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**“A BEASTLY LANGUAGE”:
USES OF GERMAN IN THE LETTERS OF
D. H. LAWRENCE**

JAN WILM

“Lieber Friedel, hier bin ich wieder in meinem Heimatland. Aber ich liebe es nicht” [Dear Friedel, Here I am, again in my native land. But I don’t love it.] (2L 24–5).¹ So begins D. H. Lawrence’s first full surviving letter in German. It was written on 21 June 1913, from near Edenbridge, Kent, England. The dear Friedel addressed here is ten-year-old Friedrich Jaffe, D. H. Lawrence’s German nephew.

Lawrence’s letter mostly describes ordinary impressions and gardening activities, like the covering of a small raspberry plot with nets to keep the birds from eating the berries, or the multicoloured roses shimmering in the windows of the house where Lawrence is staying. But the letter was written at a crucial moment in Lawrence’s life, and it provides a fascinating view of his opinions of England at the time. Lawrence had just returned home after roughly a year of travelling through Germany, Austria, and Italy. And this is the time following Lawrence’s elopement with Frieda von Richthofen.²

Preceding the letter to Friedel, Lawrence and Frieda had spent their first longer periods of time together on the continent. The dismissal of England that we find in the letter has its roots in Lawrence’s troubled biography, the recent years having seen his beloved mother’s death, the breaking off of an engagement, and a complicated relationship with England’s upper class, into which the miner’s son had just begun to break when his first writing was published. In the letter to the young nephew, however, Lawrence simply attributes his displeasure with the country to the weather: “In der Ferne gibt’s immer ein Dämmerung, ein Nabel und ein

wenig Dunkelheit, das macht mein Herz schwer und traurig" [In the distance there's always a twilight, a mist and a bit of dimness, that makes my heart heavy and sad] (2L 24–5). Apart from the humorous mistake Lawrence makes – "Nabel" instead of "Nebel" [mist], which would mean there is a navel over the sky – it is most surprising that he becomes so melancholy in a letter to a ten-year-old boy, whose interests, after all, may have lain not in his uncle's dejected emotional state, but rather in something like those raspberry-thieving birds. From Lawrence's explicit expression of his frustration with England, one may infer an implicit frustration with the English language as well, especially since he describes his irritation in a language not his own.

This letter in German was probably also the first letter Lawrence wrote after his return from the continent. From this it could be deduced that Lawrence felt a strong impulse to return to Germany, possibly even an impulse to make a good impression on the potential German relatives he would soon find there by demonstrating his command of the German language.³ More importantly, Lawrence had always been "strongly biased toward Germany".⁴ He had briefly studied German in school and continued to study it on his own; he had travelled through Germany, read German books, and listened to German music. Stepping into the German language for his letter-writing, then, suddenly satisfies his interest in Germany and possibly sublimates the impulse for wanderlust. Interestingly, Lawrence did not think highly of his German. In the letter to Friedel he apologises for his poor command of the language, saying that he had to write without a dictionary and without the editorial help of "Tante Frieda" [Aunt Frieda] who has been asleep the entire afternoon (2L 25).⁵ Of course, Lawrence's German was not at all poor. It was highly idiosyncratic, and subject to errors and mistakes. In the course of this article, I will trace some of Lawrence's unconventional as well as erroneous uses of German and view these in light of a modernist defamiliarisation and dislocation of language and meaning, the linguistic outcome of which frequently warrants the term poetic.

At the time of the first letter, Lawrence felt he had great difficulty writing German, and only a few weeks earlier, from Irschenhausen on 29 May 1913, he had closed a letter to his friend Helen Corke – “who provided Lawrence with most of his knowledge of Wagner” –⁶ with the following words: “Do you read much German? It is a beastly language, one that doesn’t fit the cells of my brain” (*IL* 554). And yet, Lawrence overcomes his difficulty with this Teutonic “beast” to write a tender letter in German to his young nephew. The note to Friedel is remarkable for its place in the corpus of his letters and in the context of Lawrence’s life. The overcoming of his own limitations with this “beastly language” could be seen as a very subtle, but no less powerful, hint at a larger project of overcoming the confines which Lawrence felt his own language and nation imposed on him at the time.

As with so much in Lawrence’s life and work, his relations and his oeuvre being likewise marked by ambiguity and paradox, his relationship with the German language is entirely equivocal, at once scolding and affectionate. For the rest of Lawrence’s life, his relationship with the German land and language remains fluctuating and complicated. Despite his dismissal of both his syntax and his synapses, his correspondence is increasingly sprinkled with German expressions from the time he is in Germany in 1912 and after his return to England. Writing from Germany in May 1912, Lawrence begins first to use a few occasional German words, then a full German paragraph to Frieda,⁷ and then, increasingly, carefully personalised farewells to friends who understand German (as he does in Italian, too, particularly well and humorously). For example, one encounters the terms “Auf Wiedersehen” (*2L* 27, 29), “Bleib wohl” [stay well] (*4L* 281), or the endearing “Bleibe lustig” [stay jolly] (*5L* 354). And one comes across what seem like snippets overheard or learned while in Germany, possibly from Frieda and her family. And so, very soon, there are idiomatic expressions like “echt schön” [really nice] (*6L* 145), or the idiomatic use of “futtern”, to nosh or guzzle, when he reports on his recent consumption of venison: “Wir futtern sehr gut hier – Reh!”

(6L 129). And, I venture to say that D. H. Lawrence would not be D. H. Lawrence if he had not come across the ever-baffling German word for a woman, "Frauenzimmer" (5L 411). (This odd word "Frauenzimmer", now a slightly derogatory term, like dame or broad, literally translates as "woman-room", or "room of a woman". Etymologically, it seems to have derived from a description of the actual room ["Zimmer"] of a lady ["Frau"] and then shifted in meaning to describe the lady herself. Only in the nineteenth century did it acquire the disparaging connotation it has in contemporary German.)⁸

With a smile one notices the charming mistakes Lawrence makes in German from the time he starts to use it. Instead of "zu Hause" [at home], he uses the more homely "zu-heim" (5L 177). Or the wonderful error that every German schoolchild has to go through as well, like a vaccination: the spelling error "Uhrwald" (4L 237) with an "h" that transforms reality and a primeval forest [Urwald] is magically altered to become a forest of clocks. I argue that through these slips and changes of language there occurs an opening out of meaning, a liberation from the strict rules of language and style that bears many similarities with the modernist writer's interest in Shklovskyan estrangement or defamiliarisation. I will return to this toward the end of the article.

Especially fascinating in Lawrence's epistolary work are the German letters to his "Schwiegermutter", his mother-in-law Anna Elise Lydia von Richthofen (née Marquier), Baroness von Richthofen and Anna for short (a familiarity, however, which Lawrence never used). These letters, which he began to write in the early 1920s, exhibit Lawrence's growing fondness for the German language, a playfulness and a true delight in learning to write (and improve) his German, and his pleasure in using German for poetic descriptions of landscapes as well as for deliberately humorous effects. His growing experimentation with this "beastly language" is in no small part due to his growing fondness for Anna. Lawrence's letters to her are candid and often very witty. In 1921 Lawrence writes to his mother-in-law when he seems to be slightly

irritated by the constant prattle of her daughters, Frieda and her sister Johanna (“Nusch”) – and when he seems to be slightly intoxicated. The letter is short; I quote it in full:

Liebe und einigste Schwiegermutter,

Die Frauen schimpfen, aber ich muss doch sagen, du bist gescheiter wie deine Töchter alle.

Wir haben 4 Hähnchen gefressen, 4 Liter Pfirsichbohle gesaufen, und jetzt fangen wir an zu kämpfen. Also, hilf mir, dein Schwiegersöhnle.

D. H. Lawrence.

[Dearest and only Schwiegermutter,

The women grumble, but I really must say, you are cleverer than all your daughters.

We have gobbled 4 chickens, guzzled 4 litres of peach-punch, and now we begin to fight. So, help me, your little son-in-law.

D. H. Lawrence.] (4L 62)

Armin Arnold notes that Lawrence “often used German phrases, some of which must have amused [Frieda] considerably”.⁹ In a letter to Frieda, written while she is in Switzerland in 1928 with her sister Johanna, Lawrence speculates about how the two women might be spending their time together: “I guess you’ll schwätzen schwätzen all the day” (6L 429). (“Schwätzen” means to chatter, or to jabber). He describes the old mayor of the town where Frieda’s mother lives as a man who is “fat and lustig to the age of eighty” (6L 103). And note how his extraordinary use of similes seems to reinvent this rhetorical figure entirely. It is one thing to describe a beautiful woman as a rose, but another to describe a man as follows: “wir sahen den Hans Carossa – ein netter man, mild wie Kartoffelbrei” [we saw Hans Carossa – a nice man, mild as mashed potatoes] (6L 171–3). Or Lawrence’s way of describing the sizable portions of food in Germany: “Ich kann besser essen – aber sie bringen man so furchtbar viel, wagnvolle Kartoffeln und Schnitzel

gross wie ein Fussteppich – und wie die Leute futtern! – das nimmt mir ein wenig meine scheue Apetit weg” [I can eat better – but they bring one such a frightful lot, trolley loads of potatoes and cutlets big as carpets – and how the people pitch in! – that takes my shy appetite away a bit] (6L 171–3).

These examples of German in the letters have two central effects. They are both an insightful and ironic comment on cross-cultural communication in the first half of the twentieth century, similar to Katherine Mansfield’s use of German in her early stories *In a German Pension* (1911), for example.¹⁰ But they also show Lawrence’s playful sensibility for language, as well as a modernist sensibility of how different languages and registers can defamiliarise a stilted perception of reality and language. In a letter to his sister-in-law Else Jaffe, on 26 May 1926, Lawrence writes that he is typing up Frieda’s German translation of his play *David* and that “it is good for me to learn some German” (5L 464). And he continues to ruminate on the differences between German and English:

I am interested, really, to see the play go into German, so much simpler and more direct than in English. English is really very complicated in its *meanings*. Perhaps the simpler a language becomes in its grammar and syntax, the more subtle and complex it becomes in its suggestions. Anyhow this play seems to me much more direct and dramatic in German, much less poetic and suggestive than in English. (5L 464)

Lawrence seems to evoke a sentiment shared by Samuel Beckett, who switched from English to French since he felt that for a native speaker it was too easy always to write poetically in one’s native language.¹¹ That said, Beckett’s French is a beautiful lyrical writing, and Lawrence’s German is often highly poetic as well; for example, when he describes small clouds floating over the sea: “das Meer ist mit weissen Lämmchen bedeckt” [the sea is covered with little white lambs] (4L 210).¹²

Yet, Lawrence's most endearingly amusing letters are those to his "Schwiegermutter",¹³ Baroness Anna von Richthofen, or as he once called her in a letter to Frieda, "die Alte" [the old one], as in "Love to die Alte!" (6L 305). The letters show a developing friendship which seems marked by mutual understanding and mutual jest, judging from Lawrence's uninhibited joking. (The letters from Anna to Lawrence are, of course, lost.) Frequently, the jokes that Lawrence shares with "die Alte" are on account of her daughter Frieda's weight. Along with a letter from Mexico in 1924 Lawrence sends a photograph of Frieda, and is asked by Frieda to make something clear: "Die Frieda lasst sagen, sie sieht dicker aus, wie die wirklichkeit. Doch fängt sie weniger Brot und Kuchen an zu fressen" [Frieda asks me to say, she looks fatter than she really is. But she is starting to guzzle less bread and cake] (5L 176–7). The description of poor Frieda's fondness for carbohydrates, using the word "fressen" [to devour], reads like an in-joke between Lawrence and "die Alte". It is not the only time that Lawrence refers to Frieda's rapacious appetite with the word "fressen". To "die Alte" he also writes: "Die Frieda hat ihren Schlagrahm von Savona in einem Schluck gefressen" [Frieda has gobbled up her whipped cream from Savona at one gulp] (5L 353–4). But in Frieda's defence, she was trying to lose weight, which Lawrence promptly reports to the Schwiegermutter: "Wir essen Kilos von Weintrauben – die Frieda macht Traubenkur – auch Wachholderkur, – und Gott weiss was" [We eat kilos of grapes – Frieda is doing a grape-slimming-course – also juniper-berry-slimming-course, – and God knows what] (6L 556).

It is Lawrence's use of the German language, and his growing command of it, which built a strong bond with his "Schwiegermutter" through the letters he wrote to her.¹⁴ At the same time, while their relationship thrived up until 1929, Lawrence's thoughts of Germany remained ambiguous. The short sketches 'German Impressions', which Lawrence wrote on his first visit to Germany in 1912, already display his strong reservations about the country. It is an ambivalent relationship which he

maintained for the rest of his life. In his last letters, before his death in 1930, he clearly anticipates the alarming onslaught of fascism in Germany, and in these last notes, Lawrence seems convinced that his final trip to Germany was responsible for the quick decline of his health, almost as if it had been Germany or even the German language, which were the cause of his early death in 1930.

Curiously, however, Lawrence is hardly ever scathing or in any final way scornful of Germany, the way he clearly is of other countries, of England and especially of the United States. The USA, which he ironically, and in German, calls a "Freiheitsland" [freedomland] (4L 415), is in his estimation a nation that is "Geldgefräßig" [gluttonous regarding money] and the constitutional pursuit of happiness is described as "Besitzenfieber" [a fever for possessions] (4L 451). In Lawrence's view the labourers of the United States are lamented to be nothing but "Menschmaschinen" (4L 415), a linguistic conflation of "machine" and "man", which he focuses on in his work as well, in the effects of industrialisation on the human psyche and the body, in *Lady Chatterley's Lover* (1928) and *Women in Love* (1920) particularly.

In his fiction as in his letters, Lawrence integrated paradox and contradiction, a dialogic battling quality that is frequently realised on even the smallest scale, at the level of the sentence, as in expressions like "snow-darkness" in *Women in Love* (WL 409, 434) or "her ugly-beautiful mouth" in *The Rainbow* (R 46). In his descriptions of the United States, written in German, Lawrence is distressed by conflicting thoughts about the country, a place, which, after all, afforded him troubling as well as wonderful times and friendships. In a letter to the "Schwiegermutter" he negotiates his uncertainty: "so ist Amerika stark, stolz, übermächtig. Wenn man nur sagen könnte: 'Amerika, ihr geld ist Scheiss; geh und scheiss mehr' – dann ware Amerika ein Nichtle" [America is strong, proud, overpowerful. If one could only say: 'America, your money is shit; go and shit more' – then America would be a little nothing] (4L 351–2). Note how his remark about the USA is humorous as well as scathing, pointedly ended by the dialectal diminutive of the German

noun “nothing” (“ein Nichts”) as “Nichtle” (a little nothing). This makes it at once indulgent to his “liebe Schwiegermutter” through the use of the Upper German dialect of the Baden region that she spoke (and which Lawrence probably learned from her), while belittling the USA through the dialectal diminutive. But while the belittling tone remains, it is frequently also the case that Lawrence’s humorous and dialectal German lessens the gravity of the scathing tone he viciously evokes in English. The use of “Nichtle” here may be read as a belittling expression, but the diminutive may also imply a hesitancy to dismiss finally. In this way, a paradoxical attitude to a described phenomenon may be connoted in just one word; one word may be read as a locus for troubled, conflicting emotions.

As in the letter to Friedel I began with, Lawrence’s German is often pervaded by an unusually deep sense of “Schwermut”, a sense of heavy melancholia, which seems to come from his use of the German language itself. While there are times in Lawrence’s life when his English letters are similarly battered by a sense of sadness, one should note that Lawrence did not think of himself as a melancholic. Late in life he wrote to his sister-in-law, Else, that “it isn’t usual for me to get depressed” (7L 433). Reading the German letters, one is struck by the great freedom with which Lawrence writes poetically and humorously about his experiences, but one cannot help noticing the poignant sense of sadness and sorrow that seeps through his use of the foreign tongue.

This is best illustrated through letters concerning England and his feelings about his native land. In his English letters, to John Middleton Murry for example, Lawrence’s disdain for England while he is in Mexico in 1923 is brazen and withering. In letters written in German at the same time to his mother-in-law, his disdain and uncertainty about travelling back home to England are lessened (4L 446). In the German, his expressions seem more melancholy, sad and regretful rather than angry. It seems as if to Lawrence the German language carried with it Romantic notions of “Weltschmerz” and melancholia that he may have encountered in

his reading of German literature. His sentimentality, his mournful pathos in the German, may be contrasted with his English letters, in which command of his own language is likely to bring out expressions of anger and hostility. An argument could be made that the more ruminative slow-paced writing in another language creates a more pensive effect than the swift flow one can produce in one's own. As we who speak another language may well have experienced, when truly angered or annoyed, we may return to our mother tongues, if only because in it we know many more swearwords.

Lawrence suffuses his German letters with more emotion, for example when hinting at the true pain he feels about not being able to return to England, of being alienated, rootless. It may seem paradoxical that one's second language should enable a person to speak from the heart. But one might argue that we are often able – and this holds true for a master craftsman like Lawrence especially – to use our native languages as shields, as devices to mask our more private emotions. However, in a foreign language we may lack the final command cleverly to disguise and cover deep feelings, and so these emerge when we are speaking or writing in a language not our own.

On 7 August 1923 Lawrence writes to his mother-in-law from New York City: "Ich weiss nicht wohl, warum ich nicht nach England gehen kann. Es kommt mir so eine Wehmut über der Sinne, als ich nur daran denke, dass ich glaube es wär besser hier zu bleiben, bis mein Gefühl verändert ist" [I don't well know why I can't go to England. Such melancholy comes over my senses, when I only think of it, that I believe it would be better to stay here till my feeling has changed] (4L 479). Since this letter attests that Lawrence simply does not know the cause for these feelings, or that his conscious evasions occlude his true feelings, he may have felt that the other language could help him to see the problem (that is, his unfathomable feeling) from another angle. When Lawrence does return to England, he is quite open in English about his disgust with his native land. In a letter to his American publisher Thomas

Seltzer on 14 December 1923, he is blatantly angry: “Am here – loathe England – hate England – feel like an animal in a trap” (4L 542). In German he writes in full, longer sentences, as if he were trying harder, struggling more to find out exactly how to phrase something and to find out more clearly what he really means. In English he knows precisely how to put his feelings, so much so that he does not feel the need to write in full sentences.

On the same day, Lawrence uses the trap simile from the Seltzer letter in a note to the “Schwiegermutter” in a very different way:

Frieda ist nett, aber England ist hässlich. Ich bin wie ein wildes Tier in einer Falle, so ist es dunkel und eingeschlossen hier, und nimmer zieht man freie Luft ... ich gehe aber herum wie einer eingesperrte Coyote, und kann nicht ruhen.

[Frieda is nice, but England is hateful. I am like a wild animal in a trap, so dark and closed-in it is here, and never does one draw free air ... I go round like a coyote, and can't rest.] (4L: 542)

Again, we note that he says England is ugly, but whereas to the foreigner who speaks English (Seltzer) Lawrence merely states his feelings about England, to the foreigner who speaks German (Anna), he seems to describe his feelings, as if the other language demanded (and afforded) a new perspective on his emotional state. His description in German shows his feelings quite clearly, but he sounds less enraged, more dejected, and the trap simile is more personalised. Now, the Lawrence-coyote in the image is a more submissive animal in contrast to the one in the letter to Seltzer, which through its staccato-like expressions seems quicker, more like a hunter and less like the hunted. In German, the words “Falle” [trap], “dunkel” [dark], “eingeschlossen” and the dynamics of monotony and dull cyclical repetition – “gehe aber herum wie einer eingesperrte Coyote, und kann nicht ruhen” – evoke a more hopeless, more tortured creature.

In German Lawrence describes himself and his own emotions in a more tormented way, and he seems much more defeated.

Certainly this may be due to the fact that he would, of course, hold back his anger and disgust in a letter to his mother-in-law as opposed to a friend. But we should also remember that he uses the word "Scheiße" [shit] to Anna a number of times in the letter about the USA quoted above (4L 351). Armin Arnold notes that "In the letters to his German relatives, Lawrence was always outspoken".¹⁵ Arnold refers to factual detail here, but I argue that one can perceive a different emotional undercurrent in Lawrence's German than in his English. Having said that, my argument cannot ultimately be proved with any finality because, of course, Lawrence never wrote the same letter in both English and German, and, even if he had, it would still not be the same letter. Indeed, it could not be. Additionally, one must not forget the degree of emotional closeness or distance to a letter's respective addressees. Because of Lawrence's close relationship to his "Schwiegermutter", he simply may have allowed himself to open up to her more, to be more submissive because he trusted her and saw no need to put up a front. All the same, it may be easier to expose one's feelings in another language simply because the foreign language keeps at bay the embarrassment over one's own sentimentality that is strongly associated with specific words. Every word in one's own language comes with a history of allusion and memory, which is why some of us may find it easier to say the words "I love you" in a language not our own. This may derive from the fact that emotional expressions in our own language have become clichéd to our ears, may seem archaic, boring, or they may have lost their meaning because one has heard them too often and so fails really to hear their music.

Lawrence's German is full of beautiful, productive mistakes, which immediately undermine cliché and boredom. His German letters are brimming with fresh allusions, surreal poetic descriptions, defamiliarisations, and humorous coinages and compounds. He is very experimental in German and decisively more modern in the way of linguistic invention than in some of his writing in English. The German letters are an open space where

Lawrence can experiment with language free from the pressures to publish or to write *with style*. Paradoxically, this creates a highly original and fascinating poetic style in its own right. Beckett explained his switch from English to French, saying that “for him, English was overloaded with associations and allusions” and so it was easier, for him, “to write in French *without style*”.¹⁶

In Lawrence’s German letters one finds lyrical descriptions and insights of remarkable beauty, which match the most breath-taking examples of style in his prose fiction and poetry in English. Yet, the passages in the letters are more radical linguistically, freer because he is unafraid of making mistakes, either grammatically or orthographically, unafraid to change words according to his wishes and for effect. And to my ear Lawrence’s acute attention to detail, which evokes what Michael Bell has called the “sheer intensity of Being”,¹⁷ is emphasised further through the use of another language, and through what could conventionally be misunderstood as language errors. Seemingly unimportant details – small objects, ancillary landscape descriptions, and ordinary experiences – are transformed into an intense poetry deriving not from technical prowess, but from the idiosyncratic “new” language Lawrence uses. So he is able to make objects and phenomena even more precious, to transform or ornament them with novel expressions. Freed from restrictions deriving from overuse and traditional style in his own language, Lawrence cuts those slits into the umbrella he speaks about in his review of Harry Crosby’s poetry; there he describes how slits in the umbrellas of the deadeningly mundane offer a view “on to the open and windy chaos” (*P* 256), which is where poetry lies. Lawrence reorganises and rebuilds the German language, distorts and poeticises it as he focuses on the quotidian aspects of life and relationships, for example when he elevates the mundane through an unconventional simile.

With astounding frequency the “Schwiegermutter” sends Lawrence neckties –¹⁸ perhaps a subconsciously symbolical gesture from a mother-in-law – and on one occasion Lawrence writes to the Baroness: “Ich habe die Schlips, sie sind schön wie Rheingold” [I

have the ties, they are as beautiful as Rhinegold] (6L 396). Or he invents words such as "Kapitalstadt" (5L 488) for the German "Hauptstadt" [capital]; "niederich" (4L 204) for "nieder" [lowly]; or the beautiful word "die Papaginen" (4L 177), a plural and female variant of the word "der Papagei" [parrot], whose grammatical gender in German is male. He creates compound words such as "Dämmerungswald" [twilight-forest] or "Schiffsfreunde" [friends made on ship] (4L 288, 237); and compounds especially to describe aspects of the landscapes upon which he gazes, such as "Schneeköpfe" [snow-heads], for distant mountain peaks covered in snow (4L 350); or the droll "Regenbogenzipfel" (6L 145), which could be translated as "tip (or peak) of a rainbow", or even "lappet of a rainbow".¹⁹ Lawrence also invents adjectives to heighten the exultation of seeing a beautiful vista; landscapes are described as "himmelschön" [heavenly beautiful] and "zauberschön" [magically beautiful] (4L 204), a word which in Lawrence's mind may have echoed Tamino's aria 'Dies Bildnis ist bezaubernd schön' from Mozart's *Die Zauberflöte* (1791), which Lawrence had seen in London in 1917 (3L 181). At one time Lawrence speaks about suits tailored for his nephew Friedel and simply calls them "Friedelanzüge" [Friedel suits] (3L 135). And a friend of Mabel Dodge is simply called "eine Mabel-freundin" [a Mabel friend] (5L 238).

A very logical and meaningful compound is found when Lawrence writes about one of Frieda's notoriously erratic moods: "alas, next day Frieda was in one of her worst moods I have ever seen her in! – a seelenkater" (7L 422). The word "Seelenkater" compounds "Seele" [soul] and "Kater", where "Kater" means a tomcat but is also a common term for a hangover. Seelenkater, then, is a hangover of the soul. And Lawrence's fondness for sausages from Baden-Baden – "Badener Würstle" (6L 95) – finds its apt expression in his remarkable invention of a complete saying in German: "Brot ist der Stab vom Leben, aber mit Wurst dazu wird es auch Regenschirm" [Bread is the staff of life, but with sausage it becomes an umbrella too] (6L 145). One has to think long and hard

about what exactly this umbrella Lawrence conceives of might look like. Just imagine what the painter Giuseppe Acimboldo, whose paintings of human heads moulded from vegetables or fish, might have depicted if he had translated Lawrence's words into an image!

Lawrence's German is like no German one comes across, either by a native German speaker or a foreign author writing in German. Maybe only a foreigner and a person with Lawrence's linguistic sensibilities can approach a language in such a liberal and fearless way. When being brought up in a language, one learns it in a linear fashion, and often the inflections and cadences of one's time are most influential, the language of the moment one is born into, the language of one's parents, friends and schoolmates. One learns a native language, quite literally "avant la lettre" [before one reads], and thus one is able to distinguish quite clearly the German one's parents speak in the twentieth century from the German of Georg Büchner or Heinrich von Kleist. It seems to me a pity that one internalises one's contemporary language more deeply and is inhibited about allowing archaic diction and grammar to stream into one's speech and writing. Often a foreigner approaches a language through reading and so in a more unsystematic and anachronistic way, reading contemporary but also classic literature in the foreign language. I find it a great advantage to speak a language in such a way that can at times be almost cubist in its anachronistic fragmentation of its influences – it can have a poetic and invigorating originality, transforming what it signifies.

Lawrence's use of German is so uninhibited that many of the experimental compounds and coinages he creates might not readily occur to a native speaker. When reviewing a book on *The Minnesingers* by Jethro Bithell, Lawrence voices great reservations about it, but he also remarks that the "blithe facility and unconcern on the author's part does give the book a certain quality, almost a charm of its own" (P 198). And he notes of (later) translations from German in the book that they "are often made very attractive by the author's irresponsible, artless manner" (P 198). In Lawrence's German letters one can also find great charm and beauty in his

equally “blithe facility” with the Teutonic tongue. Many a German writer of today, I believe, would be happy to be as inventive and funny in his or her own language as Lawrence is in his foreign one. Lawrence’s German is simultaneously a new and an old German. Often it is marked by an archaic diction and style, which at times make it sound almost like the Middle High German of *The Minnesingers*, like nineteenth-century German philosophy, or suddenly like a modernist German writer of the twentieth-century. Lawrence had of course read ‘Minnesang’ both in German and in translation, as his review of *The Minnesingers* by Jethro Bithell shows; and Lawrence had read Nietzsche and Schopenhauer, among other German nineteenth-century writers,²⁰ as well as writers like Thomas Mann, of whose *Der Tod in Venedig* he was the first English reviewer.

One letter describes a group of horses he has watched: “Und dann stehen die Pferde stein-still, von Kälte benommen, mittel im Alfalfa-feld, sich wieder in der Sonnen-wärme ein-weichend” [And then the horses stand stock-still, numbed with cold, in the middle of the alfalfa-field, soaking themselves again in the sun-warmth] (5L 137). One can see here the more classical descriptions like “von Kälte benommen” coupled with a freer modernist sensibility signified in the paradoxical expression that the horses are soaking themselves in the warmth of the sun, possibly translated falsely from the transitive use of “soaking *up* the sun”.

He writes to his “Schwiegermutter” shortly before her birthday: “Kommt dein Geburtstag wieder, du alte Walküre. So reisst du auf deinem Geistross von Jahreszipfel zu Jahreszipfel, und guckst immer weiter in die Zukunft” [Here’s your birthday come round again, you old Valkyrie. On you ride on your steed-like spirit, from one year’s peak to the next, always looking further into the future] (5L 62). Again, the description of riding on a spirit-horse (“Geistross”) seems at once archaic and entirely modern; and further we find the extraordinary word “Jahreszipfel” [peak or tip of a year], similar to the earlier “Regenbogenzipfel”. And, of course, humorously calling his mother-in-law “alte Walküre” allows us to

infer just how close Lawrence felt they had become by 1924. Four years later in 1928, he even writes to her: “Meine liebe Schwiegermutter [,] Ich bin froh dass es dir besser geht. Du bist zu tapfer gewesen. Weisst du, du bist jetzt schwer auf den Beinen, du bist nicht mehr ein leichtes junges Ding” [My dear Schwiegermutter [,] I’m glad you’re better. You’ve been too brave. You know, you are now heavy on your legs, you’re not a light young thing any more] (6L 614–5). The idiomatic and comical expression “junges Ding” [young thing], especially for a woman of 76, shows how outspoken and friendly he was with her. At the same time, such expressions highlight that Lawrence’s German is also a local German, informed by the dialect spoken by the “Schwiegermutter” and her friends; this can be seen in repeated uses of the German diminutive “-le” instead of “-chen”. For example, “Kindchen” [a small child] in the Upper German spoken by Anna may become “Kindle”, or indeed, as mentioned before, “Würstchen” [small sausage] may become “Würstle”

Lawrence crosses linguistic boundaries by using language with invigorating “blithe facility” and with an original naïveté. It is naïveté, fearlessness of errors and eccentricity which in the Crosby review, mentioned above, conflate to form a kind of aesthetics: “Through [Crosby’s writing] runs the intrinsic naïveté without which no poetry can exist” (P 261). Lawrence’s aesthetic here is similar to that of Wallace Stevens, who in his late work *Adagia* (1957) writes: “It is necessary to any originality to have the courage to be an amateur”.²¹ In Lawrence’s deforming and refashioning of language, one is reminded of T. S. Eliot’s command to the modern poet that he “must become more and more comprehensive, more allusive, more indirect, in order to force, to dislocate if necessary, language into his meaning”.²²

Lawrence’s ambiguous relationship with language motivated him to pursue the expansion of language, driving it on toward the expression of deeper states of being, or more truthful means of linguistic expression.²³ David J. Gordon notes that *Women in Love* persistently “shuttles between a concern for getting at the truth and

for the linguistic means of doing so".²⁴ In *Women in Love* we are told of Ursula that: "She knew ... that words themselves do not convey meaning, that they are but a gesture we make, a dumb show like any other" (WL 186). Or note how her sister Gudrun complains: "'Ah!' she said, laughing. 'What is it all but words!'" (WL 10). And in *Lady Chatterley's Lover* we are told that Constance "hated words, always coming between her and life!" (LCL 93). Lawrence expresses a similar sentiment in one of his German letters to the "Schwiegermutter" in 1924: "Ich weiss nicht warum: aber Worte und Sprache mir etwas langweilig geworden sind" [I don't know why: but words and speech have become a bit boring to me] (5L 61).

For Connie Chatterley, as for Lawrence, language has become boring and stale; it has become the umbrella "between [humankind] and the everlasting swirl", between oneself and the chaos, which in the words of Nietzsche one must retain to give birth to a dancing star, or in Lawrence's to get a view "on to the open and windy chaos" (P 255, 256). For Connie, this chaos has been stripped from life, has become banal and anaemic along with language. It is those "ready-made words and phrases [which have] suck[ed] all the life-sap out of living things" (LCL 93).

The question is how the umbrella obstructing the poetic pandemonium might be slit, how the chaos might be seen again and the stars might dance? In *Women in Love* one may note the short exchange between the Brangwen sisters, Ursula and Gudrun, regarding the meaning of "soldier of fortune". The sisters agree that the German compound "Glücksritter" is a much nicer and more appropriate expression than the English, getting at the heart of its meaning in a more direct way (WL 374). Why should this be the case, one might ask.

Walter Benjamin in his essay 'The Translator's Task', argues that a poem (or indeed any literary text) communicates only "very little, to a person who *understands* it".²⁵ He argues that immediate comprehension of a text makes the reader's mind race through the words without really grasping their deeper meaning. To

defamiliarise words, then, can delay understanding and set the reader's mind thinking, signalling towards what Benjamin sees as the poetic, the initially incomprehensible, the mystifying and secret.²⁶ About translations of an original text, Benjamin writes that the successful translation accomplishes an original text's "renewed, latest, and most comprehensive unfolding".²⁷ Benjamin speaks about translations from one language to another, whereas this article's concerns are intra-textual "translations" of a kind, German letters in an *oeuvre* of English letters, German words spliced through English narratives. However, one can easily extend Benjamin's ideas that a translation does not subtract from the original's meaning but opens up a view from another vantage point. One may argue that Lawrence's use of German in his letters and prose are "translations" of a kind in Benjamin's sense, though translations made by the author intra-textually, while writing. In Lawrence's novel *Women in Love* characters have German names, have been educated in Germany (Gerald), are from Germany (such as Loerke), and the German language informs the narrative in an atmospheric as well as a defamiliarising way; central concepts, especially those regarding male friendship, are described through German words, such as "Blutbrüderschaft" or the aforementioned "Glücksritter". These German expressions force the reader to hover over them for a moment and puzzle out their meanings, or integrate them into the narrative in relation to the concepts they signify, which are described in English. These German terms, then, have the same effect as a cubist painting, or a montage in a film, which show an object from different angles.

Lawrence's works achieve a poetic unfolding through multilingualism: an unfolding "of a special, high form of life", according to Walter Benjamin.²⁸ This arises from the fact that foreign words defamiliarise in the sense Victor Shklovsky described in the essay 'Art as Device',²⁹ or that they dislocate in T. S. Eliot's sense.³⁰ One may well see Lawrence's sprinkling of German expressions into English writing as those little slits in the umbrella's obstructing fabric, and I would like to align this image

with an idea of Samuel Beckett's once again. Frustrated with the "veil" of language,³¹ Beckett notes in one of his German letters to Axel Kaun in 1937 (I will give this in the editor's English translation): "It is to be hoped the time will come ... when language is best used where it is most efficiently abused ... To drill one hole after another into [language] until that which lurks behind ... starts to seep through".³² Beckett's holes drilled are like Lawrence's holes slit. And even if the latter are not holes or slits through which something seeps out in the more destructive (or deconstructive) sense of Beckett, maybe they are nevertheless holes drilled into language through language. Maybe they are holes or slits through which one sees the far bank, or through which one may re-inject the life-sap into living things. And yet, even while Lawrence continually reached for the maximum of expressiveness and outspokenness throughout his life, for the poetic chaos behind the umbrella, he was well aware that even chaos and outspokenness should be controlled in writing and probably taken in moderation in life. On 16 December 1927 Lawrence wrote to his sister-in-law Else: "I'm writing my *Lady Chatterley* novel over again. It's very 'shocking' – the Schwiegermutter must never see it" (4L 237).

¹ All English translations are taken from the Cambridge Editions of *The Letters of D. H. Lawrence*, which at times translate not what Lawrence wrote, but what he seems to have intended to write.

² John Worthen argues that at the time this was not an elopement proper, since Frieda had not informed Ernest Weekley even of the ongoing affair with Lawrence, let alone a permanent commitment to him. See John Worthen, *D. H. Lawrence: The Life of an Outsider* (London: Allen Lane, 2005), 110–14. It is with a retrospective view that I call their going away together an elopement.

³ Initially, Lawrence was eyed somewhat sceptically, especially by Frieda's mother and sisters. *Ibid.*, 114.

⁴ Elgin W. Mellow, 'Music and Dance in D. H. Lawrence', *Journal of Modern Literature*, Volume 21.1 (1997), 49–60, 51.

⁵ In a letter of 10[?] January 1922 Lawrence writes again of his self-consciousness about his German, and again with regard to Friedel: “Friedel schreibt so gut English. Sicher haltet er mein Deutsch für wenig” [Friedel writes English so well. Surely he thinks little of my German] (*4L* 161–2).

⁶ Mellown, ‘Music and Dance in D. H. Lawrence’, 52.

⁷ On 13 May 1912 Lawrence ends his letter to Frieda in German: “Nun muss ich auch gehen mit Onkel Stübchen, ein Halbes zu trinken. Der Morgen ist kühl und rein, nach dem gestern-Abends Gewitter. Es war viele Blitzen in unsern Himmel, aber nicht nahe vorbei Sie wollten wohl lachen an meinem Deutsch. Habe ein gutes Herz, meine Geliebte, bitte sei nicht traurig. Ade nun. Bleib stark” [I must go now with Uncle Stübchen, for a beer. The morning is cool and clear, after the storm yesterday evening. There was a lot of lightning in our sky, but not nearby. You will probably laugh at my German. Be of good heart, my love, please do not be sad. Farewell now. Stay strong. Farewell] (*1L* 399–400). Despite many mistakes, Lawrence’s playfulness about this new language already shimmers through in the compounded expression “gestern-Abends Gewitter”, which would literally translate as “yesterday-at-night-thunderstorm”. Presumably by mistake, Lawrence uses the adverb “abends” [at night]. Since there seems to be no corresponding expression in English that Lawrence could have transliterated, this sounds like one of the playful touches Lawrence will use ever more frequently and confidently later.

The Cambridge editors’ translation of “Sie wollten wohl lachen an meinem Deutsch” as “You will probably laugh at my German” should, at least, be qualified by another possibility. The pronoun “Sie” may mean “you” as a form of respectful address, but may also signify the plural pronoun “they”. The latter seems more probable here, since Lawrence would not have addressed Frieda in the respectful way one addresses a stranger. He distinctly does not use the respectful address to Frieda a sentence later, since the expression “habe” would then have to read “haben Sie”. Rather,

Lawrence seems to be referring to the Germans he is likely to encounter with Onkel Stübchen in a pub for a "Halbes" [half a pint] later in the evening. So, the translation should read: "They will probably laugh at my German".

⁸ See Friedrich Kluge, *Etymologisches Wörterbuch der deutschen Sprache*, ed. Elmar Seebold (Berlin/New York: De Gruyter, 2002), 313. The Cambridge edition simply gives "woman" as translation.

⁹ Armin Arnold, 'The German Letters of D. H. Lawrence', *Comparative Literature Studies*, Vol. 3, No. 3. (1966), 285–98, 287.

¹⁰ For a recent consideration of the use of the German language in Mansfield's collection see Andrew Harrison, 'Ambivalence, Language and the Uncanny in Katherine Mansfield's *In a German Pension*', *Katherine Mansfield Studies*, Volume 4 (2012), 51–62. The author considers not only the way the German language sets the mood and atmosphere of a German spa town in the early twentieth century, but also considers how the German vernacular contributes to an estranging and uncanny sense of one language intruding into another.

¹¹ James Knowlson, *Damned to Fame: The Life of Samuel Beckett* (London: Bloomsbury, 1996), 357.

¹² The Cambridge editors' translation does not fully reflect the poetry of the German. It might better read: "The sea is shrouded with little white lambs" or "the sea is blanketed with little white lambs".

¹³ Arnold, 'The German Letters of D. H. Lawrence', 286.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 286.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 286.

¹⁶ Knowlson, *Damned to Fame: The Life of Samuel Beckett*, 357; added emphasis.

¹⁷ Michael Bell, *D. H. Lawrence: Language and Being* (New York: Cambridge UP, 1992), 9.

¹⁸ For example 6L 555.

¹⁹ It is possible that Lawrence meant “Regenbogengipfel” rather than “Regenbogenzipfel”, which may have been a language error or even only a spelling error, given the closeness of the written lower-case “g” and “z” in Lawrence’s hand.

²⁰ Arnold, ‘The German Letters of D. H. Lawrence’, 285.

²¹ Wallace Stevens, *Complete Poetry and Prose*, eds Frank Kermode and Joan Richardson (New York: Library of America, 1997), 908.

²² T. S. Eliot, *Selected Prose of T. S. Eliot*, ed. Frank Kermode (London: Faber, 1975), 65.

²³ See David J. Gordon, ‘Sex and Language in D. H. Lawrence’, *Twentieth Century Literature*, Volume 27.4 (1981), 362–75, 364.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 518.

²⁵ Walter Benjamin, ‘The Translator’s Task’, trans. Steven Rendall, *TTR: traduction, terminologie, redaction*, Vol. 10.2 (1997), 151–65, 151; added emphasis.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 152.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 154.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 154.

²⁹ See Victor Shklovsky, ‘Art as Device’, *Theory of Prose*, trans. Benjamin Sher (Champaign: Dalkey Archive Press, 1991), 1–14.

³⁰ T. S. Eliot, *Selected Prose of T. S. Eliot*, 364.

³¹ Samuel Beckett, *The Letters of Samuel Beckett, 1929–1940*, eds Martha Dow Fehsenfeld and Lois More Overbeck (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2009), 518.

³² *Ibid.*, 518.