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# **“Biographical, Historical, Sociological and Literary”: American Myth and Symbol Revisited**

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Abstract:

The time is right for a reconciliation of the myth and symbol school of American Studies, which was influential in the United States from the 1930s to the 1960s, with its poststructuralist and postnationalist successors. After introducing the central claims of this school and summarizing subsequent criticism made against them, this essay defends it from two angles: cognitive and pedagogical. The cognitivist discussion examines the way that the myth and symbol critics theorized symbolism and its relation to emotion at three separate levels of culture. Richard Dawkins' concept of memes provides cultural evolutionary support for their symbology. Finally, the argument is made that it is also important to take into account the changing pedagogical context of a post-American world, which strengthens the case for approaching earlier centuries of American cultural history in terms of myth and symbol.

Keywords: American Studies, symbolism, emotion, post-American, nationalism

The myth and symbol school is sometimes referred to as the consensus school, a phrase describing these critics' interest in unifying the work of different fields. This scholarship theorized the existence of a pervasive American subjectivity formed historically in opposition to Europe. This American subjectivity, it was argued, possesses certain traits: Americans are, as Gene Wise retrospectively summarized, “characteristically hopeful, innocent, individualistic, pragmatic, idealistic” (1979, 306), and the myth and symbol critics specified a set of ongoing themes in American cultural history, such as “Puritanism, Individualism, Progress, Pragmatism, Transcendentalism, Liberalism” (307). By analyzing literary texts, these critics believed that they could reveal pervasive views and attitudes held by many Americans. The most prominent examples of the myth and symbol school in literary studies include the following titles: Perry Miller's several books on *The New England Mind* (1939, 1953); F.O. Matthiessen's *American Renaissance* (1941); Henry Nash Smith's *Virgin Land* (1950); R.W.B. Lewis's *The American Adam* (1955); Richard Chase's *The American Novel and Its Tradition* (1957); Leslie Fiedler's *Love and Death in the American Novel* (1960) and Leo Marx's *The Machine in the Garden* (1964). Donald Pease has recently summed up their work in an amusing if condescending shorthand, as “a prototypical American self (*American Adam*) in an epic quest (*Errand into the Wilderness*) to liberate our native land (*Virgin Land*) from foreign encroachments (*The Machine in the Garden*)” (2009, 163). Pease's summary conveys the myth and symbol school's engagement with overarching master-narratives.

There are several traits that distinguish these works from more recent American literary scholarship. Most significantly, they all attribute a semi-autonomous status to literature, seeing it as capable of dissenting from and criticizing prevalent social attitudes and beliefs, what we nowadays call ideology. In their own words, they were seeking out the covert cultural attitudes that lurked behind overt, widely held attitudes:

When most people in a given society or sub-society adhere to inconsistencies in their actions, when they resist with emotion any attempts to reconcile their actions with their expressed beliefs, and when they persist in this behavior over an extended period of time, then presumably we are dealing with covert culture. (Bowron et al, 1957, 377-8)

An example of this is found in Leo Marx's *The Machine in the Garden*, which traces the changing attitudes that Americans held towards machine technology in the nineteenth century, many appearing to embrace it, others resisting it with lingering notions of pastoralism. Marx writes: “What begins as a conventional tribute to the pleasures of withdrawal from the world – a simple pleasure fantasy – is transformed by the interruption of the machine into a far more complex state of mind” (1964, 15). Similarly, in *American Renaissance*, F.O. Matthiessen discerns “devotion to the possibilities of democracy” apparent in works from the 1850s that strove for “the entire resolution of the intellectual, sentimental, and emotional material into the concrete reality of the poetic image and word, which alone has aesthetic value” (1968, ix, xi). These critics argued that a diachronic study of the symbols and myths expressed in great works of American literature revealed resistance to the callow materialism that threatened the country's democratic potential.

Another defining trait of the myth and symbol school is its theorization of symbols as constructions of language that were definitively – crucially – grounded in pre-linguistic experience. R.W.B. Lewis's analysis of the myth of the American Adam, for example, describes “an atmospheric presence, a motivating idea. It was the concealed cause of an ethical polemic, and it lurked behind the formal structure of works of fiction” (6). In *The Machine in the Garden*, Leo Marx defined a symbol as “an image that conveys a special meaning (thought and feeling) to a large number of those who share the culture” (1964, 4). Here and elsewhere, Marx emphasizes emotion. He describes how a symbol can “carry a burden of implication, thought, and feeling far beyond that borne by a simple reference” (191). Symbols are not important because they are directly indexical or referential, but rather because they contain a “vivid suggestiveness” (187). Marx shares Matthiessen's view that the power of the symbol lies in its

ineluctability, the fact that it evokes an emotional response rather than a coherent, reasonable thesis statement about the world. Quoting Huizinga, Matthiessen theorizes symbolism as asserting a “mysterious connection between two ideas” (qtd. 1968, 249). Paraphrasing Croce, he argues that symbols deteriorate when they lose their “freeness of suggestion” (249). Agreeing with Coleridge, Matthiessen contrasts symbolism with allegory, seeing the former as “working unconsciously in the writer’s mind” (qtd. 249). In *Virgin Land*, Henry Nash Smith defines myth and symbol as large and small versions of the same thing, “an intellectual construction that fuses concept and emotion into an image” (iv). For Smith, these are “collective representations rather than the work of a single mind” (1950, iv). He pointedly emphasizes that his analysis is not making an empirical claim about the factual existence of these myths and symbols. In an essay written nearly a half-century later, looking back on his earlier classic, he compares myth and symbol to the concept of ideological superstructure, as “occupying positions along a spectrum extending from myth at one end, characterized by the dominance of image and emotion, to ideology at the other end, characterized by emphasis on concepts, on abstract ideas” (22).

It was this theorization of symbols, in part, that a new generation of Americanists reacted against, starting with two essays, one by Bruce Kuklick in 1972 and another by Gordon Kelly in 1974, both of which leveled strong and influential attacks against the myth and symbol school, whom they accused of adhering to a Cartesianism that artificially severed thought and reality (Kuklick) and succumbing to a presentism (Kuklick, Kelly), unscientifically imposing their own ideas onto past texts, which they fallaciously imagined spoke for larger attitudes, a claim that could not be proven by considering the literature itself. Kelly attacked Marx for arguing that the meaning of the literary work, in Marx’s formulation, “resides in the inherent emotional power of the work” (qtd. 1974, 149). Kelly further argued against art’s capacities to see past ideology, arguing that literary quality is culturally relative, asserting that “The assumption that great works of art have some inherent capacity to persist over time and to evoke relatively uniform kinds of aesthetic responses is surely in need of severe qualification” (148).

In attacks that followed in that decade and subsequent ones, such as those made in Sacvan Bercovitch and Myra Jehlen’s essay collection *Ideology and Classic American Literature* (1986), the contrasts between the liberal Americanists of the past and the self-styled radical recent ones were further articulated. They argued that the possibility of dissent and social criticism discerned by the myth and symbol critics was a backwards projection of modernist literature’s aesthetic of negation. The textual ambiguity that those earlier critics admired, taking a cue from their New Critical predecessors, was in reality a form of political quietism. The myth and symbol critics, who had been considered cutting edge in their time, were now seen as racist, sexist, and imperialistically nationalist, never mind the fact that those men often held leftist political views, and that some of them were active socialists. What has followed over the last several decades has been a sustained reaction against the myth and symbol school, too voluminous to cover in this essay. Suffice to say, these reactions frequently misrepresent their views and seldom equal their intellectual brilliance.

There has also been, however, reactions against the reaction, such as that made by Frederick Crews, whose 1988 *New York Review* article “Whose American Renaissance?” proposes the term “New Americanists” to describe the new wave of critics who were foregrounding social struggle above all and dismissing the concept of “American character” as ideological. Crews described how these New Americanists regard themselves, in contrast to the earlier liberal consensus, as the first generation to see beyond ideology, and thus capable of diagnosing the Cold-War liberal biases of their predecessors. Crews is critical of their efforts to place themselves beyond ideology, arguing that these critics practice their own form of presentism, as they selectively apply or reject authorial intention to suit their agenda, and find what they set out to find when they reinterpret classic works of American literature, namely: selfishness, racism, sexism, and homophobia. Even as a critic like Donald Pease criticizes Matthiessen for imposing his Cold War notions of good individualism versus bad regimentation, he proceeds in his own research to reconsider the 1850s as a decade threatened by secession, praising writers like Hawthorne for their collectivism, a claim flatly contradicted, Crews argues, in Hawthorne’s personal writings. Presentism may be inevitable. It is a charge that nearly every major literary approach has been accused on, and Steven Watts convincingly thus concludes that “this entanglement of scholarly interrogator with subject, of present with past, occurs naturally and inevitably in the critical process” (640). Crews goes so far as asserting that the New Americanist Marcusean notion of liberal tolerance masking state-orchestrated totalitarianism is a reflection of these academics’ own positions in the 1980s, a time when radical postures of dissent and dissensus could be easily paired with a well-paid academic career. In a more recent article, Winfried Fluck makes a similar criticism of recent trends in American Studies that distance themselves from the myth and symbol school, pointing out in a 2009 article that both groups of critics share a Hegelian paradigm that finds in literature manifestations of a unifying national spirit that forms the basis of identity. The myth and symbol school discerned a covert dissent beneath an overt conformity; more recent revisionary critics such as Cora Kaplan find racism, sexism, and imperialism lurking covertly behind the overt opposition of the texts. The poles are reversed, but the model is the same. Fluck further argues that when recent critics championing diversity refute what they saw as the homogenizing tendencies of the myth and symbol school, they replace one unifying claim with another by interpreting American literature using the binary of adversarial/non-oppositional.

## A Cognitivist Defense of National Symbolism

The critical backlash against the myth and symbol school that took place starting in the 1970s was overdetermined, a result of a post-Vietnam-conflict faith crisis regarding America's self-professed ideals combined with changes in the humanities that compelled scholars to reconsider their earlier methodology. It was the influence of continental philosophy, starting with the Frankfurt school, then later Derridean deconstruction and Foucaultian radical historicism, that led the university humanities to practice a form of cultural-linguistic determinism in which all aspects of human existence came to be seen as a product of culture, including human nature and emotions. Kelly's critique of the myth and symbol school drew on Berger and Luckmann's *The Social Construction of Reality* (1966) and the work of the cultural anthropologist Clifford Geertz. These influences share a Durkheimian view of culture as an autonomous sphere undetermined by biology. In Geertz's words, "there is no such thing as a human nature independent of culture" (qtd. Slingerland 2008, 83). One of Kelly's central objections to the myth and symbol school was that these critics assigned meanings to texts and symbols with an unwarranted certainty. He rectifies that, claiming: "Knowledge – in the sense of the certainty that phenomena are real and possess specific characteristics – is differentially distributed in any society or group" (1974, 147). This is no partial perspectivalism; Kelly is arguing that reality is societally variable.

This kind of postmodernism seems to overstate the case. As an alternative, we can consider the myth and symbol school from the perspective of an embodied view of culture informed by the insights of behavioral neuroscience and cognitive linguistics, fields that have in recent decades definitively put to rest the blank-slate consciousness of the standard social science model in favor of a model of consciousness as comprised of what Antonio Damasio calls "convergence zones" coordinating different modules of the brain (1994, 94–6). Concepts precede language, starting in imagery and sensory-motor schemas that create concepts, which are "not amodal, abstract, and propositional, but perception- and body-based" (Slingerland 2008, 34). John Searle has pointed out that even non-ambiguous, non-metaphorical sentences rely on "the Background" for their meaning, implicit "know-how" comprised of skills and assumptions we use to navigate the world (Searle qtd. Slingerland 35). This suggests that even pedestrian utterances rely on a vast amount of non-algorithmic knowledge, or at least knowledge not consciously algorithmic. Experiments conducted by behavioral neuroscientists reveal the influence of non-propositional knowledge such as automaticity, in which subjects primed with stereotypes alter their social judgments, or subjects unconsciously mirror the behavior of others. Joseph LeDoux has shown through lesion studies that subjects possess an influential emotional memory even when explicit declarative memory has been damaged. Antonio Damasio's theory of somatic marking argues that emotions stem from somato-motor maps (1994, 230). Recalling an object, we consult dispositional representations that include our emotional reactions along with the object. In other words, the images that constitute our concepts are somatically marked with unconscious feelings of good and bad, urgent or non-urgent, etc. (Slingerland 43).

This research corroborates the symbology of the myth and symbol school, especially their insistence that symbols carry an emotional power based on experience that precedes textualization. The insights of cognitive science provide a means of reconceiving the importance of symbols and emotion, not only as phantasms of the structures of language, but as transcriptions of embodied experience. R.W.B. Lewis describes this eloquently in the prologue to *The American Adam*: "For the *experience* of the aims and values of an epoch is apt to be more complex and even more painful than the simple statement of them; and narrative deals with experiences, not with propositions" (1971, 3). This suggests that what we require now is a return to a sense of balance to a discussion that has drifted into a deterministic mode of social constructivism that refuses to acknowledge the reality of human nature, embodied experience, and emotion. Lewis evokes this balance:

The imagery and the story give direction and impetus to the intellectual debate itself; and they may sometimes be detected, hidden within the argument, charging the rational terms with unaccustomed energy. But the debate in turn can contribute to the shaping of the story; and when the results of rational inquiry are transformed into conscious and coherent narrative by the best-attuned artists of the time, the culture has finally yielded up its own special and identifying "myth." (3)

Lewis's point here is that national myths are the product of the interaction of general attitudes and ideas circulating in the culture, their language-bound expression in works of fiction, and their more organized and rational incarnations in the intellectual debates that form, both in the era under consideration and in later times.

A cognitivist reconsideration of the myth and symbol school can proceed by positing the reality and importance of emotion at three levels:

1. Pre-literary, inchoate: The myth and symbol school critics claimed that the literary works they selected were reflective of "deeper, often inarticulate, social or 'political' attitudes and emotions" experienced by a large group of their American contemporaries (Marx 1950, 12 qtd. Lenz 1997, 47). Such claims have been criticized as unprovable, and they are indeed such by the objectivist criteria that might be expected by the social scientist. Leo Marx is all too willing to agree with Alan Trachtenberg's criticism regarding "the inherent weaknesses of the [humanist] method in dealing with the un verbalized, collective, institutional aspect of past behavior" (Marx 1969, 84). And yet, such knowledge may be, for many, the strongest reason to engage with literature of the past. We crave to know what is was

really like to live in another time and place, and even if such craving can never be fulfilled, and discourse distorts everything it touches, such imagination recreation is the domain of imaginative literature. (It should be noted that what is meant by emotion, at all three levels, is not so much the primary emotions that Paul Ekman has described as innate and universal – fear, disgust, happiness, etc. – but rather the more conscious, culturally specific, higher cognitive emotions that are more social in nature, as formulated by Paul Griffiths.)

2. Writerly-textualized: Emotion passes into signification at this level, and imprints upon certain concepts and motifs, altering earlier European genres and conventions and imbuing them with new connotations that reflect the specificities of North America's landscape, in both the figurative and literal sense. The symbols and myths that writers articulate are influenced by aesthetic factors as well as the cultural-literary publishing apparatus, and also includes writers' sense of their imagined community of readers, a national audience whose sensibilities they internalize. Something analogous to T.S. Eliot's concept of the objective correlative may occur here between writers and their contemporary readership.
3. Critical-intellectualized: The recognition of particular symbols and myths is an intellectual exercise of reconstruction attempting to reverse engineer the original emotions, inducing cause from effect. Leo Marx describes this in an important essay, "American Studies – a Defense of an Unscientific Method":

To fully apprehend the "content" of a novel or poem, therefore, it is necessary to get those feelings, to sort them out, to name them, and to make their function explicit. For this purpose the student of literature has available the remarkably sensitive techniques of modern textual criticism. They enable him to understand the use of various literary devices to generate emotion. I'm thinking of certain narrative methods in the novel and their ironic implications, and of the subtle ways in which the explicit theme or "message" may be undercut, in poetry, by rhythm and tone; I am thinking, also, of the immense efficacy of the tacit, that is, of connotative figurative devices and imagery. (1969, 82)

Any rehabilitation of the myth and symbol school must factor in critical emotion alongside the earlier levels. As Kuklick warned, there are fraught issues to consider regarding the emotions that the intellectual historian adds to the material through psychological transference. Such concerns however, do not invalidate this approach. They can be addressed through a deep contextualization within the cultural and social history in which the literature was created. Henry Nash Smith describes this work as necessarily "biographical, historical, sociological, and literary" (200). With the addition of cognitive science, we have a working model of the interdisciplinary challenge posed by the approach set forth by the myth and symbol school.

An example of what can be accomplished applying these three levels of effective analysis can be found in Leo Marx's book *The Machine in the Garden*, one of the finest products of the myth and symbol school. Marx argues that in the first centuries of American history, the European literary genre of the pastoral was altered into "a distinctively American theory of society" (1964, 4) that was less conscious of its own artistically constructed conventionality than its European antecedents, and redefines the garden, from a sweet and pure Arcadia to a rougher "middle landscape" balancing art and nature. Later in the century, the idea became vague, "a rhetorical formula rather than a conception of society" (226). Sentimentalized, the pastoral ideal allowed the nation to pursue productivity, wealth, and power, while perceiving itself as pursuing rural happiness. In his chapter on the garden, Marx interprets Hector St. Jean de Crèvecoeur's *Letters from an American Farmer*. Crèvecoeur, a European, assumes the persona of a rustic American farmer who is likened to a plant that is being metaphorically regenerated by the fertile American land. This farmer possesses a sense of agency based on the fact that he works for himself, on land that he owns. As Crèvecoeur describes this farmer, the landscape is, Marx claims, "as an object that penetrates the mind" (110). Marx's language here brings to mind Richard Dawkins' definition of a meme, an idea that replicates itself in a way similar to genetic evolution. Dawkins argues: "When you plant a fertile meme in my mind you literally parasitize my brain, turning it into a vehicle for the meme's propagation in just the way that a virus may parasitize the genetic mechanism of a host cell" (2006, 192). Thus Crèvecoeur conjecturally records the subjectivity of Americans as he imagines it. His analysis of this subjectivity adds a larger context. His book was more widely read in Europe than America, and much of the book focuses on drawing comparisons between the two continents. In doing so, North America is largely characterized by what it lacks – aristocracy, religious hierarchy, large-scale manufacturing – and the result is an historically static description of America. What Marx's analysis adds is a contextualization of Crèvecoeur's symbolization of the farmer's meme of the American landscape. Marx argues that what differentiates Crèvecoeur's pastoralism from Europe is that there is none of the self-conscious awareness of literary conventionality that the European variants possessed, with sophisticated courtiers playing at being rustic shepherds in idyllic groves. Crèvecoeur "seems to forget that it [i.e. the farmer] is a literary device" (Marx 109). This point reaffirms the meme-like nature of the landscape symbol. The constructed identity of the farmer figure is easily assumed by Crèvecoeur, as it likely was for many actual American farmers of the age.

## America as Myth and Symbol in the Post-American Age

One of the primary sins that the myth and symbol critics were alleged to have committed was their articulation of the ideology of American exceptionalism. In a recent book on that topic, the prominent Americanist Donald Pease accuses them of practicing such exceptionalism, which he equates to having “collaborated” with the Cold-War cultural apparatus and “policed” the use of terms such as *nation* and *people* (2009, 164). Such charges, provided without evidence or argumentation, corroborate Robert Gross’s suspicion that “antagonism to exceptionalism has become an automatic reflex” (2000, 387). A surprising number of scholars have passed judgment similar to Pease, indicting the myth and symbol critics as exceptionally exceptionalist in a way that other nations’ cultural criticism never is. This charge is misconstrued in several respects. First of all, many countries – perhaps all – tend to view their culture nationalistically. Robert Spiller writes:

It is not hard, for example, to recognize the validity of the concept of a Greek or Roman culture, an Indian or Chinese, a French, German, British or even a Mexican or Australian. Such cultures are composed of basic political structures, economic conditions, and social instruments and patterns of behavior, on which are built, in an ascending scale of values, developments and configurations of language and literature, philosophy and religion, architecture and the graphic and plastic arts. No scholar is expected to master all aspects of any one of these cultures, but in specializing in one or a few aspects of it, he is expected to think in terms of the frame of the whole. (1973, 613)

The reasons listed above outline a practical justification for organizing cultural studies according to nation. It is far from clear why it should be considered chauvinistic or imperialist to interpret texts within the context of the specific nation in which they were created, yet this is view pervades at a time when the humanities has become interested in postnationalism and diaspora. The historian James Clifford dissents, arguing that “there is no reason to assume that crossover practices are always liberatory or that articulating an autonomous identity or a national culture is always reactionary. The politics of hybridity is conjunctural and cannot be deduced from theoretical principles” (10). The charge of exceptionalism is an inaccurate generalization. As Robert Gross has pointed out, cosmopolitanism is integral to classic American literature at least as far back as Thoreau, and in addition, many of the prominent scholars of the myth and symbol school – including Henry Nash Smith and Leo Marx – were political progressives with a cosmopolitan perspective (2000, 376). Pointing out aspects in which American literature possesses a set of defining traits that recur more within it than in other traditions is not necessarily an expression of boastful patriotism. The tendency for American literature to assert libertarian fantasies of free will and autonomy from deterministic social structures, for instance, reflects the influence of classic liberalism on the constitutional formation of the nation. Similarly, to notice the strong valuation of experience in American literature likewise is not to boast, but to notice strong strains of anti-intellectualism and ahistoricity in the country’s cultural history. Richard Chase’s argument that American literature is defined more by the romance than by the novel, for instance, is no flattering observation, as it suggests, among other things, “an assumed freedom from the ordinary novelistic requirements of verisimilitude, development, and continuity; a tendency towards melodrama and idyl; a more or less formal abstractness” (1980, ix).

At a time when the influence of poststructuralism is showing signs of waning and globalization has led to a world that is no longer centered around the United States to the degree that it once was, the time is right to rehabilitate the scholarship of the myth and symbol school. A cognitive approach to symbolism suggests that the cultural relativism and linguistic-cultural determinism which prompted the first wave of rejection of the myth and symbol school overasserted itself when its argument that knowledge is influenced by social-cultural factors slipped into the more drastic claim that knowledge was wholly determined by said factors. We can affirm the symbology of the myth and symbol school, as well as their interest in the way that formal elements of literature both reflect and create emotions. The embargo on these exceptionally well-written, often exciting critical narratives can end. The recent interest in postnationalism and diaspora is well-suited to the literature of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and the present. The primacy of the identity plot in American literature in fact demands such approaches. Regarding the cultural history of earlier centuries, however, the scholarship of the myth and symbol school is indispensable.

The apparently paradoxical claim might even be made that such scholarship fills a new need specific to the post-American world. As Fareed Zacharia has argued in his influential book *The Post-American World*, “At a military-political level, America still dominates the world, but the larger structure of unipolarity – economic, financial, cultural – is weakening” (2011, 218). After a decade in which the United States’ actions, both domestic and international, signal the degree to which the reality of America falls short of its professed ideals of egalitarianism and openness as the land of opportunity and freedom, the myth and symbol school can serve to renew that idealism, without succumbing to the xenophobia and provincialism that accompanies it in the discourse of its right-wing proponents on Fox News. Teaching American literature in Singapore, I’ve discovered a local fascination with the concept of the American Dream. The Singaporean scholar Simon Tay has pointed out that no Asian “wants to live in a Chinese-dominated world. There is no Chinese dream to which people aspire” (234). As the United States may play a less vital role in political and economic developments around the globe, its cultural history still offers valuable lessons and a rich literary tradition. Fernando Henrique Cardoso, former president of Brazil, argues that “what the world really wants from America is not that it offer a concession on trade here and there but that it affirms its own ideals. That role, as the country that will define universal ideals, remains one that only America can play” (qtd. Zacharia 234).

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