

A METHOD FOR AMERICAN STUDIES?

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In a recent article, "Myth and Reality in Approaching American Regionalism," Laurence Veysey reconsiders an old argument: how real is a myth?¹ He criticizes Henry Smith's Virgin Land for evading the problem of the relation of "myth" to "fact," and he laments the assumption by various critics of "a wide and rather continuous gulf between 'legend' and 'reality.' " " 'Myth,' in this view, enjoys such an uncertain relationship to empirical fact that Smith sought deliberately to avoid the issue." Veysey calls for a genuine integration of the legendary and empirical planes. Myth "is in fact merely another order of reality."

The issue raised here has underlain much of the discussion concerning a method for American Studies for at least the past ten years. Barry Marks wrote that the basic problem was "the relationship between myth and image on the one hand, and empirical fact on the other."² As Marks suggested, many students felt that with the introduction of image and myth to the analysis of cultural history, a method of interdisciplinary study had been found. For after all, "images" of reality underlie most of the humanities and social studies. Here was a master key to unlock isolated knowledge. The various personae of the anarchic individual, for example, could be traced at Walden, in the Dial, aboard the Pequod, in the records of the Slaughterhouse decisions of the Supreme Court, and perhaps in the newspapers that quoted Vanderbilt as saying "the public be damned!"

The difficulty, of course, was how did one get from personae, image and myth to empirical fact? Does the key work on both sides of the noumenal door? Henry Smith wrote in a somewhat different connection, yet with a meaning relevant to Veysey's comments: "The root of the matter is the belief in an extreme dualism of nature and spirit. If society is taken to be a part of the natural order, and art is assigned to the realm of spirit, it becomes impossible to relate art (except negatively) to the actual culture within which it occurs."³ If myth and image are considered part of the structure of art, of whatever quality, the dualism which hinders the search for a method also hinders the integration of myth and fact. Yet is it simply a matter of dualism? True, Mr. Veysey seems to be trying to quiet fears about a metaphysical ghost when he says myth is merely another order of reality--that is, it is not mystical, or ineffable, or unreal. The implication of merely

seems to be that the difference is one of degree, a degree that is readily ascertainable. One might move from one order of reality to another as, say, he moves from Fahrenheit measurements to Centigrade, with the application of a simple formula.

But this is the crux of the matter. One does not need to be a neo-Kantian, or to chant with mad Ahab, "All visible objects, man, are but as pasteboard masks," to believe that as yet we have no satisfactory means of relating myth and fact. If a myth, like a symbol, is "an object (or complex of objects) which refers to another object but which demands attention also in its own right, as a presentation,"⁴ the problem of calibration to reality becomes most complex.

For one thing, myth and image are unquestionably related to human motive. The chamber of commerce of Dry Gulch may describe the surrounding land in phrases of the "Myth of the Garden" for rather obvious reasons. The western farm land depicted on the handbills distributed by the railroads after the Civil War was presented in the image of Eden for motives yielding to inference. The multi-valued images of relatively transparent writers like Frank Norris and Jack London, however, are much more complex, and the valences in Melville and Clemens are even more subtle. Yet any understanding of the disparity between the way it was and the image created by the author must rest on an understanding of various intentions, of the apparent and hidden censors of the mind. If it is granted that these, with much work and good luck, can be determined in the mind of a man alive and eager to discuss the matter, will it not be much more difficult in the instance of images suspended only in the forms of language?

I do not mean to say that there is no ascertainable relation between myth and fact. I merely wish to emphasize the staggering complexity of the problem. A statistical calibration of myth and fact would be like a measurement of a representative sample of empirical white whales, using Moby Dick as a ruler, or like a census among the independent and happy yeomen in the mythical garden to find how many there really were.

Possibly Mr. Smith's attitude in Virgin Land was more one of respect for the problem than confusion in the face of it. The links between image and fact are characterized by "parallelisms, oblique resemblances, topsy-turvy mirrors."⁵ The relations are necessarily metaphorical or figurative. The figure or symbol exists not only as a sign pointing to several (possibly conflicting) empirical realities but also as a reality (a form or structure) in itself. The problem is to prevent the figure from being reduced to an appalling simplicity when it is measured according to only one of its functions, that of a sign pointing to the empirical world. The issue is probably not simply one of monism or dualism or pluralism. It involves everything implied in the question "How do you know?" In exploring the perspectives of American Studies, we cannot leap quickly over the rough ground where philosophy (including

the lively patriarch, metaphysics, rumors of whose death have been exaggerated) has been picking a cautious way for years.

A "method" for American Studies will not be suddenly exhumed, discovered or invented. It will be added to by the patient investigation of scholars in every discipline. There is nothing magic or super-scientific about American Studies. The problems of a particular academic discipline are also the problems of interdisciplinary study. A specific issue, a matter to be investigated, brings its own demand for method. One of the values of American Studies is the affirmation of the right of the investigator to use the methods which seem best to his own honesty and intelligence. The danger is that the search for a method will simply lead to one more artificial codification that increases, rather than diminishes, the barriers to understanding. Methods can themselves become arcana imperii calculated to discourage inquiry.

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Footnotes:

¹ American Quarterly, XII (Spring, 1960), 31-43.

² "Notes," American Quarterly, V (Spring, 1953), 71.

³ "Can 'American Studies' Develop a Method," American Quarterly, IX (Summer, Part 2, 1957), 203.

⁴ Rene Wellek and Austin Warren, Theory of Literature (New York, 1942), 193.

⁵ Ibid., 73.