

FRANK TROMMLER

10 Back to the Future of German Studies: Which Future? Which Past?

ABSTRACT

Assessing the transformations in the concept and practice of German Studies since the first Wisconsin Workshop in 1969, this essay highlights the discipline's expansion beyond the focus on literature and towards German culture, history, politics, science, and other areas. Since the 1980s the field has developed curricula and research practices that center less on canonical literature in favor of psychological, sociological, and philosophical texts, as well as film, media, and popular culture. While enrollment figures have shrunk considerably since the 1960s, the strategies of curricular adaptation have helped keep the discipline attractive both for undergraduate and graduate students, though the lessening of historical and canonical moorings as well as financial cutbacks in the humanities have unfavorably impacted graduate study. With the influx of cultural studies in the 1990s, taught mostly in English, the professionalization of language pedagogy regained its importance for curricula and for the training of prospective PhDs.

When my colleague at Penn, Gerald Prince, published an article about the present state of French Studies in the *PMLA*, the leading journal of literary criticism in the United States, in October 2016, he spoke a lot about writers and novels, their attention to what is going on in the world, and their reception both on the national and the academic scene in France and the United States.¹ In short, when he spoke about French Studies, it was about French literature. He spoke about its ups and downs and about the fact that literature in general is no longer what it once was – even in France. Prince gave a critical review of several authors, compared them and sketched their appeal to American students, and concluded that French Studies have receded in the American academy, together with other disciplines in the humanities.

1 Gerald Prince, "Talking French," *PMLA* 131, no. 5 (2016): 1489–94.

My colleague gave a critical review of French Studies. However, he was far from asking the question that I had asked ten years ago in the *German Quarterly*, a question that provoked strong reactions from all sides: “Is literature still central to German Studies?”² Asking this question was, by itself, an expression of strong doubts, which were validated in the numerous answers and comments by colleagues everywhere in the United States, most of whom confirmed that literature was still central to German Studies, while others denied that it was, and two or three suggested that it was the wrong question to ask. As far as I can judge from the strong responses, asking the question was timely, corresponding to a trend in German Studies that had become visible since the 1990s, when many curricula were changed by diminishing the share of literature in favor of texts from philosophy, history, visual arts, and the sciences, and of course films, all under the heading of German Studies. The program of the annual meeting of the German Studies Association (GSA), usually composed of a combination of members from the fields of literature, history, art history, and political science, became a strong indicator of this trend. The enormous expansion of the number of panels at these conferences resulted from the strong interest in combining literature and history with developments in other fields or in shifting the focus completely to a variety of new approaches, questions, and interdisciplinary combinations where the broad labels German culture or cultural studies seem more appropriate.

Of course, speaking here at the 50th Wisconsin Workshop and looking at the programs of the past fifty years, beginning with the literature of the 1920s in 1969 and culminating in this year’s mixture of literature, theater, philosophy, photography, and social and identity studies, I could ask the question with even more justification: “Is literature still central to German Studies?” And yet, the ten years that have passed since the *German Quarterly* article also taught us quite a bit about living with affirmative as well as negative answers. We have come to realize how important the role of language and language instruction is and that we must carefully determine

2 Frank Trommler et al., “Is Literature Still Central to German Studies?,” *German Quarterly* 80, no. 1 (2007): 97–9.

a core activity along these lines that the deans and provosts see as crucial for the mission of the humanities.

All this indicates a difference from Gerald Prince's analysis published in *PMLA*. Since French is still the crucial reference for the state of foreign languages in the American academy, I thought that his considerations would be helpful for determining the status of German Studies and attended an afternoon workshop that he and Jean-Michel Rabaté conducted with about twenty graduate students, discussing his *PMLA* piece and certain problems that he had not raised in the article. It was quite a revealing experience as the Penn students spoke up. They focused on the traditionalism of studying the great canon of French literature from Montaigne to Molière, Balzac, Flaubert, Rimbaud, and Proust. The students did not find the canon as compelling for the study of French and France as the older generation of academics. As we know, in German departments discussing the viability of the canon, especially the classics, started in the 1980s and led to revisions and compromises on graduate reading lists and a veiled abandonment in undergraduate curricula. Given the fact that French literature is much richer in great epic works than German literature, which led to a more continuous practice of reading the classics in French departments both on the graduate and undergraduate level, the more recent and more tentative discussion of the canon is hardly surprising. It is not necessarily connected with the study of poststructuralism, Derrida, and other authors of theory that has been going on since the 1970s inside and outside French departments. And not to forget, as Gerry Prince noted in his article, "French theory has been supplanted by more homegrown activities, like gender interrogations, postcolonial inspection, and ecocritical inquiries."³

Speaking of the relationship of textual work, meaning literary interpretation, and theory, it would be misleading to assume that they have been particularly tightly connected in French departments, where reading literature, against all challenges, arguably counts as the core activity. This became clear to the Penn workshop participants when one student stood up and talked about his experience. Equally versed in French and

3 Prince, "Talking French," 1490.

German, he had to decide in which department to pursue his graduate work, which would explore social practices and cultural theory and focus less on literature. It might have been tainted by specific trends in Penn departments, yet his statement deserves attention. He said that he chose German because the field appeared to him methodologically more flexible and more open to interdisciplinary exploration. His assessment touched on long-standing discussions about the centrality of literature, and all of a sudden I was put on the spot and had to answer several questions about the consequences of the less literature-centered scope of German Studies. I bring this up not to draw attention to Penn or to myself, but rather to put the transformation of German Studies in the last thirty years into a broader context, providing the basis for less homegrown discussions about our field, its recent history, and the long-term chances for survival in the American college and university.

From the experience of the last decades, I see the dynamics of our profession not just driven by some inner theoretical and methodological telos with which we try to catch a modicum of the *Weltgeist* or *Zeitgeist*, but also by more mundane factors, most crucially the discipline's function within the humanistic and educational mission of the university. In this respect, German departments, after a promising uptick of enrollments in the years after Germany's reunification, were harder hit than others by the downturn of public support for academia after the end of the Cold War, and they have indeed become more flexible in their teaching and curricular practices as well as in their interdisciplinary collaboration with other programs and departments. This was the point the student raised at the workshop. I was astounded to hear confirmation concerning methodological flexibility from other participants, including Gerry Prince, who referred to the interconnectivity of German Studies with other fields, but also pointed to the novel inclusion of sociological, political, and scientific approaches in graduate work.

Looking back at the history of German departments in this country through the eyes of a French professor is not without irony. It is ironic because German departments until the 1960s and early 1970s carried the stigma of being isolated, too isolated, within the academy, partly because of having been connected with a defeated enemy country, partly because of

their active, at times orthodox orientation towards German *Germanistik*.⁴ Of course, there were exceptional American Germanists such as Walter Silz, Blake Lee Spahr, Stuart Atkins, and others, not to speak of those emigrants like Walter Sokel, André von Gronicka, Henry Remak, Oskar Seidlin, or Heinz Politzer who opened the field and linked it with comparative literature and other literatures, but they did only seldom break through the spirit of separation from mainstream, meaning Anglo-Saxon and French literary scholarship.

I cannot claim that the Wisconsin Workshop in its earlier years helped overcome this separation because it was strongly committed to overcoming the older *Germanistik* by promoting a politically engaged *Literaturwissenschaft* in German as part of reforming a West German society still mired in traditionalist, Nazi, or post-Nazi provincialism. The efforts by Jost Hermand, Reinhold Grimm, David Bathrick, Klaus Berghahn, and their colleagues and students in Madison represented a breakthrough of sorts for American *Germanistik* and exerted much influence on departments in the country, but with their perspective and strong links to the West German Left they did not necessarily eliminate the isolation of “things German” in the American academy.

I speak about the earlier phase when intellectual solidarity with the 68ers spread across departments in some universities, certainly in Madison, where the Left had become a force in the mid-1960s, unlike in most other universities. The movement that led to a more interconnected discipline, later called German Studies, took certain socio-critical impulses from the Left that enlivened curricula but emerged mostly from different initiatives in other places that reached the stage of organization in the 1980s. These focused on revamping antiquated second-language instruction and revising undergraduate curricula and graduate reading lists with less canonical writers and topics. They originated in various institutions, mostly geared towards revamping undergraduate curricula (Indiana), but, due to the

4 See various articles in Peter Uwe Hohendahl, ed., *German Studies in the United States: A Historical Handbook* (New York: Modern Language Association, 2003); Celia Applegate and Frank Trommler, “The Project of German Studies: Disciplinary Strategies and Intellectual Practices,” *German Studies Review* 39, no. 3 (2016): 471–92.

post-Sputnik demand for M.A. and Ph.D. students, also towards graduate programs (Stanford).⁵ *Organizing* and *organization* played important roles, as these various concepts had to be discussed and streamlined. Paradoxically or ironically the strongest financial support for organizational efforts towards forming an American *Germanistik* in the 1980s came from a German institution, the German Academic Exchange Service, the DAAD.

This is not to say that Madison did not remain at the forefront of the changes, but besides the Wisconsin Workshop and its innovative programs that soon involved student collectives in an exemplary way, another departmental initiative deserves to be mentioned: Valters Nollendorfs's persistent efforts of taking stock of the discipline, publishing valuable statistics about it in Madison's department-edited journal *Monatshefte* and cooperating with colleagues at Indiana, Stanford, Ohio State universities, and other institutions in order to generate a new sense of German in North America as a common enterprise. Madison was the place where numerous representatives of the discipline, myself included, took stock in a conference under the title "Shaping Forces in American Germanics" in 1996.⁶ These assessments, like the one at John McCarthy's conference at Vanderbilt in 1994,⁷ as well as the expansion of the German Studies Association became more relevant for the reforms of the discipline than the conferences and publications of the Modern Language Association, which had been the leading forum for representing the discipline and its academic trends in previous decades.

Thanks to a new generation of students and scholars – among them a considerable contingent of younger Germans – a clear *Aufbruchgeist* [spirit of moving forward] took root *despite* the falling enrollments in the 1980s. Or maybe I should better write, *because* of them, considering the

5 See the assessment of the early phase of creating German Studies in Walter F. W. Lohnes and Valters Nollendorfs, eds., *German Studies in the United States: Assessment and Outlook* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1976).

6 David P. Benseler, Craig W. Nickisch, and Cora Lee Nollendorfs, eds., *Teaching German in Twentieth-century America* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2001).

7 John A. McCarthy and Karin Schneider, eds., *The Future of Germanistik in the USA: Changing Our Prospects* (Nashville: Vanderbilt University Press, 1996).

nervousness that these enrollment figures created. At any rate, as the sense of a common mission of the discipline of German in the United States took shape in the 1980s, the desire to reform the canon and the relationship with Germany caught on, as did the willingness to cooperate with other disciplines, especially with history departments. First seen as a kind of club of outsiders, the German Studies Association that emerged from the Western Association of German Studies in 1983 moved more and more into the center of the debates and provided a forum for such cooperation with its annual meeting in which Germanists and historians each made up 40 percent of the participants – the rest being political science, art history, sociology, and other fields.

Today it might appear to be pre-history, but there can be no doubt that this transformation towards German Studies – which did not go unopposed by a more traditionally minded faculty – laid the base for a discipline that, because of its small size and constant administrative threats of elimination or fusion with other foreign languages, understands the need for both greater intellectual openness and more active inner organization. This is what drew the attention of Gerald Prince and the Penn workshop students because German Studies has indeed produced important lessons for the foreign-language community, lessons that remain valid as long as the positive and negative factors are clearly marked.

This 50th Wisconsin Workshop was organized under the title “Back to the Future: Tradition and Innovation in German Studies,” which beckons me to summarize what I see as worthwhile elements that can be taken for the future from the tradition and the innovations of the last thirty years.

I start with the question: what was the overriding principle that guided all these concepts, curriculum proposals, and program innovations and eventually led to renaming several Departments of Germanic Languages and Literatures into German Studies Departments? It was the question that no longer emerged from an inner scientific, formerly philological telos as pursued in traditional *Germanistik*, but rather from a highly practical perspective: how can we make the field of German, which, as we know, encompasses a different, yet fascinating culture, attractive for American students? This question was not meant as a consumerist vision. As the American university, increasingly a privatized institution, developed the

trend to delivering services, its teachers often considered service providers even if they distinguish themselves as great scholars, the teaching of German language and literature lost its status as a staple within the classical, American, liberal arts education. It might be regrettable, but the truth is undergraduate programs have lost much of their function as preparation for graduate study of German literature. Instead they serve as a conduit to German culture through literature as well as many other textual and visual means to support the learning of the language. While not sacrificing the scholarly and pedagogical ethos of German courses, the clue to success has become adaptation. Many departments, often with only two or three members, have been saved that way; the internet with its free access to the whole spectrum of things in German culture and everyday life has helped in their survival as conduit to the German-speaking countries, Austria and Switzerland included.

The precondition for this revival was the recognition that German Studies used the tools of *Germanistik* but had become *American* German Studies. In 1989 a well-attended colloquium at the GSA meeting in Milwaukee had the title “Germany as the Other: Towards an American Agenda for German Studies.” It featured a historian, a Germanist, and a scholar of cultural studies who were not interested in challenging the intrinsic value and independence of scholarship when speaking of an American agenda but expressed the need to “enable faculty and students to integrate their cultural predisposition into the encounter with German language and history, strategies which also help them to cope with the increasing drifting apart of the United States and Europe.”⁸

Of course, many scholars objected, stating that there was only one scholarly truth, independent from geography and origin. After conducting graduate seminars at U.S. universities, colleagues from Germany found the discourse about texts not much different from that in Germany. But that was not the point of the reforms. What was at stake was the need to

8 Frank Trommler, Michael Geyer, Jeffrey M. Peck, “Germany as the Other: Towards an American Agenda for German Studies,” *German Studies Review* 13, no. 1 (1990): 111–38.

integrate the cultural predisposition in structuring the encounter with the Other, and this concerned particularly undergraduate students. Most striking around the 1990s was the success with which language instruction, long a stepchild of departments, was revamped. Through an initiative of the National Endowment of the Humanities, this part of the foreign-language division needed to be professionalized instead of being assigned to amateur teachers, often faculty spouses. This process towards professionalization advanced the awareness that the quality of language instruction could decide the standing, even survival of undergraduate programs. Deans and other administrators acknowledged the fact that well-organized language instruction, including literature and other content, gave departments more leverage in defending their function in the college.

Ironically the strongest challenge to upgrading language instruction resulted from one of the progressive trends of the 1990s, the opening of German Studies to the new, British-inspired wave of cultural studies. What was helpful and drew new students to German could be misunderstood as a surrender to English, since many courses and seminars in German cultural studies were conducted in English. Deans argued that if German Studies rolled over to cultural studies in English, their organization in special departments would become superfluous. As the German Studies Association followed the trend of neglecting the importance of the language, numerous members, in close cooperation with the American Association of Teachers of German, staged a counteroffensive at the end of the 1990s. At that time doctoral candidates in German who had given themselves over to the pleasures of theoretical work and cultural studies discovered at job talks that they had neglected to acquire thorough expertise in speaking and teaching the language, mustering fewer job prospects.

This brings me back to the needs of graduate students, which have shifted with the propitious jump into the digital age. I think I am not wrong in stating that undergraduate programs have stabilized in recent years in their attractiveness and enrollments, although I am fully aware of the precarious state of enrollments. Yet graduate programs are more in flux than ever. The pool of applicants has shrunk precipitously, and they have a hard time attracting new takers. The consolidation of the discipline's graduate programs, meaning their elimination or reduction to master programs, will

continue, yet also might stabilize with the continuous demand for teachers and scholars. This demand, though diminished, will be there.

Returning to my earlier comparison with French programs, I think American graduate students find the German field most rewarding in its flexibility by connecting literature with other fields and engaging with a plethora of interests in environmental, social, political, and philosophical phenomena. The problem is not limiting the literary canon – there are still excellent though fewer dissertations about Goethe and there is more literature read in German college courses than is generally recognized. The problem is rather the need for departments as well as graduate students to find the right moorings for the intellectual work in German after the canon has been reduced. Right moorings entail the specialties that trigger creative engagement and are attractive for future employers, meaning departments that look for excellent teachers both of language and thematic specialties, be they German Romanticism or environmental studies. Techniques of handling digitization also belong to these moorings. They present challenges but do not eliminate the need for close reading of texts. I am not alone in the conviction that the study of German language and literature will continue to represent the core activities that make the discipline viable in the structures of the university and give deans arguments for maintaining its specificity within the humanities. The study of German literature keeps producing enthusiasm and creative scholarship as the engagement with this particular foreign culture continues to challenge American culture and self-understanding.

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