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**Directions in German American Studies:  
The Challenge of the "New Historicism"\***

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As a relatively young discipline that cannot emancipate itself from the overpowering influence of American Studies in the U.S., the given object of its attention, and under the impact of a rapidly approaching United Europe complete with its own programs of European Studies, German American Studies finds itself increasingly in an ambiguous position. It either has to assert its uniqueness or else to justify its general claim to cultural studies. Often, and as a result of this wavering stance, its importance is underestimated. If American Studies is perceived to be needed at all at German universities, then only - as in neighboring disciplines - for the purpose of teaching literature, in this case American literature. At best one accords a certain importance to "USA-Landeskunde," i.e., to the teaching of American culture and civilization, geography and history, because such knowledge enhances an understanding of American literature. Perhaps, the reverse is more true: a fair knowledge and appreciation of American literature contributes to an understanding of American Studies in the broader sense.

However, the following will deal not with the educational utility of German American Studies, but with its claim to relevance in the area of methodology. In order to accord this claim a "willing suspension of disbelief," given the constrictions on German American Studies I mentioned above, a glance back at its history is necessary, not only to make clear that American Studies has a tangible tradition in Germany, but also to show why this historical dimension ought to be the premise for defining American Studies anew. From the very beginning,

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American Studies in Germany - like American Studies in the U.S., thirty years its senior - has been interdisciplinary. In the Twenties, the academic discipline of American Studies emerged in the United States as a protest against intractable positions in the traditional subjects English and history - first at Harvard, then at the University of Pennsylvania, the University of Wisconsin, and Yale. The protest was directed primarily against three things: 1. against the view, widespread even today, that American literature, because it is written in English, is to be seen as merely an offshoot of English literature; 2. against the conviction that serious research ought to concentrate on literature before 1800; 3. against the dominance of traditional philology and the neglect of sociological, psychological, philosophical, and aesthetic approaches. The concerted protests of literary critics and historians, of scholars like Norman Foerster, H. L. Mencken, Van Wyck Brooks, V. L. Parrington, and F. O. Matthiessen, subsequently led to the founding of a new discipline, American Studies, which was characterized, in accordance with the backgrounds of its leading exponents, by the combination or even the attempted blending of historical and literary methods. A work like Robert E. Spiller's *Literary History of the United States* (1948) can be seen as a milestone on the road to interdisciplinary independence.

The development of American Studies in Germany must be seen against this background. It represents a continuation and at the same time a not untypical German variant of the American experience. The implicit claim of American Studies to reveal the deep patterns underlying American culture - a claim featuring prominently in the so-called myth-symbol-image school - was ultimately expanded by some German Americanists into the thesis that American Studies could be regarded as the paradigmatic topic for applying the hermeneutic method in an interdisciplinary setting. This rather unfortunate development gained ground quickly, and not without American support. After the founding of the German Association for American Studies on June 13, 1953, three phases can be observed in the development of German American Studies, phases I would like to call institutionalization (Sixties), paradigmization (Seventies), and historicization (Eighties).

Americanists in the first phase sought to provide a fundamental justification for the establishment of American Studies at German universities. In the process they tried to ignore the fact that Germany could not help but orient itself politically along the lines of its vital transatlantic ally. The Americanists of the first phase wrote for a German readership that they tried to convince of two things: 1. that it had become historically necessary to study an extra-European culture that heretofore had looked to Europe as its fountainhead; and 2. that the study of this culture required a new interdisciplinary method such as had been developed in the United States for American Studies. The concept of interdisciplinarity served to satisfy the craving for a renewed international status, while the openness of its method seemed to call for German academic rigor. Thus, the political scientist and sociologist Arnold Bergsträsser, who had returned to Germany in 1950 after spending the war years at Claremont in California, speaking at the inaugural ceremony for the newly founded German Association for American Studies, called for the expansion of interdisciplinarity beyond the confines of American Studies into a universal cultural-sociological method. Nevertheless, American Studies seemed to Bergsträsser to be a model for the application of such a method, for

from the uniqueness of the cultural situation of the United States we must learn that for German American Studies literary interpretation and its cultural-historical evaluation alone go much less far toward fulfilling the purposes of cultural analysis than is the case with European national cultures.<sup>1</sup>

Because of the ambiguity of this demand that American Studies serve an exemplary function while also demanding a more far-reaching interpretation of cultural studies, German Americanists soon began to confuse object of study and method and thus ushered in the second phase, the paradigmization of American Studies, in which American Studies increasingly provided the framework for a general

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1 Arnold Bergsträsser, "Amerikastudien als Problem der Forschung und Lehre," *Jahrbuch für Amerikastudien* (1956), 11: "Aus der Besonderheit der kulturellen Lage der Vereinigten Staaten sollten wir lernen, daß für deutsche Amerikastudien die literarische Interpretation und ihre kulturgeschichtliche Verwertung allein sehr viel weniger ausreicht, um den Zweck der Kulturanalyse zu erfüllen, als dies bei europäischen Nationalkulturen der Fall ist."

discussion of methods. The relation between concept and method was reversed and was thus subject to constant inner tensions. The struggle to overcome those tensions ultimately proved to have negative results from which the discipline, in my opinion, still has not fully recovered. To clarify my criticism of the paradigmization of American Studies, I must first briefly describe American Studies as concept and interdisciplinarity as its method. German American Studies, like American Studies in the U.S., ought to be shaped primarily by the object of study, however unsharp the contours of this object may be from time to time. The object of American Studies is the culture and civilization of the United States. This object is approached through texts which I would like to call, borrowing the term from Fredric Jameson, "cultural text[s]."<sup>2</sup> Such cultural texts are contextualized by theories of representation on the one hand and theories of social production on the other, leaving between them a variable space for a middle course. This space is in each case defined by the varying extent of contextualization. As Robert F. Berkhofer has observed: "The attempt to find a single methodology for the new cultural studies founders upon the diversity of approaches to contextualism."<sup>3</sup> I shall argue later on that this diversity of approaches can be structuralized, if not systematized, through *aesthetic experience*, but at this point it should suffice to point out that cultural texts define their own methods, yet that the methods may not be allowed to assume a life of their own through a detached preoccupation with methodology as such. This danger is greatest for interdisciplinary methods, because they are almost always understood as abstracting syntheses of other, already existing methods. It is too easy to concentrate on the elaboration of an interdisciplinary method, elevating it to a single methodology, and lose sight of the actual object of study in the process. Even interdisciplinarity is lost in the elaboration of such a methodology - because interdisciplinarity can only be understood relative to individual disciplines, which for their part must be thought of as shaped by their own objects.

Yet precisely this change of direction and privileging of methodology characterizes German American Studies in the Seventies. Ameri-

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2 Fredric Jameson, *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Symbolic Act* (London: Methuen, 1981), p. 90.

3 Robert F. Berkhofer, Jr., "A New Context for a New American Studies?" *American Quarterly* 41 (1989), 591.

can Studies became the starting point for a discussion of hermeneutics that influenced the selection of specific texts - not vice versa. This shift in accent from concept to method, however, did not occur independently of American models and without encouragement from the American side. It was, for one thing, the result of sincere, but nonetheless self-serving, admiration for American humanists like Henry Nash Smith who sought to defend the humanities against the natural sciences and viewed interdisciplinarity as an expression of flexibility and universality, contrasting with the rigidity and specialization so often found in the 'hard' sciences. For another, it was an indication of an - albeit compensatory - renaissance of the German life of the mind before it had succumbed to the onslaught of Fascism. We were only too glad to heed the voices urging us to be mindful of our own intellectual tradition. At the sixth annual meeting of the German Association for American Studies in Cologne in 1959, Spiller, the above-mentioned editor of the *Literary History of the United States*, described his German colleagues as follows: "You have, probably far more than any other people, a tendency to look at human experience in terms of absolutes and to clear your theoretical positions before proceeding to empirical practices."<sup>4</sup> As far as I can tell, there was no ironic intent in his placement of German American Studies in the tradition of German idealism à la Kant, Schelling, Hegel, and Herder. In the second generation of German Americanists, such highflown expectations produced a certain feeling of self-importance. By elevating American Studies to a methodological paradigm, these Americanists ultimately believed they could be a corrective to the Americans themselves with their all too pragmatic understanding of American Studies. The very titles of some of their studies bear testimony to this inflated opinion. In the *Jahrbuch für Amerikastudien* of 1973, for example, we find two articles, one by Winfried Fluck entitled "Das ästhetische Vorverständnis der American Studies" ["The Aesthetic Pre-conceptions of American Studies"] and another by Olaf Hansen entitled "American Studies: Zur Theorie und Geschichte der Disziplin" ["American Studies: On the Theory and History of the Discipline"]. Both articles demonstrate - in practically complementary form - the difficulties of the methodological discussion in German American Studies in the Seventies. Fluck

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4 Robert E. Spiller, "Value and Method in American Studies: The Literary Versus the Social Approach," *Jahrbuch für Amerikastudien* 4 (1959), 11.

seeks to pinpoint the reason why American Studies in general, but in particular in the decisive area of literature, has failed to live up to its interdisciplinary task. Hansen tries to formulate five theoretical paradigms of differing analytical value taken from the history of American Studies; he attempts to integrate the three best ones into a dialectic approach which he thinks ought to prevail in American Studies in the future. This kind of missionary zeal, to which Fluck and Hansen themselves no longer subscribe, was not very favorably received by the Americans - not least because the United States had become the scene of methodological controversy of its own.

The historical retrospective shows clearly why Classic American Studies ultimately ran out of steam on both sides of the Atlantic. The presupposition that, owing to its historical uniqueness, American Studies was a methodologically special case was wrong. The regrettable concrete result of this error has been that at the universities of the United States, American Studies is now in retreat as a separate discipline, and that American Studies programs are being reintegrated into the English departments. By contrast, German American Studies is caught up in a historicizing phase, with the aim of reviewing and consolidating what has been achieved. Whether this is once more a consequence of a greater concern with tradition in Germany or a preventive measure in view of what is happening in the U.S., remains to be seen. But it can be said that unless some other value could be attributed to the process of historicization, this phase would have merely a summarizing character. An example of what I have in mind is Lothar Bredella's summation of the development of German American Studies, published in the October 1988 number of *American Studies International* as "American Studies in the Federal Republic of Germany: Some Observations on its History and Development."<sup>5</sup> Bredella limits himself essentially to a review of the second phase. He recapitulates Hansen's and Fluck's main theses from the Seventies and seems to recall that phase almost nostalgically as a lost golden age of German American Studies. Such recapitulations do not strike me as being very helpful.

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5 *American Studies International* 26, 2 (1988), 51-60.

What is needed rather, it seems to me, is to aestheticize the process of historicization as such, i.e., to substantialize it at least individually and tentatively. The object and method of American Studies seem to me particularly well suited to this at the present time, since the recognition of the historical dimension of all cultural texts, as demanded by Jameson, results almost automatically from the historicization of American Studies. Moreover, if the insights of the New Historicism are utilized, this historical dimension will have to be structured according to one's own aesthetic experience. This view can be found, for instance, in the summary by Sacvan Bercovitch of the "similar convictions about the problematics of literary history" shared by his collaborators in *Reconstructing American Literary History*:

that race, class and gender are formal principles of art, and therefore integral to textual analysis; that language has the capacity to break free of social restrictions and through its own dynamics to undermine the power structures it seems to reflect; that political norms are inscribed in aesthetic judgment and therefore inherent in the process of interpretation; that aesthetic structures shape the way we understand history, so that tropes and narrative devices may be said to use historians to enforce certain views of the past.<sup>6</sup>

A similar, but much more radical, view is held by the Tübingen philosopher Rüdiger Bubner. He describes the total aestheticization of the world as an historical feature of the modern age the beginning of whose ever-accelerating impact can be traced back to Kant. For according to Kant "the world as the arena of undiminished human experience, as the field of meaningful activity and experienced destiny can from now on only be approached in art."<sup>7</sup> This means that methods which have been developed to bundle cultural texts, to classify or typologize them, must increasingly take account of the aesthetic results of their apparently changing historical character.

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6 Sacvan Bercovitch, *Reconstructing American Literary History* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1986), p. viii.

7 Rüdiger Bubner, *Ästhetische Erfahrung* (Frankfurt/Main: Suhrkamp, 1989), p. 126: "Die Welt als Raum unverkürzter menschlicher Erfahrungen, als Feld sinnvollen Handelns und schicksalhaften Erlebens wird nur noch in der Kunst erschlossen."

Both Bercovitch and Bubner implicitly refer to the trend of dehierarchization, the erosion, even dissolution of the aesthetic boundaries dividing elite from popular cultures. However, since American Studies was in its classic period already a leader in the trend,<sup>8</sup> the American Studies scholar Bercovitch seems to welcome dehierarchization, while Bubner - perhaps from a more elitist European perspective - deplures it. I would argue that in order to avoid the necessity of either value judgment, the reading of cultural texts should be structured along the lines of individual aesthetic experience. Race, class, and gender can then indeed become integral to textual analysis, as Bercovitch demands, while what is usually considered the freedom of interpretation granted to the reader, especially by literary texts, can then be reinterpreted as the power of the text itself to enforce ever-changing, ever-interesting views of the past.

In the New Historicism, the literary text is privileged. Although traditional historians persist in doubting that literature can do "cultural work," exponents of the New Historicism like Brook Thomas rightly insist that it can.<sup>9</sup> Since cultural texts, according to Jameson, can retroactively engage the interpretation of earlier texts of a culture and make them their subtexts, the potential of a text to change is decisive. It guarantees the text's survival under changed historical circumstances. For this reason, certain New Historicists, for example Stephen Greenblatt, who coined the term "new historicism" in 1982 in a special issue of the journal *Genre*, demand radically individual interpretations of texts, since each interpretation that is accepted by all the members of a group already means an ossification and thus a diminution of the text's potential to change. In the following I will therefore present a highly personal interpretation of two American novels with a European perspective and a German historical documentation on the same subject. The interpretation is supposed to provide a tentative example of what I mean by structuring texts along the lines of individual aesthetic experience. The books in question are the 1979 novel by William Styron, *Sophie's Choice*, Vladimir Nabokov's 1947 novel, *Bend Sinister*, and the 1966 documentation *Das Dritte Reich des*

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8 Wanda Corn, "Coming of Age: Historical Scholarship in American Art," *The Art Bulletin* 70 (1988), 199-200.

9 Brook Thomas, "The New Historicism and the Privileging of Literature," *Annals of Scholarship* 4 (1987), 26.

*Traums* by Charlotte Beradt. The excerpts that I will try to fuse into a new cultural text refer to experiences with a high - albeit imaginary - potential to absorb change: dreams.

In *Sophie's Choice* the title heroine, one of the few survivors of Auschwitz, whose real counterpart Styron knew personally, relates that in the midst of all the horrors of camp life there was but a single respite for the prisoners: the brief hours of sleep. Sleep offered the possibility of escape from the otherwise unbearable present. And the dreams she had were usually pleasant. They thus meant salvation from threatening madness:

Next to food and privacy, the lack of sleep was one of the camp's leading and universal deficiencies; sought by all with a greed that approached lust, sleep allowed the only sure escape from ever-abiding torment, and strangely enough (or perhaps not so strangely) usually brought pleasant dreams, for as Sophie observed to me once, people so close to madness would be driven utterly mad if, escaping a nightmare, they confronted still another in their slumber.<sup>10</sup>

When I read this passage for the first time, I was immediately convinced that Sophie's testimony was true. Only later did it become clear to me that this conviction probably sprang from my wish to see their pleasant dreams as a symbol of the camp inmates' ultimately irrepressible humanity. For at the same time I was convinced, without any such indication in Styron's text, that the dreams of the guards were equally unpleasant or at least monotonous. It also occurred to me only later that my own experience seemed to point in the opposite direction: a wearisome day is more likely to end in torturous dreams than in sweet ones. I thus began to doubt the veracity of Sophie's words, or to impute the same wishful thinking to the author that I had observed in myself. Still, I did not forget this short passage from a long novel, and later when I happened upon Charlotte Beradt's documentation *Das Dritte Reich des Traums*, I looked for substantiation of Styron's thesis or Sophie's recollection. But Charlotte Beradt tells of only a single dream that was dreamed in Auschwitz. This is the dream of a female prisoner who works as a secretary and, waking, asks her neighbor in

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<sup>10</sup> William Styron, *Sophie's Choice* (New York: Random House, 1979), p. 254.

fear whether she talks about her daytime experiences in her dreams.<sup>11</sup> Although the content of the dreams is not given, it does not seem to differ from what she experiences all day, and in any case is not pleasant. On the other hand, this woman probably numbered among the privileged prisoners, and as a secretary she had something to lose. In his afterword to Charlotte Beradt's book, Reinhart Koselleck notes that in the reports of other former concentration camp inmates dreams were either without definite subject matter or indeed deliverance dreams.

The necessity to de-realize oneself in order to hold out at the vanishing point of existence within the confines of the SS system led to an inversion also of the experience of time. Past, present, and future ceased to be orientation points for one's behavior. This physically imposed perversion had to be drunk to the dregs in order to free oneself of it. The deliverance dreams bear witness to this.<sup>12</sup>

It seems to be the case, then, that actual terror, when it goes beyond all endurance, is also no longer dreamable. The mark of this fact is the cessation of any experience of time. "Normal" dream experience can thus not be related to dreams in concentration camps. The deliverance dreams noted by Koselleck substantiate Sophie's observation in *Sophie's Choice* precisely because it derives from what is an historically exceptional situation and not an everyday one. It also bespeaks Styron's inability to cope with Sophie's observation aesthetically that he needed to quote it - although it is precisely this authorial deficiency that ultimately points to the factual truth of her remark.

Vladimir Nabokov created a similarly exceptional situation thirty years earlier in his novel *Bend Sinister*. The protagonist of this novel, the philosopher Adam Krug, likewise endures the torture imposed by

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11 Charlotte Beradt, *Das Dritte Reich des Traums*. Mit einem Nachwort von Reinhart Koselleck. Suhrkamp Taschenbuch 697 (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1981 [1966]), p. 42.

12 *Ibid.*, p. 131: "Die Nötigung, sich zu entwirklichen, um in den Zwängen des SS-Systems auf einer Schwundstufe des Daseins ausharren zu können, führte zu einer Inversion auch der Zeiterfahrung. Vergangenheit, Gegenwart und Zukunft hörten auf, Orientierungslinie des Verhaltens zu sein. Diese in den Leib diktierte Perversion mußte ausgekostet werden, um sich von ihr zu befreien. Davon zeugen die Heilsträume."

a dictatorship - which in Nabokov combines the features of Fascism with those of Bolshevism. At the end of the novel, Krug goes insane after a last dream of "heartrending softness"<sup>13</sup> that is likewise characterized by the experience of timelessness. The ensuing insanity is the author's gift to his protagonist; it means salvation from a reality that is no longer bearable:

It was at that moment, just after Krug had fallen through the bottom of a confused dream and sat up on the straw with a gasp and just before his reality, his remembered hideous misfortune could pounce upon him - it was then that I felt a pang of pity for Adam and slid towards him along an inclined beam of pale light - causing instantaneous madness, but at least saving him from the senseless agony of his logical fate. (p. 233)

As the preface to the novel makes clear, the "I" in the text is not a narrator, but the author himself. Nabokov himself is overcome by pity for his protagonist as he tells the tale of Adam Krug. So he calls into question the illusion of reality in the novel and moves towards Krug on his pallet on a fictive ray of sunlight, but unlike God in Michelangelo's Sistine Chapel, not to give his Adam over to life, but to save him from it with the help of fiction. This intervention of the author in the novel enabled this reader, at least, to read and evaluate the preceding two texts differently than before.

What Nabokov could do, I could not help doing also. If Nabokov could send his protagonist a last deliverance dream just before he slipped into insanity, I could decide that the inmates of Auschwitz always should have had pleasant dreams. The historical evidence, which seems to point in the direction of deliverance dreams, would justify, if not explain, this decision. For, in accordance with Sophie's statement, deliverance dreams indeed seem to have had a life-saving quality, and if I understand Nabokov's authorial gesture correctly, they can also be seen as preserving, not only human sanity, but also human dignity. Thus, they guarantee the ultimately indestructible humanity of the dreamers, while my own ability to retrospectively

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13 Vladimir Nabokov, *Bend Sinister* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1947), p. 232. All further quotes are from this edition.

deny the camp guards pleasant dreams deprives them of that very humanity. The individual reading can thus aspire to the status of a new cultural text in that one's own fingerprint on the page can, so to speak, touch upon larger matters - if only for a moment. As regards its objective truth value, to be sure, this individual reading must remain a matter of autobiographical accident. If it aspired to more, it would immediately encounter certain limitations. One such would derive from the fact that the group of bad-dream dreamers is defined negatively, i.e., only by contrast. Not all of those who were denied pleasant dreams - privileged prisoners like the secretary cited by Beradt - should for that reason be denied humanity. Another limitation would result from the fact that such deliverance dreams should also be attributed to similar sufferers in other countries at other times. That is, if this reading did not remain entirely personal, it would seem to imply that it is impossible anyway to deny human beings their humanity, even under the most extreme circumstances. Other limitations could be named, but the point has been made: any reading indebted to the New Historicism constantly has to question its own premises and make that hermeneutic awareness part of its text.

My reading has tried to link three texts, two literary (*Sophie's Choice* and *Bend Sinister*) and one historical (*Das Dritte Reich des Traums*). The linkage was attempted in reverse chronological order: the last text, *Bend Sinister*, appeared about thirty years before the first, *Sophie's Choice*. The form of the linkage was autobiographical. It produced an individual reading of the three texts which followed what Thomas Bender has called the "process of emplotting." For it is

in the developing plot that the parts find their relation to the whole. Plot thus becomes itself an interpretation of society and the way it works [...] The creation and elaboration of such a working image of society through the rhetorical structure of a plot constitutes the cultural and political significance of historical synthesis or interpretation.<sup>14</sup>

My reading could be seen as such a process of emplotting. Nabokov's earlier text for me supplied an answer to Styron's later text be-

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<sup>14</sup> Thomas Bender, "Wholes and Parts: The Need for Synthesis in American History," *Journal of American History* 73 (1986), 122.

cause Nabokov had the courage to disregard the rules of plausibility within his fictional world and bring about a metafictional turn of events, i.e., one that is independent of narrative time. Timelessness, in this context, must be understood as the cessation of the subjective sense of time. That deliverance dreams in concentration camps can also be characterized as subjectively timeless, according to Koselleck, linked the historical and the literary observation. Thus, interdisciplinarity in this reading became an indispensable prerequisite rather than an intended aim insofar as only a preceding reflection on time in its documentary sense on the one hand, and its existential sense on the other, could provide the basis for emplotting these texts in the first place.

The necessity to put things into historical perspective is inherent in such an approach. This must be done first with regard to the object of study. It is noteworthy that both literary texts, although their authors are Americans (one could argue over Nabokov perhaps), do not deal with American affairs, but with European, in particular German, affairs. This is not unusual in contemporary American literature. The Third Reich has been the theme of novels by Walter Abish, Don DeLillo, William H. Gass, Thomas Pynchon and Rosmarie Waldrop, to name but a few. This means that the object of American Studies, the culture and civilization of the United States, is, paradoxically, no longer restricted to the United States as subject matter. Instead, American texts must be seen more and more as overarching cultural texts. Second, any method indebted to the New Historicism must itself be put in historical perspective, reflecting the fact that it is usable but uncertain in its results. Interest largely seems to supplant the search for truth. Yet since this interest must be kept alive more by the inner consistency of the argument than by adducing external facts, the "plot" - despite the fact that it assimilates elements of varying importance - can constitute a synthesis, wherein historical interpretation triumphs over pure chance in the aesthetic ordering of the parts into a whole. Thus, in spite of its limitations, the aesthetic leanings of the New Historicism strike me as able to impart new impulses to German American Studies at the present time and lead the discipline out of its provinciality - even at the risk of German American Studies becoming a kind of guinea pig for the approaching discipline of European Studies.