

Affordances of a New Language: Abbas Khider's Claim to Community in *German for Everyone*

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ABSTRACT: Like Mark Twain's essay "The Awful German Language," Abbas Khider's *Deutsch für alle. Das endgültige Lehrbuch* (*German for Everyone. The Definitive Manual*, 2019) humorously reforms the German language in order to bring it among the most beautiful languages of the world, and make it accessible to everyone. Yet Khider's fifth book elicited not just hilarity, but also negative reactions, racial insults, hateful comments, and even threats. Drawing on the work of Theodor Adorno, Ludwig Wittgenstein, and Stanley Cavell, this essay reads Khider's project as part of a dissent over what "German" is, what it means to re-imagine a language, and to count democratic membership to its community as one of its affordances. A novel parading as a grammar manual, *Deutsch für alle* is an essay in political education. Its light-hearted proposal for living with others is Khider's *minima moralia*, inspired by the gift of prepositions of a foreign god.

I. Tramps abroad

Abbas Khider's fifth book, *Deutsch für alle. Das endgültige Lehrbuch* (*German for Everyone. The Definitive Manual*, 2019), is a slender tome of heavy laughter. Ostensibly motivated by a desire to help foreigners learn the language and natives to bring German among the elegant and accessible languages of the world, Khider echoes Mark Twain's sentiment that the study of German is "harassing and infuriating." Surely, the author of *Tom Sawyer* wrote in *A Tramp Abroad* (1880), "there is not another language that is so slip-shod and systemless, and so slippery and elusive to the grasp;" when German speakers finish a very long sentence, they themselves must experience a "touching inquisitiveness" as to what they have just said, he told journalists and writers at the Concordia Club in Vienna in 1897.¹ Like linguists in pursuit of an ideal language, Mark Twain and Khider streamline sentences, articles, and prepositions, straight-facedly trimming down exceptions that make rules look "as reliable as horoscope charts." *German for Everyone* borrows from its predecessor the autobiographical framework featuring the author as an embattled

¹ Mark Twain, "The Awful German Language," 9 (hereafter *AGL*).

student, the list of grammatical difficulties and the funny confusions they generate, many of the remedies put forward, the scuttling, yet relentlessly funny mischievousness directed at German, and the rhetoric of a drastic reform that will save it from becoming a dead language.

In the atmosphere “brimful of political electricity” at the end of 1897, jokes about German likely struck a sensible chord. Mark Twain likely became increasingly aware of this aspect in the course of the stormy sessions he attended in the Austrian Parliament.² In “Stirring Times in Austria,” he marveled at the “condition of incurable disunion” among the nineteen nations of the dual monarchy, and noted that, although they spoke eleven languages (or “eleven distinct varieties of jealousies, hostilities, and warring interests”), the Germans, numerically “a fourth part of the empire’s population,” insisted that all the country’s business be conducted in their tongue. This discrepancy severely impacted the chances of a parliamentary coalition, necessary for the renewal of the *Ausgleich* holding Austria-Hungary together. The German Liberals’s obstruction of Count Badeni, who had secured an alliance with the Bohemians (through a language ordinance that gave Czech equal status with German) was the beginning of violent protests that progressively weakened the legitimacy of the Austrian government, eventually leading to the dismantling of the multilingual empire in 1918. Remarkably, at the banquet organized in Mark Twain’s honor by the Viennese Journalists’ and Authors’ Association *Concordia*, his speech was a version of the published essay of “The Awful German Language,” concerned exclusively with linguistic matters. The hosts’s “stormy cheers” recognized the American writer as “the truest friend of the German language.”

² The quote is from Mark Twain, “Stirring Times in Austria.” Published in *Harper’s* in March 1898, it reports on the stormy parliamentary sessions of November 1897. In the illuminating essay “Mark Twain in Vienna” (1945), Max Ledderer shows that Samuel Clemens’s early exposure to German began in his native Hannibal, Missouri, where there was a sizeable population of German settlers. At 18, he started working as a typesetter for the German-language newspaper *Anzeiger des Westens* in St. Louis. Some formal instruction in German, supplemented by individual study, equipped him for his prolonged stays in Berlin, Hamburg, and Vienna; apparently, however, he was never satisfied with his speaking and writing proficiency in the language. See also Norbert Hedderich’s “Mark Twain and ‘The Awful German Language’” (2003).

Abbas Khider's manual evinces an even more intimate sense of connection.³ Readers familiar with his previous four novels—recognized with prestigious literary prizes like the Adelbert von Chamisso, Hilde Domin, Nelly Sachs, and others—will remember some of the anecdotes prefacing grammatical problems in *German for Everyone*: they document his life as an Iraqi-born asylum seeker, student of philosophy, and German-language writer and serve here to credential him as a language reformer. Ready to put his past as a tramp to rest, he has found the kind of time “only the dead have” to learn German; and then he has found even more time to design *Neudeutsch*, a New German, a radically simplified language from which subclauses, gendered articles, separable and irregular verbs, noun and adjective declension have been eradicated.⁴ Neudeutsch boasts the universal article “de,” symmetrical pronouns, only main clauses and regular verbs, and fewer prepositions. “I want to prevent someone like Mark Twain coming here and uttering sentences about German like the following: ‘The German language should gently and reverentially be relegated among dead languages, since only the dead have time to learn this language’” (*DfA*, 25).⁵ But for this passing reference to Mark Twain—a quick wink that both identifies the source of inspiration, and obfuscates the extent thereof—one could accuse him of plagiarism. And yet, what a difference one hundred thirty years makes!

Like Pierre Ménard, author of *Don Quijote*, Khider would be the author of a very different text even if he had reproduced Twain's original word for word. One need only imagine Twain's joke about his frustrations with the many meanings of the pronoun *Sie* (*she*, polite *you*, *they*...) coming from someone with Khider's dark-haired complexion after 9/11: “This explains

³ Abbas Khider received asylum in Germany in 2000, and citizenship in 2007. His novels, *Der falsche Inder* (*The Village Indian*, 2008), *Die Orangen des Präsidenten* (*Oranges from the President*, 2011), *Brief in die Auberginenrepublik* (*Letter to the Eggplant Republic*, 2013), and *Obrfeige* (*The Slap in the Face*, 2016) draw on his experiences as a political prisoner, undocumented migrant, and asylum seeker in Germany. I have written on Khider's work in “Novels in the Translation Zone: Abbas Khider, *Weltliteratur*, and the Ethics of the Passerby.” His most recent novel is *Palast der Miserablen* (2020).

⁴ Khider implicitly engages in conversation with the history of the German language, offering an alternative to *Neuhochdeutsch* (New High German), the period beginning in the seventeenth century that has seen the development of standard written German and the standardization of spoken language.

⁵ This humorous claim has a much different resonance in the age of *Gegenwartsdeutsch* (contemporary German), which has seen a decline in the status of German as an international language, in part under the influence of English. Khider's ambition, borrowed from Twain, to bring German among the elegant and accessible languages of the world, speaks directly to a contemporary situation.

why, whenever a person says SIE to me, I generally try to kill him, if a stranger” (AGL, 606, 14). Whereas Twain provoked hilarity, the reactions elicited by Khider’s *Botschaft* were decidedly mixed. While many readers understood the “irony signals” [*die Ironiesignale*] and appreciated the “very smart slapstick” [*ein sehr kluger Klamauk*], others, particularly on social media like Facebook and Twitter, reacted with racist insults, hateful comments and threats, that the cultural broadcasting FAZIT summed up using an English word, with superb, although probably unintended irony: “Shitstorm against Abbas Khider.”⁶

Familiarity with populist discourses on the far right makes it relatively easy to imagine why Neudeutsch might look to certain readers like the stuff of nightmares.⁷ Clearly this writer has made himself too comfortable in the German language, treating it like his own home, instead of an ancient city with streets and squares sedimented historically.⁸ A barbarian who never contributed anything to German culture, oblivious to the fact of language as an affordance of sophisticated thought, he nonchalantly transforms a metaphysical privilege into a crude replica.⁹ This language will supposedly be for everyone, that is, everyone who must learn it as a foreign language, as if anticipating a time when German Europeans will be a negligible minority put in the situation to re-learn their own language as if it were a foreign one, or rather, to learn Neudeutsch like strangers in their own land, in order to re-integrate into what used to be their own culture. In short, *Deutsch für alle* could be a perfect cautionary tale for patrimonial populism.

⁶ See interview with Antje Weber in *Süddeutsche Zeitung* and Jo Lende, “Shitstorm gegen Abbas Khider.” Mark Twain would have approved the use of the English word, since German lacks words powerful enough to describe “all sorts of vigorous things in a vigorous way” (AGL, 617). Dismissing “Ausbruch” as too weak to convey “explosion,” he recommended the English “Toothbrush” as a loanword Germans could use instead (AGL, 615).

⁷ This would seem the kind of nightmare dramatized in the French context by Michel Houellebecq’s *Submission* (2015), set in 2022 when the French vote in a Muslim president, then complacently consent to the absorption of French, and implicitly of European culture, into Eurabia. The image of a moribund national (or even European) culture is not foreign to German intellectuals, as the heated debates generated by books from Thilo Sarrazin’s *Deutschland schafft sich ab* (2010) to Rolf Peter Sieferle’s *Finis Germania* (2017) suggest. See also David N. Coury, “A Clash of Civilizations?” and Alexandra Laignel-Lavastine, *La Pensée égarée*.

⁸ As Wittgenstein describes language in *Philosophical Investigations*, §18..

⁹ Abdelkébir Khatibi affectionately referred to Jacques Derrida as a “barbarian” in *Le Scribe et son ombre*, and the idea that immigrants contributed nothing to European culture historically is a reproach Fatima el-Tayeb addresses in *European Others*. Adorno refers to German as a “metaphysical surplus” in “On the Question: ‘What Is German?’” I will return.

To such readers, Khider's own disavowal of Neudeutsch as "a serious linguistic aberration" presumably does not change much, and it does not matter that his written German and knowledge of grammar, complete with linguistic jargon, is impeccable. That he never adopts his delightfully symmetrical and user-friendly Neudeutsch (other than to illustrate the new grammatical rules) is also no mitigating factor, and it is irrelevant that Khider has gone so far in his cultural integration efforts as to study philosophy in German, an experience he humorously compares to learning to drive at the Formula One. That was the time when he had to give up both his bilingual dictionaries (Arabic-German, German-Arabic) and the monolingual one, and following his professor's advice, read secondary literature and philosophical lexicons in order to plumb the depths of Kant's, Hegel's and Heidegger's philosophy. "There is no field in German comparable to philosophy, when it comes to the complexity of thoughts and the claim to linguistic precision" (*DfA*, 16), muses Khider, echoing luminaries like Theodor Adorno and Martin Heidegger.¹⁰ One must grant that such high-minded reflections do seem at odds with the idea of a simplified Neudeutsch, a language whose ambitions mostly concern the everyday lives of ordinary citizens like Muhammad, Marina, or Ali. One begins to suspect that the manual's scene of instruction lies elsewhere, and that Khider's "new German" signals an inadequacy of a different order than linguistic.

Indeed, like in Twain's case, foreignness serves to defamiliarize the language and break its spell of necessity; but whereas the American writer flattered his Viennese audience and the miracle of their agreement in language with his deprecatory jokes, reserving witticisms about their disunion for his political dispatches, Khider nimbly introduces his critical stance through the double entendre of the title (German—the language? the identity?—is currently not *for everyone*, but his deft pedagogy will make it so), and treads through social landscapes of language that raise

¹⁰ In "On the Question: 'What Is German?'" Adorno claims that the "inherent capacity of German words to say more than they say" makes it impossible to convey the complexity of texts like Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit* in translation. Adorno sounds here much like Heidegger, who in *Introduction to Metaphysics* and "Only a God Can Save Us" refers to "the special inner kinship between the German language and the language of the Greeks and their thought." I will return.

an implicit, but insistent question: what does it mean to be part of a community of speakers? This echoes Theodor Adorno's dissent over German upon his return from his American exile, which sheds light on a different kind of manual that emerges in the palimpsest of Khider's grammar book: it imparts political education and a light-hearted proposition about living with others whose German might be differently accented. Making explicit his claim to community, Khider puts forward a simplified morality centered on the integrity of human life.

II. Life in German: A user's manual

At Café Refugio, where Khider found inspiration for his book, old and new Berliners interact in German.¹¹ For the new-comers, however, "German" is not just the language that resists mastery, but also everything they experience in this language, including bureaucratic frustrations, impenetrable politics, and cold weather. As someone who received asylum in 2000, Khider is in a position to note that "nothing has changed in Germany, linguistically and grammatically, over the past twenty years." *I mean*, he adds ironically, "not just... the tenderness of authorities, the moral intercourse of political parties with all the important aspects of life, the clarity of paragraphs and the friendly faces here during lengthy sunny and cloudless winters, but also the endlessly delightful cases of the German language the students will never be rid of" (*DfA*, 26-27). Khider's language reform—a magic-like gesture that ostensibly concerns prepositions and declension, but through sympathetic transfer might beneficially impact politics and bureaucracy—dramatizes the

¹¹ Refugio is a project of the Berlin City Mission established in 2015, which offers refugee housing and hosts community-building events and activities open to migrants around the city (language tutoring, cooking, music and art workshops, as well as job-training sessions). Refugio is also the headquarters of Give Something Back to Berlin (GSBTB), "an award-winning project platform and network fostering community integration, intercultural dialogue and participation among Berlin's diverse migrant populations." It partners with local NGOs, senior citizens, international students, and supports not only refugees but also underprivileged youth. Their website indicates that over 60 nationalities are represented in their hundreds of volunteers and community members, who have supported over 25,000 people. See <https://gsbtb.org/about/history/>.

challenges of integration in a new country by way of a relentlessly humorous engagement with its language.

The manual is premised on an appeal to the basic facts of grammar that German speakers agree on. “Appealing to criteria,” writes Stanley Cavell in *The Claim of Reason*, “is an appeal we make when the attunement is threatened or lost [...] when we ‘don’t know our way about’, when we are lost with respect to our words and to the world they anticipate. Then we start finding ourselves by finding out and declaring the criteria upon which we are in agreement.”¹² These criteria are the grammatical rules, that Khider illustrates with examples featuring problems small and big, from sparrows and underpants, to mixed families and political parties. The examples are not exclusively German: his manual also concerns itself with European educational reforms (the “Bologna sauce”) that have turned seminar rooms into huge bedrooms (DfA, 53), with torture in American prisons (“do they use democratically elected torture devices there?”, DfA, 41), and with ambitious politicians speaking Latin while the “poor people are bawling” (DfA, 82).¹³ In the spirit of expanding the readers’ sense of the world, Khider also informs them about weather patterns in Irak (DfA, 78) and throws in some Arabic proverbs for good measure (DfA 23, 60). These are explorations of the affordances of language: how does it shape a worldview? What does it make possible and what does it obstruct? What kind of community does it accommodate, and what world does it anticipate?

A naturalized citizen, Khider brings to the project a double perspective: that of a foreigner aware of cultural stereotypes about Germans, not all of them flattering; and that of an immigrant who has taken extensive notes about language, culture, and customs in his host country. In his experience, “German” is by no means a homogeneous culture: “German federal

¹² Stanley Cavell, *The Claim of Reason*, 34.

¹³ Khider might have in mind here the Dutch populist politician Thierry Baudet of the Forum for Democracy, who started his maiden speech in parliament in Latin. He spoke about the oikophobia (self-hatred) of the governing classes, who prefer foreign cultures to their own, oblivious of Western civilization’s former glory that once “confidently spread to every corner of the world.” See Joost de Vries, “Meet Thierry Baudet, the suave new face of Dutch rightwing populism.”

states are a mosaic of many colors and stones” (DfA, 59). He cites regional differences and dialects, marveling at the nuances of Berlin humor, idiosyncrasies of smoking bars in Bavaria, and the motivations of vigilantes in Mecklenburg-Vorpommern (DfA, 58); he even borrows some of his linguistic remedies (the article *de*, the pronouns *mi*, *di*) from regionalisms in Bavaria, a place where he had frequent racist encounters. Khider is openly committed to the view that “a language is a mirror image of our life:” while entertaining readers with grammatical rules and exceptions, he casually points to a window or a door left ajar through which we catch glimpses of ordinary lives.¹⁴ The figure of the child playing Robin Hood with his stay-at-home father in a miniature life-scene—a *fragile and intimate moment*, as Cavell might say—is symbolic of Khider’s own use of make-believe to build a world for his readers. His book might parade as a grammar manual, but it reads like a novel indebted to the prose of everyday life.

As one learns, à propos relative pronouns, about people like Massud or Ali Baba, one suspects that *German for Everyone* aims to compel an acknowledgment of “German” as a diverse form of life. Massud—or is it Karim from Khider’s novel *Ohrfeige*?¹⁵—is pursued by police, apparently only on account of his name:

The police are looking for a man named Massud. He has taken the immigration office by assault and slapped a coworker. Marina opened the door to a policeman. He shows her the photo of the man who has assaulted the authorities. But Marina doesn’t know him.

“Your husband’s name is Massud.”

“Not everyone named Massud is my husband. My Massud is a German citizen. What should he be doing at the Immigration Office? He and our child are actually abroad right now.” (DfA, 70).

Massud has everyday worries like everyone else:

Massud is not hungry. He is supposed to call someone, but he can’t remember whom. But that can happen to anyone. (DfA, 73)

¹⁴ See also Wladimir Kaminer’s “Deutschunterricht,” in *Russian Disco* (183-186), on the function of examples in language manuals, and how the “characters” featuring in them project a certain world that the student comes to associate with the language.

¹⁵ *Ohrfeige* is the story of Karim, whose asylum card is revoked after the fall of Saddam Hussein. Desperate to tell his true story to someone before he leaves the country, he forces his unfriendly case worker Frau Schulz to listen to him by tying her to a chair.

Yet a few pages later, recapitulating pronouns, we catch a glimpse of him and his wife again, and learn that their lives are not easy:

Her name is Marina, she is from Mainz. His name is Massud, he is from the Chad. Their child Friedrich was born in Baden- Württemberg. They all have German citizenship. We call them the “negro family” in our apartment building. On the street, the father is often stopped by policemen for no reason, at the supermarket he is constantly under surveillance by the staff, and he hasn’t gone to a disco-bar in an eternity because he knows that the doorkeepers always send him home. Marina gets very upset and often loses her temper, but Massud is used to it and takes it all lightly, with a friendly smile. Their child Friedrich doesn’t get any of this treatment yet, but he will soon. (*DfA*, 74)

Massud and Marina’s story is not simply a made-up example; Khider positions it against a social script of discrimination and unfairness. In the world that shapes up in his manual, other families are separated, just like separable verbs: he quips that a family where the father is stuck in München, the mother in Potsdam, and the child in Bielefeld is “not a family, but a catastrophe” (*DfA*, 108). Therefore he aligns himself with right-wing conservative parties, and, advocating for the family as a unit that must remain together, declares all verbs un-separable (*DfA*, 109).

Khider’s linguistic reform is underwritten by a radical vision of social justice. He abolishes articles and declension because “nothing on this planet is worth declining.” He makes patriarchy a thing of the past (no more “ihm,” since the masculine “er” should not inflate itself, in “typically masculine” fashion, *DfA*, 64), and anticipates a classless society by getting rid of irregular verbs, because they “seem to believe they are better than everyone else.” He addresses situations where trivial considerations intervene between the subject and the verb in subclauses: “A sparrow, for example, has two wings. It flies. The sparrow (doer) and the flight (deed) stand next to each other and belong to each other” (*DfA*, 47). Why do so many things come between the doer and the deed? “In German one waits in a subclause endlessly for the verb, one becomes impatient, powerless, and bored, before it surfaces” (*DfA*, 47). This little parable illustrates the temporality

of bureaucracy and the differed promises of asylum, residence, and citizenship; Khider, self-appointed reformer of German, proclaims the end of subclauses.

He appears to borrow one of the guiding principles of the organization Give Something Back to Berlin, namely that “to become citizens and believe in democracy, people should be treated as citizens from the start.” In his manual, he imagines immigrants spontaneously flooding the streets to celebrate the adoption of his universal article “de,” happy to give free reign to their hatred of the authoritative regime of articles (*der, die, das*). They would shout “We are de people!” [*Wir sind de Volk!*], a reminder of the social contract re-affirmed by the Leipzig protesters in October 1989, which led to the fall of the Berlin Wall, here reclaimed by immigrants to assert the principle of equality as the foundation of a truly democratic community. The challenge is to obtain recognition of this principle from native Germans who might not see it as applying to newcomers: “It’s also funny to imagine the dumbfounded faces of the natives looking at these cheering people, shaking their heads and thinking that all the foreigners and migrants have gone mad” (DfA, 33-34). Ironically, a few months after the publication of *German for Everyone*, the far-right party Alternative for Germany (AfD) gained its strongest support in Saxony and other states in former East Germany, having resurrected the 1989 slogan for its political campaign.¹⁶

This success, and the negative reactions to *German for Everyone*, belie Khider’s premise of fellowship in German. They also raise the possibility of a lack of agreement about what “German” is.¹⁷ What does it mean to make a language one’s own and to formulate a claim to the community of its speakers? Might foreignness be instrumental in the defamiliarization of an experience of language and community one blindly takes for granted?

¹⁶ For background to this orientation, see Petra Köpping’s *Integriert doch erst mal uns! Eine Streitschrift für den Osten* (2019).

¹⁷ The possibility is indirectly suggested by Khider himself, who posted the poem “Grammatische Deutscheit” by Friedrich Rückert (1788-1866) on his public Facebook page in response to reactions to his book. The poem is a satire in the form of a dramatic dialog among speakers who claim to be “more German” than others, so enthralled by comparatives and superlatives as to forget what “the positive” form of the word actually means.

III. *What is German?* A dissent

“The person who once claimed that ‘we live not in a country, but in a language’¹⁸ was right. When one lives in a language like in a home, one treats it differently” (DfA, 119), writes Khider, explaining the mindset that governed the design of Neudeutsch. The distinction implied here is between a language that one treats as one’s own, and a foreign language in which one does not take belonging or ownership for granted. The spirit of this distinction inflects Theodor Adorno’s explanation why he wanted to return from his American exile to the place where German was spoken. In a foreign language, he muses, one speaks in the mode of an address to others by whom one tries to make oneself understood. By contrast, in one’s native tongue one simply says something as compellingly as possible: the language itself stands in for one’s fellow human beings.¹⁹ Adorno relies here on “an old, if unestablished feeling, that the mutual meaningfulness of the words of a language must rest upon some kind of connection or compact among its users,” a feeling that makes any act of speaking a claim to community.²⁰ This reflection belongs to Stanley Cavell, who shows in *The Claim of Reason* that its *locus classicus* is in discussions of the social contract in Locke, Hume, and Rousseau’s political theory. The question it raises is: how does such a compact bear on individuals who were not present when it was established? What about foreigners like Khider, whose consent, as Locke pointed out, could only be tacit?

Cavell’s reflections shed light on Khider’s *Lehrbuch* as a project of political education. *The Claim of Reason* examines the criteria on the basis of which speakers of a language say what they say, admitting that “nobody could have established them alone, and that of course whoever is party to them does know what they are (though he or she may not know how to elicit and state them, and not recognize his or her complicity under that description).”²¹ Cavell compares this lack of awareness to the “mode of ignorance” emphasized by Rousseau in the domain of social

¹⁸ The unacknowledged author of this memorable thought is another exile, Emil Cioran, whom Khider’s narrator also quotes in *Brief in die Aberginenrepublik*.

¹⁹ Adorno, “What Is German?,” 130.

²⁰ Stanley Cavell, *The Claim of Reason*, 22.

²¹ Cavell, *Claim*, 22.

theory, which led to “the discovery of a new mode of knowledge, a way to use the self as access to the self’s society.”²² Cavell describes the mechanism of the social contract in terms of a consent to membership in a polis: in addition to recognizing the principle of consent itself (“I recognize others to have consented with me, and hence that I consent to political equality”), the consent implies a recognition of the society and its government as one’s own, which means that one is answerable *to* it and *for* it. The effect of the teaching of the social contract is, for Cavell, “to show how deeply I am joined to society and also to put society *at a distance from me*, so that it appears as *an artifact*.”

Absent the crutch of social theory, the perspective of a foreigner can have the same effect, Khider’s book suggests. Bound to the laws of community not through birth, but because his “presence implies tacit consent” (as Locke notes in the *Second Treatise of Government*),²³ the foreigner is naturally *at a distance from* the host society, and making conscious efforts to decipher it, as if it were *an artifact* (which it is). Questions like “how I know with whom I am in community and to whom and to what I am in fact obedient” suffuse every interaction, every single one of the foreigner’s acts of speaking. It is in this sense that Khider’s project aligns with the philosophical significance of social contract theories in their “imparting of political education:” it sheds light on the contract taken for granted by the community of German speakers, challenging them to recognize that consent to participate in it is premised on the capacity to speak—for oneself and for others, in mutuality. As Cavell puts it, “once you recognize a community as yours, then it does speak for you until you say it doesn’t, i.e., until you show that you do.”²⁴ In this light, Khider’s Neudeutsch is a form of dissent, which is “not the undoing of consent but a dispute about its content, a dispute within it over whether a present arrangement is faithful to it.”²⁵

²² Cavell, *Claim*, 26.

²³ Locke, quoted by Cavell, 24.

²⁴ Cavell continues: “A fortunate community is one in which the issue is least costly to raise; and only necessary to raise on brief, widely spaced, and agreed upon occasions; and, when raised, offers a state of affairs you can speak for, i.e., allows you to reaffirm the polis” (27).

²⁵ “The alternative to speaking for yourself politically is not: speaking for yourself privately. [...] The alternative is having nothing (political) to say [...] being voiceless, not even mute” (Cavell, *Claim*, 27-28).

Specifically, Neudeutsch alerts readers that “German” as it stands is not inclusive of all those who have at least tacitly consented to participate in the (political) community of speakers. This has compromised the principle of equality, withholding the right to speak from some of its members.

Khider’s project is a distant echo of Adorno’s dissent in “On the Question: ‘What Is German,’” where he expresses views shaped by his own experience of foreignness.²⁶ Alienation from German during his American exile alerted him to the “naïve relation to what is one’s own,” teaching him the importance of “untiring vigilance regarding any swindle” one’s native tongue might promote. Although Adorno refers specifically to “the metaphysical surplus of the German language” evidenced by the difficulty of translating philosophical texts, his note of caution reinforces his dismissal of *Kultur* as the obvious answer to the question “what is German?” (WIG, 130). Adorno justifies his dissent on historical grounds: once established as autonomous, a spiritual culture [*Geisteskultur*] also has the “tendency to detach itself from real humanity and become self-satisfied” (WIG, 126), in an “unrelenting upright lack of consideration for the other” (WIG, 124). Historically inseparable from “the drive toward boundless domination,” it is “no stranger from inhumanity.” Adorno denigrates Wagner’s definition of German, “doing something for its own sake,” as “the famous formulation of German collective narcissism,” revising it as follows: “If one dares assume something that is specifically German, then it is this intertwining of the magnificent – unwilling to hold itself to any conventionally established border – with the monstrous” (WIG, 124).²⁷ Unwavering intellectual radicalism had as its corollary the rise of Hitler to power in Germany; continuing to cultivate it would mean courting the permanent possibility of relapse (WIG, 125).²⁸ To keep it at bay, Adorno concludes somewhat

²⁶ Published in 1969 in *Stichworte*, the text was originally an intervention broadcast by the Hessische Rundfunk in 1965, in response to the question “What Is German?” (hereafter WIG).

²⁷ Adorno denounces the belief in a culture of spirit as myopic because, “due to its ideal of self-sufficient purity, [it] renounces the realization of its content and abandons reality to power and its blindness” (127). Elias Canetti’s *Die Blendung* (1935) is one of the most eloquent illustrations of this idea.

²⁸ Khider recounts an anecdote that alludes to this possibility, featuring an African-looking young man who, frustrated by the tram-doors closing right in front of him, started to hit them with his bare hands, “cursing recklessly

cryptically, “German” would have to be associated instead with “a transition to humanity.” One assumes this would mean an attunement to the very aspects obliterated in the alienation of *Kultur* from its content: moral values, reality in its diverse forms of manifestation, and a thoughtful regard for others.

It is probably no coincidence that, contemporary with the experience of fascism, a similar turn away from *Kultur* occurred in the work of Ludwig Wittgenstein. I have in mind the reformulation of a thought, which in the Brown Book read “To imagine a language is to imagine a culture,” and in the *Philosophical Investigations* became “To imagine a language is to imagine a form of life.”²⁹ Juliet Floyd notes that Wittgenstein’s preference for *Lebensform* over *Kultur*, consistent since 1936, registered the realization that culture, the realm of rules and social habits described in the Brown Book in the vocabulary of language games, already presupposed complex forms of life that enabled specific ways of structuring meaning.³⁰ Wittgenstein began to see our language, our mutual interactions, and our activities in the world as subject to both cultural *and* biological necessities.³¹ Language wasn’t merely a social, conventional and artificial construction, but also captured “the common behavior of mankind” in its varied interaction to its nonhuman environment (PI §§204–6, 272). The connection with Adorno’s hope in “a transition to humanity” is striking, particularly in its implicit attention to “others.” Significantly, Wittgenstein imagines the elucidation of forms of life by way of comparisons (*Vergleichsobjekte*, cf. PI §§130), and in this sense, Floyd insists, a *Lebensform* is not an item to be described, but a method of investigation invested in “reshaping and reconfiguring our sense of possibility, of our dealings with one another, with language and with the world.”³² Imagining things from the perspective of

like most young people in the world do. To this, a man at the front with an elegant hat said loudly for everyone to hear: ‘If only Adolf were here now!’” (DfA, 108). Khider expresses unwillingness to recite the long list of instances of abuse, when he and his friends were shouted at “Foreigners out!” or thrown things at, for instance. The tram anecdote, however, “comically repeats itself every now and then in various forms all over the country” (DfA, 107).

²⁹ Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, §19.

³⁰ I am following here Floyd’s argument in “Wittgenstein on Ethics.”

³¹ Floyd, “Wittgenstein on Ethics,” 8. In *Revolution of the Ordinary*, Toril Moi also insists on the imbrication of nature and culture in *Lebensform*.

³² Floyd, “Wittgenstein on Ethics,” 8-9.

someone “other” involves for Wittgenstein an “anthropological move” that engages our values, interests and experiences. In attending to “the variety of possible ways of structuring living,” Wittgenstein’s ambition was to avoid a philosophy in which “the problems of life remain completely untouched.”

This ambition of relevance on behalf of philosophical thought bears a quiet kinship to Adorno’s awareness of the importance of critical self-reflection, most notably to the “fidelity to the idea that the way things are should not be the way they remain” (WIG, 131)—the impetus behind his redefinition of German as “transition to humanity.” These considerations offer a historical context and a conceptual framework for Khider’s dissent in *German for Everyone*, at a time when right-wing xenophobia recalls the rise of fascism in Europe in the 1930s. I read this book as Khider’s own *minima moralia*, conducted in the spirit of Adorno’s revision of “German.” Echoing Wittgenstein’s *Lebensform*, Khider’s account is a method of investigation committed to the rough ground of ordinary life, as experienced by immigrants, starting from what we say when.³³ And like Adorno’s reflections *from* damaged life, Khider’s anecdotes are drawn *from* his and others’ experiences as asylum seekers and immigrants trying to integrate in Germany. Formally, in Khider’s manual the anecdotes serve to illustrate grammatical rules: since this is a German-language manual, they are made to count as “German,” to be part of the *Lebensform* one imagines when one thinks of the German language. And by referring to instances of discrimination and inequality, or other specific challenges faced by these immigrant characters, he presents readers with the question whether this present arrangement is faithful to the content of their social contract, based on the principle of equality. This is, in Stanley Cavell’s account of the claim to community, what it means to speak publicly: determining whether one is willing to count a feature (an experience, for example such as that of immigrants like Khider) under a concept

³³ It is significant that all three—Adorno, Wittgenstein, and Khider—rely on the experiential authority of the “I” to conduct their respective investigations: critical in the case of Adorno, philosophical in Wittgenstein’s, and linguistic-sociological-political in Khider’s. The ethical import of these projects is implicit and intimately imbricated in the first-person perspective.

(here, “German,” but perhaps also “unjust,” “discriminatory”), which is the calling out, or – *claim*;³⁴ and determining whether one wills to enter one’s accounting into a particular occasion (coming before, *pro*-, those to whom one speaks, i.e., declaring oneself in “a position to inform or advise or alert someone of something, or explain or identify or remark something to someone;” here, Khider, or, in an earnest joke, Abbas Müller-Schmidt, interpellating his fellow German speakers into the “we” of community).

Some of his anecdotes echo Wittgenstein’s obsession with the example of accounting for someone’s pain behavior, which chimes with Adorno’s distanciation from complicity with suffering. Both provide a critical ground for the expression of dissent, a stage on which Khider’s account of the experience of immigrants as something that needn’t remain as it is assumes the symbolic form of an arrogation of voice addressing itself to those with whom he finds himself in community. And just as Adorno’s vision of the good life was necessarily embedded in reality as it was (rather than ensconced in an ahistorical outside³⁵), Khider traces the contours of a new German from the affordances of the old, imagining a language—and a community—more welcoming of those who currently do not find a secure and comfortable home in it.

IV. Prepositions from Allah: diplomacy, humor, and the gift of foreignness

The chapter in which Khider proposes to get rid of tens of German prepositions and replace some of them with two, borrowed from the Quran, provides a humorous answer to the much

³⁴ “It is this feature of counting something under a concept which Wittgenstein’s notion of a criterion is meant to bring out” (Cavell, 35). The latter is crucial to agreement: Wittgenstein’s *Philosophical Investigations* work from the premise that “there is a background of pervasive and systematic agreements among us, which we had not realized, or had not known we realize,” which he calls “agreement in judgments” (PI, §242) (Cavell, 30). Our ability to use language depends upon agreement in “forms of life” (PI, §241). Cavell later specifies: “The idea of agreement here is not that of coming to or arriving at an agreement on a given occasion, but of being in agreement throughout, being in harmony, like pitches or tones, or clocks, or weighing scales, or columns of figures. That a group of human beings *stimmen* in their language *überein* says, so to speak, that they are mutually voiced with respect to it, mutually attuned to bottom” (32).

³⁵ I am following here Rahel Jaeggi’s cogent reading in “No Individual Can Resist: *Minima moralia* as Critique of Forms of Life.”

debated question of the compatibility of Islam with Western values.³⁶ It addresses anew the question “who is we?” by zooming in on a singular example, Khider’s own. The memory of his discovery of writing as a vocation frames a creative ethical solution to the challenges of living with too many prepositions—and too many different people.

Khider begins “Allah’s Prepositions” with a couple of autobiographical episodes about his relationship with religion and the Quran. He used to have a burning interest in Islam when he was a boy. He was reading every religious text he could lay his hands on, and trying to convert everyone around him to a holier life. His eyes set on becoming an imam, he cleansed his spirit by burning his collection of Lebanese magazines with pictures of half-naked women: “I looked at the smoke rising to the sky and said softly: “This is my present to you, Allah”” (*DfA*, 87). As it turned out, however, the conversion at the center of his life was not to Islam, but to the art of writing. He owes his “salvation” to the bewildering discovery of *The Prophet* by the Lebanese poet and philosopher Khalil Gibran, which reconfigured in his mind the relationship between language, worldview, and writing:

The book unsettled me greatly. In Islam, the Quran is considered a linguistic miracle, it is after all God’s personal message. The Quran is absolute, whole, and peerless. It is therefore the foundation of the Arabic language. Yet now I read Khalil Gibran’s book and thought: How can this be? How can a man handle language more beautifully than God? From this moment on, I was a doubter. Immediately I stopped dreaming about becoming an imam. Since then I have wanted to be a writer. Literature instead of religion. To write more beautifully than Allah: that was my plan. (*DfA*, 88)

In case the burning of “degenerate” magazines reminded readers of Nazi book burnings, this passage should assuage any prejudice about immigrants with a Muslim background as potential religious fundamentalists: Khider seems more aligned with the Western liberal faith, central to enlightened modernity, in art as a substitute for religion. However, his youthful preference for *The Prophet* over the Quran does not translate into an alignment of distance from Islam with Western secularism; he still refers to the holy text of Islam as the “foundation of the Arabic

³⁶ See, for example, Navid Kermani’s “Can Islam be integrated?” [*Ist der Islam integrierbar?*] in *Wer ist wir?* (2009).

language,” part of the scaffolding of his native form of life.³⁷ The insolence of situating himself (and Gibran) in competition with Allah is part of his humor; but it also speaks to an ancient tradition of Arabic poetry that valued competition among poets, against which the Quran emerged as a unique recitation that signaled its address to all Arabs.³⁸ Nowhere is Khider more closely in conversation with his native culture than when he appears to rebel against it.

The provocation is more conspicuously directed at his German readers, when Khider humorously asserts that “German, in contrast to Arabic, is neither godly nor unchangeable.” What I take this to mean is not that he really thinks German is more malleable than Arabic, but rather, that one’s worldview is intricately woven in one’s native tongue, and that the precellence of the form of life it has generated is not so easily displaced in one’s mind. Khider expresses regret that his dream to become an Arab writer has not panned out, and finds consolation in a reorientation of his life’s purpose:

Unfortunately this hasn’t quite worked out. Sure enough, I have become an author, but I write in German, not in Arabic. To write more beautifully than God in German is unfortunately impossible. And I can’t imagine that some god would be proud to have discovered the German language. To change this language though, that is possible... (*DfA*, 88-89)

As an Arabic-language writer, Khider speculates, he might have held himself accountable to an aesthetic standard supposedly de rigueur in Arabic, a language whose foundation is the Quran, Allah’s beautiful masterpiece.³⁹ As a German-language author, however, the aesthetic standard recedes in the shadow of a Western secular conception of the writer, which found its ideal, heroic

³⁷ As David Gramling shows in the essay “You Pray Like We Have Fun’: Towards a Phenomenology of Secular Islam” (2012), Muslim secularism can be lived very differently from Western secularism in everyday life.

³⁸ On this tradition and the significance of the Quran, see Navid Kermani, *Between Quran and Kafka* (especially chapter one) and *God Is Beautiful*.

³⁹ This is all very much in jest, of course. Khider’s humor obfuscates the dangers faced by Iraqi writers during Saddam Hussein’s dictatorship, during which many fled the country and had to make a choice of language, and thus of the audience they addressed in their writing. See Ikram Masmoudi, *War and Occupation in Iraqi Fiction* (2015), and Hussain Al-Mozany’s essay “Die Opferung der Muttersprache” in *Parallelwelten*. Al-Mozany also engages with Mark Twain’s essay, and mentions in passing the discomfort he experienced in encountering the Twelve Theses issued by the propaganda department of the German Student Union in April 1933, calling for a defense of the purity of the German language and folkish traditions. According to these theses, Khider would also be pilloried as an “un-German traitor.”

form in Coleridge's formulation: poets are the legislators of the world. Still animated by the ambition inspired by Gibran's poem, Khider's arrogation of a (German) voice means taking seriously the task of bringing forth a new world through the power of words. He writes as a Western-language writer who has assumed a demiurgic place, and not only describes the experiences he has lived through, but also hopes to forge a new, more humane reality through the generative power of *Neudeutsch*.

Nowhere is this clearer than in "Allah's Prepositions," which casts bilingualism, more specifically one's cultural background, as a resource, rather than as something to be silently discarded. Like Mark Twain before him, Khider has learnt that rote memorization is the only way to master the arbitrariness afflicting the over two hundred German prepositions and prepositional phrases.⁴⁰ In examples that read as manifestos against arbitrary authority, Khider remembers: „Before, I didn't know whether [I should say] Mohammed is IN, BEI, or AUF the mosque or whether Jesus goes NACH, AUF, or ZU the church. Today I know: Mohammed goes IN the mosque, Jesus is IN the church, and they both go AUF a concert and then home (NACH) like all people" [*Früher wusste ich nicht, ob Mohammed IN, BEI, oder AUF der Moschee ist oder ob Jesus NACH, AUF oder ZU der Kirche geht. Heute weiss ich: Mohammed geht IN die Moschee, Jesus befindet sich IN der Kirche, und sie gehen AUF ein Konzert und NACH Hause wie alle Menschen*] (DfA, 90). After competently making a case against the chaos of prepositional uses, Khider decides that "clarity and reduction are imperatively necessary" and proclaims: „In this muddled situation in language, only two individuals can help Germans to get prepositions under control. Allah and myself" [*In dieser für die Sprache verfahrenen Situation können nur zwei den Deutschen helfen, ihre Präpositionen in den Griff zu kriegen. Das sind Allah und ich*] (DfA, 90). Khider is quick to refute the possible accusation of irreverence: Allah himself was humble (or perhaps clever) enough to make the Quran more puzzling by borrowing a couple of prepositions from foreign sources (perhaps Hebrew or some

⁴⁰ "Every time I think I have got one of these four confusing 'cases' where I am master of it, a seemingly insignificant preposition intrudes itself into my sentence, clothed with an awful and unsuspected power, and crumbles the ground from under me" (Twain, AGL, 10).

other language).⁴¹ “Allah’s prepositions are mysterious and leave room for speculation” (DfA, 86). Khider concludes his brief linguistic excursus through the Quran by presenting his initiative as inspired by Allah himself:

Allah is truly a master of replication, he has copied a couple of prepositions from other languages and glued them into Arabic. In modern literary studies this is called “intertextuality,” before it was called “plagiarism.” So I will borrow two of the plain prepositions of Arabs and insert them into German. (DfA, 92)

Believe me, he pleads—even promises—the reader, “Believe me, these foreign prepositions can help us achieve [*schaffen*] order, if we integrate them correctly and let them participate in everyday life” (DfA, 92). The allusion to integration and everyday practice is not gratuitous here; the rhetorical power of *schaffen* is noteworthy as well.

The two loanwords⁴² are MIN (*from*, marking origin, capturing the meanings of AUS and VON) and ILA, similar to the English *to*, which condenses the uses of NACH, AUF, ZU, BIS and IN. Khider explains that the new preposition, ILA, is not simply a more efficient, capacious little connector; it brings with it a whole ethos of skilful sociability, diplomacy and tact, entirely compatible with German ideals of efficient use and recycling; in fact, it finds its most eloquent illustration in the decisive politics captured by the formulation: “Wir schaffen das.” The rhetorical spin of Khider’s passage is a tribute to the suppleness of the preposition itself:

The preposition ILA (إلى) [...] is like a pepper that one can chop in everywhere, in soups, salads, in a casserole, or on the grill. It goes with everything. One finds something similar in recent German history. The Chancellor Angela Merkel is the perfect ILA. She has conducted for decades a real paprika-politics and got along with everyone—Christians, Democrats, Liberals, and Vegan-Leftists—she has always reached her aims. She was always whatever the others wanted her to be, and she said whatever the others

⁴¹ „Die arabische Sprache hat nur einundzwanzig Präpositionen, im Koran gibt es aber noch mehr, die man vor dem Islam nicht kannte. Sie sollen irgendetwas symbolisieren, das man bis heute nicht entziffern kann. Einige arabische Skeptiker im Mittelalter behaupteten, Allah—beziehungsweise Mohammed—habe sich ein paar Präpositionen aus dem Hebräischen oder aus irgendeiner anderen Sprache ausgeliehen und sie ins Arabische integriert, um den Koran rätselhafter zu machen.“ (DfA, 85-86)

⁴² A loanword is a word adopted from one language and incorporated into another language without translation. This is in contrast to cognates, which are words in two or more languages that are similar because they share an etymological origin, and calques, which involve translation.

wanted to hear. When she needed the liberals politically, she professed something liberal insistently, until they thought she was more liberal than themselves. With the Christians, she quoted the Bible. In Saudi Arabia she had no difficulty memorizing the longest Surah of the Quran, “The Cow” and reciting it melodiously. ILA is like the Chancellorin. ILA merkels the language and makes a lot possible. [*So wie die Bundeskanzlerin ist auch ILA. ILA merkeht die Sprache und macht vieles möglich.*] (DfA, 93)

Khider attaches the signifier ILA to Angela Merkel’s diplomacy, premised, in his account, on the recognition of others for who they are and what they care about. The last example, featuring the Chancellor reciting the longest Surah of the Quran (which is 286 verses long!) is not a verifiable claim, which goes to show Khider’s humor gets the better of him for the sake of a point: “with ILA one always reaches one’s goal [*Ziel*]” (DfA, 94). What is Khider’s point, and goal?

I read his imported prepositions as instrumental to a rethinking of “German” reminiscent of Adorno’s hope in a transition to humanity, and of Wittgenstein’s shift from *Kultur* to *Lebensform*. Prepositions are those discrete, but essential, ushers of language that orient one in the world—in time, space, mode—and with respect to other people; they connect things and ideas, their diversity and specificity contributing to the complexity of a language, to its affordance of thought (a nuanced representation of reality, detailed and penetrating analysis, new associations of ideas, images, of concrete and abstract notions). In short, prepositions are the discrete purveyors of meaning in its most specific form.⁴³ They make possible poetry, philosophy, and other high forms of written and oral culture. Giving them up, even in jest, is nothing short of a sacrificial gesture. Khider suggests as much: “This renewal of the German language inspired by Allah inevitably reminds me of the magazine burning on the roof of my parents’ house and of the religious phase of my life. But this time I don’t have the impression that I will come to regret something” (DfA, 96). This passage recalls Elias Canetti’s mad sinologist Peter Kien at the end of *Die Blendung* (1935), setting fire to his voluminous library in a symbolic gesture with which Canetti the moralist condemns his contemporaries for their moral failures. They deserved their fate, he

⁴³ The same could be said about the endings of articles or adjectives in declension, etc, the very elements of German Khider wants to simplify or get rid of.

told Marc Bloch; they behaved as if their culture had been inconsequential. One might as well symbolically obliterate it in a fire.

Canetti's indictment chimes with Adorno's denunciation of German culture's inhumanity, its "lack of consideration for the other" (WIG, 124). In response to instances of such inconsiderateness—the "fashion trends" of recent years, such as refugee-shelter-burnings, spitting-on-dark-haired people, or foreigners-chasing (DfA, 122)—Khider's manual is an elaborate joke with a serious aim. It is certainly not the obliteration of German culture, as some worried readers with right-wing inclinations might think; after all, he has read literature and philosophy in this language, and his life-project is to be a German-language writer. Instead, his sacrifice of prepositions, precious stand-ins for high German culture, to the simplified morality of the efficient ILA is an imaginative exercise meant as a reminder that a culture's *raison d'être* is not the domination of others, crushed under the weight of sophistication for its own sake; rather, culture is a living record of human experience, endlessly diverse, an immense opportunity for orientation towards the unknown and the foreign. As the Arabic, or *neudeutsch* equivalent of "to," ILA signifies an attitude, an opening, an orientation towards others. Borrowed from foreign sources, Allah's prepositions are carriers of the wisdom and humility to see otherness as a gift, and bilingualism (or multilingualism) as a resource.

A foreign word, ILA is the scapegoat of language: it reminds speakers something they tend to forget, namely that all words are agreements that anchor us in the shared reality of our lives.⁴⁴ What we say when has a dimension of futurity, it anticipates a world in that our use of language makes things possible in the world. The ironic example of Angela Merkel's Quranic recitation illustrating her diplomacy of expediency suggests that one might not be motivated by

⁴⁴ I am drawing here on Adorno's essay "Words from abroad," where he points out that *Fremdwörter* are scapegoats in language, alerting to the truth of mediation that all words—including in one's native tongue—perform.

an authentic interest in another culture, but by the political goal of living well with others. The readers's own goal, Khider's manual points out, is contingent on their awareness of language as an affordance: a living reality that shapes a social imaginary, a world to come. What that world will look like is open to the choices made by each reader.

V. **Khider's *minima moralia*: Don't interfere between the sparrow and its wings**

Khider is not the only one to have noticed the potentialities of the preposition *to*: Jacques Derrida, Jean-Luc Nancy, Emanuel Lévinas, and Luce Irigaray have conducted a sustained philosophical reflection on prepositional phrases like the face-to-face (Levinas's *face-à-face*), the to-come (Derrida's *communauté à venir*), the being-to (Nancy's *l'être-à*) and the "I love to you" (Irigaray's *j'aime à toi*). In their work, the preposition has ontological, ethical and political stakes; articulating them, Irving Goh argues in *L'existence prépositionnelle* that they outline the *pre-positional existence*, to be understood in its full sense of "the freedom of movement before one takes up a position." This notion aptly captures the political and ethical education imparted by Khider's manual and the temporality of delay that underwrites it as an ideal: withholding judgment of others, taking the time to look at them and truly see their stories. A book about everyday lives parading as a grammar manual [*Lehrbuch*], Khider's text teaches the very first skill crucial to an education according to Nietzsche: "One must learn to *see*, one must learn to *think*, one must learn to *speak* and *write*: the goal in all three is a noble culture," Nietzsche wrote, still hopeful about the possibilities of *Kultur*.⁴⁵ His understanding of learning to *see* is a concise recapitulation of what I take to be the wisdom of prepositional existence: "accustoming the eye to calmness, to patience, to letting things come up to it; postponing judgment, learning to go around and grasp each individual case from all sides."⁴⁶ What appears in Goh's study as a French philosophical project is

⁴⁵ Friedrich Nietzsche, "What the Germans Lack," 41.

⁴⁶ Nietzsche, 41.

in line with Nietzsche's pedagogy in "What the Germans Lack," which Khider's manual enacts and conveys in the guise of a linguistic reform.

"Not all events have happened exactly as narrated here. I have falsified some of them. Not all ideas are original, I have stolen or borrowed a couple" he cautions early on in *German for Everyone* (DfA, 9). By blurring the line between autobiography and fiction, Khider implicitly encourages readers to place the *Lehrbuch* on a continuum with his German novels.⁴⁷ At the same time, "stealing" or "borrowing" events from other people's lives suggests that Khider is not a single-handed reformer of German; his stance is taken on behalf of others like him: political prisoners, illegal migrants, refugees, and asylum seekers. Indeed, the dedication, which elaborates on the title *German for Everyone*, opens the space of redress to others: "For everyone, who can, want, and will extract some hope from notes made in the margins" [*Für alle, die auch aus den Randbemerkungen eine Hoffnung herauslesen können, wollen und werden*] (DfA, 5, my emphasis). Khider's dedication conditions access to the utopia of a "German for everyone," that is, to the egalitarian community respectful of its covenant in which every single voice counts exactly for the person it represents, on every reader's capacity, willingness, and decision to act on the insights gleaned from the notes made in the margins of *Neudeutsch*: Khider's notes, and the readers' own. "Marginalia" suggests the location of the scene of instruction: the autobiographical anecdotes and life-miniatures as marginal annotations to grammatical rules. The margin is also the place where one can learn to see; rather than react from the middle of things, take the time to look, think, and eventually speak and write.

Reviewing Khider's marginalia, one may come across his question à propos of pronouns: "How so does one need any representatives, when it would be easier to express oneself?" (DfA, 59), and note that a full subject must be autonomous and able to speak for itself; or one might make a brief note about the importance of equality as one reads Khider's proclamation: „All

⁴⁷ On Khider's blurring boundaries between autobiography and fiction in the novels, see Moritz Schramm, "Ironischer Realismus."

verbs should be equal before the law of language. No verb is better than any other” (DfA, 99). Mark Twain’s spirit is alive in these pages, as a partner in mischief whom Khider occasionally likes to contradict: whereas the American writer used to proffer indifference to the protagonist of his German textbook, a bird stuck in a blacksmith’s workshop on account of the rain, Khider’s manual elevates a sparrow to the status of a figure of freedom of movement: “A sparrow flies just when it wants. This is the nature of things. No one has the right to intervene without a reason. Everyone should immediately do exactly as they wish. But please don’t do it between the sparrow and its wings. The world is big” [*Aber bitte tun Sie das nicht zwischen dem Spatzen und seinen Flügeln. Die Welt ist gross*] (DfA, 55). By the time one reaches the chapter “In the verbal name of the family,” with its opening “I am pleased that I have less and less tasks ahead of me” (DfA, 97), Khider emerges as the prophet of a simplified morality, a *minima moralia* of respect for the integrity of people’s lives.

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