

MASARYKOVA
UNIVERZITA

Faculty of Arts

History of Concrete Literatures
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Jeffrey A. Smith

**Perpetual Scriptures:
Quests for Textual Authority
In Nineteenth-Century American
Literature and Culture**

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ABSTRACT

In the tumultuous decades of rapid expansion and change between the American Founding and the Civil War, Americans confronted a cluster of overlapping crises whose common theme was the difficulty of finding authority in written texts. The issue arose from several disruptive developments: rising challenges to the traditional authority of the Bible in a society that was intensely Protestant; persistent worries over America's lack of a "national literature" and an independent cultural identity; and the slavery crisis, which provoked tremendous struggles over clashing interpretations of the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution, even as these "parascriptures" were rising to the status of a kind of quasi-sacred secular canon.

At the same time but from the opposite direction, new mass media were creating a new, industrial-scale print culture that put a premium on very non-sacred, disposable text: mass-produced "news," dispensed immediately and in huge quantities but meant only for the day or hour. This thesis identifies key features of the writings, careers and cultural politics of several prominent Americans as responses to this cluster of challenges. In their varied attempts to vindicate the sacred and to merge the timeless with the urgent present, a number of religious and political leaders and men and women of letters helped define American literary culture as an ongoing quest for new "bibles," or what Ralph Waldo Emerson called a "perpetual scripture."

As a work of cultural studies, the thesis follows the methodological assumptions outlined in journals like *New Literary History*, one of many scholarly enterprises founded to expand literary history, traditionally focused on works of imaginative literature and their authors, to consider "texts" more broadly understood – written and even in some cases nonwritten cultural products of many kinds and purposes. These in turn could be situated within cultural contexts which, inverting the former relationship between text and context, would come to the fore as principal objects of study in themselves. Thus, "the line between literary and nonliterary texts has become blurred," and new questions have arisen with regard to the nature and authority of texts of various kinds.¹ These questions bear on our understanding of novels, stories, poems and plays and of how and why they are produced.

Specifically, in the cases at hand, the early literature of the United States lends itself to analysis as one manifestation of a broader concern in a text-centered Protestant culture with the uses and impact of various kinds of writing. The thesis argues that many culture-makers – key religious leaders and founders, poets and storytellers, and political leaders, journalists, activists and polemicists – were all engaged in movements that overlapped and converged on a shared set of hopes and anxieties. It further argues that their efforts in turn arose from and attempted to influence the cultural circumstances of pre-Civil War America, and that given their interdependence, these projects can best be understood through an

interdisciplinary approach, a coordinated examination of developments in religion, literature, politics and “media” that have traditionally been treated separately.

The study is divided into three parts. After an Introduction outlining the persistent concern over the new American republic’s “literary delinquency,” Part 1, “The Quest for New Prophets,” focuses on religious religious texts and ideas about the “sacred.” The crisis over biblical authority, described in chapter 1, gave rise to two contrasting responses. In one stream were various attempts to recover, restore or re-found the old textual authority, if need be through the making of new scriptures or new biblical translations and interpretations. Chapter 2 describes and differentiates the most important of these revivalist and “ultra-Protestant” projects, evaluating their uncertain success at addressing the anxieties that prompted them. Chapters 3 and 4 turn to the parallel but quite different efforts of “liberal” Protestants, notably Unitarians and their descendants in the Transcendentalist movement. As American ideological cousins to the European Romantics, the Transcendentalists and their allies and protégés saw the need for religious renewal and “new Bibles” as inseparable from the frustrated need for an original, powerful and distinctively American national literature.

Part 2, “The Quest for New Scriptures,” considers the simultaneous emergence of new forms of “high” and “low” text and the efforts of some literary artists to find ways of synthesizing them. As textual products of the American Founding, the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution already carried authority but, over the course of the early nineteenth century, gradually rose in prestige to become the basis of a national political canon of “parascriptures” bearing the quasi-sacred status that many still see them as holding today. That evolution is described in chapter 5. Chapters 6 and 7 examine the rise of mass-produced, “disposable” text, notably via the “news revolution” that began with the penny press, and the literary projects it helped inspire. In the case of Herman Melville and, especially, Harriet Beecher Stowe and Walt Whitman, these included stories and poems that self-consciously sought to merge journalistic with biblical themes and writing styles.

Part 3, “The Quest for National Salvation,” analyzes the great antebellum political crisis over race and slavery in terms of complex and sharply contested questions of textual interpretation. Chapter 8 considers the role in these debates of William Lloyd Garrison, Frederick Douglass, John Brown and Martin Delany, including Delany’s literary response to the problem in his only novel, *Blake*. Chapter 9 focuses on Abraham Lincoln and especially the Gettysburg Address, reading both the address and the storytelling around the “Lincoln legend” as further efforts to synthesize the sacred with the ephemeral, thus inscribing America’s experience and destiny into a national secular scripture. The Conclusion reviews all the efforts previously described in terms of their distinctively American qualities and the foundations they laid for a national literary quest that remains ongoing today.

¹ C. Jan Swearingen, “What Is the Text? Who Is the Reader? A Meditation on Meanderings of Meaning,” *New Literary History* 38, no. 1 (Winter 2007), 148.

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