

Comparative German Studies

As I typed this speech I was wondering why people might be interested in attending it. Some of you have certainly studied German in Germany. My speech then adds new perspectives to your own experiences, will help you to remember, --will dress your memories in my words. Others of you plan to study in Germany or plan to study German. Those of you who will participate in the University of Utah's Study Abroad Program in Kiel might be curious how one of the instructors looks like, how she talks, what she has to say, who she is. I promise you will get some answers in these twenty minutes.

Many of you are German instructors, meaning my instructors as well as German scholars for years and years. What can I give you? I hope, I can give you something back of what you have given to me. At least, I want to thank you for guiding my sometimes weird thoughts. I want to thank Johanna Watzinger-Tharp for providing me the opportunity to teach here. This experience gives me my personal answer why I studied German. After my return to Hamburg in summer, I plan to teach German as a foreign language.

Usually, the dedications come at the end. I want to tell you now, why I, a native German citizen from Hamburg / Germany, study German in Salt Lake City. I want to weave my story of German Studies along the Delta Airlines Route between Salt Lake City and Hamburg, beginning in the so called Philosophenturm, ending here in the building LNCO 1920.

The Philosophenturm is with its 15 floors, the highest building on the Hamburg Campus. Here the Humanities are located, and the most wonderful view over the city. The gossip goes, that the tower resembles the famous academic ivory tower: Everybody thinks his or her body away, i.e., nobody does anything in the pragmatic sense of the word.

Die department of German Language and Literature is located at the 3rd and the 4th level. Linguistics and Middle High German on the 3rd, Literature on the 4th. The small DAF ('German As Foreign Language') department has been exiled to the 14th floor, where the Scandinavian department is also located. The other small subdepartment Theater and Media did not have a geographic location. Recently it changed its departmental umbrella joining partly Theater Directing and partly Communications. Later in their professional lives, the Theater and Media students will run around as twin pairs: one as director, the other as her or his personal critique.

I faced my first study-related crisis in the first week at the University of Hamburg. Having been introduced to several instructors, we had to choose one of the six introductory classes. I ended up with Prof. Klaus Briegleb. Later I got to know that he is a Paul deMan expert. No wonder, that my writings are constantly concerned with deconstruction. Prof. Briegleb took us with the author Christoph Ransmayr to "Die Letzte Welt", "The Last World," a rewriting --or remembering -- or displacing of Ovid's Metamorphoses in Tomi after World War II. With Ransmayr, Briegleb and Ovid, we sent messages to China, protesting the Chinese government's student massacres on the Tiannamen Square in 1989.

The Summer Semester was an official strike semester. We painted the walls, protested the

German attitude towards China, the study conditions in the humanities. We discussed and demonstrated, some students were even sleeping in the university.

After the Summer break, we continued in overcrowded seminars and lectures. From the roughly 30 seminars that were offered in Modern German Literature I decided for an autonomous class about Gay and Lesbian texts that introduced me to Gertrude Stein, her paternalistic making of her lovers autobiography, and to the question of genre.

My question was: what is German Literature when American Literature in German translation is taught in German Studies? Which signification does the process of translation play? Walter Benjamin wrote that the German "Brot" and the French "pain" both mean "bread". The signifiers, he says, are different, but the meaning remains the same. The French pain and the English "pain" are spelled alike. Their meaning is different. The reading of "pain" (Brot) as "pain" (Schmerz) translates Benjamins assumption into an error. Brot means "bread", "pain" means Schmerz, hence not bread. Back to Ms. Stein: to study "Die Autobiographie von Alice B. Toklas" means to study the translation of "The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas", means to study the nature of 'translation.'

It is easy to remain in the field of women writers or not-native writers when the department offers so many seminars as in Hamburg. Besides that though, I also had to cover my requirements in linguistics and Middle High German, two classes each, one for beginners and one for experienced. After the fall of the Iron Curtain, the University of Hamburg recruited more visiting Professors from the former East Block. I was lucky to attend a seminar in ethnolinguistics with a linguist from Estonia about the 19th century Russian linguist Vygotsky. The seminar was very insightful. However, like Gertrude Steins texts, Vygotsky also broadened my understanding of German Studies. I defined them then as "Native German students studying texts and the structure of language".

For two semesters I stuck with Prof. Sybille Benninghoff-Lühl in German postcolonial studies. We deconstructed the colonizers' discourses in the German African Ex - Colonies, and discovered for us new, censored or oppressed textual communities. Jaques Derrida and Helen Cixous added their flavor to our discussions. Space became text, texts marked spaces, vernaculars, father languages and mother tongues were either in the letter lines or in the silenced spaces between them.

The discomfort with foreign texts, the confrontation with colonizers, colonized, the distribution of power through texts and in texts, disturbed my mental frames of reference. How political are German Studies, I asked in the seminar, not expecting an answer, of course. The student next to me replied: what is political?

- I was ready for my Master thesis - or for German Studies abroad.

Prof. Martha Helfer reintroduced me to the literary 18/19th century. Re-reading Wilhelm Meister, I acknowledged how much I had learned in the nine years between High School and the Classicism class at the University of Utah, how much my de- and reconstructed reception was different from my reading then, shaken by experiences abroad, shaped by Prof. Helfer and the classmates. I never wrote a twenty pages paper in one week, except for this class.

Here in LNCO, I discovered that German indeed is a second or third language. My students teach me day by day the complicated word order, prepositions, kasus with long u, der- and ein-words, with their multiple endings. The discussions about personal experiences sheds a

light on my Germanness, gives me new ideas about this geographical and textual space. Teaching German here, means for me to teach communications in the literal sense of the word. To convey the basic needs like drinking and eating to somebody else, to get along in a foreign country, to share a communicative space. German Studies here widens my former statement that native German speakers study texts and the structure of language. In German as a second or third language, the non native speakers, study communication in German.

What are German Studies? Probably, to explore this question exhaustively requires more than an academic lifetime. Space for sure, is not the final frontier. Not the geographical space, not the discursive spaces, and not the unmentioned spaces in-between.

At the end of my self imposed exile, I am now in the process of studying contemporary exile literature in Germany. I read German, write in English, write in German, read in English, read vernaculars, read linguistic neologisms.

I try to talk about the multilingual experience with Prof. Klotz in our directed reading hours. Sometimes the english expression escapes me, or we find ourselves suddenly talking in German about French Secondary Literature written in English. Prof Klotz is a great guide and companion through this linguistic salad. However, our German Studies try to make exiled texts communicatable - between us and to others - here and across the ocean.

In June I go back to Germany, exploring new, strange German Studies. Prof. von Schmidt provided me the great opportunity to teach Communication in German and in Germany to American Students. However, we will discuss texts by migrant authors, some of them originally in German, some translated, some escaping linguistic boundaries into neologisms making their statements about the political functions of geographical and discursive frontiers. I am looking forward to the work with Eva Bates, Prof. von Schmidt and the students. For all of us will contribute to our German experience - with and without German beer.

What are then German Studies or German Studies? Or a German Study? Or my German Studies? In my talk I hope not having talked around these questions but having talked the German Studies around. We all know the importance of the way we ask a question. Let me then reconsider the question of German Studies, of how German a Study is, how we study German, depends on time, place, participants, topics, inspirations, goals and last not least - on an open minded team.

I want to thank my colleagues for sharing their teaching experiences with me.

Thanks to all members of the German department for giving me the opportunities of teaching and studying a language I love. Thanks to the secretaries who helped me out when I had trouble with lost keys, pay checks or the registrar. Thanks especially to Stuart McDonald, the department's soul. Thanks to the copy team for their reliable work. Thanks to the cleaning persons for providing my office from turning into a mess.

Last not least I want to take advantage of the fact that the person who emotionally and financially sponsored all my German explorations happens to be here tonight. Thanks Mom, for your unconditional support.