

Transatlantic Uneasiness: Perks and Pitfalls of Crossing the Pond

Navigating across the Atlantic is a challenge not only for authors, their books and their literature, but for scholars as well. Jan Behrs (Literaturhaus Schleswig-Holstein) examines the academic career of the German-born Harvard professor Kuno Francke (1855–1930). In his essay, he explains the slight uneasiness of transatlantic academic relations between Germany and the U.S. — an uneasiness that persists despite a generally well-functioning culture of exchange between the two countries.

By Jan Behrs

The excellent blog posts that precede mine have already made a couple of great points in favor of transatlantic literary studies. From very different viewpoints, they all come to the conclusion that our discipline(s) can only benefit from a broader angle that does not stop at national and cultural borders. As David D. Kim has pointed out in [the first post of this blog](#), there is also a long line of intellectual predecessors that have tried in their own way to think transatlantically. Last but not least, there is a stable institutional framework (consisting of the DAAD, the Fulbright Program, the Alexander von Humboldt and Volkswagen foundations, and many others) that can help cover the material costs of bridge-building. Especially if we look at the particular connection between the US and Germany, which admittedly plays a privileged role in the broader picture of transatlantic relations, we have to ask ourselves why the transnational outlook advertised in this blog isn't already the norm: the proud scholarly tradition, the material support, and the expectation of intellectual rewards are all there, so why do we still not have the thoroughly cosmopolitan academic landscape that we all seem to want?

The answer to this question is simple and frustrating at the same time: Even with a well-established framework that fosters academic exchange, the exchange itself is not (and cannot be) without friction. Crossing a bridge, even if it is a nice and well-maintained one, inevitably leads to discomfort and the unpleasant realization that our (academic) values and practices are not universal, but contingent. To give more concrete examples from my own perspective: German »Germanistik« still has a tendency to see itself as the center of the world when it comes to German literature. Even though the slightly disrespectful term »Auslandsgermanistik« for all scholarship from outside the German-speaking world is mostly avoided these days, the idea that other scholarly cultures just cannot muster up the same intensity of attention and depth of understanding is still firmly in place. On the other side of the ocean, German Studies in the United States has long developed enough self-esteem to repay the German snobbery with an attitude of their own: while institutional exchange with the German-speaking world is still valued, the scholarship produced there is read only selectively and often treated with a kind of mild derision.

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The transatlantic uneasiness that shines through in these observations is by no means surprising — this is just how academic differentiation works. Using the framework that the sociologist Rudolf Stichweh developed for describing the relations between academic disciplines, we could speak of a »process of individualization« that separates German Studies in Germany and in the US: While a stable infrastructure of exchange and communication remains in place, both institutions have at some point reached a position where they can stand on their own feet without necessarily having to interact with each other. And it is not hard to see why such a process of individualization was necessary, especially for US academia: The tenets of German Literaturwissenschaft developed in the 19th century, namely the philological »Andacht zum Unbedeutenden« or »attention even to the most marginal aspect of a text«, could just not be fully integrated into an academic practice that also had to include language teaching and the general study of »Germanness« (whatever that may be). As the editors of a 1970 volume on German Studies in the US put it somewhat defensively, specialization of the extremely detail-oriented kind »is possible to a much greater extent among our colleagues in German-speaking countries than it is in the United States. Our specific situation demands that most of us should be generalists« (Lohnes and Nollendorfs 3). This tendency to have the big picture in mind is not the only factor that sets the two academic cultures apart, but is a particularly important one. Unsurprisingly, German literary studies have historically not reacted too kindly to the holistic but less detail-oriented approach favored in the United States. In 1928, the reviewer of a literary history hailing from the US notes that the sweeping style of the book would have been »intolerable if it had been written in Germany; coming from a German in America, we can just so accept it« (Helm 218).

The author of the book that is being snubbed here, the Harvard professor Kuno Francke (1855–1930), is a good example of the chances and risks that transatlantic literary studies can afford. Before coming to the United States, Francke had had a promising but not stellar academic career in Germany that was defying the trend towards academic specialization typical of his time: In his own description, he »dallied around aimlessly at the university for five years« (Francke, *Deutsche Arbeit* 1) and studied with eminent

historians, philosophers, archaeologists, and philologists before finally settling for a dissertation in history. Even after that, Francke writes, »I was still unable to find the right path and swayed back and forth [...] because I had never learnt to educate myself. This education would be afforded to me only by the experience of being abroad« (*Deutsche Arbeit* 2). Exactly the trait that would have made Francke a somewhat shaky candidate for a German academic career, his broad outlook caused by a lack of specialization became a boon of his early years at Harvard from 1884 on: »From the outset, I was encouraged to interpret ›German‹ in the broadest possible way, that means to use it as a collective term for political, social, intellectual and artistic traits of German history« (2). It is safe to say that Francke would not have been able to do this at a German university in the late 19th century. In the United States, however, his unusually broad approach made him successful, and his contemporaries did not fail to notice that he won over the Americans by being the opposite of a typical German professor, despite his thick German accent: »Francke was broad-minded by nature. [...] He was singularly free from that besetting sin of German scholars, pedantry« (Walz 3).

Francke's unlikely career abroad (which is followed by grudging acceptance in Germany some decades later) is a nice success story, but does it have any broader implications? I would like to suggest that it is especially the frictions and fault lines that come with transatlantic exchange that make his story interesting. His main work, the frequently reissued *Social Forces in German Literature* (1895; later called *A History of German Literature as Determined by Social Forces*) is a case in point. Written with an American audience in mind and from the peculiar perspective of a (often home-sick) German far from home, Francke boldly flips the script and claims that his position enables particular insight unavailable to scholars in Germany: »[T]he very distance which separates me from the country of my birth may have helped me to see at least some of its intellectual mountain-peaks as they tower up in clear outline above the dark stretch of the hills and the lowlands« (*Social Forces* vi). Here is not the place to judge if Francke achieved his lofty goals — a fair criticism of the *Social Forces* book would be that it fails to elaborate what exactly it wants to do in terms of method. However, a couple of achievements do stand out: As I have pointed out elsewhere (Behrs 2016), Francke effortlessly includes contemporary literature (which was then mostly off-limits to literary scholars) into his historical account and even planned to write a whole volume about contemporary texts. More importantly, Francke is extremely innovative in tying literature to larger societal forces, thereby curtailing the role of the author as a genius solely responsible for the text. Again, it is debatable if his stated goal of »point[ing] out the mutual relation of action and reaction between these [intellectual] movements and the social and political condition of the masses from which they sprang or which they affected« (Francke, *Social Forces* v) is achieved in the book or not. However, the literary-sociological framework alone stands out, and I would argue that this framework is a result and example of transatlantic literary scholarship. A less desirable consequence of Francke's unusual position between the US and Germany is that when »Germanistik« enters a brief phase (in the 1920s and 30s) where literary sociology is trendy and Francke's outlook on

literature edges closer to the mainstream, his pioneering text plays virtually no role in the discussion anyhow.

The example of Francke can show us on the one hand that transatlantic literary studies have the potential to unlock otherwise inaccessible ways of thinking and can foster »broad-mindedness«, a quality generally in short supply in academia. On the other hand, the fact that the proto-sociological thoughts of the *Social Forces* stayed isolated even when literary sociology became the method of choice for a while (and when Francke was at the top of his fame) reminds us of the risks that come with such encounters: the cracks that you have to jump might make your thinking more agile, but the product of such thinking might still fall through in the end. Seen like this, transatlantic literary history is not only a history of stellar achievements, but also one of missed opportunities, and it is my hope that the discussion around this blog is able to encompass them both.

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