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Myth and Symbol in American Studies

THE PUBLICATION OF HENRY NASH SMITH'S *VIRGIN LAND* IN 1950 HAS PROVED IN retrospect a major intellectual event. The work inspired a series of books that adopted its approach and attempted to relate consciousness to society in the United States. Receiving its most sophisticated recent expression in the publications of Leo Marx, this perspective has come for many to define American Studies; the authors—Marx calls them humanists—are at least a major movement within American Studies. But Smith and his followers have written little about their methodological premises. As Alan Trachtenberg has stated of *Virgin Land*: “Its informing theory nowhere gets a theoretical exposition: the book prefers to exemplify rather than theorize.”¹ Indeed, one has only to listen to the persistent and recurring angst voiced by graduates in American Studies to realize that this scholarly genre has not adequately defined what it is about. The aim of this article is twofold: it makes a stab at explicating the premises that guide humanist writing; and it tries to assess the plausibility of these premises *and* of the substantive conclusions that the humanists have reached.²

Most of us are familiar with the terminology which Smith and Marx bor-

¹“Myth, History and Literature in *Virgin Land*,” p. 2, read at a meeting of the American Studies Association of Northern California, Stanford University, Aug. 30, 1967. The author kindly lent me a copy of this paper.

²Although the patterns of explanation are widespread, I have been mainly concerned with Smith's *Virgin Land* (Cambridge: Harvard Univ. Press, 1950) (all citations with the exception of the one in footnote 20 are taken from that edition), and Marx's *Machine in the Garden* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1964), the most important publications of the school. But I have also cited with some regularity R. W. B. Lewis, *The American Adam* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press 1955); Charles L. Sanford, *The Quest for Paradise* (Urbana, Ill.: Univ. of Ill. Press, 1961); Alan Trachtenberg, *Brooklyn Bridge* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1965); and John William Ward, *Andrew Jackson: Symbol for an Age* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1953). Aside from general considerations, I would note the authority of Marx himself for treating these men as a “movement”; see “American Studies—A Defense of an Unscientific Method,” *New Literary History*, 1 (1969), 75–76.

rowed from literary criticism. Smith's brief statement in *Virgin Land* urges that symbols and myths designate larger or smaller units of the same kind of thing: an intellectual construction that fuses concept and emotion into an image.³ Marx writes that an image refers to a verbal recording of a simple sense perception,⁴ but also implies elsewhere that this formulation may be misleading.⁵ Although these notions are vague, I think the following illustration clarifies them. Suppose I see a man on the corner, and come home and write a story about him. The "mental picture" I have in mind when I write about him is an image when I merely wish to designate or refer to the man. I name this image with the phrase "the man on the corner." If I want to speak of the symbol or myth of the man on the corner, I am making the image "carry a burden of implication (value, association, feeling, or, in a word, meaning) beyond that which is required for mere reference."⁶ We invest the image with much more than a denotational quality; we enable it to connote moral, intellectual and emotional qualities of wider and wider range.

There are two reasons for believing that the American Studies movement is committed to this view of an image as a mental entity. In the first place, symbols and myths are images for Smith, and for Marx they are, at least, the same sorts of things as images. But symbols and myths at best *reflect* empirical fact, and so are never themselves factual; they are "products of the imagination," "complex mental construct[s]."⁷ So if images are of the order of symbols and myths, and the latter are not factual but "mental constructs," then images are also mental constructs, states of mind, however accurately they may refer to the factual. In the second place, the American Studies humanists make a strict dichotomy between consciousness and the world. Smith writes that symbols and myths exist "in a different plane" from empirical fact;⁸ in *Brooklyn Bridge* Trachtenberg urges that facts and symbols have two separate modes of existence—facts have a specific spatio-temporal location; symbols have a place in the mind.⁹ Marx—like Smith and Trachtenberg—writes that the chief concern is "the landscape of the psyche," "the inner, not the outer world"; actual objects and events are secondary.¹⁰ The location of an image is not "out there" "but in consciousness. It is a product of imaginative perception, of the analogy-perceiving,

³Smith, p. v; Marx "American Studies," p. 86. See also Ward's "Looking Backward: Andrew Jackson: Symbol for an Age," in *The Historian's Workshop* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1970), pp. 214 ff.

⁴Marx, "American Studies," pp. 83–84.

⁵Marx, *Machine*, pp. 190, 193.

⁶*Ibid.*, p. 4; "American Studies," p. 86.

⁷Smith, p. v; Marx, "American Studies," p. 86.

⁸Smith, p. v.

⁹Trachtenberg, *Brooklyn Bridge*, p. vii.

¹⁰Marx, *Machine*, p. 28. Here Marx is speaking only of Hawthorne.

metaphor-making, mytho-poetic power of the human mind.”¹¹ In terms of this bifurcation between mind and the physical world images belong to the mental realm.

This explication helps explain why the humanists effectively resort to the analysis of painting in their work:¹² the painting is a striking physical example of the image or symbol in the artist’s mind. As Marx writes, the symbolic landscape existed on many planes of consciousness, on the canvas, in books and in the minds of those familiar with art and literature.¹³

It would be a mistake, however, to regard images as pictorial only. For example, Marx notes that Hawthorne makes use of auditory images.¹⁴ Sitting in my study, I can imagine the man on the corner telling a story; or recall the aroma of his shaving lotion. In short, images and symbols are often visual in quality, but are not necessarily so. More important, because we use “physical object” language to analyze images, we must emphasize their internal status. Although they are very like the kinds of things we see, hear and smell when we see a man on the corner, hear him talking or smell his shaving lotion, images are really mental entities, different in kind from what in fact exists. Finally, we ought to note that as used by humanists, images and symbols are not uniquely occurring entities. They have the capacity to appear in many minds; as I shall argue later they have what I would call a platonic status. Smith writes that they are “collective representations rather than the work of a single mind.”¹⁵ Marx and Trachtenberg also write of a “collective image” and the existence of symbols in America’s “collective imagination.”¹⁶ Indeed, one of the primary purposes of the American Studies movement is to demonstrate the way in which these “collective” images and symbols can be used to explain the behavior of people in the United States.

Although there is much that is obscure in this position, I hope to have explicated it as plainly as possible. I must conclude that the humanists suppose what I shall call a crude Cartesian view of mind. There are two kinds of existents for them; the one with which they primarily deal consists of something very like pictures (and their aural and olfactory equivalents) which exist *in* the mind and which may or may not refer to what is “out there” in another sphere. Moreover, these ideas are platonic: they exist independently of the people who think them. Smith writes that the Lewis and

¹¹*Ibid.*, p. 264. Here Marx is describing Thoreau’s position although the implication is that Marx subscribes to it.

¹²See esp. *Brooklyn Bridge*, *Andrew Jackson: Symbol for an Age*, *Virgin Land* and *The Machine in the Garden*.

¹³Marx, *Machine*, p. 142.

¹⁴*Ibid.*, p. 28.

¹⁵Smith, p. v.

¹⁶Marx, *Machine*, p. 164; Trachtenberg, *Brooklyn Bridge*, p. vii.

Clark expedition “established the image of a highway across the continent . . . in the minds of Americans”; the image of the West was “so powerful and vivid” to Americans that it seemed “a representation of America.”¹⁷ Marx argues that Elizabethan ideas of America were “visual images” containing “the picture of America as a paradise regained”; but for Marx images of the landscape need not picture the *actual* topography—the Elizabethan images were not “representational images”; nonetheless, people “actually saw themselves creating a society in the image of a garden.”¹⁸

It is impossible, I think, to “prove” the inadequacy of a theoretical position. But we can indicate that some versions of some positions are implausible and that they lead to dubious results. Gilbert Ryle’s now classic *The Concept of Mind* (London: Hutchinson, 1949) does this by exposing the inadequacies of one kind of Cartesianism—what is essentially the humanist view of images and symbols.¹⁹ But let us initially make a traditional counter-argument.

A crude Cartesian has two options. First, he can maintain his dualism but then must give up any talk about the external world. How can he know that any image refers to the external world? Once he stipulates that they are in different planes, it is impossible to bring them into any meaningful relation; in fact, it is not even clear what a relationship could conceivably be like. Descartes resorted to the pineal gland as the source and agent of mind-body interaction, but this does not appear to be an out for the humanists. Second, the Cartesian can assimilate what we normally take to be facts about the external world—for example, my seeing the man on the corner—to entities like images, symbols and myths. (When Leo Marx calls an image a verbal recording of a simple sense impression, he may be making this move.) Facts and images both become states of consciousness. If the Cartesian does this, he is committed to a form of idealism. Of course, this maneuver will never be open to (Karl) Marxists, but it also presents problems for the humanists: they have no immediate way of determining which states of consciousness are “imaginative” or “fantastic” or “distorted” or even “value laden” for there is no standard to which the varying states of consciousness may be referred. On either of these two options some resort to platonism is not strange. A world of suprapersonal ideas which we all share and which we may use to order our experiences is a reasonable supposition under the circumstances. But this position, although by no means absurd, is not one to which we wish to be driven if we are setting out a straightforward theory to explain past American behavior.

¹⁷Smith, pp. 18, 139.

¹⁸Marx, *Machine*, pp. 36, 43, 143. See also p. 159.

¹⁹Some have complained that the “Cartesian” views Ryle condemns may never have been held by Descartes. But the views Ryle does castigate are essentially similar to those the humanists hold—“crude Cartesianist” views.

In the new preface to the Twentieth Anniversary Reissue of *Virgin Land* Smith confronts these issues directly. He admits that his former dualism of mind and environment was too strict. Adopting what I have called above the second Cartesian option, Smith writes that his old view “encouraged an unduly rigid distinction between symbols and myths on the one hand, and on the other a supposed extramental historical reality discoverable by means of conventional scholarly procedures.” “Our perceptions of objects and events,” he adds, “are no less a part of consciousness than are our fantasies.” Yet Smith wants to have it both ways. On this view, we can never reach an external standard to judge the truth value of our conscious states; but this is exactly what Smith attempts to do. The relation of images to “historical events” is always changing; images impose coherence on “the data of experience”; and most important, “images are never, of course, exact reproductions of the physical and social environment.” The obvious question is, what is this “environment”?²⁰ If it is external to consciousness, how can we know about it on Smith’s view? If it is not, how do we—again on Smith’s view—distinguish it from our images?

These ruminations do not clarify the confusions in American Studies Cartesianism, and the point of Ryle’s *The Concept of Mind* is not to conduct an “argument” with the doctrine as I have done. Rather, Ryle urges that this view of consciousness—the realm of images and symbols—is logically misconceived. Ideas for Ryle are not entities existing in the head; they are not occurrences, episodes or events. The Cartesian position wrongly contends that mind and body are two different sorts of *things*, and that although the mind is not a thing existing in space, it is enough like such a thing that we can fruitfully talk of mind-body relations, as we would talk of the relations between two different physical objects. Suppose a spectator were to watch a successful college football team; he says that he knows the functions of the coach, the waterboy, the doctor and of each of the offensive and defensive players. He then says “But there is no one left on the field to contribute the element of *esprit de corps* for which the team is so famous. I don’t see who exercises team spirit.” It would have to be explained to him that he didn’t know what to look for. Team spirit is not a task supplementary to all the others which someone must perform. It is, roughly, the keenness with which each of the special tasks is performed, and performing a task keenly is not performing two tasks. Our spectator does not know how to use the concept of team spirit; it cannot be understood as a specific thing. Similarly, for Ryle, mental concepts cannot be understood as things which exist in our heads. This kind of analysis gets the connection between the physical and the mental radically incorrect. For example, if a person has a good idea, he will not write, talk and argue *and* have a peculiar entity in

²⁰Cambridge: Harvard Univ. Press, 1970, pp. vii-x.

his head; he will simply write, talk and argue in a convincing and intelligent manner. Having a mind is for an organism to be disposed to behave in a certain way, to possess certain propensities to action. The realm of the mental is not a realm of inner things, but a realm of observable activities and processes. As Ryle puts it, to speak of a person's mind is to speak of certain ways in which some of the incidents of his life are ordered; to talk of his abilities, liabilities and inclinations to do and undergo certain sorts of things, and of the doing and undergoing of these things in the ordinary world.²¹

Using something like a Rylean analysis of mind, we can easily reinterpret the Cartesian aspect of American Studies scholarship. How can we make its ideas clear? Suppose we define an idea not as some entity existing "in the mind" but as a disposition to behave in a certain way under appropriate circumstances. Similarly, to say that an author has a particular image of the man on the corner (or uses the man on the corner as a symbol) is to say that in appropriate parts of his work, he writes of a man on the corner in a certain way. When he simply writes of the man to refer to him, let's say, as the chap wearing the blue coat, we can speak of the image of the man, although the use of "image" seems to obfuscate matters. If the man is glorified in poem and song as Lincolnesque, we might speak of the author as using the man as a symbol, and here the word "symbol" seems entirely appropriate. For images and symbols to become collective is simply for certain kinds of writing (or painting) to occur with relative frequency in the work of many authors. Even this simplified dispositional analysis of the meaning of mental constructs at once avoids many of the obscurities into which we have fallen. Indeed, the use of a sometimes oracular language of literary criticism hides a powerful explanatory pattern: we have postulated the existence of mental constructs to explain certain (written) behavior; we analyze the meaning of these constructs in terms of the existence of this behavior as we simultaneously confirm our theoretical structure in the discovery of further behavior patterns of this sort.

Although this procedure meets some difficulties, what I have called the platonic strain in humanist scholarship is apparent in the intellectual his-

²¹*The Concept of Mind*, esp. chap. 1, and pp. 167, 199. No one, of course, wishes to deny that some of us may at some times have what we have learned to describe as visual pictures in our heads. What Ryle denies is that such images function as a paradigm of what it is to have ideas. Moreover, I by no means want to imply that Ryle has said the last word or that my simple "behaviorist" account is adequate; the point is rather that the humanist theory is very confused, but that much of its thrust can be easily reconstructed. Interested readers might consult *Ryle*, ed. Oscar Wood and George Pitcher (New York: Doubleday, 1970) and *The Philosophy of Mind*, ed. Stuart Hampshire (New York: Harper and Row, 1966).

tory that it has produced, and in this area their theoretical approach has reinforced suspect substantive conclusions.

Presentism is notorious among the errors that historians can make—interpreting the past in concepts applicable only to the present. Historians are liable to read their interest back into the past, and misconstrue an individual's thought so that it is relevant for the present; the result will be that historians extract from an author what is significant for us, but lose the author's intentions. Whatever the final justifiability of a platonic view of ideas, it is not difficult to see that such a view could reinforce a presentist position. For platonists there is a set of eternal ideas existing independently of the individuals thinking about them, and intellectual history, in particular, becomes the history of enduring but competing concepts, of the posing of timeless questions and answers. It is, therefore, easy for a platonist historian to formalize his present concerns (which may or may not be among the enduring ideas) in a series of conflicting options; and then read these conceptions into the past. The worth of each past writer is measured by what he had to say on each preordained topic. Consequently, praise or blame is allocated in virtue of a writer's ability to comment on problems of interest to the platonist historian.

The accusation of presentism is difficult to sustain. It depends on the assumption that we know the correct interpretation of the past and that someone else is misinterpreting it. But the correct interpretation of the past is usually just what is being questioned, and so to argue that an historian is a presentist easily begs the question. Nonetheless, presentist traps would be easy for myth-symbol school platonism to fall into; moreover, the logical character of its substantive analyses of past thinkers constitutes evidence that it has not been interested in the authors' intentions but in the authors' relevance to the humanists.

It is clear that the humanists adopt a platonic approach to intellectual history. They use phrases like "archetypal form,"²² which commit them to something like a platonistic view. Marx asserts that a full telling of his story would require him "to begin at the moment the idea of America entered the mind of Europe and come down to the present. . . ."²³ Smith writes that the success of the Lewis and Clark expedition "reactivated the oldest of all ideas associated with America—that of a passage to India" and begins his account of the "activation" of the idea with Columbus.²⁴ Sanford speculates that the "myth of Eden" may be important for all human experience and argues that it is indeed the central myth in all American experience.²⁵ Ward has the Jacksonians "extending in time an idea

²²See, for example, Marx, *Machine*, p. 228.

²³*Ibid.*, p. 4.

²⁴Smith, p. 20; see also p. 235.

²⁵Sanford, pp. vi, 34–35.

that had been cherished in this country since the Puritans. . . .”²⁶ Lewis writes that “propositions” like the natural goodness of man were not novel in 19th century America but “made their appearance with the birth of Christianity.”²⁷

In humanist scholarship, this view prevents an understanding of the peculiar intentions of a given thinker. For example, we find that earlier men are always “anticipating” later ones: in *The American Adam* Holmes follows the psychic pattern later proposed by Jung, and *Nick of the Woods* is “a faint and fitful anticipation” of *Moby Dick*;²⁸ Smith finds the myth of the garden present “in embryo” in an early writer;²⁹ Marx has various people “prefiguring” others;³⁰ and if this language is ambiguous, he also urges that *The Tempest* anticipates the moral geography of the American imagination, that Robert Beverly’s early history anticipates “the coming fashion in thought and feeling,” and that Carlyle anticipates “the post-Freudian version of alienation”;³¹ and *The Quest for Paradise* has Dante anticipating “the future course of history.”³²

We don’t lack other examples, but the point is plain. Whatever value these discussions have for determining the significance *to us* of certain texts, it does not tell us what the authors meant, what they intended to say about the world. Consider this form of historical explanation: we must suppose, for example, that Carlyle sat down at his desk and thought “in this piece of writing I want to anticipate a post-Freudian version of alienation.” We credit an author with a meaning he could not possibly have meant to convey since that meaning was not available to him; if we are concerned with the author’s intention, it is logically inappropriate to suppose he could have meant to contribute to a debate whose terms were unavailable to him and whose point would have been lost on him.

There is another problem closely related to this one. Lewis writes that the Adamic image was “slow to work its way to the surface of American expression.”³³ Ward argues that Melville’s contemporaries did not read *Moby-Dick* but “in more obscure fashion” grappled with the same problems.³⁴ Marx has a “fully articulate” pastoral ideal “emerging” only at the end of the 18th century.³⁵ The danger here is that of too readily “reading

²⁶Ward, p. 107; see also p. 168.

²⁷Lewis, p. 32; see also p. 60.

²⁸*Ibid.*, pp. 39, 92; see also p. 98.

²⁹Smith, p. 139.

³⁰Marx, *Machine*, pp. 32, 69, 72.

³¹*Ibid.*, pp. 72, 82, 178; see also pp. 186, 280n.

³²Sanford, p. 38.

³³Lewis, p. 6; see also pp. 40, 85.

³⁴Ward, p. 202.

³⁵Marx, *Machine*, p. 73; see also p. 88.

in" a doctrine which a given writer could in principle have meant to state, but in fact had no intention to convey. If a gifted writer *meant* to articulate the doctrine with which he is being credited, why is it that he so often signally failed to do so?

Of course it is possible to purge humanist scholarship of these modes of expression: for a start we could give the enduring ideas names that, at least to us, had no peculiar relation to any one temporal period (for example, we could speak of an author as struggling to elaborate a notion of the unconscious rather than as anticipating Freud). Such a program, however, could easily become ahistoric. The descriptions to be used would necessarily be so broad and general that the ideas might take on a life of their own and do battle with one another in such a way that their "history" would become irrelevant. In any event, this sort of undertaking would require a radical recasting of myth-symbol scholarship: *its* analyses of ideas proceed *via* descriptions that are closely tied to the concerns of mid-20th century intellectuals; indeed, this is what makes this scholarship so suspect. The point is not that we can demonstrate a presentist orientation; rather, we maintain that it is wildly implausible for past thinkers to have intended to speak to our very specific contemporary problems.³⁶

Whatever their difficulties as intellectual historians, humanist scholars, as Marx claims, have not merely attempted to write books about books.³⁷ They have also tried to relate intellectual currents to the culture's *zeitgeist* and to argue that some symbols and myths dominated all America. The road to this claim is a difficult one, and I want to examine three of its turnings: the way in which the notion of popular culture is constructed; the connection of this culture to ordinary life; and the sort of explanation involved in the use of this culture concept.

The humanist technique in identifying the "popular consciousness" is first to examine popular writing—editorials, "best seller" and pulp fiction, political speeches. We cannot assume in these instances that the writers' intentions were to tell the truth about the world; on the contrary, what we are interested in is that the writers are very likely attempting to persuade the reader or listener of something; or to express what he already feels. The language writers choose will be designed to have these effects. Humanist works are perceptively aware of this problem and use it to argue their case;

³⁶The preceding discussion owes much to the work of Quentin Skinner. See "Meaning and Understanding in the History of Ideas," *History and Theory*, 9 (1969), 3–53. This article and his more recent "On Performing and Explaining Linguistic Actions," *Philosophical Quarterly*, 21 (1971), 1–21, provide bibliographic references to his other papers. Pages 14–16 of the latter article clarify the confusions of those who have complained of the "intentional fallacy."

³⁷Marx, *Machine*, p. 385.

because popular writers or speakers are aware of their audience in the way they are, we can extrapolate from their work what was “in the mind” of the audience. The popularity of Robert Frost, Marx writes, “would seem to argue the universal appeal” of the way he conceives of the world.³⁸ Smith argues: “The individual [popular] writer abandons his own personality and identifies himself with the reveries of his readers. It is the presumably close fidelity of the . . . stories to the dream life of a vast inarticulate public that renders them valuable to the social historian and the historian of ideas.”³⁹ Ward asserts that popular speeches of the early 19th century reflect “attitudes [which] express the need of the American people” to believe Jacksonian doctrines.⁴⁰ Commenting on public oratory, Trachtenberg states that “surely the conventions of language themselves suggest predispositions among Americans to react in certain ways at certain times.”⁴¹

The central idea is that the popularity of a book or the success of a politician indicates that writers or speechifiers express the belief of the plain man or persuade him to adopt the belief they express. Now it may in some instances be true that speeches express people’s beliefs or persuade them of these beliefs, or that popular fiction functions in these ways. But it is fallacious to infer from the popularity of politicians and pulp fiction that the contents of speeches or books are accurate indicators of a people’s beliefs: this is a nice instance of the *post hoc ergo propter hoc* fallacy. Suppose we know that an author wishes to sell many copies of a book and that he feels he can do so by writing of murder and mayhem since he feels they in some way reflect his audience’s “needs”; he writes his book and it indeed sells very well. To assume now that his murder and mayhem expressed the “needs” of the people is an unwarranted inference. The causal linkage may be true, but we simply don’t *know* why many people read mysteries, science fiction or sensational best sellers. Similarly, suppose a Gilded Age politician waves the bloody shirt in a speech, hoping that this device expresses voters’ beliefs or will convince them of his own, and elect him to office. And, voila, he is elected. The vote for him may then be taken to legitimate the claim that his speech reflected what the people wanted to hear or that he persuaded them of what he believed himself. Here again, although the causal connection may be true we cannot justify the inference.⁴²

Even if we overcome these problems, we are left with a second large

³⁸Marx, “Pastoral Ideals and City Troubles,” *Journal of General Education*, 20 (1968–69), 260; see also 266–67.

³⁹Smith, p. 101.

⁴⁰Ward, p. 113.

⁴¹*Brooklyn Bridge*, p. 117.

⁴²See Ward’s comment in “Looking Backward,” p. 218.

question—the relation of “popular culture” to ordinary life. The “literate public” that reads popular books is much larger in number than the intellectuals whose behavior we initially wanted to explain. Nonetheless, this public is by no means everyone, and without hesitation American Studies scholarship has jumped from the “literate public” to everyone. Smith makes a representative statement along these lines; he writes that “most Americans would have said during the 1880’s that the Homestead Act had triumphantly borne out the predictions of the 1860’s [concerning the growth in numbers of yeoman farmers].”⁴³ If opinion polls today are any indication of people’s knowledge, it is much more likely that most Americans of the 1880s would not have heard of the Homestead Act or predictions about it. Ultimately, however, my supposition is as unsupported as the one from *Virgin Land*. The simple point is that the imputation of collective beliefs is an extraordinarily complex empirical procedure which ought not to be undertaken lightly. Yet the humanists are persistently eager to speak of “the anonymous popular mind,” “the widespread desire of Americans,” “the imagination of the American people,” “the majority of the people,” “the popular conception of American life,” “the American view of life” or “the average American.”⁴⁴

Trachtenberg, the most astute humanist critic, has pointed out this dilemma in commenting on recent critiques of “conservative” “consensus” history. The critiques appear applicable to the American Studies school which would certainly disavow these labels, and Trachtenberg writes:

Was American society ever so unified, even in its values? And American popular culture, hasn’t it been based, especially since the Civil War, on normative ideas of “national character” which actually *exclude* many people and modes of life? When we speak of “our culture,” don’t we mean “majority culture,” or what seems to be majority culture, for how can one tell, if evidence of this “public mind” is mostly written material, written by elites for a “public at large,” or popular literature fed to its readers? Without really concrete historical studies regarding who believed what when, and why, how much confidence can we have in what passes for “the general and pervasive meanings?”⁴⁵

We need not be caught up in the consensus-conflict debate to view American Studies generalizations with suspicion; we need only remember that many people live in a country and that attribution of motives to all of them requires extensive evidence.⁴⁶

⁴³Smith, p. 220.

⁴⁴*Ibid.*, p. 57; Ward, pp. 16, 24, 45; *Brooklyn Bridge*, p. 118; Marx, *Machine*, p. 3; Sanford, p. 254. Lewis’ *American Adam* is exempt from this criticism.

⁴⁵Trachtenberg, Review of Ward, *Red, White, and Blue, Carleton Miscellany*, 1970, p. 108.

⁴⁶On this question one ought to consider Marx’s notion of an “informal random sample,” “American Studies,” pp. 84–85; see also *Machine*, pp. 193 ff.

The third observation on popular culture concerns its explanatory role. The myth-symbol group offers a schema—in terms of some concept of culture—which is to explain the behavior of Americans throughout our history.⁴⁷ To focus on one example, consider the application to diplomatic history. Smith writes that inferences from the myth of the garden “will be recognized as the core of what we call isolationism,”⁴⁸ and 25 pages of Sanford’s *Quest for Paradise* argue that “a world mission of regeneration” associated with the “Edenic myth” is “the great underlying postulate of American foreign policy.”⁴⁹

Now consider Gar Alperovitz’s *Atomic Diplomacy*.⁵⁰ The book attempts to set out the viewpoint of the U.S. diplomatic elite in the immediate postwar period and maintains that the decision to drop the atomic bomb was primarily based on the belief that the use of the weapon would make the Russians more tractable. Of all the “revisionists” Alperovitz has been the most criticized. His opponents have mounted attack after attack concerning his use of evidence and his ability to substantiate the claim he makes. I have no desire to add to this controversy. What I wish to point out is that historians make severe demands on their peers concerning the adequacy of explanation. Alperovitz’ work is nearly 300 pages long, and deals with a four-month period in American history and the motivations of perhaps fifteen men. Nonetheless, his critics have not regarded as satisfactory the empirical data he has brought to bear on the questions he tries to answer.

If we turn to humanist scholarship we face, of course, a much larger explanatory schema which is not designed to explain behavior in the way that Alperovitz does. But the humanists suppose that their myths and symbols form a hierarchical structure which has a consistent and verifiable relation to those more specific beliefs with which Alperovitz, for example, is trying to understand behavior. I am not at all clear what this series of relations amounts to. But before we can accept this sort of explanatory pattern at all, we must be able to specify how confirmation or disconfirmation of a lower-level explanation is connected to an American Studies symbol or

⁴⁷One serious problem in the humanist movement concerns the use of the word “culture.” Although writers imply that they are using the word as an anthropologist would, they do not take up, for example, the ways Americans perceive sex and kinship relations or patterns of deference and authority—traditional concerns of the cultural anthropologist. Rather, many writings in American Studies apparently combine the anthropological meaning of “culture” with its meaning as it occurs in “he’s very cultured” or “he’s low-culture”; “culture” here means a style of social and artistic expression peculiar to a society or class. The two senses of the word are related, but the assimilation of the two, or failure to define a third can lead only to trouble.

⁴⁸Smith, p. 218.

⁴⁹Sanford, p. 229.

⁵⁰New York: Vintage, 1965.

myth at a higher level; in other words we must have some idea of how we can decide on the truth or falsity of humanist claims. We must know how the truth or falsity of Alperovitz' assertions supports the argument that the United States is conducting "diplomacy in Eden"; or legitimates the position that isolationism and the myth of the garden are connected. If myth-symbol generalizations have any substance, they must be subject to falsification by the conclusion of "lower-level" historical research. If we do not know how to establish links between the two levels, the humanists will not have achieved viable explanations of any behavior; what we would have instead are a series of ruminations with little empirical content, and not history.

The three criticisms concerning extrapolations from popular literature to history are serious but in some measure obvious and pedestrian. Far more important from a theoretical viewpoint is the humanist analysis of the relation between the great work of art and the culture in which it is written. Here we must explore a treacherous area involving the deepest commitments and basic assumptions of the myth-symbol school. Whatever its emphasis on popular literature, the school has evinced an immense respect for the significant works of American fiction and their position as cultural documents. Marx has explored this problem explicitly, and although I shall be concerned with his formulations, the arguments he puts forward are, I suspect, crucial for everyone who views great books as keys to the study of the cultures of which they are a part. Marx's earlier writings seem to imply that the work of art "reflects" or "expresses" historical truths about the period in question: it is a source of knowledge about some body of extra-literary experience, and a proper understanding of this art is a shortcut around masses of historical data.⁵¹ To those not already committed to the magical qualities of the novel, this position has little, if any, merit. The question we must always ask is what grounds we have for asserting the truths the novel is supposed to express. *Ex hypothesi* the work offers its own grounds, i.e., the fact that it is great art warrants our belief in what it is said to reflect. Why we should accept this notion is unclear, and whatever his earlier perspective Marx deprecates the idea in a recent theoretical article.⁵²

The argument he puts forward in its stead is powerful but, I believe, mistaken. He begins by defining the essential quality of an enduring literary

⁵¹Bernard Bowron, Leo Marx and Arnold Rose, "Literature and Covert Culture," *American Quarterly*, 9 (1957), 380-81; Marx, *Machine*, pp. 10-11.

⁵²Marx, "American Studies." Marx sets up his discussion by posing a dichotomy between the humanist and the social science-content analyst. I do not think this dichotomy exhaustive; see also Trachtenberg, *Brooklyn Bridge*, pp. 136-37.

achievement as the “inherent capacity of a work to generate the emotional and intellectual responses of its readers.” We measure the extent to which a work has this quality by placing our faith “in the impersonal process of critical scholarly consensus. . . . trusting that in the long run it will correct or eliminate invalid observations. . . .” It is perhaps unfair to offer comment at this point, but in light of the issues Marx raises it becomes imperative. There is no objection to basing our literary appraisal of *Moby-Dick*—Marx’s example—on “the process of critical scholarship.”⁵³ But this is inconsistent with his idea that the novel has an *inherent* capacity to generate satisfactory emotional and intellectual responses. If a work has this inherent capacity, then its aesthetic merit should be clear to everyone; *Moby-Dick*, for example, would have been acclaimed as a masterpiece upon publication, and there would be no question of achieving critical consensus, or of relying on the judgment of literary critics. My feeling is that Marx’s use of “inherent” cannot really be upheld, and that he would rather wish to argue that the literary power of *Moby-Dick* is demonstrated by the scholarly consensus about its merit: *Moby-Dick* is a great work of art because it continues to be emotionally and intellectually satisfying to successive generations of those who are trained in the techniques of literary criticism. This makes Marx consistent and yields a justifiable definition—for who should define literary merit but those who spend their lives considering such questions?

I am doubtful, however, if the use of “inherent” is a slip. Marx goes on to say that books like *Moby-Dick* are major sources for the humanist “in his continuing effort to recover the usable past.”⁵⁴ If the work of art has an inherent capacity to generate satisfactory emotional and intellectual responses, then in recovering a usable past the humanist is merely using material whose acceptability is plain to everyone. He simply speaks for us all. But as Marx states, it is the community of humanists who define the greatness of a work of art, whatever inherent qualities it has notwithstanding. The humanists, and they alone, are determining the material out of which they are to reconstruct the usable past. In bringing together literature and history in this fashion, Marx has defined a mandarin caste—the humanists, literary critics with an interest in history—whose task it is, by definition, to determine the relation of the past to the present. But before we can understand this notion fully, we must spell out the way in which *Moby-Dick* helps us to recover “the usable past.”

Marx is not concerned here with the past; he says that the best books need not tell us about past actuality: “If our purpose is to represent the common life then we should not turn to the masterpieces we continue to read

⁵³Marx, “American Studies,” p. 81.

⁵⁴*Ibid.*, p. 80.

and enjoy. Probably it would be best, for that purpose, to put literature aside altogether.” Rather, Marx says that books of the stature of *Moby-Dick* comprise a larger and larger portion of the consciousness of 19th century America that remains effectively alive in the present; so far as the present is concerned, *Moby-Dick becomes* the culture which produced it.⁵⁵ Since this view comprises “the crux of the method” Marx defends, American Studies does not appear to be an historical enterprise, and should we accept it, we have no business to masquerade as historians at all. More significantly, we must face up to the implications of the function of Marx’s humanists: they define what has literary merit, and their interpretation of this literature frames the proper understanding of the past.

However we feel about this allocation of responsibility, there are two more substantive problems involved in Marx’s analysis. First, it is not at all clear that *in fact* great novels come to comprise a larger and larger portion of past consciousness effectively alive in the present. This is true for literary critics, perhaps true for some members of the educated public; but we cannot extrapolate from generalizations about these groups to speculation about the entire culture. A much more appropriate candidate than *Moby-Dick* in this instance would be elements of Lincoln’s character. But here we are dealing with a complex empirical question—what aspects of the past are alive in the present—and if we are to answer it, we cannot do so by a supposition about the significance of the literary elite.

The second substantive problem concerns what in the past *ought* to be alive in the present. As scholars I don’t think we have any options: what ought to be alive are the most significant aspects of past actuality. I do not think Marx would deny this. Indeed, I think he affirms it. At one point he urges that the essential quality of great literature—its capacity to generate satisfactory emotional and intellectual responses—is identical “in a word” to “its compelling truth value”; *Moby-Dick* has “cognitive value.”⁵⁶ Marx is not simply arguing that *Moby-Dick* is that part of the past most alive today, but apparently when properly understood *Moby-Dick* tells us something true and important about 19th century America. In short, I believe that when Marx stresses the novel’s importance for obtaining a usable past, he is not abandoning historical scholarship. He also believes that the usable past determined by American Studies techniques corresponds to the most significant aspects of past actuality. But if this is so, we have come in a circle: *Moby-Dick* “expresses” or “reflects” essential truths about American culture, and those of us in American Studies are elected to determine these truths. As I have previously noted, Marx rejects the expressive position, but his reasoning leads

⁵⁵*Ibid.*, p. 89.

⁵⁶*Ibid.*

us nowhere else. Before the American Studies humanists can make a case for their approach, or before we can solve the difficult problems involved in the study of past cultures, we must have clearer thinking than this.

I should end this discussion with an apology and a defense. My conclusions are mainly negative: that humanist scholarship in American Studies illustrates a set of classic errors. But I realize that philosophical criticism is much easier to do than constructive empirical research. Nonetheless, it seems worthwhile to ascertain whether some frameworks of analysis are perhaps more likely to lead us astray than to help us deal coherently with the past. This is the modest sort of investigation I have attempted.⁵⁷

⁵⁷Although none should be associated with any of the positions I have taken above, the following people commented helpfully on an earlier version of this paper: Henry Abelove, Sydney Ahlstrom, Dorothy Dunn, Daniel Walker Howe, Leo Ribuffo, Alan Trachtenberg and Michael Zuckerman. I also profited from an informal discussion of some of these issues at colloquia at Amherst College and Weyleyan University.

