

## 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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My overall view of the ms. is that it presents a rich and wide-ranging engagement with the hermeneutical challenge posed both the Bible and by the creation of para-scriptural texts (novels, poetry, declarations, speeches), all of which were marshalled to advance or critique what the author suggests were uniquely American conceptions of nationhood and citizenship. The book is eloquently written – it is immensely readable – and shows a deft knowledge of the critical fields upon which it draws. The book's strongest parts, to my mind, are those which focus in on particular texts / authors (the discussion of Whitman's lost novel is convincing, for instance, as is the careful account offered of the Gettysburg Address); elsewhere the focus is broader, as chapters rattle through narratives of theological contention and denominational histories. While these are fine – and probably necessary given the scope and ambition of the book – they do in places feel derivative of earlier accounts (accounts which are properly acknowledged in the references). The overall shape that the book has - of expansion-contraction-expansion etc. – works well for a study which aims to offer such a broad account of the topic, but I felt that it was in the more tightly-focused sections that the author was able to make the most impressive interventions.

The book is deftly written, in language which is accessible while still able to do justice to often complex ideas and positions. The author displays a good awareness of the latest scholarship across the different aspects of his research.

Following the author's revisions, I still feel very positively about this book. I was pleased to see that the author had spent some time and effort tightening his argument – the revised version is considerably shorter, and I think the pruning was necessary to remove some of the padding that was impeding the clear articulation of his argument. So I liked the revised Introduction especially – punchier and more immediate in its impact; and the decision to incorporate aspects of what was chapter 9 (on Delany) into a revised chapter 8 makes a lot of sense.

As I stated in my initial review, there is so much here to admire in the way that the author synthesises a substantial amount of material to tell his story, such that the book will appeal to readers keen to find out more about the intellectual culture he describes, as well as to those interested in the specific authors/texts upon which he focuses.

## **Conclusion**

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

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Signature: