

“Fashion is not a bad thing”:

CONVERSATION WITH SANDER GILMAN

Dr. Sander Gilman, Distinguished Professor of the Liberal Arts and Sciences as well as of Medicine and Director of the Humanities Laboratory at the University of Illinois at Chicago, presented his response to the question “Where are the Humanities going?” in February 2002 in the Max Kade Center at the University of Cincinnati. Before his lecture, he spoke with Susanne Lenné about social mobility, the challenges for the foreign language curriculum, the fashion of scholarship and current trends in German literature.

FOCUS: Your Curriculum Vitae, published on the web-page of the University of Illinois, is a very impressive account of your academic endeavors. Could you briefly highlight some of the most important steps and turns in your academic career?

Gilman: Well, I have been employed by many institutions, and I have taught a wide range of things. I spent a very long time at Cornell and I was a member of the faculties of Liberal Arts and Medicine as well. Then, I went to Chicago. I was there for seven years, both at the Medical School and in the Humanities. And last year I went to the University of Illinois at Chicago and again, I have a split appointment at the Liberal Arts and Sciences. My interests are clearly interdisciplinary, but they have always been on German Studies. I was trained well as a Germanist, and my interests have always been centered on, though not exclusively, German texts, German history, German culture.

FOCUS: In your recent book *The Fortunes of the Humanities*, which appeared in 2000, you observe that the “system of social mobility is breaking down,” and you predict that the reduction of funds for higher education in the US will have great “unforeseen, long-term consequences for the social and economic fabric of the United States.” How would you describe these consequences?

Gilman: Well, I think what has happened since World War II is that higher education was the means by which people from the working class and lower middle class have become members of the middle class. In this country, we believe very strongly in the egalitarian access to higher education. What happens, and has happened now, is that higher education has become elitist in complicated ways. For a very long period of time, many state universities charged no tuition and there were places where you had immediate access. Now, even junior colleges cost enough money that, unless one borrows money, it is oftentimes difficult to get an education. And what that does is to eliminate that group which is already outside of the mainstream. In this country, it tends to be heavily minorities and new immigrants. The way that these groups used to get into the system was through the system of education: public education and public higher education.

Private education has recognized this in an odd way. One of the things that has happened this past year, is that Harvard, Princeton and Yale, as well as other institutions, have started to focus on not only less or under-represented minorities, as they have always tried to do, but on members of the lower middle class – no matter what their background is. It used to be that if you applied for Harvard, for example, and you were extremely good and got in, and if your parents were marginally able to pay, what you wound up doing was borrowing high amounts of money. Now these universities are recognizing that this is part of their obligation. So, what has happened in the last decade, and certainly this year, is that those students who were at the margins, are no longer able to use the universities at all.

There is a big discussion in Germany on whether or not there should be an introduction of tuition there. The arguments for tuition do not recognize the notion of the universities being a force of social mobility. The Germans have gone from a nine percent to thirty-two to thirty-six percent – it depends on the figures you read – movement to some type of higher education, post-secondary education. It has been a major leap within the last forty years. But, if you look at the family patterns, what you see is precisely that there are groups who are not that well represented in those thirty-six percent. They are not even well represented in the *Abitur*-structure. And if you look at class movement in Germany, it has been primarily the middle-class which has increased this number and not the working-class. This is also true in terms of the quality of German educa-

tion. The most recent comparative survey (PISA) of higher education ranked German education on the secondary level below that of the United States in all areas of study. Thus German university students are in general more poorly prepared than the best American students, even though both tend to come from similar social groups.

Ironically, of course, in the GDR it was exactly the working class that went to the universities and the 'middle class' was excluded (with the exception of the leadership cadre). This has now completely collapsed. The ethos, which said that if your father worked in a factory, you should go to the university, has been reversed. The discussion on tuitions will be an interesting one. I think that they will introduce some type of *Hörgeld* or something like that. And the question is whether or not the re-structuring of the German universities will make it possible for other people to get into the system. I rather doubt it.

FOCUS: This brings to mind another question: You mentioned, that thirty-six percent of the German population currently attends the university. On the other hand, there is talk about over-qualification, about too many academics for whom there might not be a job in their professional field.

Gilman: That is an interesting question because one of the things that people who make that argument seemed to have missed, is that there is something called "Europe". I will give you an example: well-trained people in the sciences who become PhDs almost by definition have to be Anglophone. The working language of science is English. Whether you like it or not, it is. That means that you can work in a lab in Belgium, in Italy, in Spain, or beyond Europe in Canada or Hong Kong. And your generation – you – are working all over the world. My older son works in Tokyo. He does not think that this is weird. In other words: the problem in Germany is that they do not understand, that higher education systems in general are not intended nowadays to simply provide that social mobility within Germany but within Europe. More and more young people are now, for example, going to what used to be the East – either the former Soviet Union or former communist countries – because there are all sorts of employment possibilities. And German is more accepted as a kind of lingua franca than it is in the rest of Europe. So, one of the things I am seeing is an interesting German academic diaspora and I think that this is a good thing, not a bad thing.

FOCUS: Would you say that this is true more so on the PhD-level than for someone leaving the university with a Master's degree?

Gilman: It depends. The Erasmus program has meant, for example, that I have students – I teach also at the Freie Universität in Berlin – who come in on the Erasmus program, many of whom intend to get whatever the university-leaving-degree is and go into some type of international studies: Tourism, for example. One young woman who was with my class last year is going to go back to Belgium and is going to work in Tourism. She wanted to learn a year of German because she knew that she would deal with Germans. And it wasn't just the language she wanted to learn, she wanted to get the culture. So, I see a lot of mobility. But it is an interesting problem because the discussions that are now going on with the *Hochschulrahmengesetz* mean that there is going to be a whole generation of young academics who are *habilitiert* or at least *promoviert*, who are going to have to look for jobs outside of Germany. That freaks people, because they think that they are going to lose something. But if you think in more global terms it means that you got people out there who are well-trained in your method throughout the world.

FOCUS: In your latest book you remind us that, in the years following WWII, knowledge of a foreign language was seen either as a means of acquiring the command of "high" culture or as a pragmatic tool within the context of the War. Why do students today learn a foreign language? How do German Departments respond to that?

Gilman: Well, again, one of the things you have to understand is that over the last twenty years we have persuaded people that the learning of languages is also a learning of cultures. And if you learn a culture, you also learn about your own culture. I think about young Germans. I just did a TV program with Thomas Meinicke, who is one of the best young novelists today, who spent a year in the States when he was in high-school, and you see that permeating all of his fiction. His experiences in the United States helped him understand himself as a young German writer better. Sometimes this kind of experience has pragmatic ends, that is, sometimes you then go and work in that area, and sometimes it does not.

I think recently we have also had a greater access for high-school

students to spend time outside of the United States. And that immediately changes why you study a language. The connection between language and culture becomes manifest by living abroad. I mean, when I studied German in high-school, we studied exactly the way you studied Latin. There was absolutely no difference, because there was no living culture to which one related the lesson. I think therein lies a big difference.

FOCUS: Your concept of "language across the curriculum", which would allow, for example, historians of France to study French history in French and participate in discussion sections in the foreign language, etc., is fascinating. Could you comment on the success of such programs?

Gilman: If they are done systematically, they are extremely successful. But they are also very labor-intensive. That is, you do not get large sections. And then the question is, how do you set this up within a teaching structure? The alternative structure, which has been used in places like in the city of Buffalo, where you have a class and you let students who have had some language facilities work in that language. This has been a disaster. Because, again, you have to be dealing with someone whose language skills and cultural knowledge are good enough to where they can actually make sense. And perhaps you might then, in that person's large lecture course, assign a TA from the German Department to do the discussion section, even if it is only with five students who want to do it in German. But then, the college or the university has to be willing to say: "It is worth our while for that quality of instruction." And, by the way, I am convinced that over time, those numbers will increase. Because when students come back from experiences abroad, they want to use their language, and they may not be interested in doing it in a literature or film course. They may be interested in doing it in their major.

FOCUS: Will there be enough qualified faculty to offer these kind of specialized courses and discussion sections?

Gilman: The answer is "yes" at every university, but they are different at every institution and they are a relatively small number. There may be a musicologist, for example, who is a Rameau-specialist who spent a long time working in Paris. There may be someone in the English Department. But you have to be flexible: "What faculty resources do we have?" Rather

than say: "We need someone to do Portuguese history." There may not be anybody who does Portuguese history. So, you have to be very flexible.

FOCUS: In response to the question on how to attain tenure in German Studies, you stress the importance of the "new and interesting" in academic writing and you assert that "fashion" in scholarship is a sign of this importance." This could be understood as if scholarship should feed the market and as if, to put it plainly, anything goes as long as it provokes enough interest or controversy, without regard to the validity of the argument. How do you respond to such an interpretation?

Gilman: Oh, you see, "validity of the argument" has to do with whether there is consensus, rather than truth. In other words, if you say to me: "Does it have to be right or truthful?" then I am saying: "I don't know what that means."

FOCUS: But should it not have to be convincing?

Gilman: This is what I mean: that is consensus. And I found quite often that, what at one moment was considered to be outside of a disciplinary field, can very quickly become convincing if the argument is powerfully enough made. I will give you an example from my own work. Many years ago, I gave a talk and then wrote an essay, which became a chapter of a book on Richard Strauss' *Salome*. I was attacked profoundly by musicologists, because I made an argument that the music itself carries a certain stereotypical weight. Never mind the libretto, reading the libretto as a literary critic is easy. Oscar Wilde wrote the libretto, Strauss did not. Strauss wrote the music. And people said: "Music cannot carry meaning in the modern age. That's only *Programm Musik*. That's Mendelssohn." And I said: "No, that is not true." And now there is Mark Weiner's book on Wagner. Even in musicology it has now simply been accepted that music can create, indeed, meaning.

My essay came at a moment before that was considered an acceptable argument. Most people, and clearly very serious musicologists, were simply dismissing it. And now, twenty years later, this is just commonplace. I had the ability to write that essay, exactly because I was not a musicologist. That is, I came from outside the field. And German Studies, once you think of it as not genre or discipline driven, but studying the

complicated culture of the German speaking world, gave me a perfectly good right to work on it. What is interesting, then, is when those weird, singular, unacceptable views are accepted within a consensus. Now, I have written other things that have never gotten accepted. People today still think that they are weird. And you know, they may really be weird. You cannot always tell when you are working things out. And therefore, one of the questions always is, not only to think of this as a form of an ongoing dialogue, but where you are in that dialogue. Whether you are early in that dialogue, or you are late. I think it is not very interesting to be the last person to do a project, which a hundred people have worked on before, because the amount of inspiration would have to be very limited. So, fashion, for me, is not a bad thing. With fashion you can shape your field.

FOCUS: Does this not also pave the way for sensationalism? Anything that arouses controversy, anything that attracts attention would be acceptable?

Gilman: The answer is: it can attract attention in a negative or positive way. I think the saddest scholarship is scholarship that has the potential for changing the world that we know, and is presented in a way as to deny such potential. I am comfortable with the notion that you address a broad audience in such a way as to engage their interest. But that does not mean that they are going to agree with you. This is why cultural conflicts are important. They really are important. And scholarship that does not engage in those conflicts – if they are asking questions, in a sense *should* engage – seems to me not worth doing.

FOCUS: This reminds me of a recent announcement of a conference entitled "(Ab)using Auschwitz:[...]" With such an extensive body of writing in the last decade, scholarly, fictional, autobiographical and other, do you think that the Holocaust has become a topic that is being abused in order to gain funds or publicity?

Gilman: This is an interesting question. Let me ask you another question: Do you think that after Napoleon's defeat the obsession with the *Befreiungskrieg*, to use the German term, was a sign of commodification of Napoleon? Wagner, Heine, indeed virtually every French, British, and

German writer of the mid-nineteenth century was obsessed with Napoleon. The answer is: traumatic events have always shaped the next generation and, oftentimes, the generation thereafter. Is it being exploited? Of course it is being exploited! Are there cheap exploitative things that have to do with the Holocaust? Of course. Should we forbid this as a topic? No. But we should – and the conference will probably address this – ask the hard questions about how it is used, why it is used, what the implications of the audience are, and what the implications of the theme presented the way it is presented are. And sometimes the answer is: ‘it is a good thing,’ sometimes the answer is: ‘it is a bad thing.’ And again – back to the question of interpretation – our views may or may not resonate.

FOCUS: What new fields of research do you see emerging? Which do you find most promising?

Gilman: Well, in terms of young writers looking at Germany as a multicultural society, I think that writers like Thomas Meinicke and Zafer Senocak are the most interesting young writers in Germany right now. There is Dürs Grünbein, the poet. These are poets and authors who are dealing with the complexity of a new Germany in Europe and they are clearly the most interesting people. Günter Grass has evidently just published a new novel. I have not read a Günter Grass novel in a number of years. But it has gotten enormously good reviews – and not just by the Grass-clique. Because, evidently, he has gone back to this very simple narrative and he has gone to the topic of the war. So, it will be interesting to see these younger, very experimental writers, Ingo Schulz, Thomas Meinicke, Zafer Senocak, also in terms of this whole question about: ‘Ok, we now have this new Germany, what do we do with it?’ And I think we are still in the age of the novel. I think that, except for Grünbein, new poetry is certainly not terribly engaging. And the new post-Heiner-Müller-theater has just been a disaster.

FOCUS: Thank you for this interview.

Gilman: You are welcome.

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Word and Flesh

CONVERSATION WITH DOROTHEA GRÜNZWEIG

Dorothea Grünzweig was born in 1952 in Korntal near Stuttgart. She studied German and English in Tübingen and Bangor, Wales, after which she conducted research on the poet Gerald Manley Hopkins in Oxford. After teaching at the University of Dundee in Scotland, and at a school in South Germany, she moved to Finland, where she taught at the Deutsche Schule in Helsinki from 1989 to 1998. She now lives in Helsinki and in the country. Grünzweig received several prizes including the: Lyrikpreis der Stiftung Niedersachsen (1997) and the Heinrich-Heine-Stipendium im Literaturhaus Lüneberg (2000). Two of her collections have been published with the Wallstein Verlag in German: *Mittsommerschnitt* (1997) and *Vom Eisgebreit* (2000). The first collection translated into English by Derk Wynand will appear in 2002 as *Midsummer Cut* (Ottawa, Ontario: BushekBooks). The following conversation took place in German and occasionally English. It was decided to produce a transcript in English, with both parties involved in the translation process.

JEREMIAH: One of the aspects of your poems which I find so fascinating is the challenge they pose to such traditional philosophical dichotomies as self/other, culture/nature, and human/animal (see Jeremiah 154-57). Another opposition which they question is that between body and mind. Feelings are evoked by means of very concrete, physical images, whereby the body is both a symbol of and a participant in certain states of mind. Do you consciously set out to explore corporeality, and how do you understand embodiment? A big question!

Grünzweig: Yes, quite! Well, what I can say is that I have been thinking a lot recently about the physicality of words. At the moment, working on the new poems, I now and then find myself exploring how the names of things – that is, words, and maybe more specifically *poetry* – can be on the one hand empty, inauthentic, or then, on the other hand, bodily, or true. Poetic language, when it yields itself up to discovery, means for me that