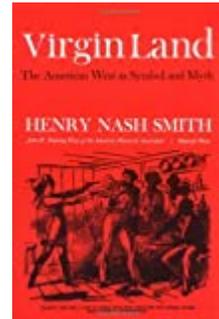




Henry Nash Smith. *Virgin Land: The American West as Symbol and Myth.* Cambridge and London: Harvard University Press, 1978. vii + 305 pp. \$16.00 (paper), ISBN 978-0-674-93955-4.



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<i>Virgin Land</i> and the Myth and Symbol School

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The myth and symbol school is generally regarded as the first theoretical contribution of American Studies to scholarly interpretations of the past. In fact, the most prominent practitioner of the myth and symbol approach, Henry Nash Smith, received the first doctorate in what remains a relatively new field.[1] *Virgin Land's* signal contribution was its nuanced analysis of the powerful myths generated by the European encounter with the American West. Smith considered two dimensions of the westward migration: the mental conceptions/misconceptions that inspired individuals to cross the frontier and strike into the “new” land; and the mental constructs that were prevalent once the territory began to be settled.[2] Smith relied heavily on Frederick Jackson Turner’s “frontier thesis,” not as a guiding interpretation of American identity, but as an example of the mythology he hoped to critique. Turner is ever-present in *Virgin Land*, the focus of both the book’s beginning and ending.

Smith’s method is simply summarized: American culture can be read as a common language comprised of myths and symbols, obtainable, in part, by reading elite and popular American literature. These myths and symbols were “collective representations rather than the work of a single mind” (p. xi). Ambitiously, Smith hoped to isolate the conscious and unconscious thinking underlying westward movement, extracting it from literary sources (e.g., Fenimore Cooper, Walt Whitman, and dime novels such as the Erastus Beadle’s series) and the testimonials of politicians, railroad agents, and writers (including Frederick Jackson Turner). Smith was one of the progenitors of the multidisciplinary approach to the study of culture. Long before the culture wars of the late twentieth century, he chose to include texts outside of the literary canon for determining the “American mind.”

In Smith’s analysis, the frontier operated as a means of economic, spiritual, and masculine renewal. Some of

the pioneers viewed the West as a passage to India, a route to the rich trade route of the Orient (pp. 15-48). Travel in the primeval West, so the mythology went, required rugged individuals, the intelligent backwoodsmen, to act as guides. They knew both “wilderness” and “civilization.” Thus there were heroes like Daniel Boone, Kit Carson, and Wild Bill Cody, as well as heroines such as Hurricane Nell, Wild Edna, and Calamity Jane. Smith categorizes these guides, or trailblazers, as “The Sons of Leatherstocking” (pp. 51-120). Finally, with the influx of European immigrants into conquered territory of the rural West, the yeoman took center stage, establishing the myth of the garden (pp. 123-260).

For many of the younger generation of scholars in the field of American Studies (or now American Culture Studies), Henry Nash Smith is too conservative. While *Virgin Land* is regarded as a classic, it is at the same time dismissed as the product of an obsolete methodology. Scholarly critics of the “consensus school” argue that Smith’s narrative of American westward expansion was too tidy. He left out important details, such as the fact that the so-called virgin land was already inhabited. Smith is sensitive to class issues, to be sure; but as his debunkers have noted, his decision not to criticize literary conventions depicting the land as female shows his failure to address issues of gender. Literary critic Donald E. Pease classified the myth and symbol approach as “official nationalism.”[3] Few of the “New Western Historians” have been more influential than Patricia Nelson Limerick, born a year after the publication of *Virgin Land*. Her book *The Legacy of Conquest: the Unbroken Past of the American West* took a more proactive stance on the symbols of the American West, arguing that myths about the West distort our perceptions of its true complexity.[4]

Other have criticized the myth and symbol tradition for its lack of methodological rigor. For example, Bruce Kuklick argued that even if certain myths and symbols could be proven, it would not necessarily prove that yesteryear’s texts speak for today. Kuklick countered the notion that myths necessarily maintain a continuous meaning over time and space. Also, while some kinds of myths and symbols might be based on facts of experience, others might simply be a product of fantasy.[5] On the other hand, Alan Trachtenberg has argued that the myth and symbol approach is compatible with Raymond Williams’ concept of “structures of feeling” and Clifford Geertz’s stress on “ideology.”[6] Emphasizing both “myth” and “ideology” in his works, Richard Slotkin builds on Smith’s approach without overlooking important dynamics such as race and class, thus bring-

ing to the forefront many of the omissions of his progenitor.[7] Finally, the notion of American exceptionalism has been equated with the myth and symbol school, including Slotkin.[8] Nevertheless, the myth and symbol scholars provided rich material for future comparative studies.

While much of the criticism against it hits the mark, *Virgin Land* was no celebration of the winning of the West, but a critical work exposing the destructive legacy of eighteenth-century agrarian and frontier thinking in an industrial era.[9] Smith introduces *Virgin Land* with the question, “What is an American?” (p. 3). Fifty years ago many scholars detected a unity in the American mind that could be grasped and generally understood. For example, Henry S. Commager’s *The American Mind* was published in the same year as *Virgin Land*[10]. Such a title would not pass muster in today’s intellectual environment—in which a bland melting pot stew has been transformed into an exotic salad bar—but Commager’s book expressed the thinking of his day. The experience of World War II and the Cold War should not be discounted.[11] If the present climate in academia stresses the diversity rather than the unity of American identity, this is a luxury made possible by the absence of an apparent outside threat (real or imagined) lurking to destroy the nation. Considering that *Virgin Land* was hardly a triumphal view of the American past—and considering that appeared during the first stirrings of Cold-War hysteria on American university campuses—Smith and the pioneers of American Studies were more courageous than some of the contemporary skeptics give them credit. [12]

Although not the first to focus critically on the mythology of land, *Virgin Land* influenced, directly or indirectly, several classics in the field of landscape history.[13] Following Smith’s work were several important American Studies classics with a landscape or environmental focus, including R. W. B. Lewis’ *The American Adam*, Perry Miller’s *Errand into the Wilderness*, and Leo Marx’s *The Machine in the Garden*. [14] If Smith failed to adequately consider gender, the myth and symbol approach was subsequently reoriented around gender issues in Annette Kolodny’s *The Lay of the Land* and *The Land Before Her*. [15] If after Smith some continued to doubt that the myths and symbols of the West had little to do with American culture overall, then they were thrice challenged by historian Richard Slotkin. [16] Today the focus on land or the environment is well-represented in critiques of American imperialism. Hence, the “radical” anthology, *Cultures of United States Imperialism*, a work that applies postcolonial criticism to foreign policy

and cultural representations of the foreign.[17]

Thirty-six years after *Virgin Land*, Smith graciously noted in a lead essay of the anthology *Ideology and American Literature* that he had failed to adequately consider the violence of westward expansionism and the fact that the “free land” was actually stolen land. He also confessed that his objectivity was tainted because “my own attitudes were influenced by the basic myth or ideology of America to a greater extent than I had realized.” However, many of his overall observations about the enduring myths and symbols of the frontier remained convincing. As Smith noted in the same essay, Turner’s frontier mythology still holds sway in American culture. Its influence is clear from the celebratory, “look out for number one” individualism, the heroic image of a cowboy in the White House, and the historical role of frontier mythology in justifying a host of abuses of the natural environment.[18] Although it embodied the assumptions of its time, Smith’s *Virgin Land* influenced a new examination of myths about the American West.[19]

If there is to be any analysis comparing and contrasting the growth of American society with that of other societies, then it will be essential to have a degree of understanding about the myths that have been circulating in the cultures under study. The European conquering of the American West, for example, can be compared with Russia’s eastward expansion. Indeed, the United States and Russia met in the Pacific Northwest and Alaska. In a famous passage of *Democracy in America*, Tocqueville noted that Russia and America “tend toward the same end.”[20] The U.S. Library of Congress, in collaboration with various Russian institutions, is currently showcasing a digital library that offers a comparative history of Russian expansion through Siberia and American expansion through the West (called “The Meeting of Frontiers”). Such scholarly endeavors will certainly call into question any lingering assumptions about American exceptionalism.[21] Although the internationalization of American Studies may be at hand, it does not negate the legacy of *Virgin Land* nor its heuristic value.

Notes

[1]. In 1940 Smith received his Ph.D from Harvard University, its program in American Civilization headed by Howard Mumford Jones.

[2]. Richard Bridgman, “The American Studies of Henry Nash Smith,” *The American Scholar* 56 (Spring 1987), 263.

[3]. Donald E. Pease, “New Perspectives on U.S. Culture and Imperialism,” in Amy Kaplan and Donald E. Pease, eds., *Cultures of United States Imperialism* (Durham, N.C. and London: Duke University Press, 1993), 23.

[4]. Patricia Nelson Limerick, *The Legacy of Conquest: the Unbroken Past of the American West* (New York and London: W. W. Norton and Company, 1987).

[5]. Bruce Kuklick, “Myth and Symbol in American Studies,” *Locating American Studies: The Evolution of a Discipline*, Lucy Maddox, ed. (Baltimore, Md. and London: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1999), 71-86. This influential essay was originally published in *American Quarterly* 24 (October 1972), 435-450.

[6]. Alan Trachtenberg, “Myth and Symbol,” *The Massachusetts Review* 25 (Winter 1984), 667.

[7] See Richard Slotkin, “Myth and the Production of History,” in Bercovitch and Jehlen, eds., *Ideology and Classic American Literature*, 70-90.

[8] For an indictment against Slotkin, see Brian W. Dippie, “American Wests: Historiographical Perspectives,” *American Studies International* 27 (October 1989), 17.

[9]. Giles Gunn, *Thinking Across the Grain: Ideology, Intellect, and the New Pragmatism* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1992), 195.

[10]. Henry S. Commager, *The American Mind: An Interpretation of American Thought and Culture Since the 1880’s* (New Haven, Conn. and London: New Haven Press, 1950).

[11]. See Margaret Mead, *And Keep Your Powder Dry: An Anthropologist Looks at America* (New York: W. Morrow and Company, 1942). This book was revised and republished in 1962 (during the Cold War).

[12]. According to Lisle A. Rose, *The Cold War Comes to Main Street: America in 1950* (Lawrence: University of Kansas, 1999), the year 1950 was when the convergence of the war in North Korea, McCarthyism, and the fear of nuclear annihilation caused a change in the national mood. For any American back then to come out with a book that debunked the glory of Manifest Destiny was quite heroic. Moreover, Smith’s account of the settlement of the American West can be seen as a strong indictment against capitalism, for it details how many of the lower class were victims of the railroad barons and real estate agents.

[13]. As Philip G. Terrie notes, "Historians have been writing about the relationship between Americans and the environment since the onset of European settlement in the New World" (42). See Philip G. Terrie, "Recent Works in Environmental History," *American Studies International* 27 (October 1989): 42-65.

[14]. R. W. B. Lewis, *The American Adam: Innocence, Tragedy, and Tradition in the Nineteenth Century* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1955); Perry Miller, *Errand into the Wilderness* (Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1956); Leo Marx, *The Machine in the Garden: Technology and the Pastoral Ideal in America* (London and New York: Oxford University Press, 1964).

[15]. Annette Kolodny, *The Lay of the Land: Metaphors as Experience and History in American Life and Letters* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1975); *The Land Before Her: Fantasy and Experience of the American Frontiers, 1630-1860* (Chapel Hill, N.C and London: The University of North Carolina Press, 1984).

[16]. See the important trilogy by Richard Slotkin, *Regeneration Through Violence: The Mythology of the American Frontier, 1600-1860* (New York: Harper Perennial, 1973); *The Fatal Environment: The Myth of the Frontier in the Age of Industrialization, 1800-1890* (New York: Harper Perennial, 1985); *Gunfighter Nation: The Myth of the Frontier in Twentieth-Century America* (New York: Harper Perennial, 1992).

[17]. Henry Nash Smith, "Symbol and Idea in *Virgin Land*," in Sacvan Bercovitch and Myra Jehlen, eds., *Ideology and Classic American Literature* (Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press, 1986), 21-35.

[18]. See footnote 3. For an evaluation of the post-colonial approach in the field of American Studies, see Gesa Mackenthun, "State of the Art: Adding Empire to the Study of American Culture," *Journal of American Studies* 30 (1996): 263-269.

[19]. See Richard W. Etulain, "Myths and the American West: An Introduction," *Journal of the West* 37 (April 1998): 5-9.

[20]. Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, trans. Henry Reeve (New York: World Classics, 1946), 286. This book was originally published in 1835 and 1840.

[21]. It is interesting to note that Turner's "frontier thesis" has been applied to Russia. For example, two early studies are Donald W. Treadgold, "Russian Expansion in the Light of Turner's Study of the American Frontier," *Agricultural History* 26, 4 (1952): 147-152; A. Lobanov-Rostrovsky, "Russian Expansion in the Far East in the Light of the Turner Hypothesis," in Walker D. Wyman and Clifton B. Kroeber, eds., *The Frontier in Perspective* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1965).

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