Call for Papers

Umwege: Detours in German Thought and Literature
German Studies Graduate Student Conference, Brown University
Keynote Speaker: Carol Jacobs, Yale University
April 12-13, 2013

“Method is detour” (“Methode ist Umweg”), states Walter Benjamin in the *Origin of the German Mourning Play*. This brief, almost ironically straightforward dictum about detour summarizes Benjamin’s own critical approach—one that concerns itself with opposing conceptions of directness, linearity, and immediacy in the realms of language, art, history, and politics. Benjamin’s fascination with forms of aberrant movement is situated in a broader context of the German intellectual and literary traditions. Starting in the eighteenth century, with the seminal work of writers such as Baumgarten, Lessing, Mendelssohn, and Kant, German philosophers and theorists have often wandered into the domains of art and the aesthetic. Whether bringing the aesthetic into proximity with the political, as in the case of Schiller, theorizing the Apollonian/Dionysian dichotomy in classical Athenian tragedy in the case of Nietzsche, or even Heidegger’s investigation into the concepts of Being and truth through the work of art—the “aesthetic detour” has been a key component in much of the development of canonical German thought. Simultaneously, the wandering protagonist has developed into a dominant literary motif. Beginning with Goethe’s *Wilhelm Meister*, detour was established as a key poetic principle in the genre of the *Bildungsroman* and simultaneously initiated an enduring obsession with literary topoi of deviation and digression. Long after the days of the grand (de-)tour, the tradition of deviant paths in German literature has continued. It is present in Adalbert Stifter’s walking narrator, Robert Walser’s personal and artistic interest in long walks, as well as in Sebald’s literary pilgrimages through the maze of European landscapes and histories.

Detours are of critical interest to us due to their paradoxical character. On the one hand, detours are experienced as a nuisance; deviations are punished, and digressions appear to decrease productivity. And yet, these forms of aberration, resistance, and deferral open up a discursive space in which invention and thought can thrive unencumbered. This conference will investigate the potential of detour as a method of thought, a mode of writing, and aesthetic production; thus we especially invite papers that approach the critical with the literary and vice versa.

Topics may include but are not limited to:

- figures of non-linearity, indirectness (the maze, the labyrinth, errancy)
- overcoming or bypassing the limits of representation (overdetermination, trauma, the sublime)
- detour and accident, contingency, or coincidence
- philosophical conceptions of the detour
- detours between texts (citation, inter-textuality, translation)
- detours between media (ekphrasis, captions, etc.)
- detours and spatial dis-orientation (ateleological explorations, measurings, conquests)
- the detour back to German Studies: re-definition of German studies through other disciplines? (influence of non-Western literatures, natural/social sciences and digital humanities)

Please submit a 300 word abstract for a 20 minute paper by January 15, 2013 to: detours2013@gmail.com

The conference will be held at Brown University, Providence (RI) on Friday and Saturday, April 12-13, 2013.

Conference organizers: Michael Powers, Eric Foster, Benjamin Brand

Brown University
Department of German Studies
190 Hope Street Providence, R.I. 02912
German_Studies@Brown.edu