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FROM THE EDITOR:
The German—American Literary Relationship

In 1786 Goethe packed his bags and headed south. The chronicle of his *Italienische Reise* has made Goethe's sojourn in Italy by far the most famous among German-language writers, but many other 18th- and 19th-century authors found inspiration in Greek and Roman culture. One may argue, however, that in the 20th century—especially in the postwar period—the United States has supplanted Italy as the destination of choice for German writers. Of course America has long been a desirable destination for Germans, but over the past 150 years the pull factors that have brought them to these shores have changed dramatically. In the 1850s Germans came to the “Land der unbegrenzten Möglichkeiten” in pursuit of economic opportunities or religious and political freedom. The German immigrants that thronged America's points of entry in the 19th century have been replaced by the affluent tourists of today—German-language writers among them—and the high ideals that brought the '48ers to America are now overshadowed by the fantasy worlds of Walt Disney and Hollywood.

Italy appealed to writers like Goethe as the birthplace of the Renaissance; he and others were lured across the Alps by classical aesthetics. In a broad similarity, contemporary German writers cross the Atlantic in search of the birthplace of popular culture. The American aesthetic—if that's what we may call the post-modern pastiche of pop culture—is omnipresent. Rare is the urbanized society that doesn't wear blue jeans or listen to rock and roll, and in many countries—maybe even the United States!—the Big Mac has a greater cultural influence than the Bill of Rights. While some would seriously question the aesthetic value of American pop culture, there is no denying its pervasive international influence.

Some German writers have travelled here in search of the (mythological?) six-gun slinging, fast-food eating, electric-guitar playing America they know from the movies. Others have found higher inspiration from “legitimate” artistic influences like Poe and Whitman, Stein and Hemingway. Whatever the connection, several methods of exploring the literary relationship between the United States and the

German-speaking world have evolved: one may analyze the *Amerikabild* of one writer, examine the American literary influences on another, or one may evaluate a third writer within the realm of German-American literature. This third method is still evolving.

For years the accepted definition of German-American literature required that it be written in German by an American of German-speaking extraction, and that it deal with so-called German-American themes. In *Monatshefte* 86 (1994), Jerry Glenn argues against such a restrictive definition—which would exclude the works of a writer like Norbert Krapf, who explores his German heritage in English-language poetry. With writers like Krapf in mind, Glenn applauds Society for German-American Studies President Don Tolzmann's more recent definition, which has been revised to include writings in English. Yet there remains the proviso that the literature deal with “German-American themes.” Glenn wonders: “Must the content of a German-American architect's work be ‘German’ for it to qualify as a legitimate subject of research in the field?” (350).

Why worry about this? Because there are a number of writers who may otherwise fall through the cracks, writers whose works could enrich our study of literature, be it German or American or German-American. For example, how should one deal with Ursula Hegi, a German-born American writer whose works are written in English, yet set in the fictional German town “Burgdorf”? Hegi deals with German—not German-American—themes in her novel *Stones from the River*. Conversely, to what realm of research does Irene Dische belong? Dische was born and raised in New York but lives now in Berlin, where she too writes in English about “German themes.” Is Hegi a German-American and Dische an American-German?

And how should we talk about Patrick Roth? Roth was drawn to America some twenty years ago by the Hollywood film industry. He writes in German and is published by Suhrkamp for a German readership, yet his works are not exclusively “German” in their thematics. Indeed, they at times have American settings and incorporate aspects of American pop culture. In an interview in this issue of *Focus*, Roth identifies the dilemma facing critics who attempt to classify writers like him: “I've been living in L.A. almost half my life. What am I then? German? American? I don't think I'd be writing these books had I not lived here. America and Americans have shaped

my themes, my views. . . . My foundation, my language memory, my view of the spirit is 'German.' My car is 'American.' So is my view of the body, of things material. My view of the world" (118-19).

Glenn makes a distinction between exiled German writers like Bertolt Brecht—who was never really "at home" in the United States—and Thomas Mann, who became a US citizen and actively participated in American cultural and political life. Assessing whether a writer was "at home" in America is Glenn's "bottom line for distinguishing between those who became German-Americans and those who were here temporarily, either for a semester as guests at universities, or for a year or a decade as refugees from political oppression" (352). Such an approach would certainly inform discussions about how to classify writers like Roth or Reinhard Lettau, but there will remain writers who occupy a nether region between German and American literature.

To determine if a writer is a legitimate subject for research, I suggest that those of us interested in German-American literature focus on the reader instead of the writer. Any American may read Ursula Hegi or Norbert Krapf with interest, just as any German may enjoy Irene Dische or Patrick Roth. But those Americans with a special interest in things German—or those Germans with a broader knowledge of America—bring another dimension to the *Lektüre* and may win a deeper understanding of the works of these and similar authors.

Maybe Patrick Roth and Ursula Hegi will never be considered German-American writers—and maybe they shouldn't be. But instead of disqualifying a writer who does not conform to every point in an evolving definition, scholars in both German-American studies and even the broader field of American *Germanistik* might be better served by asking simply, "Is this author of special interest to us?" At *Focus on Literatur* we support the assertion made by La Vern Rippley in the 1993 *Yearbook of German-American Studies*: "Instead of American literary scholars trying hard to outdistance their counterparts in Germany they ought to spend some effort on what is 'American' about the Germanistik found in this northern hemisphere" (3). Rippley lauds the German-American focus of volume 65 of the *German Quarterly*: "In this particular issue are printed articles about literature . . . without the usual implicit self-denial coupled to a self deprecatory

assumption that if it is German literature we study, then we cannot admit of an American bias, interest or even curiosity" (3). We at *Focus* proudly admit to such an interest, but stop short of an "American bias." Each issue will reflect our ongoing support for "traditional" German scholarship, yet we consider it our special mission to seek out writers who straddle the German/American cultural boundary. We invite the graduate students among our readers to submit articles, book reviews, and interviews that challenge conventional definitions of *Germanistik* and explore the special literary relationship between the United States and the German-speaking world.

J. Gregory Redding