

Teacher Feature

Peter Meister

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Touchdown	<i>touching down [in airplane]</i>
dein Kopf	<i>your head</i>
an meiner Schulter	<i>on my shoulder</i>

Hans-Jürgen Göhrung
(<http://www.deutschehaikugesellschaft.de/die-dhg/> 6jan15)

In one of Peter Meister's favorite classroom activities, students relax with haiku, first by browsing until they find one they like, perhaps discussing it with a colleague or with the whole class. Eventually, students are asked to "play with" or "transform" their haiku by making one change:

Touchdown	<i>touching down</i>
dein Kopf	<i>your head</i>
an seiner Schulter	<i>on his shoulder</i>

Using their new poem, which now in some sense is in fact their own, as a new point of departure, they make another change:

im Restaurant	<i>in the restaurant</i>
dein Kopf	<i>your head</i>
an seiner Schulter	<i>on his shoulder</i>

Perhaps that's where they want to leave it. But if they don't have something they like after two or three transformations, they can keep on playing until they do, or throw that one away and play the game again with another poem. Many students think they don't like poetry. So Meister tells them not to worry about counting syllables, and not to call it a poem, if the term carries unpleasant associations. In keeping with habits in contemporary haiku circles, students are allowed to ignore punctuation, if they don't extend this experiment to their other writing.

Dr. Meister grew up in Indiana, and, until college, knew no more German than his classmates (*Kindergarten*; *Angst*, in those days a recent borrowing still pronounced as in German). He had a great teacher in college, who sent him to Vienna for spring of his sophomore

year. Meister completed his B.A. in German at The University of Pennsylvania, and his Master's and Ph.D. in medieval German at The University of Virginia. At various stages in his career, he has taught German to children in middle school, older kids in high school, and, since 1990, younger and older adults at The University of Alabama in Huntsville. He served as reader for a major textbook through several editions, and, on several occasions, as reader for the ETS Advanced Placement exam. In 2007 he was listed in *Who's Who Among American Teachers and Educators*.

Reasons for learning German are more subtle than for a language whose native speakers are uncomfortable with English, Meister tells learners. Few Germans need you to speak German for their sake. In fact, they don't even need to practice their English on you, though some may nevertheless insist that your relationship with them be grounded in English. So why learn their language when Austrians, Swiss and Germans are so good at yours?

They themselves, perhaps in German but not just *for* their German, are abundantly worth knowing. You'll know them better, even in English, if you know and love German-speaking Europe, present and past. Much has been translated, but if you're experiencing their culture deeply in translation, this joy will lead you to want to experience Mozart in his own tongue; for the culture, like a picture in his opera, is hypnotically lovely ("*Dies Bildnis ist bezaubernd schön*"). If you're in business, they'll know you mean business when you conduct the transaction in German.

The value of learning a European language extends to endeavors in one's own land and tongue. Currently on leave to complete *Earth Chooses to Thrive, Three Plays* envisioning world peace, Meister takes the European Union as his model for how antagonists outside of Europe might turn their financial interests to the service of peace, with great economic return on their courage and creativity. As with Israel and Palestine today, there was a time when French-German cooperation was as hard to imagine as setting foot on the moon, or tying a camera to a comet.

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