

HABILITATION THESIS REVIEWER'S REPORT

Masaryk University

Applicant

Jeffrey Alan Smith

Habilitation thesis

Perpetual Scriptures: Quests for Textual Authority in Nineteenth-Century American Literature Culture

Reviewer

Dr. David Copland Morris

Reviewer's home unit, institution

University of Washington Tacoma USA

1 How relevant is the topic within the given academic field?

The topic of Smith's manuscript is extremely relevant to the fields of literature, American studies and cultural studies. His work is thoroughly interdisciplinary, and ambitiously seeks to identify main themes of American intellectual, political and religious development. It richly explores the interconnections among these themes in order to convey a strong sense of the cultural ferment underlying American life from the Revolution to the Civil War.

Smith's work is a fine exemplar of cultural studies in that texts are viewed in dialectical relation to context as much as they are seen as products of individual authorship. Thus, for example, such strong seemingly different sensibilities as those of Joseph Smith and Ralph Waldo Emerson are shown to be oriented toward cultural and spiritual projects with striking similarities.

2 How precisely, clearly and understandably is the topic formulated?

Smith's is a wide-ranging and deeply probing work which sees American life and identity as rooted in their relation to certain foundational texts. Since the United States, unlike other nations in the 19th century, had no tribal or ethnic origin, Smith intriguingly shows the great importance that the Bible, the Constitution and the Declaration of Independence had as a kind of cultural glue. Yet he further demonstrates that these documents were constantly subjected to interpretation and reinterpretation under various historical pressures, especially that exerted by the need to resolve the great political, economic, and above all moral, issue of slavery. His topic is a complex one but I believe it manages to capture important dialectical dyads in the rapidly evolving American society during period in question: orthodoxy and free thinking, tradition and revolution, individualism and cohesion, morality and economic gain, literalism and contextualization, the Bible and the daily news. Smith's study culminates in a powerful

third and final section which focuses on the use of the three foundational texts (Bible, Constitution, Declaration) by both sides in the national debate about slavery.

Smith's focus on Emerson's notion of "perpetual scripture" holds the thesis's wide-ranging discussions together. An especially interesting chapter, for example, makes a good case for how the seemingly ephemeral matter contained in the daily newspapers became itself a kind of scripture, attended to and debated with almost religious fervor. The portrait Smith paints of a young, highly idiosyncratic country fervently and sometimes chaotically striving to find a philosophical, spiritual and moral ground for its existence is compelling. The ongoing search for such a ground is palpable even today (to say the least). Intentional or not, Smith provides an intriguing and I think fruitful twist on the contested idea of American Exceptionalism.

3 What contributions does the thesis make to the field and how does it compare to other works, both foreign and domestic, in the field?

The closest comparable studies to Smith's that come to mind are: David Reynolds, *Beneath the American Renaissance*; Harold K. Bush and Brian Yothers, eds., *Above the American Renaissance*; Hans Bergmann, *God in the Street. New York Writing from The Penny Press to Melville*. Smith, however, synthesizes materials that are usually separated. I know of no other individual scholarly works that cover materials as disparate as, say, the rise of daily news production, the quest for an original national literature, the journalism career of Whitman, the rise of Mormonism, the internal theological battles of the Unitarian church, Emerson's evolving stance on slavery, the transcendentalists' varying views of the constitution, the parascriptural nature of Uncle Tom's Cabin, the contextualization and very close reading of the Gettysburg address, the place of Lincoln in the national psyche as well as in primal Christian narrative. The above is only a partial list. The many other books that Smith cites along the way deal with one or another of the particulars--on the Declaration of Independence and Constitution, for instance, there is Pauline Maier's *American Scripture: Making the Declaration of Independence*, Michael Kammen's *A Machine That Would Go of Itself: The Constitution in American Culture*, and Donald S. Lutz's *The Origins of American Constitutionalism*. But these books only examine separate topics contained in Smith's larger project.

Interestingly, in its ambition and breadth Smith's thesis puts me most in mind of a classic pioneering interdisciplinary work of cultural studies from the 1970s, namely *Natural Supernaturalism: Tradition and Revolution in Romantic Literature* by M. H. Abrams. Abrams's book dealt with European writers, but like Abrams, Smith takes on a challenging array of figures and treats each of them in rewarding depth while also maintaining a unifying focus.

4 How appropriate and relevant is the chosen methodological approach to the topic?

I am impressed by the way Smith smoothly integrates close textual analysis, evocation of relevant historical backdrop, and philosophical speculation. He has included in his scope

iconic individuals along with more obscure figures whose lesser-known efforts show the major texts and projects in a richer light.

5 What is the level of analysis?

The level of analysis is consistently high. At no time does the text seem to be just treading water. I found Smith's treatment of the much written-about Emerson and Whitman to be particularly sharp. Smith illuminates an illuminating connection between Whitman's career as a journalist and as a poet. Perhaps my favorite line in the entire thesis is this with regard to Whitman's poetry: "Its panoptical vantage point could be that of an imaginative news reader, but equally well that of a god." The line is full of wit but also succinctly reflects the cultural dialectic Smith is exploring throughout the thesis.

With regard to Emerson, I would point to Smith's brilliant paragraph (p 71) concerning an instance where Emerson uses the somewhat archaic word "desponding" instead of the more current "despairing." Smith's commentary on the implications of Emerson's choice is a marvelous fusion of close reading and broad cultural analysis.

The entire third section of the thesis, taking up the subject of slavery, is among the most insightful explorations I have come across on that tragic topic. Smith's reading of the Gettysburg address as a seemingly secular, highly compressed (and therefore extraordinarily powerful) dramatization of Christian theology is very moving as well as intelligent.

6 Are formal criteria (language, citations, etc.) of sufficiently high standard?

The writing is sophisticated and nuanced throughout, but also very clear. The citations and bibliography are impeccably done. This is scrupulously produced scholarship.

Reviewer's questions for the habilitation thesis defence (number of questions up to the reviewer)

How would you compare the quest for textual authority in the United States with that in other nations or cultures?

May your thesis be fairly regarded as a redefinition, intentional or not, of "American exceptionalism"?

How do you see the quest for textual authority and perpetual scriptures playing out at the present moment in America society?

Do you see the advent of multiculturalism as in some sense a relinquishing of the American quest for unifying perpetual scriptures? Or is multiculturalism another attempt

to produce just such a scripture? Can one identify candidates today aspiring to produce a perpetual scripture? (Ibram X. Kendi's *How to Be an Antiracist*, for example?)

What similarities do you see between the rise of the popular press in the early 19th century and the rise to pervasiveness of the Internet today? If an online item receives something like three billion views in a month what are the implications for the notion of "textual authority"?

What is the significance of the decline of non-evangelical Protestant churches in the United States today? Does this decline make the Protestant imprint on early American history less significant for current cultural analysis?

Conclusion

The habilitation thesis entitled *Perpetual Scriptures: Quests for Textual Authority in Nineteenth-Century American Literature Cultures* by Jeffrey Alan Smith fulfils requirements expected of a habilitation thesis in the field of History of Concrete Literatures (Germanic Literatures).

Date: April 20, 2023

Signature: