Aesthetic Premises in American Studies*

1.1. Debates about the theory and method of American Studies have become a staple of the field. They have remained unsatisfactory where they have failed to compare theoretical claims with the interpretive practice dominating American Studies at the present time. Theoretical statements are declarations of good intentions in which possible contradictions can be glossed over by skillful rhetoric. Their application and test in interpretive practice, on the other hand, will reveal what guiding assumptions have been really constitutive. Gunnar Myrdal has therefore reminded us: "Whoever wants to discuss the merits of a theoretical approach has to make an effort to analyze the tacit value assumptions by which the approach is constituted and its method and results are determined" (Myrdal 76). The following discussion of central but largely unacknowledged aesthetic premises in American Studies is an attempt to make such underlying premises explicit and to describe their far-reaching impact on the field in its currently dominant form. A key promise of American Studies, as it emerged in the 1930s and then again in the post-War II period, was to break down the barriers between disciplines like history and literary studies, so that literary studies could go beyond a narrowly defined formalism and discuss literature again in its historical and cultural significance, while historians, on the other hand, would profit from the new interdisciplinary approach in their attempts to use literary texts as important sources for understanding America. The question is to what extent this project has been realized and, if not, what barriers still stand in the way of its realization.

1.2. One of the main reasons why American Studies has paid little attention to underlying premises is a persistent belief in the saving powers of a new, unified method. In order to overcome the narrow confines of traditional

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disciplines, a new interdisciplinary synthesis was envisioned.[1] These calls for interdisciplinary cooperation are based on the "tacit assumption … that a single method, although not yet in sight, would be desirable …" (Spiller 19). It is safe to say, however, that an interpretation is not primarily determined by the methods it uses. On the contrary, the choice of method is already a manifestation of underlying assumptions about the nature and value of the interpretive object.[2] These prior assumptions guide the interpretive practice and pre-determine the results. They dictate and limit the direction of our critical interest and constitute the very object the critic sees. An interpreter's a priori views of literature – for example, why it is worth studying, what its function and potential is, and wherein its value lies – will decisively shape the way in which he will proceed methodologically. The kinds of features we are looking for in a work, the aspects we notice – or fail to notice – will thus inevitably be governed by what we take to be self-evident truths about the nature and value of literature.

Wherever the by now classical works of American Studies have been discussed as exemplary studies, the shaping influence of such underlying assumptions on their interpretive procedures has been neglected. It is important to realize, however, that it is not the lack of a new interdisciplinary method, but the continuing, unrevised perpetuation of certain aesthetic premises that stands in the way of determining how literature is related to society. The major shortcoming of current American Studies is not a lack of methodological rigor but a lack of awareness about the continuing presence and shaping power of unacknowledged a priori assumptions. These premises will continue to determine results in the field as long as they are not subjected to critical analysis and revision. For this purpose, the following essay pays closer attention to the actual interpretive practice of current American Studies than to theoretical debates which have often had little operational significance.[3]

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1 See, for example, Henry Nash Smith's essay "Can 'American Studies' Develop a Method?," which can be read (and has often been read) as a theoretical manifesto of American Studies.

2 Recent hermeneutical discussions, for example by Hans-Georg Gadamer and Jürgen Habermas, have provided forceful reminders that method in the humanities always remains dependent on underlying assumptions (Vorverständnis). Cf. Hans-Georg Gadamer's *Wahrheit und Methode* and *Erkenntnis und Interesse* by Jürgen Habermas. A detailed discussion of the way in which aesthetic theories – consciously or unconsciously, willingly or unwillingly – govern the procedures of literary studies, that is, its descriptive, interpretative, and evaluative practice, can be found in Winfried Fluck, *Ästhetische Theorie und literaturwissenschaftliche Methode. Eine Untersuchung ihres Zusammenhangs am Beispiel der amerikanischen Huck Finn-Kritik*. In the second part of the book, an analysis of American literary criticism of Mark Twain's *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* is offered as a case study.

3 The need for analyzing concrete interpretive practices instead of remaining merely on the level of theoretical discussions can be illustrated by a recent critical contribution to the American Studies debate in which Olaf Hansen, in applying an argumentative

1.3. In describing certain shortcomings of current American Studies debates, I have already indicated what approach I want to pursue in the following essay. By the use of concepts like "a priori assumptions" or "tacit premises" I am not referring to pre-existing prejudices or to a hermeneutical hypothesis about the meaning of a text of object. Rather, I want to focus on prior assumptions about the object in question and its function that form the basis for every subsequent interpretive step in literary and cultural analysis. The fact that these premises are characterized as "aesthetic" in the case of American Studies may appear puzzling, however, for several reasons. To start with, it has been one of the major promises of American Studies as an interdisciplinary project to go beyond a merely aesthetic perspective on literary and cultural texts. Moreover, one may argue that aesthetic values cannot be separated from more general assumptions about reality, society and politics – so that, inevitably, aesthetic assumptions also stand in the service of ideological, political and social interests. However, these larger ideological or political interests are not directly constitutive in scholarly interpretations of aesthetic objects or cultural artifacts, because these interpretations must conform to standards of evidence and plausibility that disciplines hold at any given time. Thus, ideological interests are not sufficient to explain the particular form and direction an interpretation has taken. In order to become influential within a discipline, more general political or other interests have to be adapted to disciplinary rules and conventions. We have to learn to analyze these disciplinary uses and to resist their seemingly self-evident authority.

2.1 If one wants to describe the contribution of literary and Cultural Studies to the larger field of American Studies[4], one has to turn to those approaches that began to develop in American English departments of the 1930s in protest against a curriculum that was completely dominated by English literature. The best known representatives of this movement – critics and scholars like F. O. Matthiessen, Robert Spiller, Henry Nash Smith, R.W.B. Lewis, Charles Feidelson, Richard Chase, Roy Harvey Pearce, Marius Bewley, Leo

pattern to the field of American Studies that has been developed in the so-called "Positivismusstreit," criticizes an "empiricist concept of culture" (395) and accuses American Studies of a naive positivism. However, although the positivistic culture concept of anthropological functionalism has occasionally been a point of reference in discussions of the theory and method of American Studies, it has hardly ever shaped the field's interpretive practice – and certainly not the classical works of the American Studies movement. In the interpretive practice of these works, the concept of culture has remained, by and large, organicist, resp. "contextualist," and has not become functionalist. It is thus not an "empiricist methodology" that undermines the goals of American Studies but the continued use of premises scholars take for granted. See Hansen's essay "Hermeneutik und Literatursoziologie. Zwei Modelle: Marxistische Literaturtheorie in Amerika/Zum Problem der 'American Studies'."

[4] The theme of the conference for which this paper was originally written was "The Relevance of Literary Studies for American Studies."

Marx, Leslie Fiedler, and Richard Poirier – have shaped American Studies decisively, in the U.S. as well as in Germany, by their attempts to develop an alternative to the New Criticism and its insistence on an autonomous aesthetic sphere. The best known and most influential theoretical statement of this group has been provided by Henry Nash Smith in his essay "Can 'American Studies' Develop A Method?," first published in 1957. Smith's programmatic essay can help to recall the methodological dilemma that led to calls for a new method in American Studies. The methods of the social sciences were considered inadequate, because, as New Critics or Rene Wellek and Austin Warren had argued in their influential *Theory of Literature*, they fail to account for the specific literary dimension of literary texts and remain therefore "extrinsic" to literature. On the other hand, Smith criticizes the New Critical rejection of historical and social contextualization because – as he argues with respect to Mark Twain – this blocks an understanding of both the literary achievement and the cultural significance of a writer like Twain. Twain never bothered to observe formalist ideals of organic structure and literary craftsmanship, but he became a great writer nevertheless. Smith thus calls for a method that is literary as well as sociological: "What is needed is a method of analysis that is at once literary (for one must begin with an analytical reading of the texts that takes into account structure, imagery, diction, and so on) and sociological (for many of the forces at work in the fiction are clearly of social origin)" (Smith, "Can American Studies" 201). On the one hand, American Studies is encouraged to go beyond formalist concepts of literature. On the other hand, Smith continues to insist on the idea of a specific literary mode of communication. American Studies wants to revise the exclusion of sociological questions from literary studies but insists that the social or cultural dimension of a literary text can be understood only through its specifically literary structure. If New Critical literary criticism had its shortcomings, so had the sociological methods known to Smith. He thus looked for an altogether new combination of the two approaches in which social contexts would not be neglected but integrated into a literary method of analysis.

2.2 But what exactly is a literary method of analysis? Smith's reference to "structure, imagery, diction, and so on" appears entirely plausible at first sight. But it is not the whole story. The concept of a specifically or intrinsically literary quality of literary texts had its heyday in the 1950s, when literary studies claimed that, after many sociological reductions (for example in Marxist literary criticism), the discipline had finally reached a point of professional maturity in which the impressionism of earlier approaches had been overcome and the interpretation of literary texts could now be based on close, text-centered analyses of literary form. To distinguish these formal analyses from earlier, not yet sufficiently analytical approaches, the term structure was introduced. As a technical term, structure carried welcome

"scientific" associations of a disinterested analytical look at how a text was constructed. It thus became almost a professional rule to focus on textual structures in which the specific literary dimension was supposed to manifest itself. The German Americanist Franz Link has provided a helpful definition in his book on the "art of narration" in Hawthorne:

> By structure we mean the integration of all single elements of a literary text into an organic whole. The result is not a mere addition but the creation of a new artistic form which transforms the meaning of single elements. Our analysis of the structure of a literary text is thus an attempt to identify the principle which constitutes the formal and semantic unity of the work of art. This use of the term structure is different from its use in current German literary studies in which the term structure simply refers to formal and narrative elements of the text. In contrast, we draw on the more comprehensive use of the term structure in Anglo-American literary criticism, most prominently propagated by Rene Wellek, who replaces the terms content and form by material and structure: "It would be better to rechristen all the aesthetically indifferent elements 'materials,' while the manner in which they acquire aesthetic efficacy may be styled 'structure'" (Link 13, my translation).

Link's definition is useful because it clarifies the transformation in meaning that the term structure has undergone in Anglo-American criticism, where it has come to describe a particular aesthetic quality: that of an organic unity or whole (for which other terms are "inner coherence," "inner balance," "internal order," etc.). From the point of view of this definition, every literary text contains material, but not every literary text possesses a structure. On the contrary, literary works of art are distinguished from other literary texts by the fact that they possess a structure, that is, as Link puts it, "a principle which constitutes the formal and semantic unity of the work of art" and thereby "transforms the meaning of its single elements" (Link 13).

Structure, then, is synonymous with unity and organic wholeness and thus with the idea of a "Gestalt" derived from romantic organicism for which critics later also used terms like "tension," "texture," "ambiguity," "gesture" or "irony." To these terms, I. A. Richards has added the term "context," which Murray Krieger, in turn, has revived to describe the aesthetics of the New Criticism as "contextualism."[5] This is the term I also want to use in the following discussion, because – in contrast to concepts like New Criticism – the term contextualism gives a fitting description of the aesthetic premises that underlie most formalist approaches: "But it is precisely this locating of the unity in the context of the object, regardless of all idiosyncratic responses (and all actual responses are seen as more or less idiosyncratic), that markedly unifies contextualist critics and indeed led me to bestow the term 'contextualist' upon them" (Krieger, *Play and Place* 156). In their use of the term, Richards and the New Critics refer to that mysterious transformational power

5 For an excellent description of the major influence of I.A. Richards on New Critical contextualism, see the essay by Herbert Grabes, "Close Reading and 'The Meaning of Meaning'."

which erases the referential function of everyday language and transforms it into an autonomous set of inner referential relations in the literary text: "These critics unanimously affirm that, while the words of a poem, considered atomistically, may function referentially, the poetic structure of words, considered contextually, prevents the individual words from so functioning" (Krieger, *New Apologists* 131).[6] It is obvious that such a text, characterized by a "poetic structure of words," cannot be analyzed literally, because it will not reveal its cultural or social meaning on the semantic surface level. On the contrary, to think so is to misunderstand and misinterpret the poetic text. Its actual meaning, that is, its literary meaning, cannot be separated from its inner, closed structure, and hence cultural and social meanings can only be derived from the meaning of that structure.

2.3 The New Criticism and similar formalist approaches have been submitted to many critical analyses by now. However, although the New Criticism has been repeatedly criticized for its insistence on the autonomy of the literary work of art,[7] some of the interpretive consequences have rarely been sufficiently clarified – although, as can be seen in the case of American Studies, they can manifest themselves even in the work of critics who, on the theoretical level, reject the formalist claim of an autonomous aesthetic sphere. What does the equation of the "specifically literary" with a contextually conceived unified structure mean for a cultural analysis that wants to avoid the sociological fallacy? For the New Critical contextualist, we said, the specifically literary dimension and value of the text consists in its organic, unified structure. To interpret a literary text as specifically literary thus means to proceed in a way that Northrop Frye has described quite aptly when he says: "The primary understanding of any work of literature has to be based on an assumption of its unity" (Frye 63). Before a critic has even started his interpretation, it is already pre-determined that, if the text is to be described as a literary text in its own right, its analysis has to lead to a description of its unity. Literary interpretation has to find a principle that allows the critic to claim unity for the literary text. That such a unity must exist is the founding premise; where a unifying principle cannot be found, the text does not qualify as text with a "specifically literary" dimension and thus also loses its potential for revealing something about the culture that other kinds of texts cannot. But the constitutive role of contextualist assumptions can also manifest itself the other way around: Once we assume that a novel like *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* is an American masterpiece (and therefore especially expressive of American culture), we no longer need to check whether a unifying principle

6 Wherever the word poem is used in this essay, I am following the lead of Northrop Frye: "In what follows I take 'poem' as representative of everything else in literature" (64).

7 One of the best and most perceptive of these critiques is provided by Robert Weimann's *New Criticism und die Entwicklung bürgerlicher Literaturwissenschaft.*

can actually be found. On the contrary, we can safely proceed on the assumption that it must be there, for otherwise *Huckleberry Finn* could not possess aesthetic value and thus could not be considered an (American) masterpiece. If the surface level of the text does not support claims of a coherent and unified whole, another attempt must therefore be made to go back to the text and look for the unifying principle on other, more covert levels of the text.

Inadvertently, Henry Nash Smith has revealed the systemic logic of this procedure when he claims in his introduction to a new edition of *Huckleberry Finn*: "We must try to see the book integrally. How well has Mark Twain succeeded in organizing his material into a coherent and unified whole? And what does this whole mean?" (Smith, "Introduction" v). The sequence of questions is telling here. First, we have to find the unifying principle which allows us to describe the text as a coherent and unified whole, and then we can ask what this coherent and unified whole means. The question is not "What does this *text* mean?" but: "What does this (coherent and unified) *whole* mean?" (my emphasis). Strictly speaking, the object of interpretation is not the meaning of the text, but the meaning of a structure that has to be construed first in order to be able to claim literary status for the text. Even literary texts like *Huckleberry Finn*, which were produced in rather supplementary fashion over a period of altogether seven years and show little unity and wholeness, have to be described as a unified whole before the text can be analyzed as a significant expression of American culture.[8] Although Smith himself played a crucial role in uncovering a number of facts about the genesis of Twain's novel that undermine assumptions of structural unity, he nevertheless continued to insist on the presence of a unifying structural principle in order to save *Huckleberry Finn* not only as an American masterpiece but also as a privileged object of analysis for American Studies.[9]

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8 For a description of the radical structural heterogeneity of *Huckleberry Finn,* see chapt. 2 of my study *Ästhetische Theorie und literaturwissenschaftliche Methode,* as well as my essay "Zur Modernität *Huckleberry Finns*."

9 When I studied with Smith at the University of California, Berkeley, he showed me a manuscript in which the assumption of a structural unity of *Huckleberry Finn* was effectively undermined. However, although he had gathered convincing evidence, he hesitated to publish the essay because on the basis of his assumptions, this would have meant to deny *Huckleberry Finn* the status of a literary work of art. In a correspondence between Henry Nash Smith and Leo Marx, presented by Brian Attebery in his essay "American Studies: A Not So Unscientific Method," the point was later conceded when Marx writes to Smith about my essay "Das ästhetische Vorverständnis der American Studies:" "… curiously, I find his argument, so far as I can penetrate the language, pretty convincing" and Smith replied: "As to what I think about Fluck: he is of course a young man who is taking out after one of the Fathers and he certainly goes in for all he can get in the way of scoring points. But in my own case I must admit that he has touched a weak spot. I *do* recognize that I had internalized so much New Criticism that I said somethings [sic] and even thought some things I would not now endorse" (Attebery 330-331).

2.4 In an effort to treat literature as specifically "literary," literary scholars, including American Studies scholars, have tended to confuse the "literary" with its definition by New Critical contextualism. Contextualist premises may be able to do justice to a particular kind of literature, namely one written with a contextualist aesthetic in mind. However, what we often find is that the equation of literary structure with the contextualist idea of "organic unity" or a "coherent whole" is projected onto texts that were written on the basis of different aesthetic ideals. Such a projection is typical, for example, of *Huck Finn*-criticism of the 1950s and 1960s in which the search for unifying principles resulted in ever more absurd claims about the organic unity of the novel. Twain stands in a long line of authors here, ranging from Homer and Chaucer to Shakespeare and Kafka. No matter who the authors were and to what historical period they belonged, American literary criticism of the period interpreted all of them along the lines of a seemingly never-ending supply of "patterns," "dualisms," "rhythms," "repetitions plus variation," "polarities," or "juxtapositions." This interpretive practice with its often emphatic claims for originality, which nevertheless remained surprisingly conformist in practice, can now be better understood as an inevitable consequence of the contextualist premise that specifically literary texts are organized by a unifying structural principle and form coherent and unified wholes.

We may ask at this point whether such an analysis is not doing injustice to New Criticism and New Critical contextualism, which, after all, can be seen as a breakthrough in the development of literary criticism by moving away from impressionist readings or the sweeping Hegelian claims of intellectual history, and on to close readings of the literary text itself. The apparent contradiction is solved when we take into account what the New Critical contextualists tried to eliminate or suppress by their focus on the supposedly objective dimension of structure, namely the historicity of their own position. The so-called "Positivismusstreit" of the 1960s, the lively debate about the place and range of "empirical" methods in the humanities, has revealed

> that any assumption about the apparent objectivity of close reading is self-deceptive. We cannot first describe a structure and then interpret its meaning; rather, we always already, and inevitably, understand an object of analysis on the basis of certain assumptions that we bring to the interpretation of the object. Where we ignore this basic hermeneutical fact, we only allow our own prejudices to guide our interpretation. In the case of literary criticism, these prejudices consist in the assumption that the literary work of art possesses something like an internal structure that speaks for itself (Borgmann 586, my translation).

New Critical contextualism is not the long-awaited final breakthrough to the "specifically literary," then, but – just as any other method – a manifestation of a particular aesthetic movement and theory. Its understanding of literary form was decisively shaped by modern poetry for whose interpretation it can therefore be helpful indeed. But instead of restricting itself to those

literary texts that are organized by similar aesthetic principles, the successful academic institutionalization of the New Criticism led to an unwarranted generalization of one type of literary structure and to interpretations of texts according to principles by which they patently were not written. As Isabel Hungerland has put it: "Or, consider a sad example from modern literary criticism. Some of the so-called 'New Critics,' having with commendable discernment extracted, mainly from the poetry of Donne and Eliot, a certain type of relation of parts, have proceeded to hold it up as the pattern of all good poetry" (Hungerland 75). There is no particular reason, however, why New Critical contextualism should have a monopoly on definitions of what is considered literary. What Meyer Schapiro has said about "the qualities of perfection, coherence, and unity of form and content" in art also applies to literature: "As criteria of value they are not strict or indispensable; there are great works in which these qualities are lacking. Coherence, for example, will be found in many works that fail to move us, and a supreme work may contain incoherence" (Schapiro 3).

3.1 Although American Studies has tried to transcend the strongly criticized New Criticism as the leading model for a literary method of analysis, it has often perpetuated its basic premises by regarding the notion of structural unity as indispensable – as can be paradigmatically shown by a close analysis of *The Machine in the Garden* by Leo Marx, which for many Americanists has become the exemplary American Studies book of the so-called myth and symbol school. My example will again be an interpretation of *Huckleberry Finn*, but my analysis can be extended to other interpretations of high literature which Marx provides in his book.

In his interpretation of *Huckleberry Finn,* Marx emphasizes an aspect of the novel that other critics have usually treated as a cheap trick of Twain to solve some of his notorious plotting problems: I am referring to that moment in Chapter 16 when a steamboat runs over Huck's and Jim's raft. Since the passage has no further consequence in the novel and remains entirely unconnected to other parts, critics have not attributed any central role to it in the interpretation of the novel. For Marx, on the other hand, the passage is crucial. The reason is not that hard to fathom. Readers of *The Machine in the Garden* know that it is one of the intentions of the book to put the Sleepy Hollow-motif, derived from Hawthorne's work, at the center of the American imagination, because for Marx it dramatizes a conflict between pastoral and technological imagery, and, therefore, a conflict, if not a contradiction, in America's self-definition:

> Yet in retrospect we can see that this ordinary experience, partly because of its typicality, was one of those inconspicuous moments of discovery that has proven to be decisive in the record of our culture. What the writer discovers, though he by no means recognizes its importance, is a metaphor … (Marx, *Machine* 11).

> What I am saying, in other words, is that Hawthorne's notes mark the shaping (on a microscopic scale to be sure) of a metaphoric design which recurs everywhere in our literature (16). Since 1844, this motif has served again and again to order literary experience. It appears everywhere in American writing. In some cases, to be sure, the "little event" is a fictive episode with only vague, incidental symbolic overtones. But in others it is a cardinal metaphor of contradiction, exfoliating, through associated images and ideas, into a design governing the meaning of entire works (229).

For the American Studies scholar Marx, who wants to use literature to gain "deeper" insights into the American imagination, the conflict between pastoral and technological imagery is central because it illustrates an unacknowledged conflict in American culture between the utopian promise of America and a naïve reduction of this promise to the idea of technological progress. In the final analysis, the conflict is one between two versions of America, and America's major writers are distinguished by the fact that they have drawn on the possibilities of literature to complicate the idea of technological progress and to resist a naïve Americanism.

However, since, according to contextualist premises, this "better," more insightful kind of American literature can only effectively reveal its critique through specifically literary means, Marx faces the problem of having to identify the conflict he considers central for the American imagination also as the organizing principle of America's major works. As he points out in his essay "American Studies – A Defense of an Unscientific Method," in which he describes and justifies his interpretive procedure in *The Machine in the Garden,* it was relatively easy to demonstrate the centrality of the Sleepy Hollow-motif in popular texts. In contrast, representative texts of high literature such as *Huckleberry Finn* or Hawthorne's tale "Ethan Brand" do not contain any explicit technological imagery that could be said to play a central role. On the other hand, Marx cannot dispense with this imagery if he wants to claim that high literature can reveal something about American culture that other texts cannot. In order to maintain his claim, he thus has to argue that the conflict between pastoralism and technology is the unifying principle of *Huckleberry Finn*, although the brief steamboat incident is the only moment in which technology appears in the decidedly pre-industrial world of the novel: "In a key passage, Mr. Marx explains that in *Huckleberry Finn* the destruction of the raft by the steamboat reveals Twain's participation in this theme despite Twain's avowed faith in industrial progress and despite his lack of conscious symbolism in the incident" (Pizer 124).

From the perspective of contextualist premises, it is not sufficient to point to the presence of technological imagery in the novel. Marx also has to claim that it is part of a unifying principle. In order to meet the challenge, he finally comes up with the following argument:

> The theme that connects these sharp pictures of Huck's relation with Jim, setting them against the abstract moral code he feels obliged to honor, is caring. In caring for each

> other he and Jim had formed a bond whose strength is now put to a test. The pilot of the monstrous steamboat, on the other hand, had used his power with an arrogant negligence – a carelessness – typical of this raw Mississippi world (Marx, *Machine* 337).

In an influential interpretation of *Huckleberry Finn*, Henry Nash Smith had described Huck's moral conflict – captured in the title of his essay, "A Sound Heart and a Deformed Conscience" – as the unifying principle of the novel. Marx accepts this interpretation but cannot stop there because it is the Sleepy Hollow-motif that stands for him at the center of the American imagination. He therefore has to find a way to link the two conflicts and does so by a bold analogy: Smith's version of the central conflict is subsumed under the heading "caring." Then, the steamboat pilot is accused of arrogant negligence, that is, "carelessness." In this way – by creating a link via the root word 'care' – the steamboat episode can be connected with what Smith had described as central unifying principle. This is an ingenious solution for a hard-to-solve problem: By bringing together two seemingly unconnected aspects of the book through a loosely constructed analogy, the isolated steamboat incident can become part of the unifying structure of the book.

3.2 *The Machine in the Garden* is a book that one reads with mixed feelings. In its first part, it offers a highly interesting chapter of American intellectual history. The reduction of the idea of progress to technological progress and the ideological responses to industrialization are analyzed in convincing fashion. Undoubtedly, American writers like Hawthorne, Twain or Frank Norris also responded to industrialization in their literary works and often used technological imagery to give their works additional emotional intensity. However, one parts company with Marx where he claims that such responses also function as unifying principles of major American literature, no matter whether we are talking about *Walden, "*Ethan Brand," *Moby-Dick*, *Huckleberry Finn* or *The Octopus*. The problem, then, is not whether a novel like *Huckleberry Finn* contains explicit or implicit responses towards industrialization but that these attitudes are supposed to provide the unifying literary structure of the book. In order to make such a claim, Marx has to take an isolated incident in the book and link it with a generally accepted interpretation of *Huckleberry Finn* in a rather arbitrary fashion.

Similar patterns of argumentation can be observed in other sections of *The Machine in the Garden* where Marx interprets major texts of American literature that also do not show any explicit representation of the Sleepy Hollow-motif, such as "Ethan Brand" or *Moby-Dick*. By employing another "chain of virtually free association" (269), Marx manages to find a counterforce to pastoralism in each text, which means that pastoralism can become part of an explicit dualistic pattern. Once a counterforce is identified it can be interpreted as an equivalent of technological imagery by means of an analogy, so that the presence of the Sleepy Hollow-motif can be established in a

story like "Ethan Brand" in the following manner: "… fire is a surrogate for the 'machine' in this variant of the Sleepy Hollow motif …" (272). Equally ingenious is the way in which Marx manages to describe *Moby-Dick* in terms of the same central conflict: "The horrifying idea of a fall from the heights of pastoral revery into the undersea vortex of material reality is the counterpart, in this variant of the motif, to the railroad's sudden incursion in Sleepy Hollow" (292). Steamboat, fire, and fall: these motifs are extremely varied in themselves, but once they have become part of an inner-referential dualistic pattern, they can take on identical meanings.

3.3 Why is Marx playing this game of arbitrary linkage, instead of being satisfied to draw our attention to responses to industrialization where they occur, even though these may not play a central role in the texts he has chosen? The answer lies in another contextualist premise on which *The Machine in the Garden,* as well as other major works in American Studies, are based. In each case, the claim is that "high" literature provides "deep" and substantive insights that popular culture and other cultural documents cannot offer. As cultural sources, they simply do not operate on the same level. Anybody trying to make a case for the importance of high literature for cultural analysis will therefore have to dispense with arguments based on models of "reflection" or on criteria of popularity. This does not mean that Marx gives up the Hegelian assumption on which almost all of intellectual history and Cultural Studies is based, namely that art can provide special insight into the "spirit of the age." On the contrary, Marx wants to reaffirm the claim that only high literature can do this convincingly, so that, despite common assumptions, high literature is the most useful "historical document:"

> Not only must the humanist grant that *Moby-Dick* had no immediate public appeal, but he also should grant that it is no more valuable than many lesser works of fiction as a "reflection" of objective reality. Quite the contrary, so far from crediting the indefensible claim that the best books somehow provide a more reliable mirror image of actuality, that they are more representative of "the spirit of the age," it seems more reasonable to argue that the books of the 1850's which we now value least – the truly popular novels of the age – are the most useful as historical documents of this kind (Marx, "Defense of an Unscientific Method" 88-89).

With this argument, Marx insists that high literature should be a key source for *American Studies*: "In distinguishing the two methods, however, the significant point is the indispensability to the humanist, and in spite of its ambiguous sociological status, of the category of 'high' culture" (ibid., 79). High literature is indispensable for the writing of intellectual and cultural history because, by transcending mere documentation, it can reveal a deeper truth about American culture. But high literature can reveal this deeper truth only through the very qualities that provide it with a specifically literary dimension and thereby turn it into high literature: According to contextualist

premises, this is the unified structure that transforms everyday language and provides it with a new dimension of meaning through the pressures of the inner-referential context. The truth high literature reveals is thus not to be confused with the work's message. It does not reside in the semantics of the representational level. The actual site of meaning is the literary structure which gives unity to the text and transforms it into a work of art.

In New Critical contextualism, this unified structure is usually described as a pattern or as a dualistic metaphor: "Because the language of imaginative literature tends to be figurative, and because the controlling context of the individual work usually is imagistic or metaphoric, the message – the element reducible to a discursive statement – is only a part and not necessarily the most important part of the meaning" (ibid., 81). What makes this argument so ingenious is the fact that the special epistemological promise of high literature is inextricably linked with its status as high literature as defined by contextualism. The "deeper insight" the literary text provides derives from its literary dimension. The literary value of the text – the way in which it has succeeded to transform its linguistic material into an aesthetic pattern – becomes the source of superior insight. Where, on the other hand, the text fails to establish a controlling and transforming context in the form of a unified structure, we cannot expect any deeper insights. This is one of the reasons for the lack of interest American Studies scholars have shown in realist literature as a literature that appears to completely disregard poetic language in its obsessive search for an accurate, "objective" representation of reality.

4.1 Aesthetic premises have shaped *American Studies* to a much larger extent than is usually acknowledged. This has some interesting methodological consequences. One is a shift in the conceptualization of the interpretive object from "overt structure" to "covert structure." As we have seen already, it can pose considerable difficulties to locate the unifying structural principle on the explicit "surface" level of the text, as the following quotes from Marx and Richard Poirier illustrate:

> This short story is particularly useful for an understanding of complex pastoralism and the experience that generates it, in spite of the fact that – or perhaps because – it exhibits only part of the motif. The pastoral ideal figures prominently in the tale, but the new technology does not. On the surface, at least, there is no indication that "Ethan Brand" embodies a significant response to the transformation of life associated with machine power (Marx, *Machine* 265).
>
> These are rather grim suggestions, when in fact the experience of reading the opening chapters is not grim at all … The undercurrent has been indeed "so very profound" that it has never been clearly exposed beneath the surface of the first three chapters, which even some recent commentators have described as belonging to the tradition of *Tom Sawyer* (Poirier 180).

Even where a way is finally found to establish a conflict or a preferred metaphor on the surface level, it is not automatically the central structural principle

of the text. This is the very point, however, on which the whole argument hinges. Where attempts fail to describe a particular motif of the text as part of its unifying structure, the contextualist has to create a link between an explicit pattern and an organizing principle on a deeper, covert level that can be used to make a claim for unity. In such cases, a unified whole can only be construed if "explicit meaning" is complemented by "underlying meaning," and this underlying meaning can be identified as constitutive and unifying. The shift from overt to covert can be equally useful where a claim for the centrality of an "overt structure" can no longer be maintained. Thus, Henry Nash Smith can say about *Huckleberry Finn* (and thereby solve the problem of the heterogeneity of the book for which he has provided so much convincing evidence himself): "The book has a basic unity of theme despite Mark Twain's pronounced shift in overt structure" (Smith, "Introduction" xii). A shift to the level of covert structure is inevitable as long as the interpreter continues to start from the assumption of a unified whole as the precondition for the special cultural status and epistemological promise of the book. In the process, the interpretive object is redefined. It is now the covert structure of the text which becomes the actual object of interpretation, while the overt structure is seen as merely a front or as a cover for something that is disguised or hidden. However, since the covert structure is defined as something that it is not openly visible and thus not easily accessible, a way has to be found to gain access to it either by way of analogy or by a chain of free associations. Such a procedure has the added advantage of a liberation from strict criteria of evidence or plausibility. The construct of a unified principle by means of an analogy cannot be refuted, since the creation of analogies or unexpected associations is basically a poetic activity.

4.2 Another important consequence of grounding one's cultural analysis in the contextualist assumption of a unified structure or Gestalt lies in its particular concept and theory of culture. High literature provides not only privileged access to covert structures of meaning but, through these covert structures, also to a deeper aspect of a culture, the so-called "covert culture:"

> The great writer is a sensitive observer, and needless to say he does not merely project his culture. On the contrary, often he consciously reveals covert elements that less perceptive artists ignore; moreover, he sometimes reveals them precisely by turning stereotypes inside out (Bowron, Marx, Rose 88).
> Critics concerned with the devious ways in which a society nurtures its men of letters cannot afford to neglect the existence of covert culture and the writer's response to it. Here is a major source of those tensions that give a work of literary art its structure, its irony, and its stylistic signature (94).

Again, a partial truth – namely the fact that explicit expressions of a culture do not yet tell us the whole truth about that culture – is turned into a general claim that creates its own severe follow-up problems.

In the end, the confusion of the literary with its definition by the contextualists decisively shapes the large-scale attempts to define the distinctive dimension of American culture. For the only way in which the cultural meaning of a literary work of art can be viewed as the central unifying structure is if it is defined as recurrent pattern or dualistic metaphor. Consequently, the critic is left preoccupied, not with the cultural meaning itself, but with its usefulness as a central structural principle which lends order and self-sufficient coherence to the literary text. For contextualists, metaphors and symbols are therefore key sources of meaning in literature and as such they also provide the key to a more complex, less ideological understanding of American culture. Poetic (i.e., literary) structures provide the best protection against ideology. One result is that in current American Studies, the "deeper truths" of American culture manifest themselves in structures characterized by tension, conflict, duality, contradiction, paradox, or polarities:

> The American imagination … seems less interested in redemption than in the melodrama of the eternal struggle of good and evil, less interested in incarnation and reconciliation than in alienation and disorder (Chase 11).
> The style of the most exciting American books is not one of consensus or amelioration among its given constituents, but a style filled with an agitated desire to make a world in which tensions and polarities are fully developed and then resolved (Poirier x).

The concept of culture in these quotations is unmistakably contextualist; what America is really all about is revealed in dualistic patterns. It is not hard to see that this theory of American culture is tailor-made for literary scholars who, on the one hand, want to insist on the relevance of literature for American Studies but, on the other hand, do not want to give up their aesthetic premises. High literature continues to stand at the center of American Studies, and the special expertise of the literary scholar, his know-how in interpreting metaphoric and other formal dimensions of texts, can become crucially important for providing an interpretation that goes beyond superficial self-descriptions and provides a more complex view of American culture. The literary critic, it turns out, is the supreme cultural critic and Cultural Studies scholar.

4.3 To ground analyses of American culture in a theory of culture in which culture is defined by dualistic patterns or polarities might be justified in one case only: if one can plausibly assume that American culture is indeed shaped by such patterns and polarities. In this case, the theory of culture held by American Studies scholars would be a fitting description of reality. It makes sense, then, that American Studies scholars have worked with a theory of American culture that confirms their own premises, namely a so-called "dialectical theory of culture." For a description, Leo Marx has drawn on Lionel Trilling's definition of culture:

> "A culture is not a flow, nor even a confluence; the form of its existence is struggle, or at least debate – it is nothing if not a dialectic." What Trilling is proposing here may be called a dialectical theory of culture. The "very essence" of a culture, he says, resides in its central conflicts, or contradictions, and its great artists are likely to be those who contain a large part of the dialectic within themselves, "their meaning and power lying in their contradictions." Whatever its shortcomings as a universal theory, Trilling's definition has proven remarkably useful in the interpretation of American writing in the nineteenth century – a period when, as he says "an unusually large proportion of … notable writers … were such repositories of the dialectic of their times …" (Marx, *Machine* 342; Marx quotes from Trilling 7).

For Trilling, only a dialectical view of culture can protect us from Marxist and other monocausal simplifications. If we follow him, as Leo Marx does, and assume that the very essence of culture consists in conflicts and contradictions which nevertheless, in their dialectical interdependence, can be "contained" within one Gestalt pattern, then the aesthetic premises of New Critical contextualism provide the key not only to an adequate interpretation of high literature but also to the best possible understanding of American culture, because these premises capture the inner nature of what constitutes American culture after all.

The interpretive procedure analyzed here, namely to provide evidence by analogies between overt and covert structure, is thus supported by a general theory of culture in which culture is constituted by conflicts, and hence manifests itself in dualistic patterns that easily lend themselves to linkages by analogy. Metaphor, myth and symbol become privileged sources of insight because they contain such dualisms in one Gestalt, in one whole. Ultimately, only high literature organized by unifying structural principles can therefore capture the hidden, covert reality of American culture. This is also the starting premise of a "new historicism" as it is propagated by former New Critics who want to go beyond the claim of an autonomous aesthetic sphere and see literature in a wider historical context:

> But this historicism would seem clearly to be a new historicism – in contrast to older attempts to relate literature to its social origins – in its resistance to the more rationalistic or intellectualistic attempts to reduce literature to extra-literary ideology. Its context is not reducible to a set of propositions (any more than Brooks' poetic context) but is an elusive existential context which only the organic principle can begin to approach (Krieger, "Critical Historicism" 51).

5.1 I have concentrated on *The Machine in the Garden* in my discussion so far because it provides an especially instructive case study for understanding the underlying aesthetic premises that have shaped American Studies in its present form. However, obviously not every work in current American Studies is governed by contextualist premises to the same extent. In early American Studies, a traditional form of intellectual history dominated that is not yet affected by New Critical contextualism. In other cases, for example, that of Leslie Fiedler, a wide ranging eclecticism seems to evade any

strong theoretical commitment, and only a close reading would be able to show that a book like *Love and Death in the American Novel* nevertheless follows related assumptions about what constitutes literature and culture. In his excellent study *Mark Twain: The Development of a Writer,* Henry Nash Smith appears to be free of contextualist assumptions, with the one significant exception of *Huckleberry Finn*, which he wants to describe as a literary masterpiece. Consequently, this is the only chapter in the book in which he is actively searching out a pattern in Twain's text that can be described as unifying principle.

The aesthetic premises I have described here are thus not constitutive of every aspect and every form of interpretive practice in contemporary American Studies but they provide a fair description of the general direction in which the field has gone in the last decades. Moreover, they help to understand tendencies in the general development of American literary criticism which has also been under the influence of the New Criticism and its contextualist organicism. Where scholars have tried to go beyond this New Criticism in the direction of a new historicism, the constitutive role of contextualist premises remains striking. Current American Studies and recent developments of American literary history are thus characterized by similar tendencies. Both try to overcome the legacy of a contextualist aesthetics that restricts interpretations of cultural and social meanings to exclusively "intrinsic" methods and meanings. But both hesitate to drop contextualism altogether. And in both cases, the same premises lead to similar logical consequences. A discussion of aesthetic premises in American Studies can thus also be paradigmatic for an analysis of the current state of literary theory and criticism in the U.S. in general.

5.2 An instructive illustration of this development is provided by the essay "Historicism Once More" by Roy Harvey Pearce, who, although an American Studies scholar, is not addressing problems of the field of American Studies. Instead, he pursues the more general question what direction literary studies should take after the New Criticism. His description of the problem has a familiar ring: Pearce sees literary criticism situated between a "New Critical anti-historicism" and a "reductionist historicism." To overcome the shortcomings of both of these positions, he proposes a "'new' historical criticism" as a synthesis of the best aspects of both. However, even for this "'new' historical criticism" a by now traditional contextualist criterion proves indispensable:

> Thus as critics and readers, we still must work with a traditional criterion: the ideal possibility that a work of art may or may not, or indeed may only partly, achieve wholeness. (To say this is, of course, to subscribe to a version of the "organismic" theory of literary form.) But I have hoped to re-define the criterion somewhat: first, by noting that historically contingent cultural data, through language, have a crucially significant role in the "meaning" of the literary work, in all its wholeness; and second, by noting that the literary work has as its end the objectification of such historical data

> as they may be formed into ideally possible wholes. The wholeness, as I have said, ultimately derives from the writer's (and reader's) sense of *humanitas* (Pearce 27).

What Pearce attempts to do here is to modify a contextualist organicism by moving the unifying principle of the literary text beyond the text itself to an attitude he calls *humanitas*: "The value of a literary work, we can conclude, may be measured precisely as it is a whole structure, whose very ordering into wholeness is set by its realization of its potential of *humanitas*" (35).

For Pearce, 'humanitas' stands for "those paradoxical qualities which mark us as men" (28); in a similar passage he writes of "those existential contrarieties which, as it is endowed with *humanitas,* the literary work manifests" (36). Innertextual polarities have been replaced by existential polarities, but the idea that a deeper truth about life is revealed by polarities is maintained. Or, to put it differently: For Pearce, transcending contextualist organicism means to extend the contextualist Gestalt principle to history at large. Again, a deeper existential truth about history can only be revealed by "profound" literature and, more specifically, by that unifying structural principle which makes literature "profound" in the first place. Just as the literary text becomes a work of art when it is characterized by tension, paradox or polarities, high literature makes us understand that life and history are shaped by similar tensions, conflicts, or paradoxical patterns.

5.3 The new prospects Pearce wants to open up can also be observed in contextualism itself, which has tried to counter the growing criticism of the claim of aesthetic autonomy by extending New Criticism into a New Historicism. A typical example is provided by Murray Krieger's programmatic essay "Critical Historicism: The Poetic Context and the Existential Context:"

> My title indicates yet another in a wearying succession of attempts to merge the objectives of the antagonists, to construct a new bridge that would connect the insular study of literature as literature with the mainland of man's concern as a social and historical being; in short, to discover the role of literature in an existential anthropology (50).

The "social and historical" role of man is defined here as existential dilemma. Like the literary text, society, too, has a deeper dimension which does not reveal itself easily and openly. In a formulation that should sound familiar by now, Krieger characterizes this deeper, covert level as an "elusive existential context, which only the organic principle can begin to approach" (ibid., 50).[10]

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10 See also my analysis of Wesley Morris's *Towards a New Historicism* in "American Literary Criticism in Search of Literary Theory:" "Only qua structure does literature contain history and, thus, only by studying 'contextually successful poetry' can we get at the true historical meaning of literature" (318). – It almost goes without saying that the New Historicism of Krieger, Pearce, and Morris is not yet that of Stephen Greenblatt which is analyzed in the following essay in this volume.

As long as one insists on the central role of a unifying principle, manifesting itself in tension, duality, paradox or polarity, interpretations of history and society are pre-determined. Culture is a "a complex of unformulated forces which is inaccessible except through that culture's symbolic structures …;" history can only manifest itself in literature in the form of "existential and preconceptual forces;" literature becomes the privileged expression of "otherwise unavailable existential forces of the cultural context;" and "thematics," the method Krieger favors, "is … the study of the existential tensions which, dramatically entangled in the literary work, become an existential reflection of that work's aesthetic complexity" (Krieger, "Critical Historicism" 51; 52; 56; 56). Literary and Cultural Studies have a long tradition of trying to determine the relation between literary text and social context and have produced a wide range of models for describing this relation. Krieger adds another model by extending the contextualist concept of a unifying principle into social life. Again, contextualist Gestalt premises are merely projected onto society instead of making an attempt to understand the latter in its own right. As Krieger puts it: "We have, then, two organicisms, two contextualisms, one locating the unique and untranslatable *Gestalt* in the poem and the other locating it in the momentary complex of social forces" (50).

5.4 Krieger's example is telling: No matter whether critics start with the intention of transforming literary studies into Cultural Studies or the New Criticism into a New Historicism, the underlying contextualist premises lead to similar results. Instead of adding a new dimension of social and historical insight, scholars only project a unifying principle, regarded as specifically literary, onto culture and society as a whole. A contextualist organicism decisively shapes the perception and interpretation of American culture. Literary structures explain social structures, the "poetic context" is expanded into an "existential context" conceived of as a "culture of contradictions." This is basically what literary studies have contributed to current American Studies so far. If we want to develop a form of Cultural Studies beyond that unconvincing extension, the first step will have to be to overcome the tacit, largely unacknowledged contextualist premises that have shaped American Studies in the last decades.

6.1 It would be too easy to assume, however, that overcoming contextualism is merely an inner-disciplinary matter. As we have pointed out at the beginning of this essay, aesthetic premises are not an isolated phenomenon. They are always part of larger set of assumptions. In this sense, they also express social and ideological needs. The existentialist rhetoric that stands at the center of current American Studies has a historical function and a historicity of its own. It stands in the service of a deeply skeptical view of history (and of America) and insists on the "power of blackness" (Harry Levin). In projecting

the idea of a unifying principle onto culture and society as a whole, a view of reality can be supported that is characterized by such existential polarities as individual vs. society; innocence vs. corruption; garden vs. machine; nature vs. civilization; head vs. heart etc. In each case, something innocent, pure or authentic is opposed to corrupting forces of conformity or to cold, inhuman rationality. But the "corruption" of innocence is now seen as an inevitable fate of human nature.[11] In this way, a naively optimistic Americanism is challenged, and a deeper existential awareness of the true nature of reality can be presented as a special and "mature" knowledge only the intellectual class can provide. Moreover, by using terms like "tragic vision," "power of blackness," or quoting Melville's famous description of Hawthorne as a man who says "No! In Thunder!," the struggle between naïve Americanism and critical skepticism can be elevated to the level of high (Shakespearean) drama.

There is a link, then, between contextualist premises and a tragic vision of history which, in the final analysis, also affects those populist critics like Henry Nash Smith who actually want to affirm the power of vernacular values in American culture. Murray Krieger himself has pointed out that contextualist method and a particular philosophical position go hand in hand:

> Thus, as I show in that chapter, this aesthetic, for all its seeming purity, can, through thematic analysis, be pushed back – perhaps where it belongs – into a metaphysic. And the new study of "thematics," as it is defined in my final chapter, reveals it to be a branch – and a telling branch – of pure aesthetics. This projection of my aesthetic onto thematics finds in the tragic vision its natural subject, for it is the tragic vision that this metaphysic must be designed to accommodate (Krieger, *Tragic Vision* ix).

In contrast to other critics, Krieger is well aware of the logical implications of a philosophical extension of the contextualist principle of a unifying Gestalt:

> But how does the demonstration that the work is aesthetically successful ensure the accuracy of its historical and anthropological vision? How can the aesthetic judgment be shown to have such rare cognitive consequences? Through what coincidence is aesthetic complexity somehow the accurate "reflection" *of* existential complexity so that aesthetic soundness automatically, as it were, involves historic authenticity?
>
> On this occasion I can offer only the merest suggestion *of* how I would proceed to demonstrate the aesthetic and the anthropological as two sides *of* the same vision and, consequently, of the same judgment (Krieger, "Critical Historicism" 56-57).

The claim that literary structure can provide knowledge about history and culture that is otherwise inaccessible is plausible only if a philosophical claim can be made that both, literature as well as society, are governed by the same principle. If reality itself is shaped by "tension," "conflict," or "paradox," then literary texts, organized according to these same principles, can promise privileged insight into this reality and confirm at the same time that reality is

11 Post-War left liberals know what they are talking about, because many of them innocently supported a utopian socialist dream in the Thirties and had a rude awakening when they had to face the realities of Stalinism.

shaped by the very unifying principles that distinguish literature from other forms of communication. Once a tragic vision is established as the appropriate perspective on history, the "internal complications of a poem" can represent the "existential complications of the existential universe" (Krieger, *Tragic Vision* 236; 247).

6.2 At this point, one may ask whether it may not be possible to assume that American literary works of art do indeed contain a deeper existential truth described by critics like Marx or Krieger. In this case, current American Studies would merely have captured an aspect of American culture that is central after all. However, what we consider works of art in American literary tradition today is the result of a canon revision by one generation of scholars that has given us a new curriculum for the study of American literature. It is not that critics have merely opened their eyes to what was already there; quite on the contrary, they have redefined and re-interpreted a body of works so that these works can now be described as key texts for understanding America. The Melville-Renaissance can be seen as such a reorientation in American high-brow culture. The dark romantics Poe, Hawthorne and Melville helped a post-World War II generation to replace the left liberalism and realist aesthetics of the Thirties by the concept of a tragic vision, most powerfully articulated by Melville. However, one may very well argue that an author like Melville can tell us more about the time in which he was rediscovered than about the time in which he wrote his works or about a specifically American dimension of American culture. In a review of Richard Poirier's *A World Elsewhere,* Leo Marx shows an awareness of this possibility when he writes: "One cannot help feeling that this fashionable doctrine was tailored to fit our contemporary despair" (Marx, "Review" 19). Indeed, one may claim that authors like Hawthorne or Melville do not offer privileged access to American culture but to the self-definition of a critical literary intelligentsia of the 1950s and 60s.

Post-war American Studies was strongly shaped by the need of a group of critics and scholars to establish a classical American tradition which would help them to come to terms with their own post-Stalinist sense of betrayal. One blatant case of this kind of re-interpretation is the case of Mark Twain and at least in this case Martin Green's angry verdict appears justified:

> When this involves, as it has in American literary studies, reinterpreting and misinterpreting the writers of the past to make them fit the theories of alienation – the power of blackness in the American imagination – then this intellectual vice is seen at its most lurid (Green 6). … The major texts of American literature are nowadays not so much over-interpreted as re-invented (Green 10-11).

6.3 Critics of the American humanities like Maxwell Geismar or Louis Kampf have linked the 'tragic vision' we have analyzed here with the intellectual atmosphere of the 1950s, which was characterized by prosperity and

optimism about the end of ideology, but also by anxiety about the Cold War and the suffocating conformity of the times:

> The complement – perhaps the other side – of the social sciences' cheery, though somewhat frightening, optimism is to be found in the modish pessimism of our cultural critics with metaphysical pretensions. They share the social scientists' elemental view of society, but substitute for the latter's iron economic laws and statistical probabilities the notions of fate, original sin, and that catchall, the human condition. In the realm of literary culture, we have all been taught that life is necessarily tragic, and that the only matter worthy of our anguish is the imminence of Death. Learning to accept unhappiness, alienation, and the inevitable failure to fulfill one's possibilities is a sign of one's critical maturity – that is, of one's Arnoldian culture (Kampf 636).

What Kampf's analysis still leaves open, however, is why and how similar social conditions can lead to an unproblematical optimism on the one hand and to pessimism and existential despair on the other.

One explanation may be provided by the social position of the literary intelligentsia. Ever since positivism gained a foothold in the humanities, this group has faced growing challenges to the relevance of what it is doing. Clearly, debates about the theory and method of American Studies also reflect a need to provide literary and Cultural Studies, as well as intellectual history, with the legitimation of a methodologically self-aware discipline. To counter the challenge of positivism, various responses have been developed. One consists in the acceptance of positivistic criteria of scientific evidence. This strategy can be most prominently observed in analytical philosophy, of which analytical aesthetics is an offshoot. Its promise is to develop methods in which interpretation and evaluation could be logically separated, so that "objective" description could remain uncontaminated from "subjective" evaluation. That this is hermeneutically naïve was one of the starting points of this essay. Today, various forms of textual analysis, either influenced by linguistics or structuralism, have led to the revival of hopes for more objective and scientific forms of literary studies.

But there exists also another strategy to counter the positivist challenge. This is the response developed by contextualism. Its key assumption is the claim that literature can provide a specific, otherwise inaccessible and ungraspable truth. As we have seen, the only way to describe this special kind of knowledge is to tie it to that which makes literature unique, namely its organic unifying principle, "for only this approach can preserve poetry as our primary form of discourse and as the cultivated, self-conscious equivalent of our primary way of knowing …" (Krieger, "Critical Historicism" 54-55). The attempt to preserve a privileged epistemological status for literature leads to a strategy in which the production of knowledge by literature and literary studies is linked to an elusive organic principle and thus to a source of meaning that might, in the final analysis, very well be called metaphysical. In this myth and symbol metaphysics, the positivist challenge to provide a

new rationale for the relevance of one's own field, a contextualist organicism, and a tragic vision are part of one historical configuration and reinforce each other logically. This is the actual reason for the methodological dilemma of American Studies that we currently face. If we want to transform American Studies into a genuinely interdisciplinary field or into a new form of Cultural Studies, we will have to give up the assumptions that are still considered indispensable for reasons of disciplinary legitimacy. All attempts, no matter how ambitious they are, to develop a new method of American Studies will have their limits in the – explicit or implicit, intentionally or unintentionally held – aesthetic premises on which the major works in the field are still based.

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