought and manifested truth, with crystallization and disintegration. The true words . . . are not the buried ur-words that are mythically evoked. They are the found words, the performed words, artificial words, in short, the made words; just as, according to the account in Genesis, God did not reveal the names of things to man; instead, those names were made known to him only when man named them in his human fashion: in the act of naming itself” (288-89). The English edition omits the last sentence: “Every newly used foreign derivation celebrates in the moment of its appearance again the true pre-historical naming in a secular fashion” (my trans.).
words coined by people. In this way, Adorno underlines that human words have genuine value and meaning even though they are artificial (“künstlich”) and conventional when compared with the divine word. Most crucially, Adorno shifts the emphasis from God’s power to human intellectual activity. When one names things, one evokes the biblical scene of naming in a secular manner; however, one’s goal is neither completing the biblical process of creation nor reinstating the divine tongue, but rather contributing to the evolution of human language. For Adorno, such a contribution is a creative use of *Fremdwörter*, borrowings that still sound foreign to native speakers (Yildiz 68). In this regard, Adorno’s conception of language underscores human creativity and is future oriented.

Unlike Benjamin, Adorno regards the arbitrariness of language as unavoidable. He conveys this point in his 1959 essay “Wörter aus der Fremde” (WF), when he argues, “Sprache hat teil an der Verdinglichung, der Trennung von Sache und Gedanken. Der übliche Klang des Natürlichen betrügt darüber. Er weckt die Illusion, es wäre, was geredet wird, unmittelbar das Gemeinte. Das Fremdwort mahnt krass daran, daß alle wirkliche Sprache etwas von der Spielmarke hat, indem es sich selber als Spielmarke einbekennt” (220-21). Here, Adorno compares language to “a token” (“eine Spielmarke”) to convey that words do not embody ideas but express them by convention. “Keine Sprache,” Adorno concludes, “auch die alte Volkssprache nicht, ist . . . ein Organisches, Naturhaftes” (219). For him, linguistic arbitrariness is inescapable.

---

221 “Language participates in reification, the separation of subject matter and thought. The customary ring of naturalness deceives us about that. It creates the illusion that what is said is immediately equivalent to what is meant. By acknowledging itself as a token, the foreign word reminds us bluntly that all real language has something of the token in it” (189).

222 “No language, not even the old vernacular language, is organic and natural” (188).

223 Adorno is here in accord with Ferdinand de Saussure’s semiotic reflections on the arbitrariness of linguistic signs (words). Saussure defines a sign as a psychological entity consisting of a signifier (a sound-image) and a signified (a concept). The relation between those two elements is “arbitrary” and “unmotivated”: the sign exhibits “no natural connection” to the signified and represents it by convention (965). For Saussure and Adorno, arbitrariness is a
Furthermore, Adorno insists that one needs to remind people regularly about the conventional nature of words. He ascribes this task to *Fremdwörter* in the following statement: “Es [das Fremdwort] macht sich zum Sündenbock der Sprache, zum Träger der Dissonanz, die von ihr zu gestalten ist, nicht zuzuschmücken. Wogegen man sich beim Fremdwort sträubt, ist nicht zuletzt, daß es an den Tag bringt, wie es um alle Wörter steht: daß die Sprache die Sprechenden nochmals einsperrt”\(^224\) (221). Adorno here cautions against the impression that what one says exactly expresses what one means, which suggests that a word and its meaning are naturally and inextricably entwined. *Fremdwörter* expose this seemingly natural character of language because they are borrowed from other tongues rather than homegrown.

According to Adorno, an awareness of the arbitrary nature of words protects one from believing in language ontology. He excoriates language ontology, especially Heidegger, for attributing metaphysical values to words, as if they were not conventional. Adorno warns that “die restaurnative ontologische Philosophie . . . [möchte] ihre Worte als absolutes Sein unterschrieben”\(^225\) (221), indicating that the meaning of human existence is not derivable from philosophical terminology. To emphasize this point, Adorno states, “An den Fremdwörtern erweist sich die Unmöglichkeit von Sprachontologie: noch den Begriffen, die sich geben, als wären sie der Ursprung selber, halten sie ihr Vermitteltsein vor, das Moment des subjektiv Gemachten, der Willkür”\(^226\) (221). In this quote, Adorno highlights the conventionality of all words, including philosophical terminology, and thus conveys that they should not be equated default linguistic condition. Unlike Saussure, Adorno stresses the historical evolution of words. For an early philosophical discussion of linguistic arbitrariness, see Plato.

\(^224\) “It [a foreign derivation] makes itself language’s scapegoat, the bearer of the dissonance that language has to give form to and not merely prettify. Not the least of what we resist in the foreign word is that it illuminates something true of all words: that language imprisons those who speak it” (189).

\(^225\) “restoratist ontological philosophy . . . would like to impute absolute Being to its words” (190).

\(^226\) “Foreign words demonstrate the inability of the ontology of language: they confront even concepts that try to pass themselves off as origin itself with their mediatedness, their moment of being subjectively constructed, their arbitrariness” (189).
with the phenomena to which they refer. Hence, for him, it is futile to extrapolate ontological truths from philosophical vocabulary.

In this part, the contrast between Adorno and Benjamin is explicated as Adorno’s secularization of Benjamin’s notion of naming. Whereas Benjamin seeks to resurrect the paradisiacal language, Adorno’s conception of language is future-oriented. Benjamin focuses on restoring the primeval semantic integrity of words. By contrast, Adorno aims at creating and enhancing meaning despite the arbitrary nature of language.

Language and Music

In Adorno’s view, neither language nor music can create a secure link between the human world and transcendental realities. He disagrees with German Romantic theories that prioritize music over language and portray music as giving access to transcendental realms.\(^{227}\) For instance, Arthur Schopenhauer extols music as “the immediate representation of the Will.” By the Will, he means the underlying metaphysical principle of the world. For him, music is a realm for connecting with the Will. Similarly, Richard Wagner ascribes a metaphysical quality to music when he claims that his idea of the Gesamtkunstwerk (total artwork) fuses language, music, and aesthetics into a vision of a reconciled reality.\(^{228}\) In brief, the German Romantics present music as a sphere of transcendence.

To challenge those German Romantic theories, Adorno exposes the limitations of music and language. In his “Musik, Sprache und ihr Verhältnis im gegenwärtigen Komponieren” (MSV), Adorno concedes that music is less conventional than words. He argues that human language (“die meinende Sprache”) never reaches the Absolute, the transcendental entity:

\(^{227}\) Adorno began his academic career by writing musical reviews and essays on music.

\(^{228}\) On Schopenhauer’s Will, see Zöller 126-27 and 137. On Wagner’s Gesamtkunstwerk, see Birx xi. On the German Romantic primacy of music over language, see Bayerl 37-40.
Gegenüber der meinenden Sprache ist Musik Sprache nur als eine von ganz anderem Typus. In ihm liegt ihr theologischer Aspekt. Was sie sagt, ist in der Aussage bestimmt zugleich und verborgen. Ihre Idee ist die Gestalt des göttlichen Namens. Sie ist entmythologisiertes Gebet, befreit von der Magie des Einwirkens; der wie immer auch vergebliche menschliche Versuch, den Namen selber zu nennen, nicht Bedeutungen mitzuteilen. 229 (650)

In this quote, Adorno indicates that the theological advantage of music lies in its sonic quality. Music avoids conventionality because it speaks through sounds rather than linguistic signs. However, the disadvantage of music is its equivocal meaning. The sense of a melody depends on human interpretation and is always inconclusive because people decode the same tune differently. Music becomes demythologized when people convert musical tones into linguistic concepts. Without such a translation, one could neither share nor exchange one’s musical interpretations with other people. In this regard, music and language exhibit a similar degree of conventionality. 230

To accentuate his distance to German Romantic theories of music, Adorno observes that the Absolute eludes both music and language. He notes, “Die meinende Sprache möchte das Absolute vermittelt sagen, und es entgleitet ihr in jeder einzelnen Intention. . . . Musik trifft es unmittelbar, aber im gleichen Augenblick verdunkelt es sich, so wie überstarkes Licht das Auge blendet, das das ganz Sichtbare nicht mehr zu sehen vermag” 231 (652). This passage suggests that

---

229 “In comparison to signifying language, music is a language of a completely different type. Therein lies music’s theological aspect. What music says is a proposition at once distinct and concealed. Its idea is the form of the name of God. It is demythologized prayer, freed from the magic of making anything happen, the human attempt, futile, as always, to name the name itself, not to communicate meanings” (402).

230 On affinities between language and music in Adorno, see Wellmer, Versuch über Musik und Sprache and Zur Dialektik von Moderne und Postmoderne 14.

231 “Signifying language would say the absolute in a mediated way, yet the absolute escapes it in each of its intentions. . . . Music reaches the absolute but in the same instant it immediately, darkens, as when a strong light blinds the eye, which can no longer see things that are quite visible” (404).
music may reach the Absolute, but the flash of illumination is so short that the human mind
cannot register the meaning of revelation. In other words, music may yield a moment of
epiphany, but the transcendental reality remains unknown. In this way, Adorno repudiates the
German Romantic belief in music as a bridge to transcendent realities. His references to
blindness and darkening evoke the Jewish Bilderverbot, a prohibition on pictorial representations
of God. In this part, the focus falls on Adorno’s rejection of the German Romantic notion of
transcendental music. Adorno’s remarks on the conventional nature of music and language show
his distance from theological theories of transcendence. He argues for a secular approach to
language.

Totality, Redemption, and Dissonance

Adorno advocates structures of openness in language and philosophy as a way of
enhancing and multiplying meaning. In his Minima Moralia (MM), Adorno exemplifies a closed
structure of totality with Hegel’s dictum “Das Wahre ist das Ganze.” This maxim refers to
Hegel’s notion of totality as the crowning stage in the development of Geist (spirit). For Hegel,
the spirit emancipates itself from its empirical reality by negating itself (abstracting and
reflecting upon itself). The spirit continues negating itself until it reaches the final stage of self-

---

232 In Judaism, the Bilderverbot is a ban on images and the direct address of God. It is “the view that any concrete
representation of the divine, even the speaking of its name, is idolatry” (Brittain 89).
233 Adorno scholars sometimes relate his reflections on music and language to negative theology that originated in
late antiquity and thrived in the third century BCE and the late Middle Ages. Negative theologians perceive God as
nameless and “completely transcendent of the existing world so that the only way to approach the divine is
negatively: through denials and clarifications of what God is not” (Brittain 92). That is, God is knowable only
through stating what God is not. Like negative theologians, Adorno uses negation and points to the impossibility of
knowing God directly, but he favors secularism. On Adorno’s “inverse theology” as directed against “natural and
supernatural interpretation” of the world, see Brittain 98.
234 “The true is the whole” (50). For the concept of Geist, see Hegel.
reconciliation and wholeness. In this phase, the spirit attains completeness and totality when it becomes fully conscious of itself as a subject and an object. This phase is the culmination of the spirit’s development and preserves all its preceding moments.

Negation is crucial to the spirit’s evolution. As Herbert Marcuse explains, Hegel describes thinking as a negative activity. For Hegel, “Thinking is, indeed, essentially the negation of that which is immediately before us” (qtd. in Marcuse vii). In other words, thinking means negating objects by scrutinizing them. This process of thinking (negating) stops when the spirit reaches its final evolutionary stage, which immobilizes the entire system. Adorno interprets this moment as stasis and a point from which no further progress or difference is possible.

To prevent such a closure, Adorno negates and inverts Hegel’s maxim in the following way: “Das Ganze ist das Unwahre” 235 (MM 55). In this way, he advocates a dialectical mode that seeks openness rather than a resolution or totality. Adorno appropriates Hegel’s remark that the spirit evolves, “indem er dem Negativen ins Angesicht schaut, bei ihm verweilt” 236 (MM 15). For Hegel, negation works toward reaching a resolution and the final stage of evolution. For Adorno, negation must never stop despite the human desire for a resolution. In his view, persistent “negation” propels the dialectical process, precludes totality, and creates room for difference. Such dialectical (or negative) thinking has the following twofold task: “The negation is determinate if it refers the established state of affairs to the basic factors and forces which make for its destructiveness, as well as for the possible alternatives beyond the status quo” (Marcuse xi-xii). As the quote indicates, dialectical thinking exposes social contradictions in reality and posits alternatives.

235 “The whole is the false” (50).
236 “when looking the negative in the face, dwelling upon it” (16).
Adorno perceives the dialectical mode as redemptive precisely because it unveils incongruities in reality and points to various options. In the last aphorism of *Minima Moralia*, he describes his idea of redemption as a philosophical lens for interpreting the postwar world:

Philosophie, wie sie im Angesicht der Verzweiflung einzig noch zu verantworten ist, wäre der Versuch, alle Dinge so zu betrachten, wie sie vom Standpunkt der Erlösung aus sich darstellten. Erkenntnis hat kein Licht, als das [das] von der Erlösung her auf die Welt scheint. . . . Perspektiven müßten hergestellt werden, in denen die Welt ähnlich sich versetzt, verfremdet, ihre Risse und Schründe offenbart, wie sie einmal als bedürftig und entstellt im Messianischen Lichte daliegen wird.237 (283)

Here, redemption means the development of prospects for the future in a dialectical fashion, that is, using displacement, estrangement, and contradiction. To create such perspectives, one distorts, aggrandizes, and defamiliarizes the image of the world. In other words, one produces potentialities when one questions, destabilizes, and estranges the familiar paradigms. Hence, Adorno’s formula for creating semantic differences depends on challenging the existing frameworks.

Adorno concedes the limitations of his approach, reflecting, “Es ist das Allereinfachste . . . ja weil die vollendete Negativität . . . zur Spiegelschrift ihres Gegenteils zusammenschließt. Aber es ist auch das ganz Unmögliche, weil es einen Standort voraussetzt, der dem Bannkreis des Daseins . . . entrückt ist”238 (283). In this passage, Adorno admits that his method may

237 “The only philosophy which can be responsibly practiced in face of despair is the attempt to contemplate all things as they would present themselves from the standpoint of redemption. Knowledge has no light but that shed on the world by redemption. . . . Perspectives must be fashioned that displace and estrange the world, reveal it to be, with its rifts and crevices, as indigent and distorted as it will appear one day in the messianic light” (247).
238 “It is the simplest of all things, . . . indeed because consummate negativity . . . delineates the mirror-image of its opposite. But it is also the utterly impossible thing, because it presupposes a standpoint removed . . . from the scope of existence. . . .” (247).
generate fruitful answers (“the mirror-image of its opposite”) but lacks fail-safe solutions because such certainty does not exist. His approach relies on experimenting and testing, with no assurances. Despite those limitations, Adorno deems his redemptive method worthwhile when he says, “Gegenüber der Forderung, die damit an ihn [den Gedanken] ergeht, ist aber die Frage nach der Wirklichkeit oder Unwirklichkeit der Erlösung selber fast gleichgültig.”²³⁹ In this quote, he emphasizes the indispensability of redemptive approaches, regardless of how feasible or sure they may seem. In this way, Adorno stresses the need to fashion such perspectives for the future.

Adorno’s notion of redemption harmonizes with Michel Foucault’s remarks on interpretation. Commenting on Nietzsche’s genealogical philosophy, Foucault explains that knowledge requires resisting the certainty of absolutes and depends on conceptual disruptions, discontinuities, reversals, substitutions, displacements, and multiplications (151-54). For him, knowledge does not necessarily lead to conclusions, resolutions, and unity, but rather operates by active interpretation. Foucault explains, “But if interpretation is the violent or surreptitious appropriation of a system of rules, which in itself has no essential meaning, in order to impose a direction, to bend it to a new will, to force its participation in a different game, and to subject it to secondary rules, then the development of humanity is a series of interpretations” (151-52). Here, Foucault presents interpretation as bending, tweaking, and putting ideas into new games. Adorno puts a similar stress on displacing, disrupting, altering, challenging, and refuting ideas as ways of creating semantic potentialities.

Adorno’s notion of redemption is not just theoretical but noticeable in his aesthetic practices. His redemptive writing strategies include open literary forms, critique,

²³⁹ “But beside the demand thus placed on thought, the question of the reality or unreality of redemption itself hardly matters” (247).
defamiliarization, contradiction, dissonance, irony, and oxymoron.\textsuperscript{240} Those strategies serve to create possibilities rather than conclusive answers. For example, Adorno critiques and repurposes the German Romantic model of music. In his Philosophie der neuen Musik (PNM), written in American exile and published in 1949, Adorno asserts that his contemporary music perpetuates the German Romantic idea of transcendental music. He writes, “Sie [Musik] ist Ideologie, insoweit sie sich als ein ontologisches Ansichsein jenseits der gesellschaftlichen Spannungen behauptet”\textsuperscript{241} (123). Adorno assesses music as socially conditioned, thus challenging the Romantic belief in the autonomy of music. He also observes that musical compositions are so out of touch with postwar audiences, “daß ihre eigene Erfahrung kaum mehr mit der kommuniziert, für welche die traditionelle Musik zeugt”\textsuperscript{242} (18). In his view, traditional music has lost its compatibility with postwar circumstances because it relies on Romantic conventions of grandiosity, harmony, and beauty.

To destabilize the German Romantic model, Adorno ascribes a social function to music. New music, antithetical to society, reflects societal problems instead of offering a flight from reality (28). He describes the task of advanced music as exposing societal pitfalls latent in the commercialization of life. He explains, “Ihre Wahrheit scheint eher darin aufgehoben, daß sie [die avancierte Musik] durch organisierte Sinnleere den Sinn der organisierten Gesellschaft . . . dementiert”\textsuperscript{243} (28). He uses the oxymoron “organisierte Sinnleere” (“the organized absence of

\textsuperscript{240} Oxymorons combine incongruous words. Defamiliarization, or Brecht’s so-called alienation effect (Verfremdungseffekt), is a technique of portraying reality in a distorted manner. All those redemptive techniques were popular in literary and artistic movements at the beginning of the twentieth century. For example, surrealists employed contrasts and dream conventions; expressionists utilized aggrandized perspectives and light effects; Polish avant-garde writer Witold Gombrowicz mixed sarcasm, grotesque, and satire to criticize modern forms of life; Russian futurist poet Velimir Khlebnikov experimented with Russian language and created neologisms.

\textsuperscript{241} “Music is ideology insofar as it asserts itself as an ontological being-in-itself, beyond society’s tensions” (100).

\textsuperscript{242} “that their own experience scarcely communicates any longer with that to which traditional music bears witness” (11-12). For Adorno’s objections to the German Romantic tradition, see Müller-Doohm 331.

\textsuperscript{243} “The truth of this music appears to reside in the organized absence of any meaning, by which it repudiates any meaning of organized society” (19-20).
any meaning”) to reveal that the nonsensical form of new music reflects the absurdity of modern life.

Unlike Romantic music, new music is unpleasant. Its beauty consists in its ability “dem Schein des Schönen sich zu versagen” (126). Adorno values the dissonance and harshness of new music over smoothness and harmony. He describes the double function of dissonance in the following way: “Sie [die Dissonanzen] werden zu Charakteren des objektiven Protests. . . . Ihre Negativität hält der Utopie die Treue; sie schließt die verschwiegene Konsonanz in sich ein” (85-86). On the one hand, dissonant compositions are artistic means of protest because their discordant form mirrors societal tensions. In this sense, advanced music works like Bertolt Brecht’s Verfremdungseffekt (alienation effect). Like Brecht, new music confronts people with a distorted, aggrandized, and defamiliarized image of reality to stir their critical thinking. On the other hand, dissonant works allude to a possibility of harmony and reconciliation. The dialectical and redemptive quality of new music is now visible: Adorno considers advanced music redemptive because it exposes societal tensions while stimulating people to envision alternatives.

For Adorno, dissonance works as a musical and an aesthetic tool for emphasizing relations between sounds or words. He recommends using dissonance in music to create polyphony:

\[
\text{Je dissonierender ein Akkord, je mehr voneinander unterschiedene und in ihrer Unterschiedenheit wirksame Töne er in sich enthält, um so ‘polyphoner’ ist er, um so mehr nimmt . . . jeder einzelne Ton bereits in der Simultaneität des Zusammenklangs den Charakter der ‘Stimme’ an. Die Vorherrschaft der}
\]

\[244\] “[to deny] the semblance of the beautiful” (102).
\[245\] “They [the dissonances] become characters of objective protest. . . . Their negativity becomes loyal to utopia: It contains in itself the concealed consonance” (68).
Dissonanz scheint die rationalen, ‘logischen’ Beziehungen innerhalb der Tonalität . . . zu zerstören. Insofern aber ist dennoch die Dissonanz rationaler als die Konsonanz, als sie die Beziehung der in ihr vorkommenden Töne . . . vor Augen stellt, anstatt deren Einheit durch die Vernichtung der in ihr enthaltenen Partialmomente, durch ‘homogenen’ Klang zu erkaufen. (61)

In this passage, Adorno associates homogeneity with sonic regularity. In such compositions, the relationships between sounds are inflexible, and the leading voice suppresses the weaker tones. To disrupt the mono-dimensional tonality, Adorno suggests using dissonance (opposing sounds). As Hullot-Kentor observes, dissonance generates simultaneous and “independent contrasting voices” (75). Those internal contrasts defy the Romantic rule of congruence, accentuate the dynamics between sounds, and, in this way, pluralize musical meaning. Adorno finds polyphonic melodies highly stimulating because they surprise the ear by not following “the prevalent norms of intelligibility” (Rose 136).

Adorno creates dissonance in his literary works through reversals, contradictions, oxymorons, irony, and paradoxes. For example, he inverts Hegel’s statement “Das Wahre ist das Ganze”247 with the phrase “Das Ganze ist das Unwahre”248 to shift the attention from the word “das Wahre” (the true) to the term “das Ganze” (the whole), which symbolizes totality (MM 55). He then characterizes the idea of totality as “das Unwahre” (the false), effectively repudiating it. Adorno describes musical meaning in oxymoronic terms as “bestimmt” (distinct) and

---

246 “The more a chord is dissonant, the more it comprises in itself tones differentiated from each other and potent in their differentiatedness, the more it is ‘polyphonic,’ the more . . . each individual tone acquires in its simultaneity the character of a ‘voice.’ The ascendency of dissonance seems to destroy the rational, ‘logical’ connections within tonality. . . . Yet dissonance is more rational than consonance insofar as it articulates the relationship of sounds . . . contained in it instead of buying their unity at the price of the annihilation of the partial elements contained in it, that is, through a ‘homogeneous’ resonance” (49).
247 “The true is the whole” (50).
248 “The whole is the false” (50).
“verborgen” (concealed), thus suggesting that musical meaning remains evident yet unclear (MSV 650). By stating that “Glück” (happiness) in music means “das Unglück zu erkennen”\(^\text{249}\), he creates a paradox because he excludes the emotional sensation of feeling happy, which then reduces “Glück” (happiness) to knowledge derivable from the feeling of “Unglück” (unhappiness) (\textit{PNM} 126). Irony announces itself in Adorno’s observation that the beauty of new music lies in its ability “dem Schein des Schönen sich zu versagen”\(^\text{250}\) because Adorno casts beauty as the very resistance of beauty, opposing the Romantic veneration of aesthetic beauty (126).

Dissonance also emerges from Adorno’s paratactic style, the tendency to omit conjunctions to make the causal and hierarchical relations between words and sentences less apparent. An example of a paratactic juxtaposition occurs when Adorno uses the conjunction “und” (and) instead of “aber” (but) in the phrase “bestimmt . . . und verborgen”\(^\text{251}\) (MSV 650). Another example is the following enumeration: “Sie [Musik] ist entmythologisiertes Gebet . . .; der wie immer auch vergebliche menschliche Versuch, den Namen selber zu nennen, nicht Bedeutungen mitzuteilen”\(^\text{252}\) (650). In the quote, both parts of the sentence list the limitations of music without creating any cause-effect relation between them. As a result, the meaning of the sentence becomes pluralized, yet it seems less decisive.

Formally, Adorno creates dissonance through his technique of writing in configurations, which he models on Benjamin’s constellations. For Benjamin, writing in constellations means arranging words around a central motif, whose meaning arises from its refractions. He argues,

\(^{249}\) “the knowledge of unhappiness” (102).
\(^{250}\) “[to deny] the semblance of the beautiful” (102).
\(^{251}\) “distinct and concealed” (402).
\(^{252}\) “It [music] is demythologized prayer . . ., the human attempt, futile, as always, to name the name itself, not to communicate meanings” (402).
“Die Ideen verhalten sich zu den Dingen wie die Sternbilder zu den Sternen”

(“Erkenntnistheoretische Vorrede” 73). Here, he conveys that constellations portray their idea by showing the relations between its elements rather than stating the idea directly. Adorno’s configurations proceed in a similar manner. He elaborates:

Wo sie [Sprache] wesentlich als Sprache auftritt, Darstellung wird, definiert sie nicht ihre Begriffe. Ihre Objektivität verschafft sie ihnen durch das Verhältnis, in das sie die Begriffe, zentriert um eine Sache, setzt. Damit dient sie der Intention des Begriffs, das Gemeinte ganz auszudrücken. Konstellationen allein repräsentieren, von außen, was der Begriff im Innern wegeschnitten hat, das Mehr, das er sein will so sehr, wie er es nicht sein kann. Indem die Begriffe um die zu erkennende Sache sich versammeln, bestimmen sie potentiell deren Inneres. . . .

In this quote, Adorno explains that configurations (constellations) express their overarching idea indirectly through their form, depicting the idea from various angles. Its meaning emerges from the relations between the elements of the configuration. This type of writing is neither exhaustive nor conclusive but fragmentary and open-ended. The last aphorism of Minima Moralia exemplifies Adorno’s concept of the configuration: The aphorism depicts the idea of redemption in various ways as a messianic light, a philosophical duty, and an activity of fashioning.

---

253 “Ideas are to objects as constellations are to stars” (34). On Benjamin’s constellations, see Wolin, Walter Benjamin 42.

254 “Where it [language] appears essentially as a language, where it becomes a form of representation, it will not define its concepts. It lends objectivity to them by the relation into which it puts the concepts, centered about the thing. Language thus serves the intention of the concept to express completely what it means. By themselves, constellations represent from without what the concept has cut away from within: the ‘more’ which the concept is equally desirous and incapable of being. By gathering around the object of cognition, the concepts potentially determine the object’s interior” (162). On Adorno’s configurations, see Grenz 211-221, Bayerl 121-26, and Jarvis 175-192.
perspectives for the future. The aphorism is dissonant to the extent that it refrains from defining redemption in a conclusive manner.

Moreover, Adorno uses *Fremdwörter* to construct dissonance visually and sonically. They may disrupt the text visually because their form differs from that of regular German words. In his German essays on *Fremdwörter*, Adorno marks his examples through quotation marks.  

*Fremdwörter* unsettle the textual melody because of their different and rasping sound (ein schnarrender Klang) (WF 222). Adorno employs *Fremdwörter* because, in his view, they embody “a mythical remainder” in language. In his *Jargon der Eigentlichkeit*, Adorno defines “den hartnäckig mythischen Rest der Sprache” 256 as subjective meanings acquired by words throughout ages rather than a mystical residue (441). He perceives those residues as “impossible to eliminate” from language (Rose 15). They give insight into the history of human subjectivity and poeticize language because their subjective nuances often resist translation and thus can stimulate “Stimmung, Atmosphäre, [und] Sprach-Musik” 257 (ÜGF 641). For instance, the French derivation “Cachet” means in Swiss German “a distinguishing, distinctive feature” and in the whole German-speaking area “a seal, a signet” (641). Adorno observes that this archaic word “Cachet” can be used to foreignize texts and give them an old feel. Another example is the Latin-derived word “mondän,” which means “stylish, fashionable” and connotes a sense of sophistication. Adorno suggests using the term “mondän” for subtle evaluations of contents (642). Equally evocative is the Latin-derived word “Attitude,” which denotes a figure in ballet. 258 That meaning overlaps with the term “Attitüde,” which also denotes “a viewpoint” and “a pose.

---

255 See the original typescripts entitled “Über den Gebrauch der Fremdwörter” and “Wörter aus der Fremde: Ihr Gebrauch und Ihre Funktion.” In *Minima Moralia*, Adorno uses no special formatting for *Fremdwörter* and English expressions. See the typescript of *Minima Moralia*.

256 “the stubbornly mythical remainder of language” (42).

257 “[the] mood, atmosphere, [and] the music of language” (287).

258 An attitude is a figure in which in the dancer stands on one leg and lifts the other one with a bent knee. For the etymology of all the examples, see *Duden*.
an affected gesture” (641). The homographic and homophonic proximity of those two words increases their suggestiveness. As the above examples demonstrate, Adorno’s use of *Fremdwörter* makes his works semantically rich through emphasizing and eliciting certain connotations and meanings.

Furthermore, Adorno utilizes English expressions to create subtle contrasts. In an aphorism “Hinunter und immer weiter,” Adorno injects the English word “bottleneck” to depict the shrinking of the expressive capacities of language, or language reification.259 The “bottleneck” contains the most frequently used phrases, namely expressions for “[das] Nächste, Stumpfste und Banalste”260 (*MM* 209). By contrast, the bottom part of the bottle encompasses the unused vocabulary. In this aphorism, the word “bottleneck” focalizes the reader’s gaze on the narrow top of the bottle while revealing its bottom part as much more voluminous. The contrast between the top and the bottom evokes the idea of shrinking. In the same aphorism, Adorno uses the English phrase “down-to-earth” to ridicule the matter-of-fact approach to reality (209). He first describes conversations that rely on the bottleneck-vocabulary as objective and rational. In the final line of the aphorism, Adorno characterizes such rational people as “down to earth wie die zoologischen Ahnen, ehe diese sich auf die Hinterbeine stellten”261 (209). In this way, he ironically denounces the down-to-earth attitude as narrow and representative of an early evolutionary stage. Hence, the dissonant character of this piece emerges from the contrast between the German and English elements.

Adorno’s redemptive writing techniques square with Steiner’s notion of “falsity.” In his 1975 *After Babel*, literary critic Steiner argues that language evolves due to human social needs,

---

259 On Adorno’s notion of language reification, see Bewes.
260 “the most obvious, dullest and tritest matters” (183).
261 “down to earth like their zoological forebears, before they got up on their hind-legs” (184).
primarily the human desire for individuation (the differentiation of oneself from others) and the human need to protect one’s privacy (498). Human individuation depends on “falsity,” which for Steiner means not “a mere miscorrespondence with a fact. It [falsity] is itself an active, creative agent. The human capacity to utter falsehood, to lie, to negate what is the case, stands at the heart of speech and of the reciprocities between words and world” (224). Steiner clearly understands “falsity” as the human ability to falsify, fabricate, and negate phenomena through words. For him, “falsity” represents the generative force of language. In short, language develops thanks to the human use of “falsity.”

Steiner celebrates “falsity” as stimulating progress. Without “falsity,” he asserts, evolutionary advancement would not occur. He continues:

Language is the main instrument of man’s refusal to accept the world as it is.
Without that refusal, without the unceasing generation by the mind of
‘counterworlds,’ . . . we would turn forever on the treadmill of the present. Reality would be . . . ‘all that is the case’ and nothing more. Ours is the ability, the need, to gainsay or ‘un-say’ the world, to image and speak it otherwise. (228)

Steiner suggests that what propels human evolution is “falsity,” the capacity to refute, negate, and express the world “otherwise,” and to envision “counterworlds.” Were it not for “falsity,” people would reiterate the status quo, or “the treadmill of the present.” According to Steiner, “falsity” encompasses “ambiguity, polysemy, opaqueness, the violation of grammatical and logical sequences, reciprocal incomprehensions, [and] the capacity to lie” (246). He portrays

---

262 Steiner criticizes mathematical approaches to language and Noam Chomsky’s biolinguistic concept of transformational generative grammar, according to which people are born with an innate linguistic knowledge (“deep structures”) that enables them to express meaning in language. As Steiner observes, Chomsky neglects social, historical, and cultural factors influencing language acquisition. On the recently discovered genetic factors involved in language acquisition, such as the Foxp2 protein that facilitates the learning of patterns and the associating of words with objects, see Schreiweis et al.
those forms of “falsity” as “not pathologies of language but the roots of its genius” (246). Thus, from Steiner’s perspective, “falsity” ensures the growth of civilization.

Adorno’s redemptive writing strategies and Steiner’s concept of “falsity” represent similar methods of negating reality. Both writers seek to counteract conceptual closure and fixity through refusal, contradiction, disruption, plurality, and ambiguity. Both thinkers describe those means as redemptive, that is, capable of generating new approaches and alternatives to the existing standards. In a sense, Adorno’s call for fashioning redemptive perspectives reverberates in Steiner’s praise of “falsity” as an instrument without which “the individual and the species would have withered” (246). In this regard, for both Adorno and Steiner, creating difference means resisting and challenging conceptual standards and opening new horizons.

Adorno and Steiner approach the issue of semantic potentialities from different angles. Adorno frames the devising of redemptive outlooks as a philosophical responsibility. Steiner assumes an aesthetic standpoint when he states, “Language is a constant creation of alternative worlds” (246). For him, the purpose of language is to produce “alternity,” i.e., “the ‘other than the case’, the counter-factual propositions, images, shapes of will and evasion . . . by means of which we build the changing, largely fictive milieu of our somatic and our social existence” (232-33). Put differently, “alternity” entails possibilities latent in “falsity.” “Alternity” corresponds to what Adorno terms redemptive perspectives. Hence, for both Adorno and Steiner, creating semantic opportunities requires negating and imagining reality “otherwise.” Adorno maintains a secular notion of language, and he presupposes no theological assurances. By contrast, Steiner seeks to reinject the religious concept of transcendence into the discourse on language and depicts God as the guarantor of meaning in language. Steiner presents the human capacity to lie as part of his notion of “falsity.” Adorno does not include deliberate falsehood in
his redemptive writing techniques, but instead he suggests defamiliarizing and distorting the image of reality in aesthetics for didactic purposes.\(^{263}\)

In this part, when Adorno inverts Hegel, he reveals his own endorsement of open, dialectical approaches rather than of theories that promote totality. His dialectical mode represents a redemptive technique for critiquing reality and pointing to alternatives. Steiner’s notion of “falsity” contextualizes Adorno’s redemptive writing techniques.

**Conclusion**

Adorno’s critique of both Benjamin’s mystical concept of language and the German Romantic primacy of transcendental music over language shows that Adorno advocates a secular notion of language. In his view, although words are arbitrary (conventional), they can be used creatively to amplify and pluralize meaning. By inverting Hegel’s concept of totality, Adorno endorses open, dialectical modes that enable both evaluating the status quo critically and uncovering alternatives. To create such dialectical ideas, Adorno employs his redemptive writing devices, including open literary forms (configurations), critique, defamiliarization, contradiction, oxymoron, irony, and dissonance. He often uses foreign expressions to elicit irony and contrast. Adorno’s writing techniques resemble Steiner’s concept of “falsity,” imagining the world differently. Both writers present the creation of semantic possibilities as a process of unsettling

\(^{263}\) For Adorno and Steiner, artworks function as the crucial sources of meaning and edification. Steiner attacks the theory of deconstruction. Adorno aligns himself with deconstruction to the extent that he seeks to amplify and pluralize meaning without relying on any theological or philosophical absolutes. His redemptive writing techniques are deconstructive since they expose contradictions within theories. Both Adorno and Derrida favor fragmentary forms and argue against philosophies of origins. Adorno considers rhetoric a means of making words expressive and portrays language as a human product with history. Derrida, by contrast, depicts language as ahistorical. His concept of arche-writing (originary writing) is subjectless. Adorno does not subscribe to Derrida’s notion of “dissemination,” that is, the diffusion of meaning or endless proliferation of signs. For Derrida, “dissemination” implies an excess of meaning. For Adorno, words never fully convey ideas. In his view, one can express ideas more adequately through configurations (or constellations), writing that arranges words around a central motif. For a critique of Derrida’s deconstruction, see Habermas, *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity* 161-210. Habermas claims that Derrida creates a version of first philosophy through presenting arche-writing as an indeterminate ahistorical authority.
and refuting the existing paradigms and constructing new ones. This process is redemptive because it prevents one from fruitlessly repeating intellectual or cultural patterns. For Adorno and Steiner, the goal of imagining the world differently is not to mystify it but to foster human evolution by opening intellectual vistas. To engender such possibilities, Adorno uses his redemptive writing tools while Steiner employs his notion of “falsity.” Although Steiner’s recourse to religious transcendence contrasts with Adorno’s secularism, both writers construe semantic possibilities as enrichment, opportunity, and growth instead of errors or deviations.

The next chapter discusses a translingual subject in W.G. Sebald’s *Austerlitz* from a literary perspective.
Chapter Four

Spectral Identities and Translingual Subjects in W.G. Sebald’s *Austerlitz*

The previous section examined Adorno’s redemptive writing techniques, including open literary forms (configurations), critique, defamiliarization (estrangement), contradiction, oxymoron (incongruous words), irony, and dissonance (opposing voices). The theoretical part concentrated on Adorno’s secularization of Benjamin’s language mysticism. The aesthetic analysis focused on Adorno’s inversion of Hegel’s concept of totality and examples of Adorno’s writing strategies. The analysis concluded that his redemptive writing techniques serve to pluralize meaning through destabilizing conceptualizations and suggesting alternatives.

In contrast to the theoretical and aesthetic frame in the preceding section, this chapter introduces a literary dimension and explores how languages enrich and invigorate human identity and generate a sense of a linguistic and cultural belonging. Central to this study is W.G. Sebald’s 2001 novel *Austerlitz* about a fictional Jewish refugee named Jacques Austerlitz.264 In the summer of 1939, a five-year-old Austerlitz arrives in England on a ship with a Kindertransport, a transport of Jewish children evacuated from Europe. A Welsh Calvinist family raises him under the name Dafydd Elias. As a teenager, he learns his original name. When he is retired, he begins to investigate his past and discovers that he was born in Prague to Jewish parents that perished during the Holocaust. Having learned about his early French-Czech upbringing, the protagonist decides to reactivate his Czech language.

---

264 Sebald did not consider *Austerlitz* a novel due to its lack of dialogues. He described his book as “ein Prosabuch unbestimmter Art” and “a long prose elegy” (Doerry and Hage 199) (Cuomo 103). This study treats *Austerlitz* as a novel with dialogue rendered in reported speech.
This chapter claims that the novel depicts not the protagonist’s longing for exile but his attempts to overcome his sense of hollowness through translingualism, the mixing of languages. Here, a translingual identity denotes the protagonist’s French-Czech self, whose suppression in England causes his feeling of spectrality or hollowness. The first segment analyzes how Austerlitz’s foster family, English educational system, and his habitual repression of memories silence his translingual past and deplete his identity. The second part explicates how the character regains his translingual identity and reinvents himself by recovering his memories and Czech language, and by switching to the French-Czech linguistic mode. The analysis concludes that the protagonist’s translingualism, the mixing of French and Czech, functions as a form of self-therapy and enables him to surmount his sense of emptiness.

A highly acclaimed, contemporary German writer, Sebald has garnered accolades for his Kunstsprache (stylized language), melancholic tone, meandering sentences, literary allusions, genre hybridity, and a blend of fiction with reality. His prevalent themes include exile, the Holocaust, trauma, memory, and nature. He treats the topic of the Holocaust most extensively in Austerlitz. In Die Ausgewanderten, Sebald offers a collection of stories about Holocaust victims but does not trace their life trajectories as thoroughly as in Austerlitz. Foreign languages are much more prominent in the novel than in those stories and often convey the mental states of the character.

This definition of translingualism is indebted to linguists Suresh Canagarajah and Claire Kramsch. For Canagarajah, translingualism means communication involving several languages, particularly cross-language relations. This study employs the term “translingualism” to emphasize the dynamic relationships between languages. The term “multilingualism” is not used because it tends to imply an additional language rather than part of one self (Canagarajah 7). This additive meaning is visible in the German word Mehrsprachigkeit (multilingualism), whose prefix Mehr- means “more” and indicates an addition. The word Vielsprachigkeit, whose prefix Viel- means “much” and “poly-” and connotes multiplicity, is less common. In this work, translingual subjects include silenced speakers, that is, subjects who suppress, have forgotten, or are forbidden to speak their languages (Kramsch 17).

See Hintermeier and Pralle 254.
Sebald’s fiction has been celebrated in Anglo-American studies. Literary critics have praised him for his original style and melancholic pace. Because of his portrayals of Holocaust trauma, some critics call him “eine Art ‘Gewissen der Nation,’” emphasizing that Sebald tackles complicated themes concerning Germany. His reception in his homeland has been more mixed and nuanced. On the one hand, Germans admire his fiction while, on the other hand, some view his criticism of Germany’s relationship to its history as provocative. Sebald finds the official Holocaust commemorations too holistic, abstract, and not compassionate enough toward Holocaust victims. At the same time, he rebukes postwar German writers for disregarding the theme of German suffering. His book on the bombings of German cities during World War II sparked controversy and accusations that Sebald neglected the responsibility of the Germans for the war.

The scholarship on Austerlitz focuses on genre hybridity, memory, history, exile, and Sebald’s literary models while neglecting the role of foreign languages in the novel. Cultural geographer Jessica Dubow and literary scholar Richard Steadman-Jones argue that Austerlitz’s multilingualism reveals his mental breaks, trauma, and exilic condition but do not discuss how speaking French and Czech enables him to overcome his sense of hollowness. Literary scholar Stefan Willer interprets the protagonist’s stuttering in English and Czech as a speech deficiency but overlooks Austerlitz’s proficiency in French and his attempts to relearn Czech. Whereas

267 “a kind of conscience of the nation.” See Hoffmann 10. Unless otherwise indicated, all translations are mine.
268 On Sebald’s Anglo-American reception, see Schwartz 18, Hutchinson, “Sprachen”115, Denham, and Pakendorf 120. On differences between Sebald’s Anglo-American and German reception, see Hintermeier, Denham, and Sheppard. On Sebald’s reception, see also Wolff; and Baxter, Henitiuk, and Hutchinson.
269 For Sebald’s evaluation of Germany’s relationship to its Nazi past, see Stoisser 240-41, Pralle 259, Rondas 216-220, Hoffmann 271, and Hage 192. For Sebald’s account of the bombings of German cities during World War II, see Luftkrieg und Literatur. For a historiographical treatment of those air raids, see Friedrich.
270 For a narratological approach to languages in the book, see R. Kohn. On Sebald’s literary models, see Hutchinson, W.G. Sebald. On Sebald’s genres, see Öhlschläger. On history, exile, and memory in Austerlitz, see Denham and McCulloh.
Willer portrays foreign languages as the cause of Austerlitz’s pain, this study shows that speaking French and Czech has a healing effect on him.

The existing studies of multilingualism in the novel mistakenly equate Austerlitz’s ability to speak several languages with a split or confused personality and erroneously examine his identity through the prism of a monolingual subject. By neglecting both the protagonist’s deliberate switch to the French-Czech linguistic mode and his involvement with a French woman Marie, those studies incorrectly suggest that the character is fixated on his past. This work rectifies those inaccuracies by synthesizing Austerlitz’s examination of his past with his future-oriented translingualism.

Sebald considered himself an outsider in Germany and a guest in England, where he spent most of his life. He grew up in Bavaria, left his homeland in the 1960s, lived in French-speaking and German-speaking Switzerland, and settled in England. He disclosed that, despite being born in 1944, he felt deeply implicated in Germany’s Nazi past because his father was a Nazi soldier reluctant to discuss his Nazi phase of life with his son. Sebald never denied his German roots but preferred to maintain distance toward both his homeland and England. He revealed that he felt a sense of reserve toward German and English and favored his original Bavarian dialect. His linguistic ambivalence is often viewed as expressing his desire for “den Zustand des Entheimatetseins” that appears in his fiction as a theme of exile (Catling 28). Indeed, Sebald frequently depicts exiled subjects unable to fit into their environments.

---

271 On Austerlitz as a disoriented character, see Willer. Dubow and Steadman-Jones infer Austerlitz’s split personality from the fact that he has two English father figures, one speaking Welsh and the other speaking English. The authors, however, neglect the fact the Austerlitz felt no sense of division when he spoke two languages and had two mother figures in Prague.
272 Neither R. Kohn nor Willer nor Dubow and Steadman-Jones address the role of Marie.
273 For Sebald’s comments on his father, see Lubow 170-71. Sebald describes his relationship to Germany as that of an uninvited spectator (der Zaungast) (Poltronieri 91).
274 “a state of homelessness.” Catling discusses exile in Sebald’s Nach der Natur and Die Ringe des Saturn. For Sebald’s characterization of standard German as almost a foreign tongue, see Pralle 254.
Sebald’s biography is relevant to understand the novel because the book contains several autobiographical elements. Like Sebald, the narrator is a writer who moves back and forth between Germany and England, eventually settling in England. Moreover, much like its author, the narrator considers himself an observer and harshly criticizes research and teaching methodology in German academia in the 1960s. Another biographical affinity is the protagonist’s father who goes by Sebald’s nickname, Max. Max’s condemnation of fascism squares with Sebald’s thoughts on Germany’s relationship to its past, which will be expounded later in this chapter.

To explicate Austerlitz’s translingual identity adequately, one needs to consider the novel’s language, narration style, and historical sources. The book is written in German but contains frequent English, French, Czech, Welsh, and Dutch sections that colorize the background and signal Austerlitz’s emotions. This study focuses on foreign language injections that convey his psychological states. Sebald paraphrases and translates foreign language sections into German while placing some in explicatory contexts. Foreign language insertions that reveal the protagonist’s feelings, however, appear either without translation or in quotation marks. This analysis treats the format of those foreign passages as a lens into the character’s emotions.

The narration style is crucial to comprehend the ambiguous relationship between the narrator and Austerlitz. Their voices are often blurred, mixed, and indistinguishable from each other. Instead of quoting dialogues between the book’s characters, the narrator transcribes their conversations using reported speech and declarative markers like “sagte er” (“he said”). Similarly, the narrator’s dialogues with the protagonist appear in reported speech. In this way,

---

275 For similarities between Sebald and his narrators, see Schwartz 13-14 and Lubow 169. For Sebald’s objections to equating him with the novel’s narrator, see Lubow 169 and Doerry and Hage 204. For Sebald’s comments on German academia, see Pralle 254-55 and Hage 183-85.
the narrator emphasizes his function as a mere transmitter of somebody else’s voice, but the narration acquires a second-hand quality. Since the narrator uses reported speech and declarative markers inconsistently, his voice sometimes blurs with the voices of other characters, thus generating interpretive ambiguity.

Austerlitz is based on two individuals. The first figure is Susi Bechhöfer, a Jewish refugee who was sent with her twin sister Lotte to London on one of the Kindertransporte before World War II and raised by a Welsh couple. Lotte dies young, unaware of her Jewish roots. Susi discovers that her Jewish birth mother died in Auschwitz and that her birth father was a Nazi soldier. Susi embarks on a search for her relatives. Sebald modifies her story by constructing one main character, different father figures, and fictional details on Austerlitz’s Welsh life, French-Czech upbringing, and travels throughout Europe. The second model for Austerlitz was Sebald’s colleague, who was an architectural historian fascinated by railway stations and opera houses.

Sebald uses real figures to mix fiction with reality. His narrative strategy harmonizes with his concept of literature as a form of tailoring. In his view, writers resemble tailors because they both design products out of real matter. Sebald elaborates, “Man braucht möglichst genaues, möglichst authentisches Material, um eine gute Geschichte machen zu können. Ich sehe das fast wie das Schneidermetier. Das Fiktive ist der Schnitt des Kleides. . . . Man kann nur mit solchem Material gut arbeiten, das selbst eine Legitimationsbasis hat.” Sebald describes here literature as capable of fashioning good stories only if its material is legitimate, by which he means real.

---

276 See Cuomo 111. On the Kindertransporte, see Curio. On the reconstructions of history in Sebald, see Santner.
277 See Cuomo 110-11. Sebald sometimes mentions Ludwig Wittgenstein as the third model.
278 “One needs the most accurate and most authentic material to be able to make a good story. I see it almost like tailoring. The fictitious is the cut of the dress. . . . One can work well only with such material that has a legitimate base itself.” See Löffler 85. On Sebald’s concept of literature, see also Hutchinson, “Sprachen” 116. On Austerlitz as a subject dependent on archives, see Long.
Austerlitz accords with Sebald’s notion of writing precisely because the novel relies on real models.

Sebald’s conviction that German authors ought to write indirectly about the Holocaust underlies his blend of fiction and history. He instructs his compatriots to thematize the Holocaust “aus einer gewissen Entfernung heraus, oblique, tangential sich dem Thema annähernd, hier und da darauf verweisend.” Austerlitz exemplifies this indirect approach by fictionalizing the story of a real Holocaust survivor. Sebald unveils the Holocaust as the cause of Austerlitz’s arrival in England incrementally. The first half of the novel describes his life there and occasionally, and often vaguely, alludes to his Jewish heritage. The second half of the book—after two hundred pages—reveals that Austerlitz’s parents were Jewish victims of the Holocaust and narrates his search for his roots and the traces of his parents. This indirect and evasive presentation of the Holocaust theme causes interpretive ambiguity.

Sebald’s literary preference for oblique depictions of the Holocaust may derive from his relation to his father’s Nazi past. Sebald recommends that German authors write about the Holocaust indirectly because, in his eyes, a direct treatment seems inappropriate and in bad taste. Similarly, this ethical dilemma motivates Sebald’s advice to portray Holocaust victims by focusing on their individual sufferings instead of holistically. The novel follows this empathetic method, drawing attention to Austerlitz’s emotions and preserving his “authentic” voice through foreign language sections that suspend the narrator’s voice.

---

279 “from a certain distance, obliquely, approaching the topic tangentially, pointing to it here and there.” See Rondas 216.

280 See Pralle 253.

281 See Stoisser 241.
Austerlitz has relevance to contemporary discourse about cultural integration. The protagonist epitomizes all child refugees, not just Jewish ones in the Holocaust.\textsuperscript{282} His alienation from his foster family and English student community and his habitual suppression of memories cause his turn to translingualism. This triple failure shows some of the factors that obstruct cultural integration of refugees. The analysis of Austerlitz’s case can reveal ways of fostering linguistic and cultural belonging through translingualism.

A Ghost of Himself

Austerlitz speaks several languages, picking up Welsh in his childhood in Wales and speaking French with near-native proficiency. As a student in England, he learns French and later uses that language throughout his career as an architectural historian and in his love relationship with a French woman, Marie de Verneuil. Austerlitz converses with the narrator so eloquently in French that the narrator mistakes him for a native French speaker. In hindsight, the narrator reports that the protagonist spoke French “auf eine so formvollendete Weise, daß ich ihn lang für einen Franzosen hielt”\textsuperscript{283} (50). Evidently, Austerlitz has no difficulty communicating in French, but he does not know that French was one of his two mother tongues.

The protagonist’s fluency in French contrasts with his uncertainty and stuttering in English, his purported native language. The narrator reflects on the character’s peculiar manner of speaking English:

\begin{quote}
Es berührte mich damals sehr seltsam, als wir in das für mich praktikablere Englisch überwechselten, daß nun an ihm eine mir bis dahin ganz verborgene gebliebene Unsicherheit zum Vorschein kam, die sich in einem leichten Sprachfehler äußerte, und in gelegentlichen Stotteranfällen, bei denen er das
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{282} For a discussion of world citizenship in Sebald, see Kim.

\textsuperscript{283} “with such natural perfection that for a long time I thought he had been brought up in France” (31).
abgewetzte Brillenfutteral . . . so fest umklammerte, daß man das Weiße sehen konnte unter der Haut seiner Knöchel.  

This passage signals Austerlitz’s discomfort with English through his occasional stammering, mistakes, and clenched fists that suggest nervousness. As Dubow and Steadman-Jones aptly observe, Austerlitz’s lack of fluency in English indicates his “exilic” condition, namely his estrangement (19). His preference for speaking in French with the narrator also shows his uneasiness in English. Austerlitz’s ease in speaking French challenges Willer’s characterization of his multilingualism as a speech deficiency and “a calamity that troubles his every attempt at communication” (97). Against this background, Austerlitz’s uncertainty in speaking English reveals his emotional condition and less his speech impediment. One must note that the protagonist’s stuttering in English is Sebald’s literary invention: The real survivor did not develop any speech deficiency.

The cause of Austerlitz’s estrangement from English resides in his Welsh foster family of Emyr and Gwendolyn Elias. Emyr, a former Calvinist missionary, devotes himself to preaching, and his wife Gwendolyn occupies herself with chores around the house. Austerlitz compares his life with his foster parents to “einer Art von Gefangenschaft” (70). The same sense of confinement comes through in his wish to escape from his home in Bala. He dreads returning home for school breaks so much that, despite its tyrannical character, he describes his education in a private English school as “nicht eine Zeit der Gefangenschaft, sondern der Befreiung” (92). He voices his reluctance to return home, “Während die meisten von uns . . . im Kalender

---

284 “When we switched to English, in which I was better versed, I was strangely touched to notice in him an insecurity which had been entirely concealed from me before, expressing itself in a slight speech impediment and occasional fits of stammering, during which he clutched the worn spectacle case . . . so tightly that you could see the white of his knuckles beneath the skin” (31-32).
285 “some kind of captivity” (45).
286 “a time not of imprisonment but of liberation” (60).
die Tage durchstrichen, bis sie wieder nach Hause durften, wäre ich am liebsten nie mehr nach Bala zurückgekehrt. Von der ersten Woche an verstand ich, daß diese Schule . . . mein einziger Ausweg war.”\textsuperscript{287} (92). This quote captures Austerlitz’s desperate longing to free himself from his Welsh home.\textsuperscript{288}

Austerlitz feels estranged from his foster parents for two reasons. The first reason is not the language barrier but his identity change. His adoptive parents name him Dafydd Elias and remove his belongings without ever explaining to him their motivations. Emyr and Gwendolyn are oblivious to the fact that the five-year-old refugee is not a blank slate but dislikes his new name. He recalls, “wie sehr es . . . [ihn] schmerzte, auf einmal mit einem anderen Namen angeredet zu werden”\textsuperscript{289} (69-70). As the quote implies, the new identity alienates the protagonist from his foster family rather than integrating him and obstructs his own self-integration. Considering their emotional indifference to the refugee, the parents’ decision to change his name seems hardly a protective measure.

The second reason for Austerlitz’s estrangement is lack of parental love. Emyr and Gwendolyn neither adopt nor naturalize the boy as an English citizen. They never call him their son or seek an emotional rapport with him. Emyr addresses him indirectly “in der Regel mit der Frage ‘And how is the boy?’”\textsuperscript{290} (73). Here, the word “the boy” marks Emyr’s distance to the refugee. By refraining from calling the child his “son” or by his name, Emyr denies him a role in the family and suggests that the boy is a foreign implant or a decoration. Quotation marks around the English question symbolize a rigid boundary between the couple and the child: Adoptive

\textsuperscript{287} “While most of us . . . crossed off the days on the calendar until they could go home, I would have preferred never to return to Bala at all. From the very first week I realized that . . . the school . . . was my only escape route” (60).

\textsuperscript{288} This desire pervades his dreams about leaving his home and entering a friendlier reality (69). The always-closed windows in his house and the lack of access to radio and newspapers reinforce his sense of captivity (70).

\textsuperscript{289} “how it hurt to be suddenly called by a new name” (45).

\textsuperscript{290} “generally by asking, ‘And how is the boy?’” (47)
parents tolerate the refugee without fully accepting him into their family. Austerlitz’s foster mother is equally aloof: Only once does she show him intimacy by stroking his hair (72). The absence of games, jokes, and arguments between Austerlitz and his foster parents further confirms the distance between them, which also surfaces in Austerlitz’s habit of calling Emyr and Gwendolyn “Ehepaar Elias”\textsuperscript{291} rather than his “parents” (70). In brief, the child misses parental affection.

The emotional coldness of the protagonist’s foster parents precludes his integration into their family. They extirpate his former identity without showing any intention to incorporate him into their relationship. Consequently, the couple and the child live next to each other rather than together as one family, which prevents Austerlitz from resolving a tension between his new home and his former one. Instead of a sense of belonging, he feels guilt: In his mind, his foster parents are the punishment for his leaving his birth parents (70). He perceives his life in his foster family as hollow because he does not feel accepted. Despite his new and safe place of abode, he remains not only an orphan but also the victim of a parental failure: Given their religious profession, Emyr and Gwendolyn would appear pedagogically equipped to raise a refugee.

Religious education intensifies Austerlitz’s alienation and sense of emptiness. His foster parents immerse him in Calvinism, but he is unenthusiastic about religion and even feels confined (\textit{eingesperrt}) in Calvinist eschatology (93). Austerlitz underscores Emyr’s practice of recording biblical passages from his sermons about the nearing apocalypse and the punishment of humankind. The protagonist quotes those biblical sources in English and surrounds them with quotation marks to indicate his dislike of Emyr’s sermons (74-75), thus suggesting that he

\textsuperscript{291} “the Eliases” (45).
associates English with Emyr’s strict religious conduct. Austerlitz detests memorizing “die endlosen Psalmen und Bibelsprüche”\textsuperscript{292} for his Sunday school so much that he seeks contact with Evan, a Welsh shoe repairer rumored to communicate with ghosts (82). Dubow and Steadman-Jones interpret Austerlitz’s turn to Evan as a sign of the protagonist’s split personality (12). This study reads Austerlitz’s fondness for Evan as expressing the boy’s lack of identification with Emyr and also his desire for companionship, both of which highlight Austerlitz’s alienation. His disconnect from his foster father seems to propel his dislike of Calvinism: He rejects Calvinism because it belongs to the culture of his emotionally cold adoptive father.

The account of Moses in the Welsh Bible strongly resonates with Austerlitz. He is frightened when he reads about baby Moses floating in a watertight basket among the reeds on the Nile River. As the book of Exodus narrates, Moses’ mother leaves him there to save his life because the Egyptian Pharaoh ordered the death of all newborn Hebrew boys. Pharaoh’s daughter finds baby Moses and allows him to live in her court. This biblical fragment fills Austerlitz with such intense fear that he remembers the Welsh version of the scene by heart (85). The story of Moses represents an allusion to Austerlitz’s Jewish heritage and arrival in England. Just as Moses’ mother saves him by letting him float on the river, Austerlitz escapes the Holocaust on a ship to England. His foster parents could have used parallels between Moses and Austerlitz to explain his origin to him.\textsuperscript{293} Equally evocative for Austerlitz is the picture of the Israelites’ camp that appears in the book and refers to the biblical wandering of the Hebrew people through the Sinai Peninsula under Moses’ leadership. Austerlitz feels much closer (näher)

\textsuperscript{292} “the endless psalms and biblical verses” (53).
\textsuperscript{293} A crucial difference between baby Moses and Austerlitz is that Moses’ mother becomes his wet nurse in the Egyptian court, whereas Austerlitz has no nurturing mother in England.
to the picture than to his life in Bala (88). Both religious elements indicate Austerlitz’s Jewish heritage, but the narrator does not explicitly reveal the protagonist’s Jewish roots.

Another reason for Austerlitz’s discomfort with English is his impression of being an impostor among English students. School principal Penrith-Smith instills in him this idea during a brief conversation in which the fifteen-year-old learns that his foster parents did not adopt him. He also learns that he must start signing official documents with the name Jacques Austerlitz and keep this name secret from his peers. At the time, Austerlitz’s adoptive mother is deceased, and his grief-stricken foster father is in a mental asylum. The principal explains, “As far as the other boys are concerned, you remain Dafydd Elias for the time being. There’s no need to let anyone know. It is just that you will have to put Jacques Austerlitz on your examination papers or else your work may be considered invalid” (101-02). In this statement, Penrith-Smith acknowledges the teenager’s dual identity while instructing him to pretend to be Dafydd Elias. With this institutional “approval,” Austerlitz begins to live as a spectral subject. He behaves like Dafydd Elias while not knowing who he is. He is both outside of his foster family and a ghost of himself. The principal’s indifference to Austerlitz’s dual identity remains invisible to non-English speakers because his words appear only in English.

The consequences of the principal’s request are twofold. The immediate effect is Austerlitz’s confusion captured in his brief English reaction, “Thank you, Sir” (102). Some critics interpret the quotation marks around the English phrase as suggesting that the protagonist’s identity is split.294 However, the context in this scene suggests Austerlitz’s disorientation, puzzlement, and confusion. After a while, he asks the principal about the meaning of the name. Long-term, Austerlitz’s suffers shame as an aftereffect: The command to withhold

---

294 See R. Kohn 46.
his identity implies that the protagonist’s name means something despicable or undesirable. Indeed, Austerlitz regards his name as “einen Schandfleck” and internalizes his perceived stigma with every instance of not using his name publicly (110).

Penrith-Smith’s conduct reveals an unconcern for the student’s mental health. He offers neither help nor counseling, nor a transitional period during which the protagonist could use both names. Most importantly, Penrith-Smith transgresses his competencies when he changes the protagonist’s identity. As the narrator explains, Emyr and Gwendolyn intended to tell Austerlitz his real name when he would turn fifteen, but they did not request his name change. Against this backdrop, Penrith-Smith seems to act in the interest of administrative convenience.

The principal’s behavior divulges a general institutional reluctance to deal with Austerlitz’s otherness. To avoid administrative complications, the head teacher renders the student’s actual name barely visible by having Austerlitz use it only on school papers. Other teachers reinforce the suppression of the teenager’s identity through their silent consent: They continue to call him Dafydd and offer no help despite knowing about his two names and his mentally ill foster father (111). Consequently, Austerlitz’s identity undergoes marginalization and falsification: His name exists merely on paper for the record, thereby confirming his spectral existence. In this way, Austerlitz comes to associate English with his marginalized status in his foster family and student community. It is thus small wonder that he feels estranged from his English homeland and reluctant to speak its language. In essence, he projects his alienation onto English.

A reversal of Austerlitz’s perception of his name occurs after several months. The reversal sets the stage for his search for an emotional connection to his past and ensues from a

295 “an ignominious flaw” (72).
course in European history during which the protagonist learns about the Battle of Austerlitz in December 1805 in Moravia (in the present-day Czech Republic). The battle ended with a victory of the outnumbered Napoleonic troops over Russian and Austrian armies and counts not only as one of Napoleon’s greatest tactical feats but also as one of the events leading to the 1806 dissolution of the Holy Roman Empire. Austerlitz credits his teacher André Hilary with rectifying his misprision of his name. He comments, “Je öfter Hilary das Wort Austerlitz vor der Klasse aussprach, desto mehr wurde es mir zu meinem Namen” (110). As the passage indicates, the protagonist learns to accept his name as the teacher, unfamiliar with his student’s background, repeatedly explains the battle. Thanks to Hilary’s teaching, the protagonist begins to invest his name with a positive meaning and eventually describes his name as “einen Leuchtpunkt, . . . so vielversprechend wie die über dem Dezembernebel sich erhebende Sonne von Austerlitz selber” (110). Now, Austerlitz evidently regards his name as a sign of his uniqueness.

The protagonist’s pride about his name exemplifies what gender theorist Judith Butler calls “a reverse citation” (Excitable Speech 36). By reverse citation, Butler means a process of detoxifying insulting words “from their power to injure” by using them repeatedly in new affirmative contexts (15). Her example is the word “queer,” an offensive label for gay and lesbian communities that has now become neutral (14). An analogous re-signification affects the protagonist’s name: The toxic tinge of the name vanishes because the more Hilary employs the

---

296 Though it had no direct impact on the status of the Czech language, the Battle of Austerlitz occurred amidst the Czech National Revival, a cultural movement lasting from around 1770 to the nineteenth century. The National Revival sought to revitalize the Czech language that was severely repressed and used almost solely among peasantry due to the enforced Germanization since 1620. See Wilson.
297 Sebald’s history teacher was a model for Hilary (Stoisser 238-39).
298 “The more often Hilary mentioned the word Austerlitz in front of the class, the more it really did become my own name” (72).
299 “a bright light . . ., as promising as the sun of Austerlitz itself when it rose above the December mists” (72).
word “Austerlitz” in the context of tactical mastery, the more he reverses the damage inflicted by the principal and demonstrates the power of education to debunk cultural misperceptions. Without the history class, Austerlitz would have remained unable to relate to his name without prejudice.

The history class is a rare hilarious event in the novel. The name Hilary and his teaching methods evoke hilariousness; he teaches his favorite subject, the Battle of Austerlitz, often while lying on the floor. His detailed descriptions of the event cover a few pages in the novel, and he discusses the battle several times with his students.

Sebald’s account of the history class shows an affinity to Kafka’s use of humor. Kafka often nests humor in the horrible and inserts comical elements into his narratives to alleviate their overall dark, absurd, and horrifying mood. Similarly, Sebald incorporates his humorous description of the history class into Austerlitz’s story to interrupt its gloomy atmosphere. Like Kafka, Sebald employs humor to signal change. In Austerlitz’s case, humor has a positive effect on the protagonist and helps him rectify his negative perception of himself. In this sense, humor serves to facilitate the resolution of unpleasant issues. Whereas in Kafka comical elements often pertain to Jewish theology, Sebald uses humor to reflect not on theological issues but human feelings.

Although Austerlitz regains his self-esteem, he remains ignorant of his origin. Historical knowledge about the Battle of Austerlitz does not equate with knowing one’s past. Surprisingly, the protagonist remains passive and refrains from examining his past, thereby perpetuating his ghostly existence. The twenty-year-old displays no interest in either solving the mystery around

---

300 For example, in Kafka’s Die Verwandlung, the transformation of Gregor Samsa into a verminous bug contains some comical moments, including Gregor’s failed attempts to turn over on his back and his comments on his changing food preferences.

301 For instance, Kafka writes about disciples who have lost the Holy Writ. On humor in Kafka, see Scholem.
his origin or finalizing his naturalization process managed for him by Hilary, to whom he eventually reveals his identity. Hilary resolves the obstacle that Emyr caused when he eradicated data on Austerlitz’s birthplace, and Austerlitz does not lift a finger to help. Instead, the protagonist satisfies himself with a belief that he is chosen (auserwählt) and has a special status, and he clings to this idea almost his entire life (111). Admittedly, Austerlitz’s pride seems justified when one considers that he has overcome the prejudice instilled in him by the principal, but the protagonist’s ignorance prevents him from finding out what his special status means. Consequently, his name remains a hollow husk with no personal substance.

Austerlitz’s behavior exemplifies Kramsch’s concept of “symbolic competence.” Kramsch defines “symbolic competence” as an ability to comprehend the symbolic value of language, to mobilize words for reframing perceptions, and to understand the impact of language beliefs on personal integrity (200-01). Austerlitz clearly comprehends the symbolic value of names because he treats his original name as evidence of his exceptionality. As he adapts to the model of an English citizen, he gives himself a sense of integrity. Most importantly, he keeps suppressing his linguistic memories: He hears voices that speak about him behind his back “in einer fremden Sprache, Litauisch, Ungarisch oder sonst etwas sehr Ausländisches” (127). Those voices are the echoes of his repressed Czech language that seeks to break through his subconscious mind. However, Austerlitz not only avoids reflecting on those voices but also eschews contact with anything that could trigger recollections. His goal is, “mich an möglichst gar nichts zu erinnern und alles aus dem Weg zu gehen, was sich auf die eine oder andere Weise auf meine mir unbekannte Herkunft bezog” (205). For this reason, he avoids newspapers and

---

302 “in a foreign tongue, Lithuanian, Hungarian, or something else with a very alien note to it” (127).
303 Austerlitz eventually admits that he might have sensed that his Czech language was dying off (203).
304 “to recollect as little as possible, avoiding everything which related in any way to my unknown past” (139).
listens to radio only at safe times. In taking great pains to subdue his memories, Austerlitz divulges his awareness that he must examine his memories to end his sense of spectrality. By repressing his recollections, he contributes to his feeling of emptiness.

Even in retrospect, Austerlitz feigns unawareness about the war as a way of exonerating his willful ignorance. “So wußte ich,” he claims, “nichts von der Eroberung Europas durch die Deutschen . . . und nichts von der Verfolgung, der ich entgangen war, oder wenn ich etwas wußte, so war es nicht mehr, als ein Ladenmädchen weiß beispielsweise von der Pest oder der Cholera” (205). However, his alleged unawareness conflicts with his previous descriptions that he witnessed war atrocities, corpses, and bomed out buildings during his visits to parishes, where his foster father substituted for priests drafted into the English army (75-78). Through his previous account of parades marking the end of the war, Austerlitz inadvertently contradicts his feigned unawareness (88-89). Those attempts at self-expiation reveal that he was deliberately blind to his past. Ultimately, he admits that his ignorance has shrunken his sense of identity (205). In short, the more he has steered away from his past, the more he has hollowed himself out.

Austerlitz’s practice of suppressing his memories and evading reality contributes to his emotional paralysis. He seeks to cure those self-inflicted wounds in his translingual phase of life. The protagonist feels disconnected from the world and “vereinzelt . . . unter den Walisern ebenso wie unter den Engländern und den Franzosen” (185). He does not belong to any profession, religion, or social class (185). Most importantly, his fear of human relationships runs so deep that he cannot even form friendships (185). The same fear impels him to sever his love relationship

305 “I knew nothing about the conquest of Europe by the Germans . . . and nothing about the persecution I had escaped, or at least, what I did know was not much more than a salesgirl in a shop, for instance, knows about the plague or cholera” (139).

306 “isolated . . . among the Welsh as much as among the English and French” (125).
with a French woman, Marie, because she inquires too much about his past (312-13). In this way, Austerlitz’s tendency to repress his past fuels his alienation.

Eventually, the protagonist’s strategies for evasion lead to his mental breakdown that clears the ground for his subsequent reorientation. His collapse is depicted as the disintegration of language and aphasia, namely loss of ability to speak and read. Austerlitz describes his breakdown through an allegory of being lost in a city, with the city serving as a metaphor for language:

Wenn man die Sprache ansehen kann als eine alte Stadt, mit einem Gewinkel von Gassen und Plätzen . . . , so glich ich selbst einem Menschen, der sich . . . in dieser Agglomerationsenicht mehr zurechtfindet, der nicht mehr weiß, wozu eine Haltestelle dient, was ein Hinterhof, eine Straßenkreuzung, ein Boulevard oder eine Brücke ist. Das gesamte Gliederwerk der Sprache, die syntaktische Anordnung der einzelnen Teile, die Zeichensetzung, die Konjunktionen und zuletzt sogar die Namen der gewöhnlichen Dinge, alles war eingehüllt in einen undurchdringlichen Nebel. . . . Nirgends sah ich mehr einen Zusammenhang, die Sätze lösten sich auf in lauter einzelne Worte, die Worte in eine willkürliche Folge von Buchstaben, die Buchstaben in zerbrochene Zeichen und diese in eine bleigraue, da und dort silbrig glänzende Spur. . . .

Clearly, Austerlitz no longer sees any meaning in language. He cannot form sentences and hallucinates that words dissolve into chunks, letters, and traces. This aphasic moment signals his

307 “If language may be regarded as an old city full of streets and squares, nooks and crannies . . . , then I was like a man who . . . cannot find his way through this urban sprawl anymore, no longer knows what a bus stop is for, or what a back yard is, or a street junction, an avenue or a bridge. The entire structure of language, the syntactical arrangement of parts of speech, punctuation, conjunctions, and finally even the nouns denoting ordinary objects were all enveloped in impenetrable fog. . . . I could see no connections anymore, the sentences resolved themselves into a series of separate words, the words into random sets of letters, the letters into disjointed signs, and those signs into a blue-gray trail gleaming silver here and there . . . .” (124).
realization that his life and words lack sense. At this point, the “grammar” of Austerlitz’s identity is dissolving.\textsuperscript{308} As Dubow and Steadman-Jones point out, the account of Austerlitz’s aphasia is reminiscent of Hugo von Hofmannsthal’s famous fictional letter \textit{Ein Brief} about a poet who gives up his literary profession in favor of a wordless language of feeling and nature because he finds it more expressive and joyful than human language (17-18). While the literary allusion is present in this passage, the scene seems to emphasize the mental breakdown of the protagonist: His dissipating words stand for the dissolution of his self.

Aphasia palpably reminds Austerlitz of his spectral existence. He realizes that his multilingual life lacked a nourishing foundation because it was built on the suppression of his past. It occurs to him that his knowledge of English, Welsh, and French and his academic career do not add up to a meaningful self because he does not know his origin. In other words, the character grasps that he must confront his subdued memories to discover his roots. In this respect, Austerlitz’s aphasia amounts to a moment of crisis necessary for his reorientation.

Austerlitz’s breakdown is reminiscent of Beckett’s characters in \textit{Endgame}. The play describes a world after a human-caused catastrophe that is never explicitly named. The characters are deformed, have abbreviated names like Nagg, and only can babble. Their superficial dialogues often stop in the middle, do not follow the logic of question and answer, and serve to perpetuate the sense of catastrophe. Austerlitz resembles Beckett’s figures insofar as his identity shrinks into a hollow husk, and he loses the ability to communicate. Like Beckett’s characters, Austerlitz does not explicitly state the reason for his crisis.\textsuperscript{309} Unlike Beckett’s play, Austerlitz seeks to reinvent himself rather than prolong his breakdown ad absurdum\textsuperscript{310}.

\textsuperscript{308} See Clingman 198.
\textsuperscript{309} Only later, Austerlitz confesses that his breakdown resulted from his self-censorship, namely his repression of memories (206).
\textsuperscript{310} On meaninglessness in \textit{Endgame}, see Adorno, “Trying to Understand \textit{Endgame}.”
In this part, Austerlitz’s identity shrinks and becomes hollow. The erasure of Austerlitz’s original identity, the institutional indifference to his double-identity, and his repression of own memories drive his sense of emptiness and spectrality. In the next section, Austerlitz builds his new self through his translingualism.

**Recovering the Translingual Self**

Austerlitz’s recovery of his translingual identity involves discovering his French-Czech upbringing, reactivating his memories and Czech language, and preserving his French-Czech allegiances. His journey does not reconstitute his childhood-self but produces a translingual subject that constructs himself anew in-between French and Czech cultures.

An indication of Austerlitz’s French-Czech heritage appears in his recognition scene with Věra, who was his nanny and a neighbor of his mother. He travels to Prague because, after hearing the ship’s name—**Prague**—on a radio program about prewar transports of children to England, he realizes that he was one of the ship’s passengers (208). The protagonist enters one of the houses on his list of prewar Prague residents with the last name Austerlitz and recognizes the building’s interior. In a Czech-French exchange, Věra confirms that he has found his birthplace. He says a sentence memorized in Czech, and she responds in French:


---

311 Similarly, Clingman observes that foreign languages navigate Austerlitz on his journey (199).
In this quote, the Czech section and its German translation\textsuperscript{313} ensure the overall clarity and indicate the direction of the scene, whereas the French question appears without a translation to create suspense. The gesture of embrace, Věra’s hand motion, and Austerlitz’s impression of knowing her hands serve as nonverbal signals that the characters recognize each other. French and Czech passages function here as a frame for Austerlitz’s identity and set the stage for depicting his bilingual childhood.

Another indication of Austerlitz’s French-Czech past is his euphoric reaction to Věra’s Czech words. As she mixes French with Czech, he feels a profound rush of joy and describes himself as “ein Tauber, dem durch ein Wunder das Gehör wiederaufging”\textsuperscript{314} (227). Austerlitz remarks that, in his state of elation, he managed to understand “so gut wie alles, was Věra sagte, und wollte nurmehr die Augen schließen und ihren vielsilbig dahineilenden Wörtern lauschen in einem fort”\textsuperscript{315} (227). This scene illustrates not a miraculous restoration of Austerlitz’s ability to speak Czech but the bliss he feels at hearing sounds once dear to him. His sense of elation confirms that he did not entirely forget Czech. Had he forgotten it, he would have found Věra’s mix of languages utterly perplexing. In this scene, the therapeutic quality of translingualism—the

\begin{footnotesize}
\begin{itemize}
\item\textsuperscript{312} “Promiňte, prosím že Vás obtěžuji. Hledám paní Agátu Austerlitzovou, která zde možná v roce devatenáct set třicet osm bydlela. I am looking for a Mrs. Agáta Austerlitzová who may have been living here in 1938. With a gesture of alarm, Vera covered her face with both hands, hands which, it flashed through my mind, were endlessly familiar to me, . . . and very quietly but with what to me was a quite singular clarity spoke these words in French: Jacquot, she said, dis, est-ce que c’est vraiment toi? We embraced, we held each other’s hands, we embraced again, I do not know how often . . .” (152-53).
\item\textsuperscript{313} The first Czech line reads as follows: “Excuse me, please, for bothering you.”
\item\textsuperscript{314} “a deaf man whose hearing has been miraculously restored” (155).
\item\textsuperscript{315} “almost everything Vera said . . ., so that all I wanted to do was close my eyes and listen forever to her polysyllabic flood of words” (155).
\end{itemize}
\end{footnotesize}
mixing of French and Czech—appears as Austerlitz’s joy at hearing Czech, the language he clearly had missed all along.

Austerlitz feels elated because his linguistic sense of home involves Czech and French. At the request of his parents, Věra raised him bilingually, speaking French outside the home and Czech at home when talking about “häuslichere und kindlichere Dinge”316 (227). Austerlitz’s arrival in England disrupted the equilibrium between his two mother tongues. He retained French throughout his life. What had vanished was Czech—the language he correlated with the intimacy of being at home. English failed to fill this void because his foster parents did not strive for intimacy with him. Against this background, the protagonist’s estrangement from English and his prior hallucinations about voices speaking behind his back confirm that the disappearance of Czech was his subconscious, festering wound. In this regard, Austerlitz’s stuttering in English implies less a “speech impediment,” as Willer suggests, than the awareness of being away from home (95). Hence, the protagonist’s quest for his past is also an attempt to reestablish his sense of home.

Austerlitz’s French-Czech upbringing represents a cosmopolitan model of education. His bilingual education derives from both his parents’ admiration for the French culture and his father’s notion of freedom (225). Austerlitz’s mother, Agáta Austerlitzova, was a Czechoslovakian opera singer so passionate about French opera music that she named their son after French composer Jacques Offenbach.317 Austerlitz’s father, Maximilian Aychenwald, hailed from Saint Petersburg (now Russia) and was a political activist campaigning against the fascists. In Věra’s words, “Maximilian sei von Grund auf Republikaner gewesen und habe davon

---

316 “more domestic and childish matters” (155).
317 Jacques Offenbach is famous for his comic operettas and opera *The Tales of Hoffmann*. Agáta regarded her role of Olympia in Offenbach’s opera as her crucial achievement. Sebald discloses that the last name “Austerlitz” is a reference to the original last name of American dancer and actor Fred Astaire (Doerry and Hage 199).
geträumt, die Tschechoslowakei inmitten der überall in Europa unaufhaltsam sich ausbreitenden faschistischen Flut als eine Art von zweiter Schweiz zu einer Insel der Freiheit zu machen"\(^{318}\) (225-26). As Věra observes, Max endorsed popular sovereignty, rejected dictatorships, and understood freedom as resilience to fascism. As a neutral democratic republic during both world wars, Switzerland seems a logical choice as his model country because it reflects his political beliefs.

Bilingual education appears to tally with Max’s anti-fascism. He traveled to Germany and Austria in the 1930s to assess political attitudes there and condemned fascism as a destructive ideology and “eine blinde Eroberungs- und Zerstörungssucht”\(^{319}\) (244). The absence of opposition to fascism in Nazi Germany petrified him so much that he compared the crowds of Hitler’s supporters in Nürnberg to a homogenous mass akin to “einem einzigen Lebewesen”\(^{320}\) rather than individuals (246). Germany’s acquiescence to fascism seems to have impelled Max’s envisioning of a multilingual country as “an island of freedom.”

Given Max’s anti-fascist stance, bilingual education might have been one of his tools against fascism. Max maintained that fascism originated in ideas cultivated individually and in families, and that it was created “aus dem Wunschdenken jedes einzelnen und aus den in den Familien gehegten Gefühlen”\(^{321}\) (244). To counteract fascism, one would thus have to root the concept of freedom deep into human minds. Bilingual education might help achieve this goal because speaking two languages might protect people from viewing duality as a threat and from believing in the superiority of one language over others. Considering that Max never speaks

\(^{318}\) “Maximilian was a lifelong republican, and had dreamt of making Czechoslovakia an island of freedom in the midst of the tide of Fascism then inexorably spreading throughout Europe, a kind of second Switzerland” (154).

\(^{319}\) “a blind lust for conquest and destruction” (167).

\(^{320}\) “a single living organism” (168).

\(^{321}\) “by every individual’s wishful thinking and bound up with false family sentiment” (167). Max’s reflections on fascism echo Sebald’s criticism of his father. In Sebald’s family, his father’s Nazi past was a “taboo” (Wachtel 44).
directly in the book, one must conclude that the novel portrays bilingualism as liberating but does not call it a fail-safe antidote to fascist thought.

Biographical parallels between Max and Sebald are superficial. Like Max, Sebald castigates his compatriots for their civic passivity towards the Nazis. Contrary to Max, Sebald associates Switzerland with his private life rather than with freedom from fascism. He studied in French-speaking Switzerland, worked in its German-speaking part, and considered retiring to the French-speaking part of the country. In fact, Sebald described Saint Peter’s Island, a Swiss place, where Jean-Jacques Rousseau lived briefly as a refugee, as the only place where he “felt at home.”

Sebald’s depiction of Austerlitz’s bilingual childhood represents less an endorsement of bilingual education than his contribution to the cultural debate about the Holocaust remembrance—a dispute that was very much alive while he was writing the novel. In the so-called 1998 Walser-Bubis debate, German writer Martin Walser famously argued in his Peace Prize speech at the German Book Trade in Frankfurt that the Holocaust was exploited to portray the permanence of German shame. Walser advocated commemorating the past privately and shifting public attention to other issues. Ignaz Bubis, President of the Central Council of Jews in Germany, criticized Walser for trying to look away from history. Sebald responded to the dispute

---

322 See Poltronieri 93.
323 See Lubow 168.
324 See Lubow 167. For Sebald’s remarks on Rousseau, see “J’aurais voulu que ce lac eût été l’Océan.”
325 The Walser-Bubis debate revived some themes from the 1986-89 Historikerstreit (the so-called historians’ debate), the “major national self-interrogation about historical responsibility and national consciousness of the 1970s and 1980s” (J.W. Müller 61). The historians’ debate began with the late Ernst Nolte’s question whether Stalinist Communism was not a precedent for the Nazi mass murder (59). Jürgen Habermas accused Nolte of relativizing the Holocaust, shirking moral responsibility, and trying to create “an acceptable past” (Holub 943). The debate focused on the singularity of the Holocaust, the relation between Auschwitz and the Soviet Gulag system, the right of the Germans to feel like victims, and the Nazis’ use of technology. Habermas and his supporters declared victory with his notions of post-conventional identity and constitutional patriotism, which “appeal to universal values of justice and morality” (Holub 946). For details on the debate, see J.W. Müller. See Maier for a critique of both Habermas’ concepts and the debate, particularly its neglect for non-historical variables and its portrayal of national identity as unchangeable.
in his interviews and in his novel by thematizing the Holocaust. He asserted that one must commemorate history because it affects the present.\textsuperscript{326} Contrary to Walser, Sebald warned that German historical consciousness declined and that the Holocaust theme became treated as an antiquity.\textsuperscript{327} Instead of abstract holistic commemorations of Holocaust victims, he recommended presenting individual cases and the moral failure of the nation.\textsuperscript{328} \textit{Austerlitz} constitutes Sebald’s literary response to the debate insofar as the book depicts the implications of the Holocaust for the protagonist, including his loss of language, parents, and home.

Though instructive, Sebald’s choice of a multilingual country as a model of freedom exhibits several limitations. To begin with, Sebald does not discuss relations between Switzerland’s national languages (German, French, Italian, and Romansh) and thus fails to show how linguistic diversity might stimulate tolerance.\textsuperscript{329} Next, Sebald omits to mention that Switzerland served the Nazis as their secret banker.\textsuperscript{330} Exposed in the late 1990s, this issue demonstrates that linguistic diversity does not necessarily translate into immunity to fascism. Then, Sebald depicts bilingualism primarily within Austerlitz’s family but does not explicate how one might implement bilingualism on a larger educational scale.

Sebald’s narrative style diminishes the persuasiveness of his account of bilingual upbringing. The section about Austerlitz’s childhood relies on reported speech that highlights the

\textsuperscript{326} See Pralle 259.
\textsuperscript{327} See Rondas 220. For Sebald’s criticism of celebratory approaches to Germany’s history, see Stoisser 240.
\textsuperscript{328} According to Sebald, the Germans display an abstract sense of shame (\textit{Schande}) rather than moral failure (\textit{Scham}) (Hage 192).
\textsuperscript{329} German, French, and Italian are Switzerland’s official languages. Romansh does not belong to this group due to a small number of speakers. In German-speaking cantons, Swiss German appears in speech and High German in writing, although this division is not always strict.
\textsuperscript{330} Historians gathered in the Switzerland’s Independent Commission of Experts (the so-called Bergier Commission) have shown that Switzerland claimed neutrality but maintained business relations with the Nazis. For example, Swiss banks were buying Nazi gold, and Swiss factories were supplying the Nazi army with weapons and machinery (493-525). For an explanation of how the report debunked the myth of Switzerland’s neutrality and decency, see Junz. For a discussion of the impact of Bergier Commission on Holocaust restitution claims against Swiss banks for concealing and not returning dormant accounts to families of Holocaust victims, see Bazyler.
narrator’s distance to the story. Sebald weakens the persuasiveness of his account through his technique of periscopic writing, adopted from Austrian writer Thomas Bernhard and meaning “Erzählen um ein, zwei Ecken herum,”331 namely writing at many removes, without an omniscient narrator. Following this technique, Max speaks indirectly, and Věra mediates his words, with Austerlitz and the narrator relaying her account. The periscopic style comports with Sebald’s principle of discussing the Holocaust indirectly but turns his idea of bilingual education into a hypothesis rather than an explicit pedagogical recommendation.332

Austerlitz seeks to reconnect with his bilingual childhood and regain his translingual self by creating two bridges to his past. The knowledge of the circumstances of his parents’ death forms the first bridge. Their death is suggested by the fact that they never return to Prague or strive to locate him in postwar England. To reconstruct his mother’s ordeal, Austerlitz visits the Theresienstadt ghetto in the former Czechoslovakia, reads about the ghetto, and discovers that, in 1944, she had been sent from the ghetto to concentration camps in Eastern Europe. The protagonist researches historical documents in the National Library in Paris, hoping to unearth leads on his father, who had moved to Paris to wait out the war while Agáta kept postponing the decision to leave the country. The book closes with Austerlitz on his way to the French camp in Gurs, where his father was interned. In contrast to his previous passivity, the protagonist now examines his past actively. By learning about his birth parents, he stimulates his self to grow. One must note that the narrator’s failure to elaborate on Austerlitz’s motivation for his travels

331 “narrating from around a corner or two” (Doerry and Hage 204). On periscopic writing, see Hutchinson, “Sprachen” 121.
332 Bilingualism and multilingualism gain an increasing relevance in teaching as ways of promoting cultural integration. This turn occurs due to the recent rise of xenophobia in Europe and the United States and due to debates over strategies for integrating immigrants and refugees into host countries.
makes them seem contingent. Nonetheless, the plausible reason for his travels is precisely his need to follow the traces of his Jewish parents.

Austerlitz’s second bridge to his French-Czech childhood is the recovery of his Czech language and the memories it holds for him. This step is crucial to building his translingual identity because language and memories function as intimate connections to his past life in Prague. One example of language restoration occurs when Austerlitz’s examines a photo that shows him wearing a trainbearer-costume. Taken when he had attended a party with his mother half a year before his evacuation from the country, the photo bears a Czech inscription on the back and appears inside the book and on its cover. Věra shows him the picture, and he uses it as a visual cue for summoning up his memories:


---

333 The photo is authentic and shows an architectural historian from London (Doerry and Hage 198).
334 “The words páže růžové královny, páže růžové královny went round and round in my head, until their meaning came to me from far away, and once again I saw the live tableau with the Rose Queen and the little boy carrying her train at her side. . . . I could not recollect myself in the part. I did recognize the unusual hairline running at a slant over the forehead, but otherwise all memory was extinguished in me. . . . I have studied the photograph many times since, . . . the six large mother-of-pearl buttons. . . . I examined every detail under a magnifying glass without once finding the slightest clue” (183-84).
Austerlitz reclaims here a semantic piece of his language through repeating the Czech phrase silently until the meaning of the word “páže” ("trainbearer") returns to him. Despite recognizing himself, he lacks a recollection of the event captured in the photo. One can infer that the picture and the Czech phrase succeed in recovering a fragment of his semantic memory but fail to evoke his lived experience.

Austerlitz’s failure to recall his lived experience is reminiscent of Marcel Proust’s idea of involuntary memory. In his *Swann’s Way*, the first volume of *Remembrance of Things Past*, Proust declares that one can genuinely recapture the past only with the help of involuntary memory, a term he coins for accidental reminiscences triggered by material stimuli. “The past is hidden,” Proust argues, “beyond the reach of intellect, in some material object (in the sensation which that material object will give us)” (48). Here, Proust emphasizes the spontaneous nature of memory. His model holds true for some memories. People would lack traditions, witness testimonies, anniversaries, and literature without the ability to recollect consciously. However, the scene with the photo squares with Proust’s idea because it demonstrates how the deliberateness of the protagonist’s efforts to recapture the event causes them to fail. This failure suggests that a genuine connection to Austerlitz’s past resides in his spontaneous memories.

One could read Austerlitz’s effort to recall the costume party against Walter Benjamin’s comments on memory as a process of forgetting. In his “The Image of Proust,” Benjamin asks rhetorically:

> Is not the involuntary recollection . . . much closer to forgetting than what is usually called memory? And is not this work of spontaneous recollection . . . a counterpart to Penelope’s work rather than its likeness? For here, the day unravels what the night has woven. When we awake each morning, we hold in our hands . . .
but a few fringes of the tapestry of lived life, as loomed for us by forgetting.

However, with our purposeful activity, and even more, our purposive remembering, each day unravels the web and the ornaments of forgetting. (202)

In this quote, Benjamin suggests that forgetting creates memories. What one remembers is the result of forgetting. For him, purposeful (or voluntary) remembering creates gaps in the fabric of memory and cannot bring back the past. Austerlitz’s case accords with Benjamin’s view to the extent that the protagonist’s deliberate attempts at memory fail to recall his childhood event. In other words, his purposeful act of remembering does not yield memories. However, Benjamin presupposes that one’s access to “the tapestry of lived life” diminishes over time. Austerlitz, by contrast, works in the opposite direction and seeks to gain access to his lived experiences and his fabric of memory. His goal is to unlock his childhood memories.

Still, the scene with the photo aligns with Benjamin’s notion of aura. In “On Some Motifs in Baudelaire,” Benjamin describes aura as “the associations, which, at home in the mémoire involontaire, tend to cluster around the object of a perception” (186). For him, aura is typical of involuntary memories and means the unique personal associations that make an object seem familiar to one. According to Benjamin, photographs do not reproduce aura. Nor can the mental images triggered by photos replicate aura. Austerlitz’s confrontation with the picture harmonizes with Benjamin’s remarks on aura because the picture fails to evoke the unique presence of the childhood event. By Benjamin’s standard, the photo is not auratic and thus cannot reawaken emotions associated with the costume party.

335 For Benjamin’s account of aura as a “cult value” of artwork, see “Das Kunstwerk im Zeitalter seiner technischen Reproduzierbarkeit.” Aura means there the uniqueness of artwork and implies that the original artwork is always unknowable. For Benjamin, photography causes the decline of aura and destroys the unique character of originals.
Unlike the photo, a stuffed squirrel in a store in Theresienstadt is auratic. The squirrel triggers an involuntary reminiscence in Austerlitz and helps him recover his emotional link to his past. The animal reminds him of the Czech word “veverka,” which means a “squirrel” and appears so familiar to him that he characterizes the word as his forgotten friend (284). Austerlitz’s strong impression of familiarity with the word implies a personal resonance. Věra unveils this resonance when she discloses his childhood fascination with squirrels and their ability to remember where they stash their nuts. As a child, he would ask her, “Aber wenn alles weiß sein wird, wie wissen dann die Eichhörnchen, wo sie ihren Vorrat verborgen haben? Ale když všechno zakryje sníh, jak veverky najdou to místo, kde si schovaly zásoby?”336 (295). This Czech question belongs to Austerlitz’s lived experience. His sudden and intense sensation of familiarity brings back his childhood passion for squirrels and, in doing so, enables him to reconnect emotionally with his past. The photo in the previous scene restores the meaning of some Czech words, whereas the auratic squirrel manages to unlock his affects contained in the word “veverka,” namely his childhood fascination with squirrels.337 Since Austerlitz experiences several similar spontaneous reminiscences, the claim that the language in the novel “does not impart identity” seems inaccurate.338 On the contrary, Austerlitz’s behavior confirms that linguistic memories confer identity because they refer to human lived experiences. His memories have a therapeutic impact on him in stimulating his growth, giving him an emotional bridge to his past, and, in this way, helping him overcome his sense of hollowness.

336 “But if it’s all white, how do the squirrels know where they’ve buried their hoard? Ale když všechno zakryje sníh, jak veverky najdou to místo, kde si schovaly zásoby?” (204).
337 The recurring mother-of-pearl buttons also suggest a continuity between Austerlitz’s past and present. He bursts into tears when he sees those buttons on his foster mother’s dress (99). They appear on the trainbearer’s costume and as the button-eye of the stuffed squirrel (284).
338 See R. Kohn 46. Other involuntary memories include Austerlitz’s ability to count in Czech and the memory of his mother dressed as Olympia (234, 236).
Austerlitz’s reminiscences differ from Proust’s aesthetics of memory. In Proust, one replicates memories to embellish the remembered image of reality and to create its more authentic version. Austerlitz does not repeat his reminiscences but seeks to retrieve them from his subconscious mind in the first place. His recollections are not obsessive: He stops trying to recall the face of his mother when Věra confirms that he has indeed recognized his mother in one of the pictures he had brought from the theater where his mother used to work (360-61). Here, the photo is auratic. Austerlitz is uncertain about his discovery, but Věra confirms that the photo depicts his mother. Unlike in Proust, the protagonist’s goal is neither changing nor beautifying his past but rather learning about it and healing his sense of emptiness through affective contents derived from those memories. As he reframes the squirrel and the photo of his mother as his emotional ties to his French-Czech self, he regains both the linguistic content and the affective substance.

Austerlitz’s emotional reaction to the Czech word “veverka” exemplifies the so-called language-tagging phenomenon. Drawing on linguistic studies and clinical research in psychotherapy and psychoanalysis of bilinguals, linguist Aneta Pavlenko explicates that human brain “tags” events according to a language in which they take place. Thus, words not only convey denotative meanings but are also linked in the mind to specific events and experiences. Pavlenko explains that remembering an event in the language in which it occurred generates more accurate, detailed, and vivid images and “may facilitate recollection of early memories, trigger retrieval of previously repressed traumatic memories . . . , and rekindle emotions.

---

339 For a critique of Proust’s aesthetics of memory, see Bersani 7-28. According to Bersani, Proust’s model of remembrance is redemptive insofar as it restores, enhances, and repairs past experiences (11). Bersani cautions, however, that Proust’s literary memories can downplay the singularity of human experience because Proust portrays life as realized “most authentically” in the imaginary mode, which suggests that art is superior to human life (11).

340 Studies cited by Pavlenko show that linguistic memories might account for up to 80% of all memories (191).
experienced at the time of remembered events” (194). In other words, remembering an event in its original language may bring back feelings experienced during the original event with special vividness. Austerlitz’s reaction to the word “veverka” is in accord with the language-tagging phenomenon: The noun “veverka” is a semantic label for a “squirrel” and a “tag” for his childhood activity of watching squirrels in Prague parks. The Czech word produces a sensation of familiarity in Austerlitz precisely because its memory is correlated with his fascination with squirrels. Hence, Austerlitz’s recollection yields an affective connection to his Czech tongue, another piece of semantic memory, and, most importantly, a profound link to his lived experience embedded in the Czech expression.

The language-tagging phenomenon underscores the value of emotions in Austerlitz’s understanding of home. He associates the English word “home” with his experiences of marginalization within his foster family and at the school. Home in the sense of intimacy and belonging is part of his French-Czech childhood. Since Austerlitz reports no positive experiences at his foster house, one can infer that his “English” sense of home remains unchanged. To recover the positive meaning of home, Austerlitz resumes speaking French and Czech.

Austerlitz’s deliberate and continued practice of speaking Czech and French serves him as a self-therapy. The French-Czech linguistic mode restores his positive notion of home and becomes the foundation of his translingual identity. After his travels through Germany and Theresienstadt, Austerlitz leaves England and returns to Prague to resume his relationship and conversations with Věra “abwechslungsweise in französischer und in tschechischer Sprache”341 (360). He stays there for an extended period. His intentional turn to French and Czech has received no scholarly attention, yet it indicates Austerlitz’s commitment to his translingual mode

341 “first in French then in Czech or vice versa” (252).
of life. Despite his advanced age, Austerlitz continues to excavate and cultivate his Czech vocabulary. His effort to counterbalance the attrition of Czech reveals his desire to keep both languages in his life. He wants to continue the process of forming himself anew and filling the void of home. The disappearance of English from his speech forms a concomitant circumstance, indicating that the protagonist relinquishes his spectral English identity for a more genuine French-Czech model. With satisfaction, he observes that he feels “befreit von seinem falschen englischen Leben,” thereby proving his acceptance of his translingual identity (361). While he feels trapped and hollow in English, he feels authentic, free, and at home in his French-Czech linguistic mode. For this reason, English passages disappear from the novel in favor of French and Czech quotes. After commenting on his feeling of freedom, Austerlitz travels to Paris, thus revealing his desire to remain in his new linguistic mode. In contrast to the hollow English that he associates with alienation, the deep emotional resonance of French and Czech allows him to develop his self in an authentic and constructive manner.

Translingualism does not reconstitute Austerlitz’s former French-Czech persona but gives him an opportunity to reinvent himself through his new language affiliations. In this regard, Austerlitz embodies a subject in process/on trial, a notion developed by Bulgarian-French literary critic and psychoanalyst Julia Kristeva in her book *Revolution in Poetic Language.* By subject in process, Kristeva means that human identity is never finished or constant but changes with every linguistic utterance. That is, people alter their identities by speaking. Kristeva’s central claim is that a human subject is born at the threshold of language, which she calls a thetic border between the symbolic and the semiotic. Borrowed from Jacques Lacan’s psychoanalytical

---

342 “liberated from the false pretenses of his English life” (254).
343 Kristeva argues that Husserl’s phenomenology and Hegel’s theory of the subject presuppose a rational and stable adult subject and thus disregard the fact that people are not born as rational beings but gradually develop rational skills. She seeks to overcome the dogma of the rational subject by defining humans as both rational and affective.
theory, the category of the symbolic means the realm of language, conceptual rules, and cultural, social, and patriarchal structures (29). By contrast, the semiotic denotes affects, Freudian drives (psychic energies), and the poetic dimension of language, such as music, rhythm, and tone (29). In Kristeva’s theory, people emerge as subjects every time they speak because every utterance amounts to crossing the thetic boundary and represents a unique viaduct between the semiotic and the symbolic. Since people communicate constantly, they keep crossing the thetic boundary and, by the same token, changing their identities.

According to Kristeva’s theory, Austerlitz’s lifestyle before his breakdown amounted to an attempt to suppress the semiotic side, namely affects associated with his Czech origin. His mental collapse and aphasia paved the way for his reentry into language or, in Kristeva’s terms, his rebirth as a subject by speaking French and Czech. This translingual mode preserves the symbolic and the semiotic and, most crucially, enables Austerlitz to keep transforming and expanding his identity through his use of both languages.

Concurrent with his allegiances to French and Czech are Austerlitz’s new cultural interests. He seeks to familiarize himself with his parents’ cultural preferences, particularly their love for French culture. To this end, he visits the theater in which his mother worked and begins to read French writer Honoré de Balzac. The protagonist reads Colonel Chabert, a novella about a French soldier who is believed to have fallen in Napoleonic battles and returns to France to reclaim his wife, honor, and belongings. Austerlitz chooses Balzac purposely because his mother and Věra shared a passion for French culture, and because Věra has a large collection of

---

344 On terminologies in Kristeva and Lacan, see Beardsworth.
345 For Lacan, people enter the realm of language once. To do so, they must leave the semiotic, which he terms the maternal realm. For Kristeva, speaking is moving between the semiotic and the symbolic and requires no relinquishment of the semiotic. On Kristeva’s divergence from Lacan, see Kramsch 94-100.
346 The theme of the novella echoes Austerlitz’s journey to his origin. Sebald quotes a few sections from the novella (400-01).
Balzac’s works that the protagonist still remembers from his childhood. These attempts at
gaining cultural knowledge confirm Austerlitz’s motivation to stay connected to his birth parents
and differ from his dislike of his foster parents’ Calvinism. By familiarizing himself with his
birth parents’ cultural predilections, the protagonist further expands his sense of self.

Austerlitz’s translingual practices contribute to his emotional transformation. He strives
to develop genuine relationships with two living characters. His first emotional attachment is
Věra. He remains in touch with her, helps her improve her life conditions, and sets up a
retirement fund for her. All those gestures of gratitude intimate that Austerlitz no longer eschews
human contact but desires genuine friendships. His second emotional involvement is Marie. At
the end of the novel, he decides to reconnect with her (414). His decision suggests that he intends
to resume his love relationship with her. He had rejected her because she was too inquisitive, but
now he wants to start an honest relationship because he has finally confronted his past.
Austerlitz’s affective associations contrast with his previous feeling of isolation and thus testify
to his emotional change.347

Scholars have overlooked the protagonist’s love relationship with Marie, yet she has
twofold significance for his translingual identity. First, his love for Marie shows that French is
not merely one of his mother tongues but also the language of his desired future with Marie.
Hence, the therapeutic dimension of French involves both Austerlitz’s childhood memories and
his intended future with Marie.348 Second, the scholarly neglect for Marie’s role has produced an
inaccurate perception of Austerlitz as clinging to his past. This view disregards the protagonist’s
dual goal declared at the end of the book, “Ich . . . werde also weitersuchen nach meinem Vater

347 The narrator is the third living character, with whom the protagonist forms a relationship. However, the narrator’s
primary function is to preserve Austerlitz’s story.
348 Likewise, reading French helps him recuperate in a hospital in Paris (384-85).
und auch nach Marie de Verneuil" 349 (414). As the quote indicates, the two magnets in Austerlitz’s life are his father and Marie. Dubow and Steadman-Jones do not mention the protagonist’s dual orientation and interpret his story as illustrating his “state of survivorship” and the impossibility of forgetting (24). Admittedly, Austerlitz’s life depicts the consequences of the Holocaust for a child refugee, but his motivation at the end of the book seems to be a dual desire to bear witness and make amends for his willful amnesia throughout most of his life. Most importantly, in choosing two personal pivots, Austerlitz reveals that both past and future are relevant to him. The strong presence of Marie in the second half of the novel suggests that Austerlitz’s decision to search for her represents his recognition of her importance to him and thus his emotional reorientation rather than an afterthought.

The complexity of Austerlitz’s translingual identity manifests itself in a melody he hears in a circus in Paris. The musical performance mesmerizes him, “Manchmal ist es mir gewesen als hörte ich ein längst vergessenes walisisches Kirchenlied aus ihrem Spielen heraus, dann wieder . . . die Drehung eines Walzers, ein Ländlermotiv, oder das Schleppende eines Trauermarsches, wo die im letzten Geleit Gehenden bei jedem Schritt den Fuß, eh sie ihn aufsetzen, ein wenig einhalten in der Luft” 350 (389). The melody captivates Austerlitz because he recognizes himself in its hybrid form: The Welsh church music echoes his Welsh culture. The waltz evokes the heritage of his parents. 351 The funeral march conjures up their deaths. This

---

349 “I am going to continue looking for my father, and for Marie de Verneuil as well” (293).
350 “Sometimes I seemed to hear a long-forgotten Welsh hymn in their melodies, or then again, . . . the revolutions of a waltz, a ländler theme, or the slow sound of a funeral march, [in] which . . . uniformed guard[s] of honor . . . pause every time before taking the next step, with one foot suspended an inch above the ground for the briefest of moments” (274). The English translation adds some details that are absent from the German original and suggest that Austerlitz portrays himself as one of the guards.
351 The reference to ländler, a folk dance popular in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries in Bavaria and Austria, is an allusion to Sebald’s region.
musical mélange does not imply a split personality but portrays the protagonist as a product of various cultural attachments.

Austerlitz’s reaction to the melody reveals his existential uncertainty. He cannot determine whether he feels pain or happiness, “Was in mir selber vorging, . . . das verstehe ich immer noch nicht, . . . ebensowenig wie ich seinerzeit hätte sagen können, ob mir die Brust zusammengedrängt wurde vor Schmerzen oder sich zum ersten Mal in meinem Leben ausweitete vor Glück”\(^{352}\) (389-90). His emotional confusion conveyed in the quote originates in his knowledge about his roots. On the one hand, Austerlitz might feel pain because he can neither bring his parents back to life nor restore his childhood but must rely on snippets of memories. In this regard, the melody reminds him of—and perhaps even “reunites him” with—his experience of loss (Dubow and Steadman-Jones 24). On the other hand, Austerlitz might feel happy because he no longer deludes himself and is ready to develop true relationships. Since his decision to search for his father and Marie occurs after his musical experience, one can conclude that he accepts his state of uncertainty and acknowledges both his past and the possibility of happiness. His acceptance of both emotions has escaped literary scholarship that has focused on his past.

The protagonist’s emotional vacillation squares with Sebald’s view on the role of pain and happiness in his writing. Sebald describes happiness as one of “beatific moments” that soothe the experience of “the horrific,” namely trauma and loss.\(^{353}\) In other words, serenity functions as relief and respite from pain. According to literary scholar Ben Hutchinson, Sebald’s notion of happiness derives from Italo Calvino’s definition of literature as seeking to overcome the force of gravity (W.G. Sebald 147). As Hutchinson expounds, happy moments appear in

---

\(^{352}\) “I still do not understand what was happening within me . . ., nor could I have said at the time whether my heart was contracting in pain or expanding with happiness for the first time in my life” (274).

\(^{353}\) See Silverblatt 86.
Sebald’s works as images of suspension, lightweight, and levitation (146). Such moments are also discernible in the rhythm of the circus melody. Lightness and levitation appear in the waltz’s rise and fall movement and in the ländler’s figures of hopping. Suspension surfaces in the funeral march as an act of holding the leg in the air. This “happy” imagery suggests that the protagonist accepts his translingual identity as oscillating between pain and happiness.

Unlike Sebald, Austerlitz seeks neither exile nor “a state of homelessness” (Catling 28). Rather, he mobilizes his languages to overcome his sense of emptiness by building a figurative home in-between French and Czech cultures, without choosing a new national pivot or settling in one country. Austerlitz favors French and Czech cultures but neither changes his nationality nor relinquishes his English citizenship. Dubow and Steadman-Jones draw a similar conclusion that the protagonist’s discovery of his Czech origins does not lead to “a national return” (20). Thus, Austerlitz’s sense of home remains translingual and cultural, without an interest in national commitment.354

An unresolved issue remains the protagonist’s relationship to English. English vanishes from the book after his recognition scene with Věra and is consistently associated with homelessness. Admittedly, English is imposed upon the refugee, but it would be incorrect to blame a language for actions of Austerlitz’s foster parents. Above all, by associating English solely with alienation, Austerlitz divulges his ingratitude toward his adoptive parents and fails to admit that he would have perished, like his Jewish parents, if he had not been sent to England. Equally uneven is the distribution of English injections in the novel: They underscore Austerlitz’s unpleasant experiences in England, whereas his happy experiences, such as his friendship with a fellow English student, appear in German. The protagonist shows no clear

354 On European cosmopolitanism in Sebald, see Bauer.
intention of reconciling French, Czech, and English as parts of his self. His estrangement from English is unfortunate because it prevents him from developing an even richer network of associations.

One might object that Sebald employs a Holocaust survivor as a protagonist to expiate himself for his adolescent unawareness of the Holocaust. Sebald confesses that he learned late about the Holocaust because he grew up in a remote Bavarian region and his parents avoided discussing their past. It would thus seem that Sebald writes about a Holocaust victim to compensate for his late confrontation with Germany’s Nazi history. However, this charge seems inadequate because Austerlitz is not an autobiography but a work of fiction. Nor does Sebald suggest resemblances between himself and the protagonist. It would be incorrect to claim that Sebald avoids coming to terms with his family’s Nazi past by describing himself as an outsider and fictionalizing the story of the real survivor. By modeling his fictional character on a real refugee, Sebald neither relativizes nor diminishes her suffering but rather commemorates all the survivors of the Kindertransporte in a literary fashion. In doing so, he accentuates the suffering of child refugees in any war zone.

In this part, Austerlitz’s self-reinvention occurs in three phases. He researches his origin and scrutinizes his memories. To build his translingual identity, he recovers his repressed Czech and switches to speaking French and Czech.

**Conclusion**

Austerlitz’s turn to translingualism results from the suppression of his French-Czech past. His foster parents silence his original identity, without offering a viable emotional substitute. The

---

355 See Wachtel 44.
356 The Jewish religion is not central to Austerlitz’s story. His Jewish heritage is indicated throughout the book, but he does not seek to recover his Jewish faith.
English educational system further suppresses his French-Czech identity. Austerlitz contributes to his sense of spectrality by stifling his memories. To reinvent himself, the protagonist examines his roots and memories and, most crucially, reactivates his Czech language and shifts to speaking French and Czech. This translingual mode has a therapeutic effect because it enables him to form linguistic, cultural, and emotional attachments that help him overcome his sense of hollowness and find an abode in-between French and Czech cultures.

Austerlitz’s story reveals that the integration of refugees into a host country fails when the country denies, suppresses, or erases their origins. His case indicates that linguistic, cultural, and emotional bridges between refugees and their host country can facilitate their sense of belonging. Austerlitz feels alienated in his English environment because his heritage has been removed and he has been given no healthy substitute nor allowed to merge his heritage with English culture. By renouncing his English identity, Austerlitz demonstrates that integration requires preserving the host culture and the refugee’s heritage. Austerlitz exemplifies the plasticity of human identity. He forms his translingual identity through his French-Czech linguistic practices. Intriguingly, the protagonist asks the narrator to look after his house in London, perhaps implying that he might return. By not cutting his ties to England entirely, Austerlitz suggests the possibility of reconciling the French, Czech, and English parts of his self.

Austerlitz’s case illustrates the link between language and national belonging. His disaffection for England reveals that national belonging originates within families. Austerlitz develops no sense of national belonging because of his unequal treatment in his family. The lack of parental love prevents him from identifying with the country of his foster parents. By relinquishing his English self, Austerlitz exposes that the cultural colonization of refugees

---

357 Austerlitz also implies that he might die (414).
miscarries. His adoptive parents colonize him by changing his name and extirpating his past, without ever adopting him. Austerlitz retains his English citizenship but displays no interest in national matters. He remains a citizen on paper.

Austerlitz’s school experiences reveal that education might foster the feeling of national belonging. Whereas the school principal undermines Austerlitz’s status within the community of English students, history class rectifies this situation; namely, it gives him an entry point for an understanding of his background and corroborates the education’s ability to make cultural bridges. Austerlitz’s translingualism constitutes a viable alternative to monolingualism because it enables him to create dynamic linguistic, cultural, and emotional identifications. The protagonist constructs a nurturing sense of self through his French and Czech allegiances, thus confirming that a sense of belonging is dynamic and evolves along with human linguistic, cultural, and emotional attachments.

Sebald’s notion of a translingual subject contrasts with Adorno’s framework discussed in Chapter Two. Adorno prioritizes the mother tongue over other languages and stresses the need to cultivate German and retain national commitment in postwar reality. Contrary to Adorno, Sebald presents a subject who speaks several languages and does not identify with one country. Unlike Adorno, Sebald underscores the fluctuating nature of human linguistic and cultural attachments. For Adorno, spectrality affects all the Germans expropriated of their language by the Nazis. To overcome this condition, Adorno debunks the myth of linguistic purity and promotes using foreign borrowings in German. For Sebald, spectrality afflicts silenced speakers, like Austerlitz, and is curable by reinstating the suppressed tongues. Adorno remains loyal to his mother tongue throughout his texts for private and patriotic reasons. Sebald’s protagonist shifts to his French and Czech mother tongues because of their therapeutic power and for purely private purposes.
Both Adorno and Sebald emphasize that the exposure to languages might protect one from ideologies.

The following chapter examines Sebald’s translingual aesthetics in *Austerlitz*. 
Chapter Five

Panta Rhei: Translingual Aesthetics in W.G. Sebald’s *Austerlitz*

The preceding section focused on a literary analysis of a translingual protagonist in W.G. Sebald’s *Austerlitz*. The suppression of the protagonist’s memories and Czech language has caused him to feel hollow and spectral. His translingual practices, namely speaking French and reactivating Czech, have enabled him to cure his sense of emptiness. The analysis concluded that translingualism is therapeutic and facilitates the formation of human linguistic, cultural, and emotional attachments.

This chapter argues from an aesthetic perspective that Sebald’s *Austerlitz* contains two models of German: Nazi Deutsch and Sebald’s translingual mode, which mixes German with other tongues and serves to counterbalance Nazi Deutsch. The first part analyzes Sebald’s portrayal of the Nazi style of grandiosity and misdirection (illusory precision). The second section exemplifies Sebald’s model with a German-English snow scene. The final segment contextualizes Sebald’s translingual writing within his remarks on aesthetics. The chapter concludes that Sebald’s literary translingualism opposes Nazi Deutsch and advocates literature as a domain for transcending linguistic, literary, and national boundaries.

Sebald is a renowned yet controversial postwar German writer. His fiction thematizes the Holocaust, exile, trauma, and memory. He is celebrated for his so-called Kunstsprache (stylized language), his documentary fiction style, melancholic tone, and use of photography. In Anglo-American readership, Sebald counts as “the master of melancholy” and receives acclaim for his moving portrayals of Holocaust survivors. His reception in his homeland has been a bit less

358 Sebald often calls his literary language Kunstsprache. See Hintermeier and Pralle 254.
359 See Hintermeier 22. On Sebald’s hagiographic status in Anglo-American readership, see Hutchinson, *W.G. Sebald*. On Sebald’s Anglo-American reception, see also Schwartz 18, Denham, and Pakendorf 120. On differences
One possible reason for Sebald’s mixed reception in Germany is his assessment of German philology as too abstract and inflexible, as well as his description of German literature as thematically narrow and stubborn. As an expatriate writer, Sebald harshly criticizes Germany’s relationship to its Nazi past as not empathetic enough toward Holocaust victims. Sebald caused controversy when he published his book accusing postwar German writers of shying away from depicting the suffering of the German population during World War II air raids.

_Austerlitz_ tells a story of a fictional Jewish refugee named Jacques Austerlitz who grows up in a Calvinist foster family in Wales and travels throughout Europe to retrace the routes of his birth parents who died at the hands of the Nazis. Although written predominantly in German, the novel contains numerous foreign language sections that form an exhaustive meta-reflection on language and aesthetics. In *Die Ausgewanderten*, Sebald’s earlier text about the Holocaust, foreign language insertions occur less frequently and signal geographical settings. The short stories in *Die Ausgewanderten* present life trajectories of several Holocaust victims without discussing the role of language. By contrast, _Austerlitz_ intertwines the protagonist’s story with the theme of language.

Since the scholarship on _Austerlitz_ concentrates on memory, exile, and Sebald’s literary models, the aesthetic role of foreign languages in the novel remains uncharted. The few

---

360 For Sebald’s evaluation of German academia, see Pralle 254-55 and Hage 183-85. For Sebald’s comments on postwar German literature, see Hage and Hintermeier. For Sebald’s criticism of German humanities in the 1960s, see Cuomo 106-07. For Sebald’s remarks on the conspiracy of silence in German postwar philology, see Wachtel 46-48.

361 For Sebald’s criticism of Germany’s relationship to its history, see Stoisser 240-41, Pralle 259, Rondas 216-220, and Hoffmann 271. According to Sebald, the Germans display an abstract sense of shame (Schande) rather than moral failure (Scham) (Hage 192). For Sebald’s descriptions of the bombings of German cities during World War II, see _Luftkrieg und Literatur_. For a historiographical account of those air raids, see Friedrich.
examinations of multilingualism in the book focus on the main character from a psychoanalytical angle and neglect other multilingual sections.\textsuperscript{362} An exception to this trend is an article by literary scholar Rob Kohn, who takes a narratological approach and portrays foreign language sections as exposing the narrator’s unreliability. Kohn, however, does not investigate the narrator’s multilingual passages, dismissing them instead as nearly absent (43).

Scholars of Sebald’s literary style have either omitted the aesthetic role of foreign languages or categorized them as disruptions, with little or no analysis of foreign language passages. For example, literary scholar Andreas Kramer claims that foreign language injections express Sebald’s skepticism toward language and intrude in the text, but he does not examine any multilingual instances.\textsuperscript{363} Literary scholar Gunther Pakendorf insightfully analyzes word order, reported speech, archaic vocabulary, and temporality in Sebald’s works but omits foreign tongues. From a linguistic perspective, literary scholar Matthias Zucchi shows that Sebald uses his stylized language to historicize his works and make them lyrical. While enumerating Sebald’s neologisms, anachronisms, grammatical deviations, and Bavarian and Austrian expressions, Zucchi observes that foreign languages mirror geographical locations in Sebald’s fiction. In \textit{Austerlitz}, however, foreign expressions are copious and fulfill various functions besides marking geographical contexts.

The dearth of scholarship on foreign tongues in the novel might result from Sebald’s ambivalence toward German and English. On the one hand, he often underscored that he felt “attached”\textsuperscript{364} to his native language and described it as “eine Art von Floß,”\textsuperscript{365} a linguistic tie to his homeland. Except for his English poems, Sebald wrote his fiction in German, explaining that

\begin{flushright}
\textsuperscript{362} For a review of those studies, see Chapter Four.
\textsuperscript{363} On multilingualism in \textit{Austerlitz} as a textual disruption, see also Willer.
\textsuperscript{364} See Angier 69.
\textsuperscript{365} “a kind of raft.” See Pralle 253. Unless otherwise noted, all translations are mine.
\end{flushright}
he considered himself not proficient enough in English to write literature in that language.\footnote{366} On the other hand, Sebald disliked contemporary German and frequently joked that, thanks to residing in England, he was “spared always having to be up with the latest jargon” in his homeland.\footnote{367} Sebald’s colleague Jo Catling has linked his views on both languages to the theme of exile in his works but has not analyzed \textit{Austerlitz} within this context.\footnote{368} This chapter shows that Sebald’s ambivalence toward German surfaces in \textit{Austerlitz}.

Sebald’s mouthpiece in the novel is the unnamed German narrator. Like all Sebald narrators, he shares biographical similarities with Sebald.\footnote{369} For example, Sebald left Germany in the 1960s, lived first in French-speaking Switzerland and then its German-speaking part, and finally settled in England. Similarly, the narrator is a writer who shuttles between Germany and England and eventually decides to live in England. Like Sebald, the narrator regards himself as an outsider in both countries and remains critical of German academia in the 1960s. The correspondences between the narrator’s remarks on language and Sebald’s view on language are too substantial to be coincidental, and thus the narrator must be understood as a figure for Sebald, despite his objections to equating him with the book’s narrator.\footnote{370}

The narrator is also the central refracting instance. He relays the dialogues of the characters by using reported speech and declarative markers, such as “sagte sie” (“she said”), to indicate that he has merely transcribed someone else’s words. However, his reporting techniques are inconsistent, so that the characters’ voices are at times indistinguishable from his voice.\footnote{371} An

\begin{footnotes}
\item[366] Sebald spoke German, English, French, and his Bavarian dialect. He also read texts in Italian (Baker). Sebald preferred his Bavarian dialect to standard German (Pralle 254). For Sebald’s explanation on why he writes in German, see Jaggi and Angier.
\item[367] See Zeeman 28. On Sebald’s estrangement from German, see Hintermeier.
\item[368] Catling focuses on Sebald’s \textit{Nach der Natur} and \textit{Die Ringe des Saturn}.
\item[369] On autobiographical features of Sebald narrators, see Schwartz 13-14 and Lubow 169.
\item[370] For Sebald’s objections to associating him with the novel’s narrator, see Lubow 169, and Doerry and Hage 204.
\item[371] On the narrator as a homodiegetic figure (one of the book’s characters) and his reporting style, see R. Kohn.
\end{footnotes}
additional degree of refraction results from Sebald’s strategy of periscopic writing, borrowed from Austrian writer Thomas Bernhard and denoting an indirect narration style that relies on two or more reporting figures.\textsuperscript{372} All sections relevant to this chapter appear in the periscopic style. For example, Věra, Austerlitz’s nanny, speaks indirectly as he and the narrator mediate her words. Věra, Austerlitz, and the narrator refract the voice of Max, Austerlitz’s father. Due to those multiple relaying instances, the characters’ voices may occasionally seem mixed or blurred, thus generating interpretive ambiguity in the novel.

\textit{Nazi Deutsch} and Grandiosity

Throughout the book, Sebald associates \textit{Nazi Deutsch} with grandiosity and misdirection (illusory precision). Grandiosity appears most distinctly in the Nazi slogans used by Max, a Czechoslovakian political activist and delegate of republicans who favors popular sovereignty over absolutist and monarchical rule. Max travels throughout Germany in the 1930s to evaluate the political attitudes there for his compatriots. From his field trips, he assesses that the core of fascism resides in “\textquoteleft\textquoteleft das magische Wort tausend”\textsuperscript{373} (244). “\textquoteleft\textquoteleft Tausend, zehntausend, zwanzigtausend, tausend mal tausend und abertausend,”\textsuperscript{374} Max notes, is “\textquoteleft\textquoteleft der . . . den Deutschen eingetrichterte Reim auf ihre eigene Größe”\textsuperscript{375} (244). Here, he links the word “tausend” with the Nazi conviction of their greatness, and he observes that the German Reichskanzler continually reminds his followers of this mantra (244). When combined, the words “Reich” and “tausend” refer to the notion of “das tausendjährige Reich,” the Nazi belief in their duty to resurrect the Holy Roman Empire (\textit{Heiliges Römisches Reich}), which had existed from the early Middle Ages until 1806.

\textsuperscript{372} On the periscopic writing, see Chapter Four. For Sebald’s dislike of omniscient narrators, see Silverblatt 83.
\textsuperscript{373} “the magic word \textit{thousand}” (167).
\textsuperscript{374} “A thousand, ten thousand, twenty thousand, . . . a thousand times a thousand, thousands upon thousands” (167).
\textsuperscript{375} “the refrain . . . [drummed] into the Germans . . . [about] the promise of their own greatness” (167).
The concept of “das tausendjährige Reich” implies magnitude in a secular and religious sense. As German Jewish philologist Victor Klemperer explains in his book *LTI: Lingua Tertii Imperii* about the Nazi perversion of German, the Nazis used the word “tausend” as a superlative to portray their regime as paramount (281). Superlatives, Klemperer observes, were the most common feature of *Nazi Deutsch* and often took the form of exaggerating the Nazi military power (283-84). Besides superlatives, the Nazis appropriated religious ideas to evoke religious magnificence. For example, Nazi officials often invoked the Holy Roman Empire, a religious-political body with emperors consecrated by popes, to sanctify the Nazi vision of eternal empire (280). As Klemperer explains, the Nazi concept of eternal empire had a profoundly religious tinge because eternity connotes divinity. He clarifies, “Ewig ist Attribut einzig des Göttlichen; was ich ewig nenne, erhebe ich in die Sphäre des Religiösen”376 (143). He indicates here that eternity implies religious transcendence. This sense of transcendence inhered in the word “Reich” because the term was appropriated from religious rituals. Klemperer explains that “das christliche Jenseits ist das Himmelreich, und im allgemeinsten und schlichtesten Gebet des Christentums heißt die zweite Bitte: Dein Reich komme”377 (149). Through their use of those ideas, the Nazis colored their concept of empire with the religious sense of grandiosity.378

Max’s use of Nazi slogans reproduces the voice of the Nazi regime and represents a form of heteroglossia. Russian literary scholar and critic Mikhail Bakhtin defines heteroglossia as a diversity of speech types, dialects, and jargons within a national language. The macro scale

---

376 “Eternal is an attribute reserved exclusively for the divine; by calling something eternal I elevate it to the sphere of the religious” (114).
377 “For Christians the next world is heaven [Himmelreich], and in the most universal and simple Christian prayer the second request is *Dein Reich komme* [Thy kingdom come]” (118-19).
378 Klemperer mentions the following question on school examinations: “‘Was kommt nach dem Dritten Reich?’ Antworitet ein Ahnungsloser oder Übertölpelter: ‘Das vierte’, dann lässt man ihn (auch bei guten Fachkenntnissen) als unzulänglichen Parteiünger unbarmherzig fallen. Die richtige Antwort muß heißen: ‘Nichts kommt dahinter, das Dritte Reich ist das ewige Reich der Deutschen’” (143-44). On “das tausendjährige Reich,” see also Schmitz-Berning 607 and Michael and Doerr 396.
forms of heteroglossia include “social dialects, characteristic group behavior, professional jargons, generic languages, languages of generations and age groups, tendentious languages, languages of the authorities, of various circles, and of passing fashions, languages that serve the specific socio-political purposes of the day, even of the hour” (262-63). In brief, heteroglossia means multiplicity of voices within one language and appears in novels in the form of imitation; parody; characters’ speeches; and genres, such as diaries, letters, street songs, or folk sayings (273).

On a micro scale, heteroglossia denotes two meanings or intentions in a word. Bakhtin describes such heteroglossia as “another’s speech in another’s language, serving to express authorial intentions but in a refracted way. Such speech . . . serves two speakers at the same time and expresses simultaneously two different intentions: the direct intention of the character who is speaking, and the refracted intentions of the author” (324). Here, Bakhtin conveys that heteroglossia signifies the speaker’s attitude and constitutes a subtext or a commentary hidden in a word. Such forms of heteroglossia entail “comic, ironic or parodic discourse, the refracting discourse of a narrator, refracting discourse in the language of a character and finally the discourse of the whole incorporated genre” (324). Hence, heteroglossia mimics a discourse and signals attitudes toward that language.

Those attitudes often function as a form of critique. For this reason, Bakhtin credits heteroglossia with a centrifugal (decentralizing) force, namely an ability to prevent one discourse from dominating others by exposing various attitudes and lingos in a language. Bakhtin exemplifies the decentralizing function of heteroglossia with fabliaux, short humorous tales in verse popular in France in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. Usually about sexual intrigues

---

379 Bakhtin argues against treating the language of poetry as ahistorical and authoritative.
involving an unfaithful wife, her husband, her lover (typically a student), and an indecent priest, those tales employed a coarse language to condemn the duplicity of the clergy, whose authority was almost untouchable at the time.

Max’s account employs heteroglossia to attack the Nazi spirit of grandiosity. Through irony, Max uncovers that the Nazis used pomposity to mask their imperial ambitions. In describing fascism as “eine blinde Eroberungs- und Zerstörungssucht,” 380 Max identifies grandiosity as the Nazi camouflage for their desire for supremacy (244). His reference to conquest impugns the Nazi image of their greatness because conquest suggests violence instead of benevolence. Max eventually becomes a Nazi victim. He anticipates his death, comparing himself to “[einem] Fremdkörper” 381 about to be “zermahlen und ausgeschieden” 382 by Hitler supporters. This comparison hints at the perniciousness of the Nazis rather than at their greatness (246). 383

Crucial to the Nazi idea of grandiosity is the deification of Hitler. Max alludes to this stylization in his cinematic example of the Nazi sense of grandiosity when he describes the 1935 Nazi propaganda movie Triumph des Willens directed by Leni Riefenstahl. 384 The movie counts as one of the finest propaganda films ever because Riefenstahl was one of the first directors to massively deploy moving cameras, aerial photography, close-ups, and music. The film portrays

380 “a blind lust for conquest and destruction” (167).
381 “a foreign body” (168).
382 “crushed and . . . excreted” (168).
383 Irony permeates Max’s comments on the Nazi regime. For instance, he observes that the crowds in Nürnberg greet Hitler as the long awaited “Heilsbringer” (246). However, their euphoria is incongruous with Max’s comparison of the city to “einem hoffnungslos überfüllten Ghetto” because a ghetto connotes suffering (246). Since Nürnberg was the heart of the Nazi regime and, except for 1923 and 1926, the location of 1923-1938 annual Nazi party rallies, the description of the city as a ghetto serves to highlight the monstrosity of the Nazi system.
384 Der Sieg des Glaubens was Riefenstahl’s first film about Nazi rallies and documented the 1933 rally but was ordered to be destroyed because it showed Hitler in a company of inconvenient members of Sturmartellung (SA), the paramilitary unit of the Nazi party. They were executed during the Night of the Long Knives in July 1934. Among those officers was Ernst Röhm, who was the SA leader and a long-time comrade of Hitler.
events from the 1934 Nazi Party rally in Nürnberg, including Hitler’s speeches and Nazi military parades and ceremonies, and famously opens with a shot of Hitler’s aircraft descending through clouds toward the city to conjure an impression of a deity landing on earth. The plane’s shadow appears from the bird’s eye perspective as a cross to evoke the idea of a Savior. As the last scene of the movie, a close-up of a swastika fades into an image of a marching German army.

Without mentioning the movie’s title, Max’s ekphrastic account clearly identifies the iconic scenes of the film. As he explains, viewers could see not only

wie sich das Flugzeug des Führers durch die Wolkengebirge allmählich herabsenkt auf die Erde; nicht nur wurde die allen gemeinsame tragische Vorgeschichte beschworen in der Zeremonie der Totenehrung . . .; nicht nur sah man die dem Tod fürs Vaterland sich weihenden Krieger, die riesigen geheimnisvoll schwankenden Fahnenwälder, die im Fackelschein davonzogen in die Nacht – nein, man sah auch . . . aus der Vogelschau eine im Morgengrauen bis gegen die Horizont reichende Stadt von weißen Zelten, aus denen . . . die Deutschen hervorkamen und sich . . . alle in dieselbe Richtung bewegten. . . .

(247-48)

All the scenes in this quote, including the aircraft, the commemoration of the dead, torchlights, and the white tents of rally participants, occur in the movie and indicate the Nazi propaganda’s reliance on pomp and deification strategies. In fact, the Nazis stylized Hitler as “Erlöser”

---

385 Ekphrasis is a vivid depiction of artwork through another medium of art. For instance, a poem describes a painting. In this case, a section in a novel describes a movie.
386 “the Führer’s airplane descending slowly to earth through towering mountain ranges of cloud; not only was the tragic history they all shared invoked in the ceremony honoring the war dead . . .; not only might one see warriors pledging themselves to die for the Fatherland, and the huge forests of flags mysteriously swaying as they moved away by torchlight into the dark—no . . . a bird’s-eye view showed a city of white tents extending into the horizon, from which . . . the Germans emerged . . . [and] all went in the same direction . . .” (169).
387 “the Saviour” (39).
coming to the poor (Klemperer 55). He called some of his fallen soldiers his disciples and insisted on “seine besondere Gotteskindschaft” (144). As Klemperer records, Hitler claimed, “Die Vorsehung führt uns, wir handeln nach dem Willen des Allmächtigen” (144). Hence, pomp and references to Christianity served to deify Hitler.

As Max notes, the Nazis sought to imbue the entire German nation with religious magnificence. To this end, the movie depicted the Germans as marching together in the same direction “als folgten sie einem höheren Ruf und seien, nach langen Jahren in der Wüste, nun endlich auf dem Weg ins Gelobte Land” (248). Max adds that the Germans equated themselves with “einem zur Messianisierung der Welt auserkorenen Volk” (247). Those appeals to a religious vocation served to bolster the halo around the German nation.

Max’s irony reveals the pretentiousness in the image of German evangelizers in two ways. First, in characterizing the Germans as God’s chosen people, Max draws a similarity between the Germans and the Jews, who are regarded by Judaism and Christianity as God’s chosen people. The biblical story of Exodus, to which Max alludes, describes how the Jewish people leave Egypt and wander through the Sinai desert in search of the land promised to them by God. The disparity between the Germans and the biblical Jews consists in the fact that the Egyptians unjustly persecuted the Jews. By contrast, the Germans were neither biblical figures nor oppressed by the Egyptians but instead, under the Nazi leadership, made the Jews their primary targets.

388 “his special sonship” (115).
389 “We are led by Providence, we act according to the Will of the Almighty” (115).
390 “following, so it seemed, some higher bidding, on their way to the Promised Land at last after long years in the wilderness” (169).
391 “a people chosen to evangelize the world” (169).
The second ironic element is Max’s observation that the German belief in their salvific mission originated in “ihrer unverwundenen Erniedrigung” \(^{(247)}\). Max refers here to the peace treaty of Versailles, which ended World War I and required Germany to acknowledge its responsibility for the war, to disarm, and to make war reparations. Many Germans perceived the treaty as unjust, shameful, and humiliating. This historical context around that humiliation is suggested in the novel but explicit in the movie’s prologue, which labels 1918 as the beginning of German suffering and 1933 as the year of Germany’s rebirth. Against this background, Max’s reference to German humiliation suggests the preposterousness of the Nazi belief in their evangelizing mission because the country has shirked admitting its responsibility for World War I, which further contradicts the Nazi image of their greatness.

As portrayed by Sebald, the Nazi style of grandiosity invokes history and religion to lend credibility to Nazi imperial ambitions. Grandiosity emerges when the Nazis couple their vision of empire with the Holy Roman Empire. Stylizations of Hitler as a divinely inspired leader serve to project a similar sense of magnitude. Sebald employs irony to denounce the Nazi idea of grandiosity.

**Nazi Deutsch and Misdirection (Illusory Precision)**

Besides grandiosity, Sebald associates Nazi Deutsch with misdirection (illusory precision). Whereas precision tends to facilitate the ease of understanding, the Nazi deportation directives that Věra describes show how precision can serve to mislead. In Věra’s account, misdirection denotes an abundance of details that divert attention from relevant issues. As she explains, two messengers from “der Kultusgemeinde” \(^{(177)}\) bring Agáta, the protagonist’s mother,

---

\(^{(247)}\) “the humiliation from which the Germans had never recovered” (169).

\(^{(177)}\) “the Israelite religious community” (177).
directives that she must prepare herself “auf den Abtransport in einer Frist von sechs Tagen”\textsuperscript{394} (258). This laconic message comes with a heap of papers,

in denen . . . bis ins einzelnste alles bestimmt und festgeschrieben war: wo und wann die Vorgeladene sich einzufinden habe, was an Kleidungsstücken . . . mitzubringen sei, welche Gebrauchsartikel . . . sich empfehlen, daß das Gesamtgewicht des Hauptgepäcks fünfzig Kilo nicht übersteigen dürfe, was an Handgepäck und Mundvorrat mitgeführt werden könne, wie die Koffer mit Namen, Transportziel und der ausgegebenen Nummer zu kennzeichnen seien; daß sämtliche beigeschlossenen Formulare vollständig ausgefüllt und unterfertigt werden müßten, daß . . . jede Anordnung der amtlichen Organe in jedem Fall genauestens zu befolgen sei.\textsuperscript{395} (258)

Here, the messengers and directives represent the voice of the Nazi regime. Those guidelines underscore technicalities, such as weight limit, clothing, labeling instructions, and required documents, to conceal the lack of essential information about the deportation’s destination, reason, and purpose. In other words, the focus on procedural details functions here to hide the crucial omissions.

The deportation directives depersonalize Agáta and strip her of her dignity by disregarding her right to know where and why she is transported.\textsuperscript{396} Subjected to the prism of weight limit, tag number, and the completeness of her paperwork, she is forbidden to object to

\textsuperscript{394} “to be taken away within six days” (177).

\textsuperscript{395} “setting out everything down to the very smallest detail: where and when the person summoned must present herself, what items of clothing were to be brought . . . [.] what articles of personal use it was advisable to bring . . .; the weight of the main item of luggage, which was not to exceed fifty kilos; what else could be brought in the way of hand baggage and provisions; how the luggage was to be labeled, with name, destination, and the number allotted to her; the proviso that all the attached forms were to be filled in and signed, that . . . all orders issued by the official authorities were to be followed to the letter in every contingency” (177-78).

\textsuperscript{396} Věra mentions that Agáta’s case was part of a large-scale deportation of the Jews from Prague.
the authorities. What reinforces her objectification is the requirement that all deportees wear their transport numbers “um den Hals . . . an einem Spagat,”\(^\text{397}\) which demotes the victims to numbers, if not animals on a leash (260). The use of passive voice in the directives introduces an impersonal tone and accentuates the activities, further deemphasizing the victim. At the same time, passive voice has a concealing effect because it does not require indicating the agent of an action. The Nazis preferred using passive modes in official communication to evade personal responsibility (Doerr 32). Likewise, Agáta’s case would be blamed on the authorities (“amtliche Organe”) or her religious community (“Kultusgemeinde”) because the deportation directives leave out the name of the issuing clerk.

In Věra’s account, the Nazi language of camouflage (Tarnjargon) authenticates the voice of the Nazi system and exposes its deceptiveness. As genocide studies scholar Karin Doerr elucidates, the Nazis created code words (Tarnwörter) to hide their crimes, in keeping with Heinrich Himmler’s wish that there be no written record of Nazi acts against the Jews (33).\(^\text{398}\) Code words were benign expressions to which the Nazis added secret meanings. For instance, the term “Umsiedlung” (resettlement) means moving to a new place of abode, but in Nazi communication it denoted forceful expulsion “to die or to be murdered in the East of Europe” (37). The important Nazi code words in Věra’s report are the remarks on Agáta’s file: She was “EVAKUIERT oder Ghettoisiert,”\(^\text{399}\) namely sent to a ghetto for extermination (261). For the public, the word “evakuieren” (to evacuate) meant removing people from war and bombing regions. For the Nazis, it meant deporting the Jews for annihilation.\(^\text{400}\) It is worth noting that the

\(^{397}\) “round their necks on pieces of string” (178).

\(^{398}\) Himmler comments on Nazi anti-Jewish policies, “In our history this is an unwritten, never-to-be-written page of glory” (qtd. in Doerr 40).

\(^{399}\) “EVACUATED or GHETTOIZED” (179).

\(^{400}\) See Schmitz-Berning 219. On the word “evakuieren,” see also Michael and Doerr 153. Other relevant Nazi term in Věra’s section is “arisiert” (257). “Arisierung” (Aryanization) meant confiscation of Jewish property (Michael and Doerr 72).
word “Evakuierung” (evacuation) replaced “Auswanderung” (emigration) when its secret meaning of deporting to ghettos and concentration camps became too recognizable to the public.

The misleading effect of the word “evakuiert” (evacuated) is now evident. For the Nazis, the label “evakuiert” masked killing in ghettos and concentration camps. For the public, the word connoted safety and life, not death. Hence, the deceptiveness of language in Věra’s account results from meticulous, yet misleading deportation instructions and Nazi code words. This image of Nazi Deutsch contrasts with the narrator’s wish for a different language, which will be discussed shortly.

Věra’s account is heteroglossic; it contains the voice of German-Jewish writer Franz Kafka. His voice appears as a blind quote in the following description of the messengers: “Diese Boten . . . trugen mit verschiedenen Falten, Taschen, Knopfleisten und einem Gürtel versehene Jacken, die, ohne daß man sich darüber klar wurde, wozu sie dienen sollten, besonders zweckmäßig erschienen” (258). The italicized section comes from Kafka’s novel Der Prozeß and belongs to a detailed description of the messengers’ appearance that directs the reader’s attention away from Agáta’s deportation order. Kafka’s book tells a fictional story of bank official Josef K. who is unexpectedly arrested “one fine morning,” tried before the court for a year, and eventually murdered by two court messengers without knowing his charges or the verdict.

Agáta and Josef K. share several similarities. Like Josef, Agáta never learns the reason for her deportation, is objectified by the law, and sent to her death wearing a neck string that makes her look like an animal on a leash. Similarly, Josef is taken outside of the town and killed.

---

401 “These messengers . . . wore jackets furnished with assorted pleats, pockets, button facings, and a belt, garments which looked especially versatile although it was not clear what purpose they served” (177). Kramer also recognizes the passage as coming from Kafka (99).

402 For Der Prozeß as a novel about forgetting, see Benjamin, “Franz Kafka.”
like a dog. Like Josef on the day of his death, Agáta expects messengers. Those thematic similarities suggest that Sebald emulates Kafka to show proximity between those two literary worlds.

Moreover, Sebald imitates Kafka’s portrayal of the justice system as convoluted and suffocating. Just as the law in Kafka is massive and impenetrable, deportation directives in Sebald are complicated, lengthy, and complex (despite leaving out the essential information). Just as Kafka’s justice system grinds down every defiant individual, Nazi directives demand absolute obedience. Josef reaches the court located in an attic of a tenement building by meandering through labyrinthine staircases in suffocating air.403 Likewise, Agáta digs through deportation instructions formulated “in einer geradezu ekelerregenden Sprache”404 (258). Josef cannot grasp the law. She is similarly unable to make sense of Nazi policies and expresses her dismay by shouting, “Ich be grei fe es nicht! Ich be grei fe es nicht! Ich wer de es nie mals be grei fen!!”405 (252). Here, repetition and words parsed into syllables emphasize her consternation. Considering that this is the only direct quote from Agáta in the book, her scream boldly and clearly indicts the Nazi law.

Like Kafka, Sebald depicts power as parasitic. In his essay “Das Gesetz der Schande,” Sebald argues that power in Kafka’s fiction is parasitic and perpetuates itself through the full control of people (88). Indeed, Josef K. stops trying to defend himself before the court and does not even resist his killers. The Nazi system in Sebald is equally parasitic: Having filed several

---

403 On Kafka’s maze-like structures as symbolizing capitalism in full control of people, see Adorno, “Aufzeichnungen zu Kafka” 267-68. Adorno casts Kafka as a late Enlightenment figure writing parables about the absurd world of late capitalism.

404 “nauseatingly” (178).

405 “I do not un der stand it! I do not un der stand it! I shall ne ver un der stand it!” (172).
appeals, Agáta stops fighting Nazi policies, becomes apathetic, and, in fulfilling the messengers’ commands without question, reveals her despair.

According to Sebald, Kafka depicts despair to evoke the Judaic hope for redemption (98-99). This type of hope appears in Kafka through the figures of light and angels (103). By contrast, darkness is the attribute of power. The section about Agáta is much darker than Kafka’s paradigm of despair since her story contains no angels but rather two messengers of darkness who deliver her the deportation order at three o’clock in the morning. The absence of light in her story indicates the hopelessness of her situation.

With his imitation of the Kafkaesque world, Sebald suggests a propinquity between Kafka’s fiction and the Nazi reality, thereby condemning the Nazis and their language as a materialization of Kafka’s absurd reality. Sebald implies that Kafka’s literary world is eerily similar but perhaps “lighter” than Nazi Germany because it is fictional. Though she seems a Kafkaesque character, Agáta is based on Rosa Bechhöfer, an unmarried Jewish woman sent to Auschwitz. Though fictional, Agáta’s story draws heavily on actual anti-Jewish Nazi policies, including property confiscations; deportations; executions; and prohibition to leave the country and access public spaces, such as parks, coffee shops, movie theaters, and public phones (251-57). By describing the Nazi reality in the Kafkaesque style, Sebald caricatures and denounces the Nazis, warning that what seems absurd or unthinkable now may become acceptable in future. In other words, Sebald’s imitation of Kafka satirizes the Nazi reality. Analogously, Sebald mixes Kafka’s voice with Nazi Deutsch to suggest that the Nazis had “perfected” the style of absurdity

---

406 For an opposing account of hope in Kafka, see Benjamin, “Franz Kafka.” According to Benjamin, Kafka’s stories show no hope for redemption for people. Benjamin quotes Kafka’s observation that human world is “only a bad mood of God, a bad day of his” (116). For Benjamin, Kafka restricts hope to intermediary creatures, such as messengers, because their evolution is “unfinished” (117).
and to caution against any similar languages in future.\textsuperscript{407} In the novel, the Nazi legacy is precisely what haunts the German language.

Recent scholarship has examined Agáta’s story as evincing Sebald’s attempt to restore the Platonic trio of goodness, beauty, and truth.\textsuperscript{408} As Kramer has argued, the characters’ names evoke the Platonic virtues. Věra means “true,” and Agáta means “good.”\textsuperscript{409} Kramer reads the name symbolism as pointing toward the concept of aesthetic beauty (99). While both names remind one of the Platonic triad, the section on Agáta seems to be an elegy about the Nazi obliteration of those values. Only Věra is alive. Agáta’s presence is symbolic since she dies in a concentration camp, or on the way to it. The Nazis destroy her career as an opera singer and deny her access to cultural activities. Nothing in her story points to a lasting idea of beauty. Its absence underscores the hopelessness of Agáta’s case.

The most elaborate account of Nazi strategies of misdirection (illusory precision) is the section about the ghetto in Theresienstadt (Terezín), Czech Republic. Austerlitz portrays the ghetto in keeping with Hans Günther Adler’s historiographical account \textit{Theresienstadt 1941-1945} about the ghetto’s structure and functioning.\textsuperscript{410} Theresienstadt functioned as both a ghetto and a transit camp for transporting the Jews to forced labor and to killing centers in Eastern Europe. Austerlitz describes job duties and diseases in the ghetto (mostly due to malnutrition and infections), events from its history, and ways of storing and transporting corpses. In contrast to

\textsuperscript{407} One could argue that Sebald’s imitation of Kafka exemplifies anxiety of connectedness, namely a fear that certain events might reoccur. On connectedness as a redemptive network, see Bersani. According to him, James Joyce’s \textit{Ulysses} is an attempt to transcend anxiety of disconnectedness through putting cultural fragments into a network (163).

\textsuperscript{408} For Plato, truth, goodness, and beauty were “divine concepts” that formed “the eternal transcendent world of the ideas or forms” (Turley 13). That realm was considered the source of life. Human souls were believed to reflect those tree virtues (13).

\textsuperscript{409} The name Věra is either of Latin or Slavic origin. Věra means “true” in Latin and “faith” in Russian. The name Agáta is of Greek origin.

\textsuperscript{410} Adler was a German scholar and one of the ghetto’s survivors.
the indirect description of Riefenstahl’s movie and Sebald’s subtle imitation of Kafka, the
section about the ghetto clearly identifies Adler as its historical source and incorporates materials
from his book, including the map of the ghetto and a list of work divisions.411

The beautification of the ghetto for the Red Cross Visit in June 1944 exemplifies Nazi deception strategies. This historical event illustrates a mass scale swindle carried out by Nazi propaganda through disguising the ghetto as a “Luftkurort”412 (343). The Nazis used this label to delude deportees and the Red Cross representatives from Switzerland and Denmark into believing that Theresienstadt was a health resort with cultural events. To that end, the ghetto’s inmates were forced to embellish the town by planting flowers, setting up signposts, organizing cultural activities, renovating houses, and building new structures, including a library, post office, chapel, bank, coffee houses, and stores. To reduce the population, over 7,500 prisoners were sent to the East, namely Auschwitz (348). After the visit, the Nazis recorded the ghetto in a movie for propaganda purposes.413

Once again, Sebald uses irony to expose the beautification campaign as an elaborate hoax. Through Austerlitz, he comments that Theresienstadt became

ein potemkinsches, möglicherweise sogar manche seiner Insassen betörendes oder
doch mit gewissen Hoffnungen erfüllendes Eldorado, wo die . . . Kommission, als
sie nach einem von der Kommandantur genau ausgearbeiteten Zeit- und Ortsplan

411 The description of the ghetto contains several Nazi terms, such as “R.n.e” meaning “Rückkehr nicht erwünscht” (“return not wanted”) (345). This file note permitted exterminating inmates (Michael and Doerr 353). Other relevant example is the noun “Einschleusung” meaning being “sluiced in” (343). The prefix “ein-” denotes the beginning of a process. In the ghetto’s lingo, the noun “Schleuse” meant a place where belongings were checked and confiscated (Adler xxxvi). When this process was complete, the inmate was considered “durchgeschleust” meaning “funneled” or “flushed through.” Per Himmler’s 1943 order, the word “durchgeschleust” replaced “Sonderbehandlung” (“special treatment”), a euphemism for “killed in a death camp” (Doerr 33). In the ghetto’s jargon, the verb “schleusen” meant “to smuggle” (Adler xxxvi).
412 “pleasant resort” (239).
413 The movie’s title is Theresienstadt: ein Dokumentarfilm aus dem jüdischen Siedlungsgebiet. The film was dubbed Der Führer schenkt den Juden eine Stadt.
Through the streets . . ., having been guided, in conformity with a precise plan and a timetable drawn up by the Kommandant’s office, through the streets . . ., could see for themselves the friendly happy folk who had been spared the horrors of war and were looking out of the windows, could see how smartly they were dressed, how well the few sick people were cared for, how they were given proper meals served on plates, how the bread ration was handed out by people in white drill gloves. . .” (243-44).

According to Adler, the elderly and poorly dressed people were ordered to stay away from the streets (169).

“A most reassuring spectacle, all things considered” (244).

Adler draws the same conclusion: The observers did not see anything alarming (175).

“Numerical accuracy [counted] as one of their highest principles” (241).
importance of accuracy, he characterizes it as “ein ungemein aufwendiges, weit über die zivilen Erfordernisse hinausgehendes Geschäft,”\textsuperscript{419} drawing attention to the difficulty of maintaining accurate records (345). He sarcastically explains that statistical correctness was hard to achieve because of the ongoing new transports, thus comparing murder to business and suggesting that the Nazis considered keeping track of mass killing more important than any concerns about its illegal nature (345).

To illustrate and condemn the Nazi obsession with statistical exactitude, Sebald refers to the 1943 ghetto census, when the Nazis forced all inhabitants to gather outside the town and stand in the same spot the entire day. With Austerlitz as his mouthpiece, Sebald describes that the census took place

\begin{quote}
am 10. November 1943, im Bohusevicer Kessel draußen vor den Mauern auf freiem Feld, auf das die gesamte Einwohnerschaft des Ghettos – Kinder, Greise, und halbwegs gehfähige Kranke nicht ausgenommen – . . . hinausmarschieren mußte . . . und, ohne daß man auch für Minuten aus dem Glied treten konnte, den ganzen, von naßkalten Schwebelfaden verhangenen Tag hindurch gezwungen war, auf die SS-Leute zu warten, die endlich um drei Uhr auf ihren Krafträdern eintrafen, die Zählprozedur einleiteten und in der Folge zweimal noch wiederholten, ehe sie . . . sich davon zu überzeugen vermochten, daß das errechnete Endergebnis . . . dem von ihnen angenommenen Stand von vierzigtausendeinhundertfünfundvierzig entsprach, wonach sie eilends wieder
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{419} “an uncommonly time-consuming business going far beyond civilian requirements” (241).
This passage suggests the extreme relevance of statistical accuracy for the Nazis. They aimed to achieve it by any means. Indeed, Adler confirms that prisoners stood approximately fifteen hours in the same spot and began walking back to the town in panic around eight thirty in the evening because Nazi officials left without giving the command to return (157). This inhumanity invalidates the previous image of Theresienstadt as a pleasant spa town and underscores the monstrosity of the Nazi system.

Sebald’s account of the census slightly diverges from historical data to emphasize the suffering caused by the Nazi fixation on accuracy. According to Adler, during the night from November 10 to 11, 1943, an initial count occurred in the ghetto, preceding the census itself, which took place on November 11. The verification outside the town was unsuccessful, and only the next alphabetical census inside the ghetto yielded the figure of 40,145 as of November 30, 1943. This second census confirms the Nazi resolve in ensuring statistical exactness.

Sebald caricatures the Nazi obsession with accuracy through his style. Just as the Nazis strove for exactitude, Sebald renders an exhaustive image of the ghetto, describing it in one sentence that extends over nine and a half pages. Due to this over-precision, his style has been characterized as “peinlich genau” and “peinlich spürbar” (Kramer 102). Admittedly, the

420 “on 10 November 1943 outside the gates in the open fields of the Bohusevice basin, when the entire population of the ghetto—children, old people, and any of the sick at all able to walk not excepted—was marched out . . . and there, through the whole of this cold and damp day, as the fog drifted over the fields, they were forced to wait . . . and not permitted to step out of line even for a minute, for the SS men to arrive, as they eventually did on their motorbikes at three o’clock, to carry out the count of heads and then repeat it twice before they could feel convinced that the final result . . . did . . . tally with the expected number of forty thousand one hundred and forty-five, whereupon they rode again in some haste, entirely forgetting to give any orders for the inmates’ return . . .” (241-42).
421 “meticulously precise.”
422 “embarrassingly precise.”
extreme length of the sentence makes it discomforting, perhaps nauseating, and difficult to read. However, the appalling effect of the section derives not so much from its length as its subject matter, and from the reader’s awareness that Theresienstadt was a real place. The length of the sentence vividly underlines the suffering of inmates, thereby condemning Nazi atrocities.

Kramer reads Sebald’s precise style as an indication of his skepticism about the language’s expressiveness (103). Undeniably, Sebald criticized contemporary German, but the section about Theresienstadt deals with Nazi Deutsch. Sebald revealed that he portrayed Nazi jargon because of its grotesque character. Consequently, the description of the ghetto is not so much a reflection on contemporary German as a caricature of Nazi Deutsch.

Moreover, the length of the words functions as a form of symbolic justice. The Nazis stripped prisoners of their dignity when they treated them as statistics. Sebald symbolically gives prisoners back their dignity by writing out the number “vierzigtausendeneinhundertfünfundvierzig,” the total count of Theresienstadt inmates. By not being written in digits, the number decelerates the pace of reading and, in this way, rivets attention on the human beings hidden behind the number. Hence, Sebald uses the typographical format to put the prisoners at the center of attention.

In this section, the Nazi style of misdirection (illusory precision) takes three forms. The first form is camouflage by directing attention to unnecessary details. The second principle is camouflage by imbuing words with secret meanings. The third form is a fixation on statistical accuracy. Sebald ridicules and condemns Nazi Deutsch through showing its proximity to Kafka’s literary style of absurdity and through his abnormally long sentence about the ghetto.

---

424 On Sebald’s dialectical writing techniques that decelerate the narrative pace, see Hutchinson, W.G. Sebald.
Translingual Writing: Margins and Ambiguity in Language

To counterbalance the Nazi style of grandiosity and misdirection (illusory precision), Sebald proposes translingual writing that mixes tongues. Against the Nazi preference for grandiosity, Sebald ascribes liberating powers to marginal and flexible linguistic forms. Sebald’s translingual model emerges from the German narrator’s reflections on language that are conveyed through metaphors of vision.

In contrast to the Nazi style of grandiosity, the narrator attributes therapeutic qualities to marginal perspectives. Their liberating potential can be seen in his comments on his eyesight defect. Instead of shapes and colors, he sees “nur eine Reihe dunkler, nach oben und unten seltsam verzerrten Formen — die mir bis ins einzelne vertrauten Figuren und Landschaften hatten sich aufgelöst, unterschiedslos, in eine bedrohliche schwarze Schraffur”425 (55). That is, he registers the world around him in the form of black hatching. His eyesight problem prevents him from reading and writing and elicits in him a sense of danger: The black lines seem menacing because they trap his vision.426

If one reads vision as a metaphor for language, then the narrator seems to feel trapped in language. Sebald invites such an analogy by portraying speaking as seeing. For him, to speak means to see. For example, Sebald describes the protagonist’s language crisis as his inability to see his way in a city and connections between words. The protagonist loses his language when he no longer discerns his path among the buildings and relations between words (183-84). Similarly, the narrator seems to lose his language since he only sees the black hatching that symbolizes the borders of his language. The English translation adds that the narrator sees a

425 “[only] a row of dark shapes curiously distorted above and below—the figures and landscapes familiar to me in every detail having resolved indiscriminately into a black and menacing cross-hatching” (35).
426 The protagonist later suffers from the same issue (331). His defect ends in a seizure and a subsequent recovery in a hospital.
cross-hatching pattern that one could construe as an allusion to a swastika and thus perhaps a suggestion that the narrator feels blocked by the legacy of Nazi Deutsch.

The narrator suspects that shifting his attention to the margins of his field of vision may cure his defect. He notes, “Dabei war es mir ständig, als sähe ich am Rand des Gesichtsfeldes mit unverminderten Deutlichkeit, als müßte ich mein Augenmerk nur ins Abseits lenken, um die . . . Sehschwäche zum Verschwinden zu bringen” (55). Here, he conjectures that clarity and healing are possible from a vantage point on the edges of his field of vision. His move toward margins contrasts with the Nazi penchant for grandiosity. Whereas the Nazis invoked grand ideas and used pompous language, the narrator turns to peripheries. His choice of margins is the opposite of the Nazi inclination toward bombast.

Sebald exemplifies such linguistic marginality through his use of Austrian words, colloquial speech, and South German verb forms. For instance, Sebald uses both German word “Krankenhaus” (“hospital”) and its Austrian equivalent “Spital” (331). He employs the conjunction “trotzdem” colloquially in the sense of the conjunction “obwohl” (“although”), which belongs to standard German. This is visible in the narrator’s comment, “Gelungen ist mir dies allerdings nicht, trotzdem ich es mehrfach probierte” (55, my emphasis). Furthermore, the narrator says that it was late afternoon, “als ich . . . in dem . . . Wartezimmer . . . gestanden bin.” Here, he uses the helping verb “sein” (“to be”) in South German fashion instead of the verb “haben” (“to have”) required in standard German because the verb “stehen” (“to stand”)

---

427 “At the same time I kept feeling as if I could see as clearly as ever on the edge of my field of vision, and had only to look sideways to rid myself of . . . [the] weakness in my eyesight” (35).
428 Another example of the narrator’s rejection of bombast in language is his comment on an eye-enhancing liquid used by artists in the past to make their eyes shiny and attractive. The narrator reads glossiness as an example of “der Falschheit des schönen Scheins” (56). Glossiness in language means inflating ideas with grandiose vocabulary.
429 “Although I tried several times, I did not succeed” (35). For Zucchi, Sebald’s use of the conjunction “trotzdem” is the Kafkaesque trait (846).
430 “[when I] was standing . . . in the . . . waiting room” (37).
denotes no movement (58). Another South German verb form appears when the narrator says, “Ein, zwei Stunden bin ich dann meist bei ihm [Austerlitz] gesessen” (51). Here again, standard German requires the auxiliary verb “haben” because the verb “sitzen” (“to sit”) does not imply motion, but Sebald opts for the South German variant “sein.” Given that those deviations from standard German are consistent throughout the novel and absent from Sebald’s scholarly work, they count as his deliberate stylizations directing attention away from standard German toward dialectal expressions. In this sense, Sebald brings linguistic marginality (dialect) to the fore.

Unlike the hatching pattern, a blurry and ambiguous environment fills the narrator with a sense of freedom. He feels free when he dreams of himself sitting in a chair in a garden and dimly seeing reality (56). He imagines himself “befreit von dem ewigen Schreiben- und Lesenmüssen, in einem Korbessel in einem Garten sitzen . . ., umgeben von einer konturlosen, nur an ihren schwachen Farben noch zu erkennenden Welt” (56). In his dream, pale colors and unclear shapes incite neither alarm nor menace but relief. In fact, he feels so tranquil and relieved that he describes his experience as akin to the “Erlösung” (56). It is worth emphasizing that tranquility emanates here not from visual acuity but ambiguity. The word “Erlösung” contrasts with the Nazi sense of “Erlösung.” “Erlösung” means both “release” and “salvation” in the religious sense. The narrator uses the secular sense of “Erlösung” to signal his feeling of liberation, thus ascribing a positive quality to ambiguity. By contrast, the Nazi sense of “Erlösung” is religious and implies the Nazi belief in their mission to evangelize the world and

---

431 “I would usually spend an hour or so sitting with him” (32).
432 Zucchi confirms that Sebald’s essays employ standard German (848).
433 “free of the constant compulsion to read and write, sitting in a wicker chair in a garden, surrounded by a world of indistinct shapes recognizable only by their faint colors” (35-36).
434 “release” (35).
restore the Holy Roman Empire. The narrator’s dream betrays no such aspirations, yet the religious echo appears intentional because the word “Erlösung” is juxtaposed with the term “befreit” (freed), which lacks a religious connotation. This religious tinge remains invisible in the English translation because “Erlösung” is rendered as a “release.”

The narrator’s dream is reminiscent of Hugo von Hofmannsthal’s Ein Brief, a letter by a fictional writer Lord Chandos to Francis Bacon about the inadequacy of human language. Lord Chandos resigns from his literary profession because of his disappointment with the arbitrariness of words. He maintains that nature conveys the spiritual experience of the world more adequately than words. Not human language but nature makes him feel part of a stream of life flowing through all beings. Such revelations, Lord Chandos claims, can only be gleaned from real things, such as a tree, a beetle, or a moss-covered stone. In essence, nature speaks for him clearer than words.

Similarities between the narrator’s dream and Hofmannsthal’s text are far from coincidental. Both figures seek less conventional ways of relating to reality. Lord Chandos finds the language of nature liberating. A hazy natural environment has an equally calming effect on the narrator. Lord Chandos has a moment of illumination when seeing a beetle swimming inside a watering cane in a garden. Similarly, the narrator’s feeling of liberation arises in a garden. One could argue that he looks at the reflection of the garden in the water: The blurry shapes around him resemble the image of the garden mirrored in the water. Unlike Lord Chandos, the narrator does not quit his profession. His leap into the alternate modality is temporary.

Against this background, ambiguity appears to denote a lens through which one perceives reality. Such a lens is liberating insofar as it recognizes uncertainties in the world and defies

---

435 On Sebald’s invocations of Hofmannsthal’s garden scene, see Catling 48–49.
conceptual rigidity. Ambiguity involves acknowledging that some contents elude classifications. In this sense, ambiguity opposes the Nazi dogma of accuracy. Whereas the Nazi style is rigid, ambiguity accepts conceptual flexibility. The Nazi style relies on illusory transparency to deceive the public. Ambiguity exposes that transparency is contingent upon interpretation. In a sense, ambiguity represents the space of alterity, a spectrum of potentialities that can emerge from changing the angle of perception.

A German-English snow scene exemplifies such a space pregnant with meaning. In this scene, ambiguity emerges from the mixing of tongues into a translingual form. Composed in German with two English blind quotes, the scene shows the narrator looking at snow in a dark December sky over a lifeless London. He reflects on snow in his native German Alps and his childhood wish, “daß alles zuschneien möge, das ganze Dorf und das Tal bis zu den obersten Höhen hinauf”\(^{436}\) (58). Snowflakes remind him of the following line from one of his favorite poems: “And so I long for snow to sweep across the low heights of London” (58). He imagines London disappearing under snow and quotes again in English, “London a lichen mapped on mild clays and its rough circle without purpose” (59).

The snow scene illustrates ambiguity on a visual, linguistic, and literary level. Haziness is manifest in the misty sky, in the snow shower, and in the vanishing city. In this section, similar obscurity occurs in the language boundaries: English parts blend with the surrounding German text, and a reader may find the boundaries hard to distinguish because they lack italics and different formatting. Those English insertions may obscure the meaning of the scene for non-English speakers. Likewise, the intertextual references are concealed because Sebald marks the

\(^{436}\) “for everything to be snowed over, the whole village and the valley all the way to the mountain peaks” (37).
English quotes with ellipsis points rather than quotation marks, thereby suggesting that the poem is fictitious.

In the snow scene, London stands for language in a dismal state.437 The narrator notes that every visit to London elicits in him “eine Art dumpfer Verzweiflung”438 (56). Even though the city always looks the same, and he knows it well, he describes it as “fremd und unheimlich”439 (57). The city’s pale and lifeless panorama exudes a similar sense of gloom. The mauve brick buildings emanate blandness (58). Lifelessness is evident in the narrator’s remark that the city resembles “[einen] riesigen steinernen Auswuchs”440 (59). The network of streets and train tracks shows no bustling life but, instead, reminds him of “ein unterirdisches Kolumbarium”441 (57-58). This lack of vigor is reinforced through a rigidity suggested by the image of “die häßlichen Rückseiten der Reihenhäuser”442 and through a sense of flatness projected by “die flache, fast baumlose Landschaft”443 (57, 56). This dull and rigidly structured urban landscape symbolizes language: Like the city, language lacks color, vitality, and flexibility. In short, language and the city are analogously insipid and rigid. Considering that this image of language precedes the sections about the Nazi style, the London metaphor seems to function as a frame and introduction to Sebald’s literary history of German. In other words, London symbolizes the miserable state of German, with the following sections depicting the factors that have caused its deterioration. *Nazi Deutsch* appears to be one such a factor.

---

437 The language-city analogy is most explicit in the protagonist’s comparison of his language loss to being unable to find his way through the city. “Wenn man die Sprache ansehen kann als eine alte Stadt,” he says, “so glich ich selbst einem Menschen, der sich . . . in dieser Agglomeration nicht mehr zurechtfindet” (183).
438 “a kind of dull despair” (36).
439 “alien and incomprehensible” (36).
440 “[a] huge outcropping of stone” (37). Gloom also emanates from “das Gräberfeld von Manor Park” (56-57).
441 “an underground columbarium” (36).
442 “the ugly backs of the terraced houses” (36).
443 “the flat, almost treeless landscape” (36).
The London metaphor must be contextualized within Sebald’s remarks on German. Sebald maintained that contemporary German was decaying. “The contemporary language is usually hideous,” Sebald said and added, “but in German it’s especially nauseating.” His example of decay was the word “das Handy” meaning a “mobile phone.” This example suggests an aversion to technological vocabulary and not to English borrowings and matches Sebald’s dislike of technology. To his ears, modern German sounded “ganz furchtbar.” He argued that contemporary German was undergoing a process of flattening and losing depth. To use his words, “Es wird ja alles eingeebnet.” Sebald revealed that his phobia (Phobie) of modern German was a byproduct of his estrangement (Entfremdung) from German, due to having lived and worked for many years in a predominantly English-speaking environment.

The landscape of London harmonizes with Sebald’s conviction that German keeps declining and becoming rigid and flat. The flat urban panorama exudes inflexibility and monotony, supporting the narrator’s impression that the city always looks the same. The regularly arranged houses evoke rigidity and a lack of variation. Like Sebald, the narrator feels estranged from his language. The ugly row houses echo Sebald’s distaste for technological vocabulary in modern German. Sebald does not suggest that contemporary German is dogmatic like Nazi Deutsch. However, he perceives contemporary German, like Nazi Deutsch, as too rigid, monotonous, and inflexible. Like Adorno, Sebald seeks to revitalize German through linguistic hybridity and semantic complexity.

---

444 See Lubow 166.
445 See Lubow 166.
446 See Lubow 166.
447 “quite horribly.” See Kospach 123.
448 “Everything is being leveled.” See Hintermeier 22.
449 See Hintermeier 22.
Indeed, the snow scene expresses the narrator’s longing for change. His desire surfaces in his reflection on his childhood habit of envisioning the world’s return to life from underneath the melting ice. He would imagine, “wie es wäre, wenn wir im Frühjahr wieder auftauchen und hervorkämen aus dem Eis”\(^{450}\) (58). In this passage, the melting ice signals spring and the rebirth of life. This expectation of spring conveys the narrator’s hope for a linguistic “spring” rather than advocating haziness as a way of hiding blemishes in language.

The melting ice illustrates transformation as high entropy. In physics, entropy measures randomness or disorder within a system. Low entropy indicates slow progress. By contrast, high entropy signifies advancement at a swift pace and is referred to as disorder or complexity, namely a great number of ways in which one could organize a system. High entropy results from transforming or merging systems into a more advanced one. The melting ice represents a case of high entropy: As ice crystals melt, they become mobile and thus capable of forming more configurations than in the solid state, where bonds between molecules were more fixed and space restricted. This example indicates that a liquid state is more conducive to new arrangements than the solid state. The melting ice is an analogy for the dissolution of language boundaries. Hence, the narrator’s wish for spring can be construed as his hope for more flexibility in language.

The transformative power of snow is celebrated in Stephen Watts’s poem “Fragment” from which Sebald quotes. The poem praises snow for changing the image of reality. The lyrical I-subject explains her longing for snow in the following way: “I remember the lucid air’s changing sky / and I remember the grey-black wall with / every colour imminent in a coming white / . . . and I remember the blue snow hummocks / the mountains of miles off in snowlight” (17). In this quote, snow brightens up reality; the air clears up. A snow-covered wall shines in the

\(^{450}\) “what it would be like when we thawed out and emerged from the ice in spring” (37).
sunlight. This positive tone resounds in the poem’s conclusion, “And I think – we need such a change / my city and I, that may be conjured in / us that dream birth of compassion with / reason & energy merged in slow dance” (17). Here, the speaking subject reaffirms that snow causes a much-needed change, thus underscoring the transformative quality of snow.451

A similar transformation occurs in the snow scene. The mix of German with English transforms the text into a translingual high-entropic hybrid form that transcends genre boundaries and borders between national literatures. This complexity would not transpire without English injections or if they were translated into German. In essence, translingualism endows the scene with linguistic and literary complexity, changing the text from a reflection on winter weather into a wish for linguistic and literary hybridity. This transformation would not occur without the English blind quotes.

It is now evident that Sebald and Adorno argue for semantic complexity. As discussed in Chapter Two and Chapter Three, Adorno frequently uses French, Latin, and Greek Fremdwörter (borrowings recognizable to native speakers as foreign) to amplify, evoke, and pluralize meaning in his texts. He insists on increasing the visibility of foreign traces in German and occasionally inserts short English language passages into his works to juxtapose ideas. By contrast, Sebald profusely employs French, English, Welsh, Czech, and Dutch language passages and quotes from English and French literature. Unlike Adorno, Sebald intensifies the heteroglossic (multivoiced) and complex character of his works by using German and English blind quotes, concealing their intertextual dimension, and making them visually less perceptible in his texts. Both writers endorse semantic density and linguistic hybridity rather than rigid conventions.

451 Conceptual resemblances between Hofmannsthal, Sebald, and Watts are created by references to stone and moss. Hofmannsthal mentions a moss-covered stone. Sebald compares London to a stony outgrowth. Watts describes London as lichen.
For Sebald, ambiguity works against conceptual rigidity. Sebald portrays ambiguity as an artistic technique of dissolving boundaries between things. As Austerlitz narrates, Alphonso, who was the great uncle of the protagonist’s English school friend, had applied this technique in his paintings.\(^{452}\) Alphonso’s aquarelles did not replicate natural sceneries but showed their outlines, “eigentlich nur Andeutungen von Bildern, hier ein Felsenhang, da eine Böschung, eine Kumuluswolke—mehr nicht, nahezu farblose Fragmente”\(^{453}\) (134). Clearly, Alphonso painted surroundings in sketchy strokes instead of precise snapshots. He employed a blurred perspective. When painting, he would wear spectacles that contained a thin layer of gray silk instead of glass lenses. His peculiar silk-lens would cause an impression that “die Farben verblaßten und das Gewicht der Welt einem vor den Augen zerging”\(^{454}\) (132). That is, the silk layer made objects seem lighter and faded. Like the snow shower in the previous example, the silk-lens would smudge shapes of objects.

To understand why the painter relies on ambiguity and a distorted perspective, one needs to contextualize them within Sebald’s notion of literary lightweight. In Sebald’s view, literature serves to reduce the heaviness of phenomena. He clarifies, “Das ist mein schriftstellerischer Ehrgeiz: die schweren Dinge so zu schreiben, daß sie ihr Gewicht verlieren. Ich glaube, daß nur durch Leichtigkeit Dinge vermittelbar sind.”\(^{455}\) Sebald indicates here that his goal is to write in a way that would make his themes less daunting than they are and thus more digestible to readers. This is not to say that literature is allowed to relativize or belittle topics. Rather, Sebald implies

\(^{452}\) The painter is a figure for a writer. In a different section, Sebald uses the painter-writer analogy when he describes an artist who only paints variations of the letter “A” (43-44). The artist conveys his reflections on language through his paintings.

\(^{453}\) “barely sketches of pictures—here a rocky slope, there a small bosky thicket or a cumulus cloud—fragments, almost without color” (88).

\(^{454}\) “[the] colors [muted] and the weight of the world dissolved before your eyes” (88).

\(^{455}\) “This is my writerly ambition: to write about the heavy things so that they lose their weight. I believe that things are communicable only through lightweight.” See Siedenberg 124.
that literature ought to tackle taboos in a manner that would reduce public discomfort and stir up
discussion. With this objective, Sebald follows the lead of Italian writer Italo Calvino, who
defines the aim of literature as overcoming gravity by making things seem weightless
(Hutchinson, *W.G. Sebald* 147). As literary scholar Ben Hutchinson demonstrates, Sebald’s
literary strategies for evoking lightweight include motifs of levitation and lifting off the ground
(147-65). Ambiguity belongs to the same repertoire of tools: Alphonso makes his objects seem
lighter by smudging their edges.

Similarly, Sebald evokes lightweight typographically when he refrains from “weighing
down” foreign languages with italics or quotation marks. In this way, he creates a visual sense of
flow, in which French, English, Welsh, Czech, and Dutch sections seem inconspicuous and
“weightless.” Since those insertions follow the thematic trajectory of the German matrix, they
maintain its cohesion. Quotation marks only appear around biblical quotes and foreign language
parts that convey the protagonist’s emotional distance. Italicization marks foreign language
passages that colorize the background. They include technical terminology, titles, such as the
Dutch title *Eendracht maakt macht* (*Unity makes strength*), and geographical locations, like the
Salle des Pas Perdus (“the hall of lost footsteps”) in the railway station in Antwerp, Belgium.457
The lack of paragraphs and chapters reinforces the impression of flow.

Sebald’s deliberate deviations from standard German also evoke lightweight. For
instance, Sebald “ages” his language with archaic vocabulary and old spelling. When describing
London, he uses the old-fashioned word “Kolumbarium” (“columbarium”) instead of its modern

456 On Sebald’s notion of lightweight as a moment of forgetting, see Hutchinson, *W.G. Sebald* 151-52. For
correspondences between Sebald’s motif of levitation and Walter Benjamin’s idea of “Jetztzeiten,” see Hutchinson,
*W.G. Sebald* 164.
457 In the novel’s manuscript, Sebald underlines foreign language titles but uses no special formatting for foreign
geographical locations and conversations in a foreign language. See the manuscript of *Austerlitz*. 
equivalent “Urnenhalle” (“columbarium”) (57). He spells the word “Telephonbuch” (“telephone book”) in the old fashion instead of the new spelling “Telefonbuch” (54). For this reason, Sebald’s Kunstsprache has been characterized as a “classical German”458 and “Diktion im Gehrock.”459 Sebald often intentionally violates German word order in present perfect tense by not putting participles at the end of a sentence. For example, the narrator states that “die mir bis ins einzelne vertrauten Figuren und Landschaften hatten sich aufgelöst . . . in eine bedrohliche schwarze Schraffur”460 (55). In the quote, the participle “aufgelöst” should appear after the word “Schraffur.”

Likewise, Sebald often intentionally abuses the end-position-requirement for verbs in subordinate clauses, like dass-clauses, wenn-clauses, während-clauses, and relative clauses. For example, the narrator reflects, “wie es wäre, wenn wir im Frühjahr wieder auftauten und hervorkämen aus dem Eis. Und während ich . . . mich erinnerte an den Schnee auf den Alpen, . . . da gingen durch meinen Kopf die Anfangszeilen eines meiner liebsten Gedichte”461 (58, my emphasis). In the wenn-clause, the verb “hervorkämen” should occur after the word “Eis.” In the während-sentence, the verb “erinnerte” should appear after “den Alpen.” Sebald deliberately misplaces pronouns. For example, the narrator says that one of his reminiscences had to do with “der Falschheit des schönen Scheins. . ., und daß ich darum mich ängstigte . . ., zugleich aber erfüllt war . . . von einer Vision der Erlösung, in der ich mich . . . in einem Garten sitzen sah”462 (56, my emphasis). Here, the first instance of “mich” is a reflexive pronoun and should occur

---

459 “a frock-coat style.” See Zucchi 842.
460 “the figures and landscapes familiar to me in every detail having resolved . . . into a black and menacing cross-hatching” (35).
461 “what it would be like when we thawed out and emerged from the ice in spring. And as I stood in the waiting room remembering the snow of the Alps. . . the opening lines of one of my favorite poems came into my mind” (37).
462 “the deceptiveness of that star-like, beautiful gleam . . ., an idea which filled me with concern . . . and at the same time . . . with a vision of release, in which I saw myself . . . sitting . . . in a garden” (35-36).
before “darum.” Given that the next “mich” (personal pronoun) is used correctly, right after the subject “ich,” Sebald’s play with the position of pronouns is intentional. Those deviations serve to endow his prose with a lyrical sound and rhythm (Zucchi 845).

Furthermore, Sebald plays with prepositions and subjunctive mode. He employs the preposition “vor” (“before”) in the temporal sense instead of the conjunction “bevor” (“before”). A case in point is the narrator’s comment that, in the past, opera singers would use an eye-enhancing liquid “vor [sic] sie sich auf der Bühne produzierten”\(^ {463} \) (55). Equally hazy is Sebald’s distinction between subjunctive forms Konjunktiv I (used in reported speech) and Konjunktiv II (used for conjectures). The narrator states that he felt “als sähe ich am Rand des Gesichtsfeldes mit unverminderten Deutlichkeit . . . [und], als sei auch linksseitig eine gewisse Beeinträchtigung des Blicks eingetreten”\(^ {464} \) (55, my emphasis). The first subjunctive form “sähe” is used correctly to denote speculation. The second sentence is also a conjecture but employs the subjunctive form (“sei eingetreten”) that is used for reported speech. Thanks to those deliberate divergences from German grammar, Sebald’s language seems less schematic.

Sebald’s preference for ambiguity contrasts with the Nazi style of dogmatic accuracy. In Sebald’s novel, \textit{Nazi Deutsch} misleads by precision. Sebald uses ambiguity to transform language and increase its multivalence and complexity. Moreover, ambiguity has a positive meaning because it serves to evoke lightweight, to which Sebald ascribes a beatific quality.\(^ {465} \) In this sense, ambiguity is for him a happy linguistic phenomenon.

Sebald’s translingual writing mixes German with other tongues into a hybrid, multivalent form. To blur boundaries within German, Sebald employs dialectal expressions and deviates

\(^{463}\) “before they went on stage” (35).
\(^{464}\) “as if I could see as clearly as ever on the edge of my field of vision . . . [, and] I thought that I had suffered some impairment on the left as well” (35).
\(^{465}\) See Silverblatt 86.
from German grammar. He directs his literary translingualism and grammatical deviations against his literary image of *Nazi Deutsch*.

**Flexibility and Tide Pools**

The goal of Sebald’s translingual aesthetics is a creation of beauty. Sebald associates beauty with flexibility and marginal phenomena. Beauty, he comments, using Alphonso’s voice, either has disappeared from the face of the earth or exists in marginal places. Alphonso argues, “daß die schönsten Farben zum größten Teil schon verschwunden oder nur dort noch zu finden seien, wo sie keiner sehe” (134). Here, he intimates that beauty resides in peripheries that people tend to overlook. For him, a tide pool is one such beautiful place. He stresses that the most beautiful colors exist “in den submarinen Gärten klaftertief unter der Oberfläche des Meers” (134). In his view, those submarine spaces epitomize beauty. Alphonso’s comments on beauty correspond to Sebald’s aesthetic ideal of miniature worlds. Sebald elucidates his ideal in the following way: “This notion of something that is small and self-contained is for me both an aesthetic and moral ideal.” Rock pools match Sebald’s ideal to the extent that they are small and self-contained. They form within crevices and gaps on rocky shores due to rise and fall of tidal flows. Hence, the image of rock pools squares with Sebald’s aesthetic ideal.

Sebald’s preference for little worlds results from his dislike of gigantism. He explains, “I don’t like large-scale things, not in architecture or evolutionary leaps. I think it’s an aberration.” His skepticism toward grand phenomena derives from his view that monumentalism often implies delusions of grandeur (Hutchinson, W.G. *Sebald* 158). Another inspiration for Sebald comes from Rober Walser’s narrative strategy of miniaturization and

---

466 “that many of the loveliest colors had already disappeared, or existed only where no one saw them” (88).
467 “in the submarine gardens fathoms deep below the surface of the sea” (88).
468 See Lubow 168.
469 See Lubow 168.
abbreviation. Sebald admired Walser’s small narrative forms and decorative style.\textsuperscript{470} Like Walser, Sebald perceived small worlds as happy places (Hutchinson, \textit{W.G. Sebald} 160). In light of Walser’s influence on Sebald, tide pools can be said to convey both Sebald’s aversion to gigantism and his association of happiness with peripheries.

The crucial feature of tide pools is their vivacity. As Alphonso observes, rock pools contain the most vibrant colors, including “spangrün, scharlach, rauschrot, schwefliggelb, und samtschwarz”\textsuperscript{471} (134). Those sassy hues differ vastly from Alphonso’s pale watercolors, the watery scenery in the garden, and gray London. This tremendous difference in color saturation shows that, in the novel, beauty is associated with vivacity and embodied by rock pools. They stand out because the narrative is permeated with grayness and no other section displays a similar degree of vivaciousness. Evidently, vivacity forms the book’s aesthetic ideal while the technique of blurring boundaries represents a stepping-stone toward vivacity. One blurs boundaries to mix ideas and generate new potentials. From this perspective, the narrator’s desire for flexibility, which he expressed in the snow scene, turns out to be longing for aesthetic beauty.

Rock pools distinguish themselves in the book with their vitality and dynamism. They are teeming with “ihr wunderbar schillerndes Leben”\textsuperscript{472} (134). Unlike other places in the novel, tide pools are vigorous, robust, and energetic. Their vitality contrasts with the image of lifeless London. Their dynamism exceeds the energy of snow in the snow scene. Snow embodies the energy that slows down the world. The melting ice symbolizes the energy that gradually mobilizes the world and restores it back to life. Tide pools, by contrast, signify the fullness of life and maximum energy, revealing Sebald’s endorsement of flexibility in aesthetics. In attributing

\textsuperscript{470} See “Le promeneur solitaire” 142.
\textsuperscript{471} “emerald, scarlet and rosy red, sulfur yellow, velvety black” (90).
\textsuperscript{472} “their wonderfully iridescent life” (90).
dynamism to liquid realms, Sebald suggests that flexibility is invigorating and conveys his desire for linguistic and literary hybridity.

Scholars often characterize Sebald’s texts as rhizomatic. As Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari explain, a rhizome is a root that has no pivot and extends “in all directions to concretion into bulbs and tubers” (7). As a method of interpretation, a rhizome combines random elements from unrelated disciplines into a chain, without one central principle. Deleuze and Guattari clarify, “A rhizome has no beginning or end; it is always in the middle, between things, interbeing. . . . The fabric of the rhizome is the conjunction “and…and…and…” (25). As the passage indicates, a rhizome resembles an enumeration of unrelated examples because it synthesizes them into one chain without any hierarchical or causal relations.

The garden scene, the snow scene, and the image of tide pools do not form a rhizome. The logic of resemblance connects those examples. They revolve around the idea of water and a garden. The narrator imagines himself in a garden. Tide pools are described as submarine gardens. The snow scene lacks a reference to a garden. Water takes the form of snow, ice, and tide pools. Water is implied in the garden scene because it imitates Hofmannsthal’s description of a beetle swimming in a watering cane. Given that those examples center on the same idea of ambiguity and flexibility, they resemble Walter Benjamin’s constellations. For Benjamin, writing in constellations means writing that refracts a central idea from multiple perspectives without stating it directly, so that its meaning emerges eventually from all its refractions. In other words, constellations revolve around a central motif and show relations between its elements.

---

473 See Öhlschläger 171.
474 See “Erkenntnistheoretische Vorrede” 73.
Sebald’s proximity to Adorno is now clearly apparent: Both writers follow Benjamin’s model of constellations. In his *Negative Dialektik*, Adorno clarifies his understanding of a constellation, “Wo sie [Sprache] wesentlich als Sprache auftritt, Darstellung wird, definiert sie nicht ihre Begriffe. Ihre Objektivität verschafft sie ihnen durch das Verhältnis, in das sie die Begriffe, zentriert um eine Sache, setzt... Indem die Begriffe um die zu erkennende Sache sich versammeln, bestimmen sie potentiell deren Inneres” (164-65). Here, he stresses that constellations convey their central idea indirectly by portraying relations between its components. The meaning of the constellation transpires from those relations.

In his *Minima Moralia*, Adorno emphasizes the concentric form of constellations. He explains:

Anständig gearbeitete Texte sind wie Spinnweben: dicht, konzentrisch, transparent, wohlgefügt, und befestigt... Die Stichhaltigkeit einer Konzeption läßt danach sich beurteilen, ob sie die Zitate herbeizitiert. Wo der Gedanke eine Zelle der Wirklichkeit aufgeschlossen hat, muß er... in die nächste Kammer dringen. Er bewährt seine Beziehung zum Objekt, sobald andere Objekte sich ankristallisieren. (97)

Here, Adorno underlines that constellations have one center and are densely woven. Adorno and Sebald follow this pattern when they organize words around one chief theme and create copious

---

475 “Where it [language] appears essentially as a language, where it becomes a form of representation, it will not define its concepts. It lends objectivity to them by the relation into which it puts the concepts, centered about the thing... By gathering around the object of cognition, the concepts potentially determine the object’s interior” (162).

476 “Properly written texts are like spiders’ webs: tight, concentric, transparent, well-spun and firm... The soundness of a conception can be judged by whether it causes one quotation to summon another. Where thought has opened up one cell of reality, it should... penetrate the next. It proves its relation to the object as soon as other objects crystalize around it” (87).
connections between those words. Sebald’s constellations are, however, more protracted than Adorno’s because he uses longer literary genres while Adorno prefers fragmentary forms.

Sebald’s criticism of the human destruction of nature underlies his description of tide pools. Commenting on the deforestation of Earth, Sebald cautions that “in one sense, organic nature is going to vanish” because it “is being replaced through the agency of the psychozootic power . . ., e.g., us—it’s being replaced by something else, by chemistry, dust, and stones.” In this passage, Sebald warns that nature has become increasingly destroyed in the name of progress. To bring this ecological issue to the fore in literature, Sebald often portrays virgin nature, such as arctic regions, as an ideal of beauty. Rock pools belong to this paradigm of beauty because they exemplify natural and vibrant places that technology has not yet touched.

Sebald’s reflections on the human exploitation of nature accord with Adorno’s remarks on the human conflict with nature. In their *Dialektik der Aufklärung*, Max Horkheimer and Adorno exemplify this issue using Odysseus as an embodiment and a prototype of “das Prinzip der kapitalistischen Wirtschaft” (80). Like capitalists, Odysseus calculates risks and tricks natural and supernatural forces for the sake of self-preservation. He adapts to the natural environment to deceive supernatural creatures. He avoids magical plants and outwits the sirens, the Cyclops, and the witches. Odysseus masters nature but becomes alienated from it. Adorno and Horkheimer use Odysseus to criticize the domination of nature through capitalism and industry. They argue for more consideration of the human dependence on nature. Like Adorno and Horkheimer, Sebald maintains that technology exacerbates human distance from nature, bringing people out of touch with the natural world.

---

477 See Cuomo 102-03
478 For Sebald’s two models of nature (a utopian ideal and a destructive force), see Johannsen 78.
479 “the principle of the capitalist economy” (48).
480 On Sebald’s relation to Adorno, see also Sheppard 100 and 117.
For Adorno and Horkheimer, nature is expressive because it is the location of *mana*, the preanimistic spirit of unity between people and nature. The writers elaborate on *mana*, “Primär, undifferenziert ist es alles Unbekannte, Fremde; das was den Erfahrungsumkreis transzendent, was an den Dingen mehr ist als ihr vorweg bekanntes Dasein”\(^{481}\) (31). In this quote, *mana* appears as a form of transcendence. The writers underscore that *mana* belongs to prehistoric times:

> Mana, der bewegende Geist, ist keine Projektion, sondern das Echo der realen Übermacht der Natur in den schwachen Seelen der Wilden. Die Spaltung von Belebtem und Unbelebtem . . . entspringt erst aus diesem Präanimismus. . . . Wenn der Baum nicht mehr bloß als Baum sondern als Zeugnis für ein anderes, als Sitz des Mana angesprochen wird, drückt die Sprache den Widerspruch aus, daß nämlich etwas es selber und zugleich etwas anderes als es selber sei, identisch und nicht identisch.\(^{482}\) (31)

In this passage, Adorno and Horkheimer highlight that *mana* denotes the prehistoric unity of people with nature. *Mana* had disappeared when human rationality developed and distinguished a word from a sign, an object from a subject. The authors view nature as expressive because it is the remnant of *mana*. Like Adorno and Horkheimer, Sebald regards nature as expressive and evocative. However, he ascribes to nature beauty rather than *mana*. The idea of *mana* remains absent from his reflections on nature, which focus on ecological aspects.

---

\(^{481}\) “Primal and undifferentiated, it is everything unknown and alien; it is that which transcends the bounds of experience, the part of things which is more than their immediately perceived existence” (10).

\(^{482}\) “[Mana], the moving spirit, is not a projection but the echo of the real preponderance of nature in the weak psyches of primitive people. The split between animate and inanimate . . . arises from this preanimism. . . . If the tree is addressed no longer as simply a tree but as evidence of something else, a location of mana, language expresses the contradiction that it is at the same time itself and something other than itself, identical and nonidentical” (10-11).
Benjamin’s historical pessimism holds equal relevance to Sebald’s criticism of the human destruction of nature. In the ninth thesis of his “Über den Begriff der Geschichte,” Benjamin illustrates his idea of historical pessimism through the figure of an Angel of History. He describes progress as the wind that blows from paradise towards the future and causes devastation. Unable to resist the wind, the Angel of History is forcibly pushed by it towards the future and sees the debris that the wind creates. Sebald does not endorse Benjamin’s historical pessimism. On the one hand, Benjamin’s pessimism about progress resounds in the painter’s belief that beauty either has disappeared from the world or endures solely in peripheries. On the other hand, tide pools incarnate beauty that exists despite progress. Unlike the passive angel in Benjamin’s thesis, submarine gardens brim with life and energy and are continually revitalized by tidal flows. Consequently, Sebald’s description of tide pools conveys less pessimism about human progress than an appeal to protect and preserve virgin nature.

Sebald’s aesthetic ideal of beauty accentuates small worlds and flexibility. Flexibility functions in his novel as an energizing force. Sebald’s technique of mixing and blurring language boundaries serves to create flexible forms in language and aesthetics.

**Conclusion**

Sebald’s translingual aesthetics is antithetical to the Nazi style of grandiosity and misdirection (illusory precision). He portrays the Nazi style as invoking grand ideas and misleading by precision. To oppose *Nazi Deutsch*, Sebald uses translingual writing exemplified in the German-English snow scene, in which languages, genres, and national canons mix into a hybrid form. This translingual paradigm aims at achieving linguistic and literary hybridity depicted in the image of tide pools as an aesthetic ideal. Sebald’s translingual writing counterbalances the Nazi style of grandiosity and misdirection (illusory precision) and envisions
literature as a transnational realm for creating meaning and value by transcending linguistic and literary borders.

Sebald’s literary translingualism has several implications. To begin with, his translingual model extends Bakhtin’s description of novels as heteroglossic, that is, speaking in varieties of one national language. Next, Sebald’s practice of mixing languages endows his text with a complexity and multivalence that monolingual works cannot reproduce. His translingual paradigm presents the dissolution of language boundaries as conducive to vitality and beauty in language and aesthetics, thereby suggesting that transcending boundaries creates conditions for novelty and alterity (otherness). In positing flexibility as the principle of growth, Sebald argues against conceptual rigidity and underscores that progress occurs by surpassing, altering, and defying standards, which in turn indicates that no linguistic or literary norms have absolute value. By deliberately mixing tongues and deviating from German grammar, Sebald celebrates ambiguity as a way of pluralizing meaning.

Most crucially, Sebald’s translingual writing promotes literature as a transnational domain in which the disappearance of linguistic and literary borders helps generate ideas. This notion of literature as a territory beyond national frontiers detaches literary works from service to national interests. Without denying literature a political function or an impact on national identity, Sebald suggests that literature has no obligation to portray national uniqueness. On the contrary, Sebald indicates that literature is especially fruitful when it strives for transnational approaches. Translingual literature lifts national borders and welcomes linguistic diversity to yield ideas that might be foreclosed in monolingual perspectives.

Sebald’s translingual model differs from Adorno’s aesthetics discussed in Chapter Two and Chapter Three. Adorno focuses on exposing the ideology and historical roots of Nazi
Deutsch. He uncovers linguistic myths appropriated by the Nazis and pluralizes meaning in his works by using Fremdwörter (foreign borrowings) much more frequently than foreign language passages. Thus, his aesthetics favors foreign borrowings over foreign language injections.

Sebald’s literary portrayal of Nazi Deutsch exposes, ridicules, and condemns its pompous and misleading (illusorily precise) character. As a literary alternative, Sebald develops a translingual style that seeks linguistic and literary complexity and hybridity. In creating such linguistic and literary bridges within his text, Sebald underscores transnational connectedness rather than separateness.
Conclusion

This dissertation has demonstrated how Theodor Adorno and W.G. Sebald defy the German Romantic monolingual paradigm of national identity that emerged in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, celebrated the mother tongue as a quasi-sacred foundation of a nation, and discouraged multilingualism. Though misappropriated, radicalized, and racialized by the Nazis, this paradigm was omitted in postwar discussions over German national identity and in scholarly examinations of Nazi Deutsch that have focused on Nazi terminology. Adorno and Sebald reevaluate the German Romantic model through their reflections on the Nazi perversion of language. Adorno dedicates himself to exposing the toxic Nazi ideology, refuting the myth of linguistic purity, and fostering tolerance of Fremdwörter (foreign borrowings) and foreign languages in German. Decades after Adorno, Sebald portrays the Nazi style of grandiosity and misdirection (illusory precision) as a haunting Nazi legacy and advocates translingualism—the mixing of languages—rather than linguistic isolation.

An essential literary contribution of this dissertation consists in tracing a trajectory of the concept of the mother tongue from its sacralization in German Romanticism to its secularization in postwar German literature. To awaken the German national spirit, German Romantic writers sacralized the idea of the native language by ascribing to it religious and moral qualities. The German Romantics utilized the idea of the mother tongue to promote German linguistic and cultural identity (Herder) and political unity (Fichte). This paradigm emphasized loyalty to the mother tongue and the need to shield its purity from foreign languages.

Adorno and Sebald secularize the notion of the mother tongue, rehabilitate foreign languages, and argue against attributing religious or moral qualities to language. For both writers, language serves to create moral or religious values instead of embodying them. Adorno
upholds the relevance of language to national identity and insists on the need to cultivate German
in postwar literature. Contrary to the German Romantics, Adorno warns against linguistic
nationalism, the idolization of language for nationalistic purposes, while he debunks and
condemns the idea of linguistic purity. He propagates a philosophical and an aesthetic framework
with one national tongue open to foreign languages. Sebald moves away from the national
perspective and favors a transnational position while maintaining the importance of language to
national identity. In contrast to the German Romantic notion of monolingual literature, Sebald
mixes German with other tongues and presents translingualism as a source of enrichment,
complexity, and multivalence. While the German Romantics describe literature as expressing
national goals and uniqueness, Sebald argues for translingual literature that seeks transnational
perspectives rather than serving national interests.

In Chapter One, the analysis of Herder and Fichte has revealed that they sacralized the
concept of the mother tongue to further German Romantic nationalism. Herder portrayed loyalty
to the native language as a moral imperative and described writing in a foreign tongue as sinful
and aesthetically mediocre. Fichte sacralized German by ascribing to it a living character
(proximity to the divine source of life), honesty, virtue, and an ennobling effect on other cultures.
Both Herder and Fichte called for insulating German from foreign influences: Herder depicted
foreign languages as destabilizing the nation and unsuitable for aesthetics while Fichte portrayed
foreign tongues as corrupt, dangerous, and detrimental to the pure and living core of German.
This attribution of ethical and religious qualities to the native language produced an image of a
quasi-sacred mother tongue hostile to multilingualism.

This chapter has exposed how the ascription of religious and ethical values to the mother
tongue surrounds it with the nimbus of sacredness and produces a similar halo around the idea of
linguistic purity, thus delegitimizing multilingualism and endorsing linguistic isolation. An equally essential contribution of this analysis stems from its revelation that the portrayal of writing in a foreign language as sinful spreads prejudice against multilingualism. Another relevant contribution of this chapter is its demonstration that when one ascribes the living character (the divine proximity) to a language, one creates a rigid hierarchy of tongues and renders other languages inferior.

Chapter Two has demonstrated that Adorno challenges the German Romantic paradigm by repudiating the myth of linguistic purity, rehabilitating foreign languages, and recommending the use of *Fremdwörter*. His praise of *Fremdwörter* has revealed his rejection of the Nazi anti-*Fremdwort* politics and his endorsement of aesthetics with one mother tongue accepting foreign elements. The analysis of Adorno’s remarks on the affinity between linguistic purity, racial purity, and societal uniformity has exposed how the Nazis instrumentalized the idea of linguistic purity to disseminate ethnic prejudice. In Excursus One, Adorno’s work on American fascist propaganda in the 1930s has unveiled how fascist propagandists glorified the concept of religious homogeneity through positive biblical references while vilifying religious diversity through antagonistic biblical tags. Excursus Two has shown how Martin Luther utilized biblical imagery to condemn Judaism in the sixteenth century.

The key contribution of this chapter consists in debunking the idea of linguistic purity as a myth. This section exposes hostility to *Fremdwörter* as a linguistic form of violence that fuels and morphs into other types of violence. An equally valuable contribution of this analysis resides in demonstrating how Nazi linguists perpetuated and radicalized the German Romantic project of sacralizing the mother tongue. This exploration of Adorno’s use of *Fremdwörter* adds an
ideological dimension to the scholarship on his notion of language and shows how Adorno’s texts can help one understand language attitudes.

A crucial theoretical implication of this chapter is that the idealization of linguistic purity frames linguistic diversity as an enemy. In other words, the glorification of purity casts diversity as the dangerous other. This section reveals that neither homogeneity nor diversity has an intrinsic value; rather, the meanings of those concepts are dynamic and negotiable. The two excursuses present religious homogeneity as another form of purity and expose how the use of biblical language can propagate religious homogeneity. They also indicate how the German right-wing group Pegida (Patriotic Europeans Against the Islamization of the Occident) endorses homogeneity through similar religious insults.

Chapter Three has explicated Adorno’s redemptive writing techniques for pluralizing and enhancing meaning in his works. Those devices include open literary forms (configurations), defamiliarization (estrangement), critique, contradiction, oxymoron (incongruous words), irony, and dissonance (opposing voices). Adorno’s critique of Benjamin’s language mysticism, Adorno’s rejection of the German Romantic idea of transcendental music, and his remarks on the arbitrary (conventional) nature of words have revealed Adorno’s preference for a secular notion of language. The analysis of both Adorno’s inversion of Hegel’s idea of totality and Adorno’s writing techniques has demonstrated that his redemptive writing devices create semantic opportunities by unsettling conceptualizations and suggesting alternate options. The comparison of Adorno’s writing tools to Steiner’s notion of “falsity” (picturing the world otherwise) has unveiled that both writers construe difference and semantic possibilities as enrichment and opportunity rather than an error.
The key contribution of this chapter consists in showing how Adorno pluralizes meaning in his texts. In this way, this section enhances the theoretical and philosophical readings of his conception of language. By demonstrating how Adorno uses English in his German works, this analysis enriches the biographical readings of his English expressions. This chapter casts redemption not in the theological sense but as an intellectual activity which fosters progress by challenging conceptual patterns. Through analyzing Adorno’s writing techniques, this section shows that he imagines a philosophical and an aesthetic space for alterity (otherness) as a process of creating semantic vistas.

In Chapter Four, a literary analysis of the main character in Sebald’s *Austerlitz* has demonstrated that his translingualism, speaking French and Czech, has helped him cure his sense of emptiness and spectrality caused by the suppression of his Czech language and his past. Austerlitz’s adoptive parents, English educational system, and the protagonist’s evasion strategies have repressed his Czech language and his past, causing him to feel hollow, spectral, and alienated. Austerlitz’s practice of speaking French and Czech and his reactivation of his linguistic memories had a therapeutic effect on him and helped him overcome his sense of emptiness, reinvigorate himself, and create a symbolic abode in-between French and Czech cultures.

Austerlitz’s superficial integration into his English homeland has demonstrated that cultural integration of a refugee requires forming linguistic, cultural, and emotional bridges between the refugee’s heritage and the host country. Austerlitz employed his translingualism to create a bridge to his suppressed French-Czech self. His story has shown that cultural education might facilitate understanding between cultural and linguistic communities. Austerlitz’s switch
to French and Czech allegiances has revealed that the sense of belonging is dynamic and changes due to human linguistic, cultural, and emotional associations.

The essential literary contribution of this chapter resides in rectifying the scholarship that reads Austerlitz from the monolingual perspective as a split personality. Austerlitz is not fixated on his past but views his past and the future as equally relevant. This chapter demonstrates conceptual links between Sebald and Benjamin, Proust, Kafka, and Beckett and shows that linguistic memories and translingualism are therapeutic, endow subjects with a sense of identity, and enable them to form dynamic linguistic and cultural associations. The analysis of Austerlitz’s story reveals that the integration of refugees into a host country requires acknowledging their heritage and preserving the culture of the host nation. An essential theoretical implication of this chapter is that human identity is neither finished nor fixed but continuously evolving through human linguistic practices and actions. In showing how the protagonist reinvents himself through speaking French and Czech, this section presents translingualism as a fruitful alternative to monolingualism.

Chapter Five has examined two models of German in Sebald’s Austerlitz: Nazi Deutsch and Sebald’s translingual mode that mixes German with other tongues. Nazi Deutsch was associated with grandiosity and misdirection (illusory precision), whereas Sebald’s literary translingualism functioned to offset Nazi Deutsch. The German-English snow scene has shown how Sebald blends languages into a hybrid and multivalent form. His translingual model advocates dissolving linguistic and literary boundaries to catalyze complexity and novelty in language and literature. His paradigm endorses the notion of literature as a domain beyond national interests that transcends linguistic, literary, and national borders to generate transnational perspectives.
The key literary contribution of this chapter consists in adding an aesthetic dimension to the scholarship on multilingualism in Sebald’s novel. This analysis demonstrates that Sebald makes his text complex through mixing German with English and reveals conceptual parallels between Adorno and Sebald. Another relevant contribution of this segment lies in showing Sebald’s endorsement of translingual literature that creates transnational bridges rather than emphasizing national uniqueness or serving national interests. This conception of literature opposes the German Romantic idea of national literature. The crucial literary implication of this analysis is that mixing languages facilitates semantic complexity. Another relevant implication is that semantic ambiguity is not impoverishing but enriching and represents the space of alterity. In this chapter, conceptual flexibility and semantic ambiguity indicate growth, enhancement, and progress.

**Adorno and Sebald: Comparison**

Adorno and Sebald share several similarities. Both writers view *Nazi Deutsch* as the toxic linguistic ballast in German. In his essays, Adorno persistently exposes the Nazi ideology in Nazi jargon and its conceptual roots in language purism. In his literary texts, he frequently uses *Fremdwörter* to emphasize internal difference within German and to dispel the myth of linguistic purity. Sebald portrays the Nazi jargon in a literary fashion and satirizes, caricatures, and condemns the camouflaging effect and the grandiose character of the Nazi style. Adorno and Sebald associate a suppression of a language with an emotional sense of spectrality or hollowness. In Adorno’s eyes, spectrality is the condition all Germans face due to the Nazi perversion of German. For Sebald, spectrality afflicts silenced speakers like Austerlitz, but its cure resides in reactivating the suppressed languages. Both writers ascribe liberating and edifying powers to multilingualism. In Sebald’s view, knowledge of foreign languages makes
people alert to jingoism and enables them to form rich linguistic and cultural networks. For Adorno, the awareness of foreign traces within one’s mother tongue protects one from linguistic myths and nationalism.

Adorno and Sebald exhibit a similar penchant for nonschematic methods of presentation. Both writers feel discomfort with their respective genres and seek more flexible and hybrid forms of presentation. Adorno feels entrapped within the standards of philosophical explication. Sebald is dissatisfied with the genre of the novel and literary realism. Both writers adopt Benjamin’s method of writing in constellations, presenting an idea from various angles, without stating it directly. They favor open and indirect forms of writing. Just as Adorno avoids making conclusive statements, Sebald mixes languages and the characters’ voices and deviates from German grammar to suggest ideas rather than pinpointing them directly.

Adorno endorses a philosophical and aesthetic framework with one national language and a limited presence of foreign tongues. His emphasis on *Fremdwörter* and his occasional use of foreign language insertions result from his immediate historical context: Adorno seeks to uncover Nazi manipulation strategies as a way of educating his compatriots about the Nazi linguistic legacy and facilitating Germany’s transition toward democracy. His primary medium is philosophical discourse. He composes in the tradition of scholarly writing that uses *Fremdwörter* and resists the German Romantic idea of linguistic purity. Adorno employs *Fremdwörter* and short foreign language sections to emphasize and evoke certain contents and aspects.

By contrast, Sebald’s primary medium is literature, a genre that has more freedom than philosophical discourse. Sebald espouses a transnational perspective and envisions literature as a domain for thinking beyond linguistic, literary, and national boundaries. His *Kunstsprache* creates semantic alternatives within German by breaking with its grammar and employing
dialectal expressions. His literary translingualism in *Austerlitz* strives to build bridges between German and other languages. Sebald’s foreign language sections are much longer than Adorno’s. He employs foreign language injections and blind quotes from foreign literary works to increase the intertextual dimension and semantic richness of his texts. His translingual protagonist uses languages to design a similar transnational network of associations. Hence, the goal of Sebald’s literary translingualism is to create transnational or perhaps global connections.

Adorno and Sebald point to the difficulty of reflecting on the Nazi linguistic legacy in German. Adorno theorizes on ways of transforming German. Sebald imitates *Nazi Deutsch* and opposes it through his literary style. Yet, the line between imitation and satire or caricature is not always clear in his text, which generates interpretive ambiguity and may suggest an uncanny resemblance between fiction and reality. Sebald’s deliberate deviations from German grammar cannot clearly oppose his image of *Nazi Deutsch*. To oppose it more evidently, he employs foreign languages as a more explicit form of linguistic otherness.

**Future Research Directions**

The scholarship on Adorno and Sebald could be advanced in the future through several research avenues. First, it would be fruitful to examine if, and to what extent, Sebald’s literary translingualism, preference for literary hybridity, and his dislike of conceptual schematism might have been influenced by Adorno’s notion of language reification, that is, the shrinking of expressive capacities of language. Second, Adorno scholars might connect his use of foreign language injections to his theory of language reification. Third, Sebald scholarship could benefit from an examination of how photography and translingualism contribute to his genre hybridity. Fourth, Sebald’s translingual aesthetics could be juxtaposed with Richard Wagner’s celebration of an unchangeable German spirit.
This dissertation has shown how the idea of linguistic purity fuels, emboldens, and morphs into other forms of purity. For instance, the idea of purity was initially construed in linguistic and aesthetic terms and acquired an overtone of sacredness in German Romantic nationalism. The Nazis racialized this image of purity to spread ethnic prejudice. Adorno and Sebald condemn the ideology of purity and debunk the myth of linguistic purity. This study of Adorno and Sebald opposes the appeals to linguistic purity by defending the value of linguistic diversity.

This dissertation has also revealed that cataclysmic events can radicalize language attitudes. The Napoleonic wars contributed to the German Romantic idea of the native language. The Nazi rise to power triggered a radical sacralization of the concept of the mother tongue. Contemporary societies invoke the idea of linguistic purity as a reaction to the inflow of Syrian refugees into Europe. Through their reflections on foreign languages, Adorno and Sebald dispel the fear of linguistic diversity.
Works Cited


---. *Studies in the Authoritarian Personality. Gesammelte Schriften: Soziologische Schriften II.I.*


---. *Austerlitz*. N.d. MS. Deutsches Literaturarchiv, Marbach.


