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NOTES TO LITERATURE
Volume Two

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A determined defense of the use of foreign words cannot take on the task of summarizing familiar arguments or sustaining a feeble life in the traditional debate through new evasions. It is valid only where it works toward a definite stand. In doing so it oversteps the bounds of defense itself: its task is not so much to demonstrate the harmlessness of foreign words as to release their explosive force: not to deny what is foreign in them but to use it.

The battle against purism in the discussion of language may be as old as purism itself. Whenever insight into the historical specificity of spirit and its objective forms has prevailed, the foreign word has found its apologists. The distinction between foreign and home-grown words is tolerantly denied. They are said to be merely different stages in a single historical process or even to bow into one another without a break in a linguistic history that is viewed in terms of the image of a stream. Loan words in which one no longer hears the foreign origin or naturalized words assimilated to the laws of the dominant language are considered historically mediated. The oldest accessible languages, along with their purity, are distorted through primordial kinships; they flow into one another in a hazy prehistoric period, and the archaic turbulences in the mirror of language blur the outlines of a primeval creaturely language, the sketchy skeleton of which is then disenchanted as a posthumous romantic fantasy. At some later point—this is part of such views—the historical continuity is to encompass the actual foreign words as well; at some point Symbol, Komplex, and Initiative are to be assimilated into the body of language as seamlessly as Bank [bank], Siegel [seal], and even Acker [field]. The customary defense of foreign words shares with purism the notion of language as something organic, despite the fact that each measures the life of language by a different rhythm. It was the nineteenth century that first consciously, with syncopation, interrupted that rhythm itself under the pressure of the individual and his autonomous expression. When language confronts the language-forming subject as something objective, the subject forces its own impulses through in opposition to language, in words that are not subject to language: words it mobilizes in opposition to linguistic convention, however rigidly conventional those words may be when one meets them in everyday language. Foreign words become the bearers of subjective contents: of the nuances. The meanings in one's own language may well correspond to the meanings of the foreign words in every case; but they cannot be arbitrarily replaced by them because the expression of subjectivity cannot simply be dissolved in meaning. Mood, atmosphere, the music of language, all the postulates of Verlaine's art poétique on which the differential principle of nuance is based, tend to harden the individual's claim to his rational indissolubility in language in that they demonstrate this claim through untranslatability. Words like "attitude" and "cachet," which cannot be rendered unequivocally in German, are drastic proof of this function, and it is no accident that Simmel, a philosopher of nuance, of the individual, and of irrationality, took them up into the artificial language of philosophy. In doing so he merely raised to theoretical self-consciousness intentions that had permeated lyric poetry, including German poetry, since the Latin quotations in Baudelaire's poems: in the young Stefan George it was still for the sake of the mystique of the chosen one, in the Rilke of the Neue Gedichte [New Poems] it was in order to call by their proper names objects that are rejected, faded, and petrified, and to awaken them abruptly in the echo they send back: "Du schnell vergehendes Daguerreotyp in meinen langsamer vergehenden Händen" ["You quickly fading daguerreotype in my more slowly fading hands"]. Such poetry frightened linguistic purism off into the provinces.

But it was not a radical refutation of purism. Now one can no longer trust in an organic growth of language that would continually assimilate foreign words; nor can the nuance-content decide on the dignity of linguistic accomplishments, since the function of the linguistic nuance has long since changed. Today it serves to conceal: nuance foreign words like "Geste" [gesture] or "mondän" [stylish] have themselves begun to
migrate to the provinces. And anything that remains within the framework of assimilation or mere opposition through nuance is compatible with the principles of purism. Even purists would not deny the history of language and could come to terms even with words that adapt to the language or affirm it through charm and refinement while seeming to stand in its way. But what about the hard, artificial, unyielding foreign words whose life intersects the sphere of nuance for only a moment; the words that do not yield, do not even carry the expression of their own past? If they had to go, purism would be in the right despite George's malachite and alabaster jugs and Rilke's daguerreotypes; perhaps purism would have to restate the idea of a pure ur-idiom, but it would be able to maintain the conception of a language closed and purposeful within itself, a language developing immanently, the metaphor for which would remain growth; it would digest or excise foreign words but not tolerate them in itself like iron stigmata or wandering cannonballs. In the final analysis, the discussion is about this ideal of an immanent, closed organic language. One should not yield to purism by granting it the organic character of language and merely magically reinterpreting the foreign words as living cells because they too have their fates and can sound lyrical. One must defend them where they are at their worst from the point of view of purism: where they are foreign bodies assailing the body of language.

Foreign words can be legitimated only in a different conception of language. While their transpersonal life, as the law in accordance with which words come together to form truth cannot be disputed, this life is not organic in the strict sense. For human beings may be set under a starry sky in which words move past, and language and creature may be dependent upon one another forever and ever, but no differently than the way the course of the stars and the fate of human beings are related to one another. Pure creaturely language is hidden from human beings or lost to them, because its quintessence would be nothing but the quintessence of represented truth. This is why the life of language is not lived with the teleological rhythm of creaturely life, with birth, growth, and death, but rather with naming as the enigmatic ur-phenomenon in between grasping thought and manifested truth, with crystallization and disintegration. The true words, fragments of truth, are not the buried ur-words that are mythically evoked. They are the found words, the performed words, the 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 he named them in his human fashion: in the act of naming itself. And in each one, genius escapes anew from mythic bondage to a life that is merely natural.

This is why, historically, foreign words are the points at which a knowing consciousness and an illuminated truth break into the undifferentiated growth of the aspect of language that is mere nature: the incursion of freedom. One cannot decide on their legitimacy or lack of it by whether they adapt but only in purely social terms. The more alienated human beings have become from their things in society, the more strange are the words that will have to represent them if they are to reach them and to indicate allegorically that the things have been brought home. The more deeply society is left by the contradiction between its quasi-natural and its rational character the more isolated will foreign words necessarily remain in the arena of language, incomprehensible to one group of human beings and threatening to the other; and yet they have their legitimacy as an expression of alienation itself, and also as the transparent crystals that may at some future time explode human beings' dreary imprisonment in preconceived language. Not on their own, certainly: Esperanto is the reverse of any genuine foreign word. But if things were in their right places, it is the foreign words that would be the first to arrange themselves accordingly, even if it were in the disintegration of historical-organic languages.

Purism sees foreign words more clearly than does a lax defense of them: their stance towards language is an alien one. Since the first violent emancipation of ratio from a quasi-natural society in the modern period, with Humanism, they have in fact withdrawn from the sucking body of language. They are residues of the operation of the social contradiction between cultured and uncultured strata, a contradiction that no longer permits either the unreflective “folk-etymological” development of language or a thoroughgoing construction of language, because free use of the forces of language is reserved for the cultured stratum, which is alienated from itself as well as from the others. The division of labor that led to the formation of the specific scientific terminologies that dismembered the Latin and Greek heritage gave foreign words their reified character: that inhuman, fetishistic commodity character by which the purist is rightly offended. But the purist's criticism stops short. The isolated position of foreign words could not be done away with through the restitution of an integral language but only by society, which names
itself along with things. But then it is not the foreign word, the dead-tired messenger from the future kingdom of language, that is replaced by the quasi-natural and historically inappropriate word; instead, the tension between the two spheres of language in which we exist today can prove productive, and the two spheres can move closer to one another in the use of a ready, serviceable terminology. Foreign words should not be protected as one of the privileges of education. Even today their use is no longer determined by education or the claim to it. A worthy task for folklore would be to examine how foreign words operate beneath the sphere of culture but without fusing with the body of language—at the deepest level of language, in political jargon, in the slang of love, and in an everyday way of speaking that from the standpoint of organic language and linguistic purity would have to be called corrupt, but in which we may see the contours of a language to come that cannot be understood either in terms of the idea of the organic or in terms of education.

The writer does not stop there. He uses the genuine, nonorganic foreign word as a quotation: from the specific realms of philosophy, of the sciences, of art, of technology, for whose independence from the total life process of society there are no longer adequate words. This is why in the hands of the writer foreign words seem to serve the ideal of culture, and it cannot be denied that under current conditions understanding of them is reserved to a small group at any point in time. But this cultural use harbors its own dialectic. The writer may well proceed in the way Walter Benjamin described in One-Way Street when he compared the man of letters to a surgeon who performs a difficult operation on his idea and in doing so inserts the "silver rib of a foreign word" into the idea. But the silver rib helps the patient, the idea, to survive, while it sickened from the organic rib. The dialectic of the foreign word is of this nature. It moves away from the organic nature of language when the latter is no longer adequate to grasp ideas. It is really not education but knowledge that decides on its correct use. In the foreign word a ray of light from ratio strikes the stream of language, which gleams painfully in it. In the foreign word the nuance is both rescued and destroyed at the same time, because the foreign word no longer seems to cast a spell on what is irrational, individual in the fleeting sense, and atmospheric, but instead flushes the outlines of knowledge, rigorous and unambiguous, out of the mass of language. Rescued: because the tiny differences in the objects that were once evoked as nuances by foreign words and then floated away return, not imponderably, as distinctions in...