

HABILITATION THESIS REVIEWER'S REPORT

Masaryk University

Applicant

Habilitation thesis

Reviewer

**Reviewer's home unit,
institution**

Jeffrey Alan Smith

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

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This is a truly excellent project. It provides the sort of broad synthesis of American intellectual history that appeared in early decades in American studies in the work of Perry Miller or Edmund Morgan, and it weaves together religious and political history and literary analysis beautifully. It could only be written by a scholar whose intellectual interests are broad in their interdisciplinary scope and deep in their engagement with the diverse field of literary history, intellectual history, religious history, and political science.

The range of texts means that any reader is likely to encounter new and illuminating information, and I am especially impressed by the ability of the author to probe the specifics of recently discovered work like *Jack Engle*. At present, I count only three works on the Modern Language Association International Bibliography that discuss *Jack Engle* beyond Zachary Turpin's edition of the novel, so this reading of Whitman's long-lost novel lays the foundation for future readings. The work on Stowe and the relationship of the *Key to Uncle Tom's Cabin* to Stowe's novel itself is really fine and illuminating, and I enjoyed the close reading of Lincoln, with its combination of serious engagement with scholarship and interpretive independence, a great deal.

The choice to make Alexander Campbell a fulcrum of sorts for the whole study seemed to me to be very effective, and the considerations of Campbell, Smith, and Miller were mutually illuminating. (I could have wished for more on the eloquent evangelist Charles Grandison Finney, but this is already a very substantial study.) The parallels drawn between religious restorationism on the Campbell/Smith/Miller model and liberalism on the Channing/Parker/Bushnell model was likewise both counter-intuitive and persuasive. Campbell is not quite invisible in American literary studies, but given his tremendous cultural significance, he is woefully under-discussed, and this project offers a corrective to this lacuna in American literary scholarship. I particularly appreciate that the study makes use of close reading as a way into texts that are often glossed broadly when they are mentioned in literary scholarship.

The author is obviously well-read across American literary history, but rather than a mere rehearsal of what is already known, the author makes connections among a variety of texts using

Emerson's conceit of "perpetual scriptures" that allow religious studies, literary studies, and studies of political rhetoric and media to be mutually illuminating. This project would have required very substantial work across fields.

One particular strength is that the study attends to pressing topical issues associated with race and equality throughout the volume, making this a very timely contribution to research in the field. I find the chapter that moves through William Lloyd Garrison, John Brown, Frederick Douglass, and Martin Delany's *Blake* be particularly fine. As is so often the case in this study, the author re-orient's our understanding of which works are central and which are peripheral in American literary studies, building to *Blake* as a kind of capstone for the chapter, and taking John Brown's letters seriously as texts for analysis. This chapter illustrates beautifully the way that the work as a whole puts religious studies and literary studies in conversation, and it provides an impressively flexible and comprehensive explanatory narrator for the development of American literature writ large.

Perpetual Scriptures represents the widest-ranging and most thoroughly integrated engagement of with US literary, religious, media, and political history in the nineteenth century currently available. Its insights into religious liberalism and proto-fundamentalism, race, intellectual history and the relationship between literary ambition and mass media are trenchant, illuminating, and, often, surprising. This is an outstanding habilitation thesis, and I believe it will make a major contribution of truly original and illuminating scholarship at the nexus of American literary and religious studies.

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

1. My sense is that Melville is a bit of a path not taken in this project, as he's considered fairly briefly relative to the more substantial discussion of Stowe. I can imagine several reasons for this choice—Melville has received a great deal of attention already, and this project is concerned with texts that haven't, for example. I wonder if you could discuss the reasons why Stowe looms larger in this particular study than Melville does, given the importance that Buell, for example, gives to Melville as an instance of literary scripturism?
2. I'm wondering if you can talk a bit about Douglass's appropriations of biblical language. This study tracks the evolution of Douglass's antislavery arguments from Biblicist Garrisonianism to constitutionally focused political abolitionism, but I think it's also interesting that Douglass can use biblical language even in passages that don't advertise their Biblicism, as when he echoes the story of Elijah in his reference to "the storm, the whirlwind, and the earthquake" in "What to the Slave is the Fourth of July?" I'm curious about your principle of selection in narrating the development of Douglass's trajectory from more explicitly biblical language to his quasi-scriptural use of the Constitution.

Conclusion

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

Date: April 18, 2023

Signature: