KK KOZIK

Piet's Sake, 2015
Oil on linen, 51 x 63 in

COURTESY THE ARTIST

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I am a French Irregular Verb

Life through the lens of language

Speak in French when you can't think of the English for a thing . . .

—Lewis Carroll, *Through the Looking-Glass*

Forgotten is the pain of memorizing all those irregular French verbs, the torment of rounding the mouth just right and skewing the glottal apparatus so as to emit a fair approximation of the proper nasal inflections. The Gallic syllables are honey on my tongue, a mastered password that lets me pass, if not as a native, then as a presumed Luxembourger, French Swiss, or a Belgian, or perhaps an Alsatian, a useful trick for traveling incognito in these troubled times.

In my own private atlas of the heart, the Old World is divided down the middle by an imaginary Maginot Line, a border that, I readily admit, bears little, if any, relation to today's geopolitical reality, but that bisects Europe along a tenuous fault line riddled with psychic land mines along which the phantasms of inherited memory stand guard. While the European Union dropped its national borders, according to the Schengen Agreement of 1995, the dividing line on my internalized roadmap has a serrated edge that roughly runs along the Rhine.

On one side they speak German, a loaded language, burdened for me, as the son of German-speaking Jewish refugees, with contradictory associations, since it is both my mother tongue (the language I spoke with my mother) and the guttural grunt of asphyxiation. On the other side they speak *Liberté, Égalité, Fraternité* (Liberty, Equality, Fraternity). The French have a sense of humor about their national slogan. I recently saw it parodied with a wink in graffiti spray painted on the side of an official government building as, "*Liberté, Égalité, Béyoncé*." Simplistic though my distinction may be—and I am full well aware of the historic inconsistencies and discrepancies, of the vagaries of collaboration and resistance—in Germany my throat tightens and stomach twitches with apprehension, in France I breathe easy, eat well, and fall in love.

* * *

In the harried but hopeful expression of every African street peddler of counterfeit Louis Vuitton handbags; inflated plastic flying saucers; creepy crawly, sticky-fingered little figurines that shimmy down windows and walls; and other innocuous knickknacks knocked off in China and hawked on the streets of Montmartre and the Parvis Notre-Dame, I see the face of my late, beloved father, who, as a young man, an illegal alien struggling to make ends

meet, lived off the doughnuts he whipped up illegally in his garret room on the Île Saint-Louis to peddle to tourists at the *Exposition Internationale des Arts et Techniques dans la Vie Moderne* (International Exposition of Art and Technology in Modern Life), better known as Paris Expo 1937, where the pavilions of Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union, situated within winking distance directly across from each other at the fairgrounds, represented the opposing forces of a world order soon to dissolve around him.

These greasy Viennese treats flavored with zest of lemon rind were called *Gebackene Mäuse* (baked mice), a name derived from the tiny tails sprouted from the globs of dough congealed in boiling oil, which name and notion sent us children into peals of laughter every time our father fried us up a batch. And so, for me, the Île Saint-Louis, that mouse-shaped lump of land where mimes, magicians, musicians, pickpockets, and puppeteers play the crowd—a pauper's paradise in my father's day, more recently co-opted by sheikhs and erstwhile Russian apparatchiks turned "insider traders"—and where the exclusive ice cream-confectioner Berthillon dispenses exquisite scoops, will forever be associated with sweetness.

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I am a French irregular verb. My father sowed the insidious seeds of French syntax in me early on. It was his grownup pleasure and my childhood chore to have me practice French pronunciation almost as soon as I learned to mouth and mimic English. My ears were receptive, but my mind was lazy. I failed to grasp why these nasally linked syllables mattered so much. French declensions wouldn't help much on the baseball mound. Rolling the lips into a hollow circle to shape a proper *bonjour* wouldn't buy me a bubble gum or a pretzel stick at Jimmy's Luncheonette. My father lost patience and slapped me when I mispronounced. I protested. But resistance was futile.

In junior high I was always the best in French, but when at the parent-teacher conference, my father challenged the "very good" as opposed to an "excellent" that Mr. Banks, my junior high school French teacher, circled on my report card, Mr. Banks shrugged: "Not even Charles De Gaulle deserves an excellent in my book!"

My high school French teacher, Miss Lorenzo, a skinny, tight-lipped, mouse-haired, prematurely old matron of indeterminate age who must surely have learned her French at a convent school, unwittingly took us to see the movie *Viva Maria!* by Louis Malle, wanting to expose us to things French, but when Brigitte Bardot proceeded to perform a striptease on the silver screen, a scandalized Miss Lorenzo promptly shuffled us ogling adolescent boys out of the cinema in disgust. That and reading "Le dormeur du val," a poem by Arthur Rimbaud about a soldier found lying in a field, who, only after the poet discovers a red hole in his head, we realize is dead, are my most vivid memories of French class.

But I do recall having to assume all kinds of contorted positions, the painful polar opposite of stances featured in the *Kama Sutra* (which I would discover in college), pressed body to body on the subway in the morning rush hour, my wrist thrust into the overhanging strap, hand gripping a French grammar, memorizing my noun declensions and my irregular verbs. And once, arriving late for a first-period French exam, on account of a delay on the Canarsie Line (now known as the L Train), I remember passing the gauntlet of pigeons positioned on the overhead ledge of the school when one let drop its hot liquid payload that landed on my forehead and ran down my left cheek. I wiped myself with a handkerchief in disgust, still muttering French irregular verbs to myself, bravely marched into class, inured but able, and scored a perfect one hundred on the test and have retained a hostility to pigeons ever since.

And so I graduated high school with the gold medal in French, a tricolor ribbon dangling from the fake gold pin that Miss Lorenzo proudly pinned to my graduation gown, kissing me on both cheeks—which somehow stirred up the memory of the striptease scene in *Viva Maria!*, though Miss Lorenzo was definitely no Brigitte Bardot—the closest I will surely ever come to nomination to the *Legion d'honneur.* I recently rediscovered that medal upon rummaging through old papers and possessions in a desk drawer (I wonder if wearing the medal and fluttering tricolor ribbon while waiting in line to board an Air France flight might impress the ground crew and merit consideration for preferred seating).

I started off college as a French major, the favorite of Professor Rothschild, a somewhat more erudite and intellectual, albeit equally tight lipped and stoic, replica of Miss Lorenzo, until I fell from grace. In the final exam she asked for an analysis of one of the works covered in class. I had underlined racy excerpts from *Les fleurs du mal* (*The Flowers of Evil*), by Charles Baudelaire:

> C'est l'Ennui! L'œil chargé d'un pleur involontaire,
> Il rêve d'échafauds en fumant son houka.
> Tu le connais, lecteur, ce monstre délicat,—
> Hypocrite lecteur,—mon semblable,—mon frère!
>
> It's BOREDOM. Tears have glued its eyes together.
> You know it well, my Reader. This obscene
> beast chain-smokes yawning for the guillotine—
> you—hypocrite Reader—my double—my brother![1]

And having taken the scholarly initiative, laudable I thought, of furthermore reading the poet's *Les paradis artificiels*, his treatise on the effects of opium and hashish, and in the undergraduate Romantic mood of the moment, taking what I thought to be his message to heart and mind, smoked a pipe of hash before class and boldly confessed to the fact in perfect French in my blue exam booklet, Professor Rothschild took my bravado as a personal affront and gave me an F. Whereupon I switched my major to English, but kept my fondness for Coleridge's opium-induced dream poems to myself.

But French profoundly infiltrated my private life. My father would never, alas, live to meet Claudie, whom I met at a party in a state of total intoxication, true to Baudelaire's poetic dictum: "Pour ne pas être les esclaves martyrisés du temps, enivrez-vous, enivrez-vous sans cesse de vin, de poésie, de vertu, à votre guise" (So as not to be the martyred slaves of time, get drunk, keep getting drunk on wine, on poetry, on virtue, as you please).

I managed to charm her in the warp and woof of my slightly slurred irregular French verbs and perfectly declined French nouns; intoxicated state notwithstanding, my sentences held together and actually made seductive sense.[2]

Nor did my father ever live to see the French seeds he planted in my thankless mind bear fruit in the form of our hybrid Franco-American, perfectly bilingual, perfectly cheeky offspring, our daughter Aurélie and son Jacques, walking, talking bundles of Gall, with a twinkle of insouciance, an ironic smile, and emulating Albert Camus, Simone de Beauvoir, Serge Gainsbourg, and countless French rebels with or without a cause, with a cigarette forever riding the lower lip, who correct my gender errors and my wife's occasional English faux pas, and in the way all children do, remind me of my many faults. *Merci, Papa!*

* * *

It's only *natural*! we Americans maintain to affirm those truths we hold to be self-evident. *C'est bien normal, ça!* (It's normal!) the French insist to substantiate the naked facts at the tip of the nose. There is perhaps a certain irony that we Americans should harp on the natural in our brave new world of artificiality, the home of artificial flavoring and coloring, plastic, MSG, Accent, processed foods, fracking, and Monsanto's genetically engineered blockbuster crops. "All-natural ingredients," as per the required marketing etiquette, can be found on the box or flap of most American packaged, i.e. processed, foods. Our seemingly limitless "natural resources" are there to be drained dry. *It's only natural* in a country with an elected Congress inclined to gloss over environmental protection.

As for the French norm, consider the following definition found on the website About.com:

> *Normal* is a semi-false cognate. While it can mean "normal," it is often used in a more figurative sense, as in "usual" or "expected." For example, the weather is supposed to be clear and sunny all week, but there's a freak rainstorm. One might say: *Ce n'est pas normal*—"That's not right, not what was supposed to happen."

1 English adaptation by the poet Robert Lowell.

2 Still fond of a drop of spirit on select occasions, years later I identified with a soused breed of spider that lives down under the Château de Cognac, in the pit of the former dungeon known as *le Paradis* (Paradise), where the oldest casks of spirit are left to age in a snow-white coat of fungus. Its state revealed in the asymmetrical weave of its web, the spider feeds on insect larvae and watches over the precious stash with a certain sloppy majesty.

French schoolteachers earn their stripes at various *écoles normales* (normal schools). The French inculcate the *norm* early on in untutored little savages, and the upper echelon of professors are graduated from one of a handful of *écoles normales superieurs* (superior normal schools), whose graduates, the elite *normaliens*, comprise a select pedagogical club of sorts, of which my wife is a member, (roughly equivalent to the privileged spawns of the Ivy League, only in France, they pay you to attend) who ascend to leadership positions in which they, in turn, set the new norms. An ordinary person, particularly an American, can sometimes be made to suffer a sense of abnormal ignorance in the company of *normaliens*. It is only normal, I suppose, that, as an American, I should be held personally accountable for all artificial flavoring and coloring, plastic, MSG, Accent, processed foods, fracking, McDonald's Happy Meals, and Monsanto's genetically engineered crops, just as I hold the French personally responsible for the dissemination of smelly cheese. Naturally, I protest my innocence. But such protestation of innocence is further proof of a shamefully abnormal ignorance of the norm.

* * *

Just as geography makes the French hexagon a natural bridge between the sun-drenched Mediterranean and the chilly gray North Sea, so, too, are the French, in custom and manner, a hybrid of Latin looseness and Teutonic rigidity. But the formidable bulwark against linguistic corruption upheld by the stiff-lipped members of the Académie française, the solemn brotherhood of guardians of the language, who collectively comprise a veritable dictionary-dyke in a valiant, albeit vain, attempt to keep the sacred tongue from springing holes, is sabotaged by an unstoppable influx of Americanisms and a seemingly bottomless well of argot and colorful idiomatic expressions, some mentionable in good company, some not.

Loose tongued on a drop of wine, the poetry comes pouring out. The popular French expression for twilight, for instance, *entre chien et loup* (literally, between dog and wolf), perfectly captures the visual drama at the tenuous border between day and night when daylight drops its muzzle of civility and darkness bares its fangs. How Chaplinesque, or rather Jacques Tatiesque, are the Gallic takes on "to be lost": *marcher* à côté *de ses pompes* (to walk beside one's clodhoppers); and "to be sleepy": *ne pas avoir les yeux en face des trous* (not to have your eyes lined up with their slits). How perfectly bobo (Bohemian-Bourgeois) is the inverted, self-mocking snobbery of the tongue-in-cheek term for tap water, *château de la pompe* (château water fountain). How anticlerical and positively blasphemous the French equivalent expression for "not in a million years": à *la Saint Glin Glin* (when Saint Glin Glin wills it).

But French curses, insults, and idiomatic expressions really let it all hang out with true poetic license. The anodyne Anglo-Saxon nitpicker becomes a *sodomiseur de lépidoptère* (sodomite of Lepidoptera) or better yet, *un enculeur de mouches* (fly butt-fucker). The French equivalent of the English "looking for a needle in a haystack" is *chercher un pet dans une bain* à *jacuzzi*" (fishing for a fart in a Jacuzzi). More lustfully vulgar still, the French for "step on it!" is *il faux pas tortiller le cul pour chier droit!* (don't wriggle your ass to shit straight!" Or the ultimate scatological French standby for "really having to go to take a dump": *avoir le cigarre au bou des lèvres* (to have a cigar at the tip of your lips). And since we've dropped our *culottes*, so to speak, what coarse Anglo-Saxon expression could possibly match the sheer lyric license of the Gallic take on "she's got the hots for you": *elle a la moule qui baille* (her mussel is yawning for you).

* * *

And then there's the division of creation by sex. How curious for an American accustomed to a neuter world in which all else outside the "I" is a swathe of "it," to fathom that everything around you is gendered to the French eye. The logic is often perplexing. So the perennially gray sky (*le ciel*) overhead is a moody old masculine. But the rain (*la pluie*) falls in female tears. The building (*le bâtiment*) you pass on the street is a strapping buck, but the house (*la maison*) is a sleek lady, to which only a privileged few are given the pass code, inviting or forbidding entry. The person (*la personne*) you meet, man or woman, is a female a priori, as is the conglomerate crowd (*la foule*). Bread (*le pain*), most typically in the elongated female shape of *la baguette*, is male, as is wine (*le vin*) and cheese (*le fromage*), the two other staples of the French diet. But the table (*la table*) at which you eat it is a woman. The truck (*le camion*) is a lumbering porter bearing *his* load. But the car (*la voiture*) is a woman that carries destinies in *her* metal womb. The same gender divide holds true for French states of mind. Joy (*la joie*) is a she, as is sadness (*la tristesse*). It is as if the world around us, in its stark duality, comprises infinite models or mirrors, constantly instructing us not only in how to behave, how to walk, talk, and dress, but also how to think (*la pensée*), thought being female, and dream (*le rêve*), reverie being male. The gender of the French noun, furthermore, affects the adjectives that decorate and adorn it as a kind of costume jewelry and the verbs that manipulate, or rather are manipulated by it.

And what about those gender-bending homonyms, like manly liver (*le foie*) and feminine time—as in how many times—(*la fois*), or the manly mould you bake with (*le moule*) versus the feminine mussel you buy at market and simmer in white wine (*la moule*)!

In France I walk around in a constant state of hermaphroditic grammatical confusion, my male body (*le corps*) enveloped by my female skin (*la peau*), ignorant of the distinction that every French schoolchild has categorized in the filing cabinet of a male mind (*un esprit*) lodged in the female head (*la tête*).

* * *

Speaking of gender, every Parisian, and particularly every *Parisienne*, is a walking billboard advertising the ever-present possibility of seduction that a walk down a Paris street just might entail. Mick Jagger may not have managed to find satisfaction in London, but if Serge Gainsbourg, the patron saint of '69, with his big nose, stick-out ears, and droopy eyes, could bed down BB (Brigitte Bardot), surely you could too—or so the tantalizing legend would have us believe.

My attachment to French gender difference is up close and personal. At the Tuileries Gardens one memorable fourteenth of July I danced a dizzying valse musette with Claudie, the perky petite brunette who would become my wife, faking the steps, though she later convinced me to take dancing lessons for our wedding. I remember exactly the outfit she had on, the cinched yellow polka-dot top beneath which her belly button peaked forth and a short, white, trilayered skirt that flared up in enticing cascades of cotton, baring leg well above the knee, and her perky brown ponytail that sashayed like the tail of a proud thoroughbred as we whirled about. I remember the rhythmic rippling notes of the accordion played by Aimable Pluchard, better known by his first name, Aimable, the legendary French bandleader, already of advanced age back then, but no less lithe and supple, beaming and swaying as he played, hovering above the dusty dance floor on a prefab stage like a puppeteer directing our clip-clop with the invisible strings of his music, unabashedly fondling his instrument, as my fingers replayed the melody down the keyboard of Claudie's spine. We swirled in an ocean of bodies, a whirlpool of humanity, when an older man, a fleet-footed hoofer, brashly reached out, plucked my fiancée out of my arms, and spun her round like he was a planet and she was the sun. Whereupon I boiled over with a cocktail of contradictory emotions, burning with jealousy, glowing with pride, seething with heretofore untapped erotic fury whipped up into a virtual frenzy by the ever-accelerating pace of the music. And when at last, after what seemed at the time like an eternity but could only have been a matter of minutes at most, he returned her to my waiting arms with a bow and a wink that betokened both gratitude and regret, my jealousy melted into boundless love leaping from my eyes (*mes yeux*), those masculine orbs, to my beating heart (*mon coeur*), that dumb male muscle, encased in my head (*ma tête*), that feminine lockbox of mind and emotion, for granting me this moment of beatitude.

Peter Wortsman's most recent books include a novel, *Cold Earth Wanderers* (Pelekinesis, 2014); a travel memoir, *Ghost Dance in Berlin* (Travelers Tales, 2013)—for which he won an Independent Publishers Book Award (IPPY); and an anthology that he selected, translated, and edited, *Tales of the German Imagination* (Penguin Classics, 2013). Forthcoming are a book of short fiction, *Footprints in Wet Cement* (Pelekinesis, 2017), and *Konundrum, Selected Prose of Franz Kafka* (Archipelago Books, 2016). He was a Holtzbrinck Fellow in 2010 at the American Academy in Berlin.