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DIRECTIONS IN GERMAN AMERICAN STUDIES: THE CHALLENGE OF THE
"NEW HISTORICISM" *)

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 tentative European Studies, German American Studies finds itself increasingly in the position of having to circumscribe its uniqueness or even justify its existence. Generally its importance is played down. If American Studies is necessary at all at German universities, then only - as in neighboring disciplines - to teach literature, in this case American literature, all the while incorporating traditional philological knowledge and the insights of modern literary theory. At best a special importance is also accorded "USA-Landeskunde," i. e., the teaching of American culture and civilization, geography and history. On the one hand, such knowledge is a necessary prerequisite not only for the understanding of American literature, but also for the assessment of our relations to the U.S.; on the other hand, such knowledge is not a commonplace in

*) This lecture is a revised version of the lecture "Amerikastudien - A Methodology?," which was given on December 2, 1988, at the John F. Kennedy Institute. A longer version will be published after a symposium entitled, "Germany and German Thought in Contemporary American Literature and Cultural Criticism," which is to take place in Paderborn in May, 1990.

Europe.

But 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," an historical backward glance 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 used in literary theory. From the very beginning, 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 arose in the United States as a protest action against intractable positions in the traditional subjects English and history - first at Harvard, then at the Universities of Pennsylvania and 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 embody interdisciplinarity was ultimately expanded by some German Americanists to make American Studies the paradigm for interdisciplinarity in the form of a hermeneutic method. This rather unfortunate development surfaced only gradually, 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, which 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 has been developed in the United States for American Studies. 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 an especially suitable object 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."¹

Because of this demand that American Studies serve an exemplary function, 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 discussion of methods. The relation between content and form 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 content and interdisciplinarity as form. 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)."²

That those texts are more easily definable than the object itself does not speak against the reality of the object; instead it is an historical feature of the modern age which, as Rüdiger Bubner has shown, has led to an aestheticization of the world, for according to Kant "the world as the arena of undiminished human experience, as the field of meaningful activity and experienced destiny can only be approached in art."³ This means that methods that have been developed to bundle cultural texts, to classify or typologize them, must increasingly take account of the changing historical character of these texts as their aesthetic premise. In other words, cultural texts define their own methods, and these may not assume a life of their own by appertaining to methodology. This danger is greatest for an interdisciplinary method because it is almost always understood as an abstracting synthesis of already existing methods (such as, in American Studies, have been developed by literary critics, historians, sociologists,

psychologists, etc.). It is too easy to concentrate on the elaboration of the interdisciplinary method and lose sight of the actual object of study in the process. And even interdisciplinarity is lost in the elaboration of such a method - because interdisciplinarity can only be defined as a process of separation or expansion 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 form characterizes German American Studies in the Seventies. American Studies became the starting point for a methodological discussion that influenced the selection of specific cultural texts - not vice versa. This shift in accent from content to form, however, did not occur independently of American models and without encouragement from the American side. It was, for one thing, the result of deep 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 in contrast to rigidity and specialization in the natural sciences. For another, it was an indication of compensatory German self-importance. 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."⁴ 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. Such highflown expectations brought about in the second generation of German Americanists the

feelings of self-importance I mentioned. By elevating American Studies to a paradigm of the hermeneutic method, 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 articles bear testimony to this exaggerated claim. In the Jahrbuch für Amerikastudien of 1973, for example, we find two such articles, one by Winfried Fluck entitled "Das ästhetische Vorverständnis der American Studies" ("The Aesthetic Preconceptions 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. Winfried Fluck 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. Olaf 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 missionary zeal, to which Fluck and Hansen themselves no longer subscribe, was not accepted favorably by the Americans - not least because their own methodological controversy had broken out in American Studies programs in the United States.

The historical retrospective shows clearly why this discussion of an interdisciplinary method on both sides of the Atlantic ultimately ran out of steam. The presupposition that American Studies was a special systematical case due to its historical uniqueness was wrong. The regrettable concrete result of this error is that American Studies as a separate discipline is today in retreat at the universities of the United States, with

American Studies programs 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 greater tradition-consciousness 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 this phase would have merely a summarizing character if no other value could be attributed to the process of historicization. For example, 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," does not strike me as being very helpful.⁵ 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.

What must be done, it seems to me, is to attribute value to 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 that 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. The discovery of value should spring from the tension between the literary and the historical text, which would also serve to generate exemplary interdisciplinarity between literary and historical methods. Such an approach could utilize the insights of the so-called New Historicism, to which I am indebted in my following remarks. The selection of American texts with a European perspective is meant to add an international aspect to the interdisciplinary one and expand the concept of

"cultural text" so far as to exclude marginality.

In the New Historicism, a method that has been developing for some time in the United States, 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 insist that it can.⁶ This standpoint seems to me more than just fashionable. 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 effect 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 effect change. Of all cultural texts, literary texts are most open to interpretation. 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 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 Traums by Charlotte Beradt. The excerpts that I will try to meld into a new cultural text refer to experiences with a high - albeit imaginary - potential to effect change: dreams. Both the subject matter and the autobiographical nature of my interpretation explain my initial identification with what follows. I will be able to put it in perspective only afterwards.

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 far 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.⁷

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 fear whether

she talks about her daytime experiences in her dreams.⁸ Although the content of the dream 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."⁹ 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 therefore substantiate Sophie's observation in Sophie's Choice precisely because Styron's novel is a literary text whose potential to effect change derives from what is more an historically exceptional situation than an everyday one.

Vladimir Nabokov created a comparable 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 a dictatorship - which in Nabokov combines the features of fascism with those of bolshevism and philistinism. At the end of the novel, Krug goes insane after a last dream of "heartrending softness"¹⁰ 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 no longer bearable reality:

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 do too. 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 had pleasant dreams. That these inmates are almost all dead and can no longer testify as to the nature of their dreams at the time, even lent my decision consistency. But not only was I able to decide in favor of sweet dreams; it even seemed to me that I was supposed to. For, as I have said, these deliverance dreams seemed to me to guarantee the ultimately indestructible humanity of the dreamers, while my ability to deny the camp guards pleasant dreams deprived them of humanity. The individual reading can thus aspire to the status of 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 truth value, to be sure, this individual reading

must remain a matter of autobiographical whimsy. 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 with the intent of producing a new cultural text. In the process, the two literary texts demonstrated their potential to effect change: Nabokov's earlier text could be seen as an answer to Styron's later text because Nabokov disregarded the rules of plausibility within his fictional world and brought about a metafictional turn of events, i. e., one that is independent of narrative time. That deliverance dreams in concentration camps can also be characterized as timeless, according to Koselleck, linked the historical and the literary observation. Timelessness, both in the literary and in the historical context, must be understood as the cessation of the subjective sense of time. Thus, interdisciplinarity in this reading became an in-

dispensable prerequisite rather than an intended aim insofar as only a preceding reflection on historical time in its documentary sense on the one hand, and its existential sense on the other, could provide the basis for establishing a linkage between these literary and historical texts in the first place.

The necessity to put things into proper 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 proper perspective, reflecting the fact that it is usable but uncertain in its results. Interest clearly seems to supplant truth. Yet this interest must be kept alive more by the inner consistency of the argument than by adducing external facts. Thus the New Historicism differs radically from the Old Historicism as it was developed in the 19th century. In spite of its limitations, the philosophical leanings of the New Historicism strike me as able to impart new impulses to 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.

- 1) Arnold Bergsträsser, "Amerikastudien als Problem der Forschung und Lehre", Jahrbuch für Amerikastudien 1 (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."
- 2) Fredric Jameson, The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Symbolic Act (Methuen: London, 1981), p. 90.
- 3) Rüdiger Bubner, Ästhetische Erfahrung (Suhrkamp: Frankfurt/Main, 1989), p. 126: "Die Welt als Raum unverkürzter menschlicher Erfahrungen, als Feld sinnvollen Handelns und schicksalhaften Erlebens wird nur noch in der Kunst erschlossen."
- 4) Robert E. Spiller, "Value and Method in American Studies: The Literary Versus the Social Approach," Jahrbuch für Amerikastudien 4 (1959), 11.
- 5) American Studies International 26, 2 (1988), 51-60.
- 6) Brook, Thomas, "The New Historicism and the Privileging of Literature," Annals of Scholarship 4 (1987), 26.
- 7) William Styron, Sophie's Choice (Random House: New York, 1979), p. 254.
- 8) Charlotte Beradt, Das Dritte Reich des Traums. Mit einem Nachwort von Reinhart Koselleck. Suhrkamp Taschenbuch 697 (Suhrkamp: Frankfurt am Main, 1981 (1966)), p. 42.
- 9) Ib., p. 131: "Die Nötigung, sich zu entwirklichen, um in den Zwängen des SS-Systems auf einer Schwundstufe des Daseins auszuhalten 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."
- 10) Vladimir Nabokov, Bend Sinister (McGraw-Hill: New York, 1947), p. 232. All further quotes are from this edition.