ROOM FOR CURIOSITY:

A Conversation with Liliane Weissberg

Liliane Weissberg is Professor of German and Comparative Literature at UPenn. She is also a member of the Center in Folklore and Ethnography, the Jewish Studies Program, the Art History Graduate Group, and the Advisory Committee in Women's Studies. Dr. Weissberg's interests focus on late eighteenth-century to early twentieth-century German literature and philosophy, and interdisciplinary studies. Much of her work has concentrated on German, European, and American Romanticism, but she has also written on the notion of representation in realism, on photography, and on literary and feminist theory.

FOCUS: Reading through your resume makes a graduate student feel almost dizzy. Looking back, what were the most important steps and decisions in your career?

LW: I think nobody should feel dizzy looking at somebody's resume. I think in my case what you may note is that as a comparatist, I tried to keep what is now considered an interdisciplinary field as widely open as possible, to leave room for curiosity, so I did a lot of different things. Which of them are the most important, you are asking, well, one step that was obviously very radical and important for me, was my move to America. Although you can argue, of course, that I have kept Germany or Europe still present for me. I am there very often as a visiting professor, teaching and lecturing. But to open up my life and my work to both European and American scholarship—this was a very important and maybe the most important step I took as a graduate student.

FOCUS: You have been a teacher, visiting professor, lecturer, and editor. What do you enjoy most about your career? Which aspect is most appealing to you and why? How do you juggle all the different roles and responsibilities?

LW: Actually I don't think of these roles as being separate. I try to teach both what the program demands and what is current in my research. And that is why some of my publications are intimately related to classes that I taught or that I am still teaching, likewise to invitations to lecture or to my participation in conferences. I

would therefore say that teaching, research and publishing is basically one thing for me. I cannot imagine research without writing, I cannot imagine research without communicating my research and vice versa communicating and learning, which results in research. That does not mean that there are parts of my job that I like less. All of us have to do a lot of what may look like routine, be it administrative routine, or be it the intimate nitty gritty scheduling of classes, or be it the double checking the footnotes for publications, and so on. These particular parts of the tasks of research, teaching or administration are less fun, but necessary.

FOCUS: Here is a provocative question for you. A professor recently commented rather harshly on the state of journals on German literature: Germanists don't read their own journals anymore, unless it's to see if they are quoted, bashed, praised, or, worst of all, ignored.
As an editor you ultimately decide whose work is published and whose is not. How do you personally arrive at these decisions? What makes an article worth publishing?

LW: I think these are two questions that relate to decision making. In terms of book and journal publishing, at least in the States, one person does not make any decision alone. In terms of book publishing, the publisher sends a manuscript out to peer reviewers. As an editor of a series, I make the first initial decision whether or not something is worthy to be sent out. And this worthiness may be related to the quality of the manuscript or to more trivial, economic observations – whether a book would have sufficient buyers and a reading public needed to make the project interesting for the publisher.

In terms of a journal, the editor will have to make a decision whether or not to send the paper out for evaluation. This decision may be made in terms of the quality, the originality of the contribution, but also whether it would fit within the framework of the journal in question. In short, if an author does not get a manuscript published, it is not necessarily a sign of the quality or the kind of research that he or she is doing. With the other comment you made, in regard to the readership of academic papers … well, I can only talk from my perspective. I certainly read other people's work (laughs), so I may not be the best person to ask if the professor's statement is true.

What I am concerned about is something else, and that is the situation of book and journal publishing. In the case of journals, you may have access to journals in the library or online. But it has become forbiddingly expensive for libraries to buy and distribute journals. Part of the problems for books these days is to find book buyers.

And because of the high prices of subscription to journals, libraries are forced to buy fewer books as well.

As the editor of a book series, I would wish that more people in German would actually buy books or ask the libraries to purchase books. German is not a widely book-buying culture in the States, apparently. There are worse "book buying fields" in the humanities than German, but there are also much better ones. And again, even within the field of German, it differs in regard to the area. People in medieval studies buy a lot of books. This is interesting for me, because these readers are students of a manuscript culture; still, they are eager to buy printed books. Scholars in 19th and 20th century German studies have problems selling their books.

FOCUS: How do you manage to be active in such diverse fields that are not often brought together (e.g. English and German)? Do you think that such combinations are becoming more and more prevalent or has there been a "post-comp-lit" return to national literatures? Do you see your work as a contribution to the current Cultural Studies "buzz"?

LW: I do not view my work with the same kind of disciplinary delineations as perhaps some universities do. I ask questions, and then I try to look at ways of answering them. Part of what drives my work is also whether there are other ways of putting questions, or, to say it crudely, "what if?" You saw it yesterday in my lecture about the Berlin Jewish salon - what if a presupposition with which we have worked for decades, if not centuries, has to be questioned? If you stay within very traditional disciplines – they were set up at universities because people had special interests in mind. But if you have a different kind of interest in asking a question, delineations may change.

Now, I had been studying and teaching comparative literature, and comparative literature can be viewed in different ways. I am sure there are people who go into the field because they want to study more than one national literature, and then studied in the way of comparing apples and oranges. There are also others who go there because they do not want to be bound by the study of one national literature. They want to ask more general questions or questions that cannot be answered within one specific, traditional field. And I belong to that latter group. So the choice of field - comparative literature - and the kind of questions that I am asking within this field may be quite predictable as well. You could say that perhaps the field of comparative literature is subversive to that of German, English, etc. in some ways. But the strength of comparative literature at a university also depends on the strength of the other

individual departments and programs.

I don't think that my work is post-comp-lit. Whether it is Cultural Studies, yes, I think so. But Cultural Studies has become to mean a lot of very different things. There is a kind of Cultural Studies that does not settle on a definite approach, that is, oh I can do anything and call it Cultural Studies because it goes beyond the text and literature. There is a more hard-core ((laughs) I know that sounds a bit like pornography) Cultural Studies where you can say, ok, what one is trying to do is to provide a very substantial link between questions social scientists have asked and questions the representatives of the humanities have asked. And the representatives of Cultural Studies in that sense are not all that different from, let's say, new historicists, except maybe not as dependent on accidental anecdotes.

FOCUS: In reference to your lecture "No Place on Earth: The Berlin Jewish Salon Reconsidered" - It was remarkable to hear how much you know about the cultural history of everyday items such as the sugar bowl, what drinking tea meant in the everyday life but also its symbolic meaning in novels and letters... How do you approach your projects in general? What kind of texts do you read?

LW: This is a somewhat difficult question because as I said before, I am driven by curiosity. And sometimes I read a novel and ask myself, what is this or that item doing in this book? Or why is it so important to have this kind of description? I am always eager to read literary works, but also historical works, social histories, and I have become more and more interested in material objects and what constitutes everyday life – which again goes back to your question about Cultural Studies. So it is not just the distinction between high and low culture, it is also a question of what is the context for the production and reception of literature. And I find it illuminating for my work to do so, both because I am interested in the material culture represented in literary works, and in viewing literary works as part of this material culture.

Just as an example, you will find an anecdote about Moses Mendelssohn in a memoir, in which he is viewed as a universal father figure for Jewish families in Berlin. He was supposed to look into the reading matter of young women in his circle. When he found that a young woman had been reading a novel, he took it away from her, and threw it out of the window. Of course, you can take this story as a rather trivial occurrence. But it may also tell us something about Mendelssohn's status within Jewish society, about the status of women, about what young Jewish women may have wanted to read but were not permitted to read, and about the function of the book.

We find that women were reading literature, that secular reading had become very important in Jewish society, that books in secular languages were read, that novels were regarded as dangerous, in particular for women. And the book itself becomes an item that is very important for the culture of that time. It tells us a lot – not the least about the German-Jewish Enlightenment.

FOCUS: The author Rahel Varnhagen seems to have been of interest to you throughout your career. Could you reflect on what sparked your interest in this woman in the first place, and how your research interest in her has developed over the years?

LW: Actually, Rahel has not been of interest to me during all of my time in the profession. I started as a comparatist focusing on American literature and its relationship to European philosophy and thought. I became more and more interested in Jewish culture since my move to the States, looking back to Germany. Now you can theorize a lot why I did not work on German-Jewish matters while in Germany, but feel freer to do so from a distance. That might have personal reasons as well.
I started reading Rahel's letters because I received an invitation to present a lecture on her work. And I became fascinated with her work out of several related points that I did not expect to happen--first of all, because Rahel is a highly original writer, secondly because the reception of her work has changed in very interesting ways since the late eighteenth century. There was the rediscovery of German-Jewish culture by post-Second World War critics, but also something we talked about yesterday, feminist critics who went back to try to find out whether or not Rahel would fill the bill of a role model. But my attitude towards her and her work has changed as well. I am much more critical towards her work now than I was when I started to read her. And I must say that I find some other writers of this period perhaps more intriguing now; authors who expressed their thoughts about Jewish emancipation in different ways. I have been fascinated with other authors who seem still largely forgotten. I am still on the road of discovery.

FOCUS: In your essay "Bodies in Pain. Reflections on the Berlin Jewish Salon" (*The German-Jewish Dialogue reconsidered*) you point out that "the conversation of the salon as well as its translation into letters have been regarded as highly gendered forms. Salons and letters demarcate a woman's space of articulation, a feminine body of work, prone to ailments itself." In your opinion, Rahel's salon can be easily be viewed as a "talking cure." Could you elaborate on this statement?
LW: The notion of the talking cure was coined by a woman whom Sigmund Freud called Anna O. Today, we now know Anna O. to be Berta Pappenheim, another

German-Jewish author, not just a socialist working for Jewish orphanages, but also for women's rights, writing against prostitution and the white slave trade in Eastern Europe, and for the rights of Jewish women. Pappenheim was a politically active woman, and she was also a literary author. She wrote very interesting short stories. In some way, these stories completed the psychoanalytic treatment that she had begun with Freud. But at the time when Freud met her, she was already in the treatment with Josef Breuer. And one of her symptoms was that she spoke English. She was a Viennese woman, and she spoke English, she imagined herself pregnant during the course of the treatment. But when Freud decided to rely not only on hypnosis, but noted that symptoms disappeared when the woman was talking, it was Anna O. who defined the process and said, it is a 'talking cure.' That is why the phrase was coined in English, because she spoke English. And this notion of the talking cure became a notion that psychoanalysis adopted. Freud was very happy that Anna O. had coined that word. Because psychoanalysis works via an oral narrative.

Now, if you go back to the talk that I gave yesterday, and my first exploration also in the specific essay that you read, it is remarkable that a notion like the "hysteric" that Freud relied upon, because women "hysterics" were the first patients that he treated, was used already in 1812, and in regard to the so-called Jewish salon, by Rahel's husband Karl August Varnhagen. Now 1812 is politically an interesting year, it is the year of Jewish emancipation in Prussia. It is also interesting because it is the time of the Napoleonic Wars. And it was coined to define a woman's body, and not just any woman's body but a woman's body that is part of the Jewish Salon. Thus, I started thinking: what are the connections between this early Jewish culture and the later discoveries of psychoanalysis? In both cases you have Jewish women being treated. In the Salon we do not think at first that they are being treated because they are hosting them, they certainly seemed in charge. But you can ask: Did this particular talking have any effect on their situation, this kind of hyperproduction of speech? Because what was happening was not merely a dialogue, it was performance as well. Did this talking affect their political, social or medical situation? Because you know from the letters, they were suffering, and as a matter of fact, Jews tended to describe their own political and social situation since the beginning of emancipation, as a medical condition.

The early Jewish autobiographies that I have worked on in my forthcoming book had a great affinity to Karl Philipp Moritz' magazine of *Erfahrungsseelenkunde*, and several of them were published in this journal. Jews in the late eighteenth century could not describe their lives in terms of pietistic autobiographies, they did not convert.

They could not describe themselves within the framework of 'Gelehrtenbiographien' because they were not famous. But they could describe themselves as medical case studies. And that is what they did. So you have a group of people who thought of themselves linguistically—as well as physically—not on the same level as the people in their Gentile surrounding.

FOCUS: Thank you for the interview.

Julia K. Baker and Laura Tráser-Vas contributed to this interview.
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