

EXCURSUS IV

*Wolfgang J. Koschnick on
American English*

All over the world linguistic purists lament the Americanization of their native tongues. The Japanese, the Turks, the French, the Mexicans, and the Germans all join in. Even the Russians agree that their venerable language is in danger of invasion by a hodgepodge of Americanisms. The British too have been fighting a losing battle to protect the purity of the tongue that Shakespeare spake.

Behind this lament is the suspicion, sometimes made explicit, that American English is a bastard language. In truth the Americans themselves often seem nervous about the encroachment of linguistic barbarism upon their speech. The book market has in recent years become a sort of wailing wall against which authors hurl profitable complaints about a language threatened by officialese, clichés, and linguistic gibberish. But is the modern American language really a kind of jargon rather than a sophisticated medium of expression, as many critics in the U.S. and abroad keep trying to make us believe?

As a German writing in English and having a fair knowledge of other languages, I am convinced that American English hardly warrants the current lament. To the contrary, American English is more creative, more intelligent, more expressive, and more versatile than any other language of our time.

The most absurd accusation is that American English is rife with slang. The abundance of slang is indeed a hallmark of American English. No other language has brought forth a comparably rich store of witty slang expressions and colorful vocabulary. "American slang," wrote H.W. Horwill, "is especially rich in metaphor, and many figurative uses of words that originated in slang have established within a short time a claim to a reputable place in the permanent vocabulary." This is exactly what makes a living language. Slang in America is not a species apart but an integral part of the language. No other language has such an intense interaction between standard language and slang. French argot is hardly more than an underworld language, and even as such it is a paltry collection of off-color words and a few patterns of speech, a pimp lingo at the very best. In German and Russian there is no such thing as slang. In German the very notion of *der Slang* (we don't have our own word for it) is synonymous with four-letter language.

Most languages reveal their lifelessness by drawing an uncrossable line between the written and the spoken word, implying that the written species is good usage while the spoken, where it differs, is bad. While these two levels of language variously interact in American English, thus contributing to its richness of forms and vocabulary, they lead almost separate lives in other languages.

Americans, alas, are often unaware of the beauty

of their idioms, while foreigners must struggle for an understanding of American English's inexhaustible resources of idiomatic innovation. It is easy to gain a good command of English grammar, but it takes many, many years to take all the hurdles of idiomatic American. In other languages it's different: Once you've fought your way through all the sneaky pitfalls of, say, Russian grammar, you know the language by and large. British English is easy to learn, but American English is an open-ended adventure.

Much of the lucidity, terseness, and precision of American English is due to its past and present development as a lingua franca. It is the contact language for many peoples on the American continent, and for the national, racial, and social subgroups forming what is now the American people. America may never have been the kind of melting pot it purported to be, but the balance (and imbalance) of socio-cultural amalgamation and antagonism, assimilation and dissimilation, has been the fountain of youth for the American language.

More than any other this is a democratic language, from the people, by the people, and for the people. It does not need and will not tolerate the kind of national academy that tries to protect and purify the languages of other nations. Grammar and rules of usage in American English are practical guides, while in most other languages they have the rank of Divine Laws. Decaying languages teem with Thou-shalt-nots; blossoming languages say "It depends." The queen would be mortified to split an infinitive; the president certainly and at all times is free to joyfully separate the to from the verb.

Of course there is a danger that American English could become debased by officialese, clichés, and other bilge. But these dangers threaten every language. From its shape, structure, and record to date the American language is better prepared than others to master these difficulties. It is an inventive and intelligent language, and Americans should never, never apologize for it to purists who prefer "court usage" to living communication.

Wolfgang J. Koschnick, a political scientist and journalist, lives in Germany and works as European correspondent for U.S. and British magazines.

EXCURSUS V

*Peter Lamborn Wilson on
Russian Literature
and the Oppression of the West*

Does the West need a Stalin of its own? The question arises because in recent times Russia has produced major voices in literature. It is as if that massive torture, which so few survived, awakened a
(Continued on page 47)

P-Melted Ice
(from page 29)

Moreover, they would have included the ethical aspects but space in the *JPSP* was too limited.

The person from Harvard Medical School said the whole study was trivial. The experimenters believed that their lavatory study was important because it tested the null hypothesis that "closeness does not affect micturition." The protester pointed out that the *JPSP* rejects 87 per cent of the papers offered it; and what, therefore, would be the effect on failed contributors when they saw the lavatory study to be among the best 13 per cent published?

The ice cube project no longer seems far-fetched. Should I activate a proposal? Or a series of proposals? One to the National Institutes of Health for a study of the psychological factors occurring when men micturate onto ice cubes? Another to the National Science Foundation for the physics or chemistry involved—temperature, pressure, ionic interchanges, etc.? Several to the National Endowment for the Humanities (or Performing Arts) for explorations of the aesthetics—lyrical, dramatic, choreographic, musical, critical, and novelistic? Another to the Economic Development Administration, Small Business Administration, the Brookings Institution, or the American Enterprise Institute for a study of the economic effects? And two, of course, to the Department of Labor to obtain enough money to ensure that the experiments were conducted without discrimination by sex, religion, age, race, place of origin, type of clothing, makeup, or adornment worn, or by length of hair on head, face, or body?

On the other hand, I admit to being bothered by that bit about the triviality of such studies. The ethics we could handle by getting larger grants to add more parameters and assistants or by obtaining a good old boy from the South to serve as project director.

Sir Isaac Newton is supposed to have said: "I do not know what I may appear to the world, but to myself I seem to have been only a boy playing on the sea-shore, and diverting myself in now and then finding a smoother pebble or a prettier shell than ordinary, whilst the great ocean of truth lay all undiscovered about me."

Most of us have to go through a lot of sand before we find anything worth holding up. Truth, like precious stones and metals, may have to be dug out of dirty soils and gravels.

But note that Newton sought and held up for view *smoother* pebbles and *prettier* shells. Who wants to chance a search doomed to find only rougher, dirtier, or uglier bits of information?

Thus my hue of resolution is sicklied o'er with the pale cast of thought; successful grantsmen must be made of sterner stuff. Let someone else forge ahead without fear of professional criticism, Senator Proxmire, or the Government Accounting Office. If the world can be seen in a grain of sand, who knows what might be seen in an ice cube in a public *pissoir*?

Frederick C. Dyer, an author and consultant in our nation's capital city, has had experience with government, business, and academic bureaucracies.

Russian Literature
(from page 32)

few paragons, a few *witnesses*. Perhaps our own sleep is so heavy that only a Terror will restore to us the meaning of value, of life, of faith.

True, the West has its own saints and poets—but who reads them, who knows their names? Would the BBC have given to one of them, as it did to Solzhenitsyn, an hour to denounce our folly? For the most part the cultural figures we elevate, crooners of an insipid nihilism, lack even the strength of those "devils" Dostoevski described. The Russian nihilists, who eventually seized on Marxism as the tool of their purposes, knew what they wanted. At least we can grant them that. Our own heroes do not know what they serve and will be swallowed up still demanding their "rights" and titillations.

Osip Mandelstam was sent to Siberia *because* he was a poet, and he died there of cold and starvation. To the end he still believed it was his joyful privilege to be a poet because Christ had died for his sins (this although Mandelstam was Jewish). With a sort of pride he told his wife: "Poetry is very important here. It must be—they are killing so many poets." She survived and hid his poems and memorized every one of them and escaped through some miracle, and she noted that those who had remained human were without exception lovers of poetry. Handwritten copies of Mandelstam's poems circulated even in the camps—she saw one herself—and were read not only by the "fifty-eights," the political prisoners, but even by ordinary criminals. By the time she wrote her amazing book *Hope Against Hope* (1970), long after the "thaw," Mandelstam's collected works had still not been published in the USSR—but he was known as one of the greatest poets of the language.

It is difficult for a Western poet not to feel somewhat envious of the chance for nobility in the face of horror.

One hears other stories from the camps that not even Solzhenitsyn has written—of silent mystics who recognize each other by the rhythm of their bodies as they chop wood or perform some other labor and realize they are inwardly repeating the Jesus Prayer. The Gulag, it seems, is studded with saints—and martyrs.

A few days ago a "mob" in Russia "clashed with police" because it wanted a church to go to. Nadezhda Mandelstam tells an amusing story about her little niece, who was secretly being taught the Bible by her grandmother (this was in the Thirties). The girl's mother, a good Marxist, took her to the Museum of Atheism in Leningrad to cure her, but there she saw an exhibit showing Christians worshipping Mammon. She refused to believe it.

It is said that Christianity thrives on persecution; but what about other things, like poetry, like real humanism, like kindness and loyalty—do they also need to thrive on persecution? Should Christians in the West *envy* the Russians?

The traditional argument against humanism is not antihuman any more than the argument against rationalism is antirational. Tradition simply points

out that true *humane* values must rest on something higher than merely *human* values. Solzhenitsyn and Nadezhda Mandelstam have realized this, not only intellectually but through the price of blood. They saw how easily Stalin's admirers swept into their bonfire the last scraps of nineteenth-century humanism—and they also see that Stalinism was the logical result of the weakness of the intelligentsia and the inevitable goal of its enemies. "Communism with a human face"—preached by Sakharov inside Russia and the Eurocommunists outside—cannot deceive such witnesses.

Why should books like *Hope Against Hope* and *Gulag Archipelago* sell so well in the West, and why should a man like Solzhenitsyn be recognized here as the great man he is?

A completely cynical answer: The anemic admire blood. Solzhenitsyn and Mandelstam have lived life—as bad and as good as it can possibly be—so much more fully than most of us. They have about them the appeal of a legend from some remote land where ogres and princes still live, just real enough that we can read about it with a pleasurable frisson of horror and wonder idly whether "it could ever happen here." But then we see in the paper the next day that some speck in the South Seas has gained its independence, acquired a parliament and an automobile factory. The journalist tells us approvingly that the island has been "brought into the twentieth century," and we nod benevolently. We have already forgotten how Russia was dragged into this admirable century. And when civil war breaks out on that island six months later, perhaps followed by the emergence of some miniature Stalin, we do not repeat that charming mantra about the twentieth century. If we are honest, we confess to the inclination to say to ourselves: "Those people are probably still savages."

A more optimistic explanation of the appeal of the Russian "dissidents" is that we realize—even if only half-consciously—that they are telling the real story of our century. They have been to the bottom and survived, and they have the answers. (Of course our own saints and poets have answers too, but they have not yet been persecuted for their answers—and besides, they are merely our neighbors, and the truth never comes from next door. So for a moment we listen to these Russians and believe them. We are horrified and declare ourselves in favor of human rights.

But one cannot live forever in horror. We have other novels, television, films, politics, the news. Solzhenitsyn? Mandelstam? Yes, yes, very interesting. Deeply moving.

But then other topics become very *in*. The Chinese, for example, are such great ecologists. Why just the other night on TV....

In passing, a third reason for the Russians' popularity: they are very good writers. Some people find *Gulag Archipelago* boring. "Solzhenitsyn is so repetitive and his irony is too heavy. And when he

tried to tell the West where it's going wrong, he made so many silly mistakes [what mistakes?]. He's already a bit *passé*." But no one can deny that *Lenin in Zurich*, for example, is one of the great books of this century. The chapter where Lenin has his hallucinatory interview with the mysterious financier is an unparalleled tour de force. When the Russians descend to *style* they can outdo anyone writing today in Europe or America, even in translation.

But finally the reason why *Hope Against Hope* or *First Circle* or *Cancer Ward* are truly important works, important for the philosophers too, is that they are describing exactly what is happening now in the West. We are living in the midst of a Terror. The witnesses from Stalin's age have spoken bitterly about the people who even at the height of the horror lived as if nothing were wrong, who adapted to the "ideals of the time," who adjusted to each new purge and who are even now nostalgic for those days. We are those people.

Of course this is rather melodramatic. We must not forget that in the West we are still free to believe and write, even if no one listens or reads. That is certainly something. The Terror we face has nothing to do with midnight visits from the Chekists, boxcars full of starving prisoners, et cetera. The people who tried (especially in the Sixties) to claim political oppression in the West always looked rather silly and by now have given up for the most part. Those who claimed an oppression of consciousness were closer to the truth, though for one reason or another they too seem to have fallen silent.

Perhaps it is because the Terror has become so diffused, so gray, so ordinary, so expected that we can no longer see it. A box of rats can be subjected to tiny and gradual increments of noise and pollution and seem to adapt perfectly—until one day they die "suddenly." People can get used to anything and not realize what has happened until it's too late. We have enough to eat, we have our cars and our entertainment. Faith, awareness—these are the "luxuries" of a few, and not even very attractive to the many. If someone comes in the middle of the night and takes a bit of awareness away—we can adjust. We can even believe it must have been a false awareness, worthy of being suppressed.

In any case, it's much easier to destroy Truth by accepting it as yet another "interesting possibility." Don't burn the icon, hang it beside a Surrealist painting—that's much more effective. Stalin was clumsy by comparison; he paid so much attention to the poets and saints that he ended up making them look important and excitingly dangerous.

Of course they were important and dangerous. So are our own poets and saints. But if we cannot listen to voices within our walls, we must listen to voices from outside—and try to realize they are speaking to us.

Peter Lamborn Wilson is on the staff of the Imperial Iranian Academy of Philosophy in Tehran.