

# Teaching German in America:

Past Progress  
and Future Promise

A Handbook for Teaching  
and Research

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Editor

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## Goethe and Schiller and Me: Reflections on Figuring out Literature While Teaching Others about It and Life Too in a Language They Don't Talk Very Good Yet

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**M**y name is Bill. I am a recovering Germanist. I have followed a winding path, from a personally fulfilling but rather ordinary undergraduate study of German literature, into graduate study of German, through a dissertation about German science fiction, on to new-hiree language-teaching duties, and thence to a career in second-language pedagogy and educational software. My fiftieth birthday (1998), the 250<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Goethe's birth (1999), the new millennium, and an invitation from a journal to contribute an article about the Goethe-Schiller friendship gave me occasion to sum up the results of a process of personal and professional *Bildung*. I aim to formulate what the Greats of Weimar mean to me now and what they meant to me half my life ago and more; to limn what that personal comparison tells us about our culture; to suggest what we might do when we engage in teaching languages and literature; and to offer some thoughts about the shape of American *Germanistik*.

### Kleist Did Not Die for Our Sheepskins

Sometimes he spent hours together in the great libraries of Paris, those catacombs of departed authors, rummaging among their hoards of dusty and obsolete works in quest of food for his unhealthy appetite. He was, in a manner, a literary ghoul, feeding in the charnel-house of decayed literature.

—Washington Irving, "The Adventure of the German Student," 1824

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antipathy of K-12 and postsecondary. We can also, individually and course by course, use current pedagogical knowledge to revitalize our teaching of literature and relate it to the teaching of language for proficiency.

## What do we gain from all this? or, Mr. Chips Doffs His Tweeds and Tips His Hat

Reading for pleasure is an extraordinary activity... [It] breeds a concentration so effortless that the absorbed reader... who is often reviled as an escapist and denounced as the victim of a vice as pernicious as tipping in the morning, should instead be the envy of every student and every teacher.

—Victor Nell, *Lost in a Book: The Psychology of Reading for Pleasure*  
(Yale UP, 1988) 1

Back to the classroom, the students, and us teachers as we live and breathe as human beings rather than just professors and *Germanisten*. It is sad that much great literature is read in misery and haste, especially by those who are training to read literature as professionals. It is also sad that much literature is taught in frustration and pain. Saddest of all is the mass disconnect that separates the populace from reading literature, reading for pleasure, and even reading at all. Victor Nell's study of "ludic reading" was one more impetus for me to reexamine what I was doing in the literature classroom and to continue further in the direction I was already headed as a language teacher. Another has been the use of phrases like "can read for pleasure" in second-language standards adopted in K-12 programs.

More than a few years before that I had sworn never again to require a term paper. Even before I realized the location of the genre of term paper on the ACTFL scale, I had sensed its pointlessness for all but—perhaps—the Germanist-in-training. Steadily I have moved toward coursework that seeks to resemble activities that occur outside the customary academic environment. If I want students to learn something from a course about Goethe and music, I will ask them to bring their own valued music and tell me and the class, in German, why they like it, when they listen to it, and how they discovered it. Maybe they will watch *Fantasia* and describe what they see and hear before they read Goethe's poem about the Sorcerer's Apprentice. It is easy to develop equivalent activities for writing, and we have so much good advice about how to respond to student writing. Helena Curtain and Carol Pesola tell us in *Languages and Children* that children learn languages best when they are using them to learn or do something else. I will amend that to suggest that all students acquire literature and language

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better when they are not thinking so directly about literature and language, but rather about themselves and their world.

The Goethe-Schiller correspondence and my own rather conventional study of *Germanistik* helped me learn about literature and life, although certainly that cannot be only way to do so, or even the best. If my encounter with the very human side of great literature has contributed also to how I teach language, I am the more grateful to it. But being a better teacher is only part of the benefit. The more I have attempted to bring literature and language to students by letting them express in class their own lives and personalities, as part of learning, not a distraction from it, the more I have come to like and care for them. Since I was never much of an ogre in the classroom, this means that in the next decade or so before I retire I may become a real softie. Perhaps as my final professional reward I will be deemed deserving enough to become real: a Velveteen German Professor.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup>The symbol "WWW" indicates that the named picture or text can be found, at least for a few years after the date of this publication, on my web site: <http://web.pdx.edu/~fischerw>. Follow links from "Projects and Publications" on the homepage table of contents.

<sup>2</sup>Recently released is *The Tiger's Tender Touch: The Erotic Life of Goethe*, by Karl Hugo Pruys (Carol Stream, IL: Quintessence Publishing Co., 1999). An ad blurb (*New York Review of Books*, June 10, 1999: 29), tells us that "[b]y celebrating in his poetry the idea of love between men and women, Goethe disguised his own secret passion for men." For a different take on Goethe's sexuality, as it apparently found expression in some supremely beautiful erotic heterosexual poems that sure don't seem to be screens for homosexuality, see the discussion and lengthy documentation from prurient primary sources in *Roman Elegies and Venetian Epigrams: A Bilingual Text*, translated, with introduction, notes and commentaries, by L. R. Lind (Lawrence: UP of Kansas, 1974).

<sup>3</sup>Second-language standards for Portland Public Schools are available at [http://www.pps.k12.or.us/curriculum/second\\_language/second\\_language.pdf](http://www.pps.k12.or.us/curriculum/second_language/second_language.pdf).

<sup>4</sup>While this article was being written, my department was awarded a Pew Grant for Redesign of Language Enrollment Courses, which we will use to carry out the redesign of first-year Spanish, with prior redesign of first-year German as the starting point. Further information is at <http://web.pdx.edu/~fischerw>; follow links from "Projects & Publications."

<sup>5</sup>I detected no significant attention to how to teach literature, even Goethe, to students as language learners in the essays offered by the 25 contributors to the volume *Approaches to Teaching Goethe's Faust*, edited by Douglas J. McMillan. The sub-text of the volume is that teaching great literature is a matter of scholarly interest only when the teacher is not going to be troubled by language barriers, either because the students are well advanced in their study or the course is offered as literature in translation. My acquaintance with several of the contributors, personally or through reputation, will not let me believe that they are indifferent to the needs of the students who constitute by far the majority of learners. Rather, the history of *Germanistik* (and of its sisters in many other language areas) has imposed a conceptual and, often, administrative structure that permits or even encourages literary schol-

ars to ignore language pedagogy. But that is partly why we are in our present mess, and why the "L" in "MLA" rubs many language teachers the wrong way.

<sup>6</sup>For a sadder story, see Joyce Neu. A colleague in Spanish at a nearby institution informs me that he has had difficulty maintaining support for his policy of refusing to award a passing grade in second-year(!) Spanish to students who have not reached Novice-Mid(!) by the end of that year.

<sup>7</sup>Examples: «<http://www.psychiatrie.de/therapie>» or «<http://www.medikamenteninformation.de/smartdrugs>», but «<http://ash.xanthia.com/freitod/archiv2.html>» only with great caution.

<sup>8</sup>For a rich discussion of the foundations of reading in the language program see Arens and Swaffar.

<sup>9</sup>Here are two examples taken from my Internet survey of syllabuses for the teaching of literature in college second-language courses:

- "Rilke – Kafka – Mann," offered by Frank Borchardt at Duke, (<http://aaswebsv.aas.duke.edu/languages/german/courses/lit/ger126syll.html>) takes a standard set of authors and uses conventional critical tools (metrical analysis, etc.). But Borchardt leads the students to the texts, in the sense that they must actively experience the literature and communicate their experience to more than just the teacher. Individual activities ask them to "write in German six lines of original verse in iambics." A group activity says "Imagine being a person with some terrible handicap; write in German metrical verse a continuation of the Rilke piece." Portfolios integrate and publish the semester's work. This may not be a big change in texts or critical methods, but the progressive pedagogical approach is so much more engaging.
- "Advanced Grammar, Conversation and Composition," offered by Gary Smith at William and Mary, («<http://www.wm.edu/CAS/modlang/gasmit/ger305/>»), represents a more radical pedagogical transformation, which is greatly aided by Smith's evident technological competence. As the title indicates, there is still conventional instructional material in the course, but Smith gives his students considerable control over (and responsibility for) their learning. Target skill levels are laid out in ACTFL terms (not a rarity any more, of course), and the immediate purpose of the language learning is stated in functional terms: "describing, telling stories, reporting events,...." Students are expected to explore the content Smith makes available, with external guidance but also while setting their own tasks and goals. Writing is conducted by stages, with peer review conducted over the Internet, including automated check-off rubrics formulated in German. The procedure provides a nice way to let students feel they are using German on a higher level without making them formulate the language themselves, though that option is there too. Some assignments are customized to the individual student and delivered electronically.

<sup>10</sup>Recent scholarship that has strengthened my convictions includes: Barnett; Bernhardt; Weber; and, of course, the two book-length studies, McCarthy and Schneider, and Van Cleve and Willson.

<sup>11</sup>At the "German Emergency" meeting at the 1995 ACTFL Conference in Anaheim, one participant reported in this way about the situation at one of the most prestigious of the country's German Ph.D. programs: "The professors are in denial. The graduate students are beyond denial." For a lighter and more encompassing approach by one of our own, see Ziolkowski.

<sup>12</sup>Just one example of such increased attention to our programs on the part of administrators became evident to me by their ample attendance and eager, informed participation at the "Colloquium on New Goals in Foreign Language Education" held on 15–16 September 1995 at the University of Minnesota under the auspices of the Center for the Advancement of Language Learning.

<sup>13</sup>I was not at all reassured about the future of the German-teaching profession when I made a return visit to the two studies by Lohnes and Nollendorfs and by Benseler, Lohnes, and Nollendorfs. It was déjà vu all over again. One feels that not much progress has yet been made in attacking problems iden-

tified a quarter-century ago. That view is strengthened by the sad remarks of a department chair in "A Plea to Graduate Departments" by Solveig Olsen.

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## Internet Resources Cited

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- «<http://ash.xanthia.com/freitod/archiv2.html>» for German group of organization promoting suicide.
- «<http://web.pdx.edu/~fischerw>» for graphics accompanying this article and for author's background and projects.
- «<http://www.medikamenteninformation.de/smartdrugs>» for German-language texts about mental health.
- «[http://www.pps.k12.or.us/curriculum/second\\_language/second\\_language.pdf](http://www.pps.k12.or.us/curriculum/second_language/second_language.pdf)» for Second-Language Standards for Portland Public Schools.
- «[http://www.psychiatrie.de/therapie/ho\\_the.html](http://www.psychiatrie.de/therapie/ho_the.html)» for German-language texts about mental health.
- «<http://www.wm.edu/CAS/modlang/gasmit/ger305/>» for Gary Smith's student-centered third-year German course.