
REVIEWS

Jeffrey L. Sammons. *Ideology, Mimesis, Fantasy: Charles Sealsfield, Friedrich Gerstäcker, Karl May, and Other German Novelists of America*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1998. 342p.

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Life in the New World, in particular the United States and its frontier, was certainly a topic of major discourse in nineteenth-century Germany. The literature written in German about the American experience is not only voluminous; it is composed of a wide variety of literary undertakings as well.

The American Bicentennial celebrations of 1976 raised interest in many quarters for an examination of such literature about America's history. Those celebrations, in fact, furnished the impetus for Sammons' seminar at Yale on the German novel concerning North America, and that seminar engendered, eventually, this welcome addition to a relatively sparsely researched field of German-American studies.

For a number of reasons, I would venture to suggest that a significant *Lücke* exists among most Germanists as to not only most of the works, but indeed also in regard to most of the authors. The significant value of Sammons' *Ideology, Mimesis, Fantasy* lies exactly here — in presenting a spectrum *cum* analysis of several of the better or better-known authors and their material.

Ideology, Mimesis, Fantasy, appearing as Volume 121 of the University of North Carolina Studies in the Germanic Languages and Literatures, centrally concerns three such authors: Charles Sealsfeld (whose life was more colorful and enigmatic than even that of Karl May), Friedrich Gerstäcker (who traveled not only through America, but much of the rest of the world, as well), and Karl May (of course). Each is the subject of a major section of the work, and five other authors are discussed, less extensively, in transitional sections: Excursus I (Balduin Möllhausen and Friedrich Armand Strubberg) and Excursus II [Talvj (Robinson), Ferdinand Kürnberger and Reinhold Solger]. Quite obviously, even this limited selection of authors entails dealing with an extensive primary literature; no fewer than 31 of Gerstäcker's novels are discussed, for instance.

The work concludes with a short overview ("Outlook") of German writing about America in this century, and despite its brevity, this section compiles an

impressive list of such literature, written by a host of authors, to include Hans Werner Richter, Alfred Andersch, Max Frisch, and Peter Handke. Here Sammons contends, convincingly enough, that it should “belong to the responsibilities of Americans working in the field of German studies to monitor and analyze [these works] more closely than they have been inclined to do in recent times” (269).

Sammons writes an easily readable, almost conversational prose, all the while erudite and insightful, and his compelling conclusions about nineteenth-century German-American literature are significant contributions to the state of knowledge in the field.

While some in the academy have cast doubt on Sealsfeld’s artistic standing, Sammons finds Sealsfeld (whose section is entitled “Ideology”) to be a “gifted, almost great writer,” who demonstrates brilliant narrative talent and fearless experimental instinct, and whose language is of a “forcefulness without compare in the German literature” (89). Gerstäcker (the “Mimesis” author), possesses in Sammons’ evaluation great strength of vision, and is an author who “aspired to be useful to people by transmitting true images” (200). Gerstäcker’s works, most would agree, include the most critical and satirical renderings of Germans in America. Karl May (“Fantasy”) stands outside the succession of fiction about America — despite all his borrowings. In fact, Sammons contends that May’s fiction, rife with unexamined presuppositions, is really not about America at all, and that May’s works “have no detectable American dimension” (245).

While the literature itself is at times described in such laudatory terms as those above, the quotations in the volume seem selected to serve the conclusions about the authors’ orientations to the new world, rather than to demonstrate the nature of their prose. While the extent of the literature is probably to some degree the reason for that, the curious reader is still left without the perspective which more extensive quotation might have accomplished.

Ideology, Mimesis, Fantasy reflects a keen awareness of extant scholarship, which has been growing in very recent years, and its bibliography is extensive — but in part arranged (that is perhaps too kind a word) under each of the German authors’ names. So one is repeatedly called on to stop and re-orient oneself. Getting lost in the bibliography is easy; finding what you’re looking for is not. An index of proper names completes the volume.

It must in fairness be said here that most sections of this volume have already appeared elsewhere, if in somewhat different form: in journals, *Festschriften*, or as contributions to other volumes. Thus only a limited amount of the content is actually new material. But since few libraries are likely to hold all of the earlier materials, for that reason alone, *Ideology, Mimesis, Fantasy* is a welcome and very

worthwhile work, which offers a great deal under one cover. It belongs on the shelves of every university library. ✱