

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO



GERMERICAN
WRITING
FROM THE 1920S

1925-27

Kurt M. Stein

Germerican

I do not believe in bilingualness in poetry . . . Poetry—that is the fateful uniqueness of language.

—Paul Celan

“MIXED LANGUAGES” ARE often spoken by people who live in areas of interlinguistic contact where there is a dominant language other than their own. For such languages in the United States nowadays the particular terms include “Greeklish,” “Yinglish,” “Spanglish,” and “FrAnglais.” This present chapter focuses on “Germerican.”

The story of what happened to the 4 or 5 million German-speaking people in the United States during World War I is worth rehearsing here. Thanks to fears of a German-American “fifth column” during the Great War, in 1916 it became illegal in many parts of the United States to teach German in American schools. In 1917 President Theodore Roosevelt said that “we must have but . . . one language. That language must be the language of the Declaration of Independence.” The problem was one of “language loyalty.” By the mid-1930s, most American German-language writers were worried

about the effect that the precipitous decline in German immigration to the United States would have on the linguistic future of the nation. Many people had believed that the American language would eventually become polyglot, a sort of linguistic melting pot. In this tradition, Noah Webster had asserted that the United States would "produce, in course of time, a language in North America, as different from the future language of England, as the modern Dutch, Danish, and Swedish are from German, or from one another." This belief in a non-English American language emerging from polyglot ethnic populations in America had remarkable counterparts in the modernist cosmopolitan literatures of the early twentieth century. Thus, a specifically American "babel of languages" characterized basically anglophone "ethnic" literature of the period (Henry Roth's *Call It Sleep*, for example) as well as "modernist" writing. Ezra Pound used Chinese and wrote prose pamphlets in Italian. T. S. Eliot closed *The Waste Land* with a series of multilingual quotations. Among European writers, James Joyce used a babel-like "language of the devil" in *Finnegan's Wake*, and Paul Celan and Samuel Beckett produced works in multiple languages.

Many German-American writers and visual artists of the 1920s and 1930s were interested in developing a multilingual and cosmopolitan tradition. Their work included: theories of translating German texts that contain English words into English, and vice versa; concern with "transfugee" writers; fostering German-language anthologies of American writers and bilingual journals; and studying the influence of American English on American German. In such a setting, German-Americans often mixed German with English: "Da steit me uf der neue Wel / u seit scho english: Very well!" And likewise they debated whether their apparent bilingualism (or diglossia) was a temporary way station along the road to German-language "extinction" (as one study of German-Americans considered it; others called it "Americanization") or a permanent "end in itself."

The German-Americans for whom the disappearance of German from the American scene was most painful were probably the last (and largest) generation of German speakers. This generation was born in the 1880s and 1890s in the United States or emigrated from Germany at about that time. For intellectuals of this generation, the

disappearance of German was often the prime motivating factor behind their work.

At the turn of the century, many German-Americans spoke German-accented English and some spoke Germerican, a lexically and syntactically polyglot mixture of English and German. The existence of Germerican reversed the biblical Babel story: that story tells of diversity coming from unity, but Germerican demonstrates a certain Websterian unity coming out of diversity.

Humorous German-accented English, which is easier to understand for those who do not know German, played an important role in the literature of the period. For example, the *New York Commercial Advertiser* claimed in 1896 that “if one were asked what was the most familiar poem in the households of America today, it would not surprise some New Englanders if he were to say, [Charles Follens Adams’s] *Leedle Yaw-cob Strauss*.” Another well-known example of German-accented English-language poetry is Charles G. Leland’s poem “To a Friend Studying German”:

Will’st dou learn de Deutsche Sprache?
 Brepere dein soul to shtand
 Soosh sendences ash ne’er vas heardt
 In any oder land.
 Till dou canst make parentheses
 Intwisted—ohne zahl—
 Dann wirst du erst Deutschvertig seyn,
 For a languashe id eaal.

This humorous tradition also produced German-accented monologues and plays. Examples from 1926–31 include *Dot’s Right*, *Dis is Mine Autogeografy*, and *Dot New Baby*. Writers of American “Dutch Dialect” stories and essays included Charles H. (“Carl Pretzel”) Harris, Joseph C. (“Rube Hoffenstein”) Aby, and George V. (“D. Dinkelspiel”) Hobart.

Unlike German-accented English literature, Germerican was a lexical and syntactical mixture spoken by hundreds of thousands of German-Americans. The term *Germerican* does not appear in the dictionaries, but it was common parlance by 1926 when Kurt M. Stein published his *Die Lorelei vom Michigan-Sea: 33 Gedichte in Germerican*: “Die

schonste Lengevitch" in Chicago. Richard Atwater's introduction to Stein's work compares it with *The Katzenjammer Kids* and with stage humor in the Weber and Fields tradition. The poems were first published in a basically anglophone Chicago newspaper column ("over the signature K.M.S.") beginning about 1913; the first of these was the first act of *Faust*. Certainly the focus of the humor is what he calls "the happy hyphenate Germerican."

In *The American Language* (1937), H. L. Mencken gives a humorous example from a German-language daily newspaper published in the United States in 1935:

"Was machst du denn in Amerika?" fragt der alte Onkel.
 Well, der Kuno was sehr onest. "Ich bin e Stiefellegger," sagt er.
 "Bist du verrückt geworden?" rohrt der Onkel. "Was is denn das?"
 "Das," sagt der Kuno, "is a Antivereinigtestaatenconstitutionsverbesserungsspirituosenwarenhändler."

Germerican-language stories about *Händler* [dealers] also appeared in English-language newspapers such as the *Chicago Tribune* and the *Evening Post*.

Germerican poets published one-line bilingual epigrams of the sort that has long constituted a genre in itself in places of syncretic cultural interaction. Among them was the Chicago-based Stein, whose *Gemixte Pickles*, was published in 1927. *Pickles* includes a Germerican version of Hegelian *Aufhebung* (meaning "pick up"): in Stein's Germerican-language version of Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, for example, Horatio (known as "Raish") says, "Well, business wird schon starteh aufzupickeh."

Atwater suggests, in his 1925 Introduction to Stein's work, that this work showed that "the German American of real life can't even speak German"—a fact that often impressed itself upon Germans when they visited the United States and German-Americans when they visited Germany. A *barbarian* is a person who does not talk in the same way as the dominant group or who knows no one language well; a commonplace charge against German-Americans and Germericans was that they were linguistic barbarians, or stammerers.

Stein was not the only German-speaking writer who couldn't bring himself to write fluent German. In Paris in 1942, Paul Celan wrote a lyric poem called "An den Wassern Babels" (By the Waters of Baby-



lon), echoing the 137th Psalm, about Jews in exile who hang up their harps and refuse to sing to Zion in a strange land. In 1948, the twenty-eight-year-old Celan, a labor camp survivor, wrote a letter in German to relatives in Israel. In that letter Celan says that "there's nothing in the world for which a poet will give up writing, not even when he is a Jew and the language of his poems is German."

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