American Studies — A Defense of an Unscientific Method*

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THE letter inviting me to join this symposium is a triumph of tact. It asks me to represent my colleagues, certain literary critics and cultural historians associated with the American Studies movement, and to describe and defend our "methodology."[1] Our courteous host, pretending to be unaware of the widely accepted view that American Studies does not in fact possess a method, implies that we must have been too busy to put it in writing. "Nowhere," he says, "does the historian have an outline of this important approach to the study of images and symbols." The flattering implication is that once our procedure is systematized and made available it will be useful to historians, including those who consider themselves social scientists, and perhaps even the most rigorous empiricists who specialize in the study of public opinion. Such at least is the promise held forth by the present meeting. Let me say at once that I am skeptical but willing to try. My feeling, to borrow some phrases used by Ezra Pound on another subject, is that the schools of scholarship represented here have detested one another long enough. Who knows? We might have something to teach each other: let there be commerce between us.

But in what sense can American Studies be said to have a method? The authoritative answer to that question was given in 1957 by Henry Nash Smith. In his essay "Can 'American Studies' Develop a Method?"

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1 Among those scholars often identified with this phase of the movement are Daniel Aaron, Allen Guttmann, R. W. B. Lewis, Charles Sanford, Henry Nash Smith, Alan Trachtenberg and John William Ward. I should say that I am a wholly unauthorized spokesman for this wholly unorganized group.

Smith not only acknowledged our notorious methodological deficiencies, but he concluded his judicious observations by asserting that nothing like a codifiable, overall method for American Studies was in sight.[2] (Thirteen years have passed, it is true, but there is no reason to think that today Smith would need to change that assertion in any significant way.) At first his seemingly pessimistic conclusion dismayed a number of his colleagues, but eventually many, perhaps most, have come around to his point of view, and now some of us are prepared to carry his argument even further. So far, that is, as the tacit definition of what constitutes an acceptable scholarly method is borrowed, by whatever circuitous route, from the physical sciences, then I for one would argue that it is neither possible nor desirable for American Studies to develop a method.[3]

To say this, however, is not to admit that our work is merely capricious or impressionistic. My purpose in what follows, therefore, is to be as explicit as possible in describing our assumptions and procedures. If they embody the rudiments of a method, it is one that admittedly invites the epithet *unscientific.* A less invidious term, however, would be *humanistic.* To clarify the distinction, which turns upon the vital relation between statements of fact and judgments of value, I shall begin with a contrast between two ways of studying group consciousness: that of the empirical historian (or sociologist) who is a practitioner of content analysis, and that of the humanistic scholar working in American Studies. Each is engaged in an essentially historical enterprise: the effort to describe and understand the state of mind of a group (or groups) of people at some moment in the past. Yet each would consider the work of the other inadequate and probably misleading. The comparison is a nice example of the difference between the social scientific and humanistic disciplines, a difference that is in many ways less obvious, and more difficult to clarify, than that between the physical sciences and the humanities. Let me begin by comparing the aims of the two schools, the criteria according to which they select their materials, and their respective methods of analysis. I shall then try to indicate certain ways in which the methods are in fact complementary. For this purpose I propose to describe, in some detail, an example of the procedures used in American Studies.

1. *The Methods of "Content Analysis" and "American Studies"*

2 Originally published in *American Quarterly* (Summer, 1957); reprinted in Joseph J. Kwiat and Mary C. Turpie (eds.), *Studies in American Culture,* (Minneapolis, 1960), which contains several essays that discuss or exemplify the methods of American Studies. A somewhat similar collection, ed. Marshall W. Fishwick, is *American Studies in Transition* (Philadelphia, 1964).

3 Although Smith does not endorse a scientific definition of method, neither does he distinguish between scientific and humanistic methods.

Compared. What are the aims of each method? In large measure the aims of content analysis are determined and limited by an *a priori* methodological commitment. As Lasswell and his colleagues put it some twenty years ago, content analysis is "a technique which aims at optimum objectivity, precision, and generality in the analysis of symbolic behavior; its value is to be appraised according to the success with which it achieves these aims in specific researches."[4] In practice, and judging by the current work of such content analysists as Richard L. Merritt, this means that the method is limited to problems susceptible to "the systematic tabulation of the frequency with which certain predetermined symbols or other variables appear in a given body of data."[5] For the content analyzer, in short, the goal of any specific inquiry must be compatible with a prior methodological restriction: the insistence upon obtaining quantifiable results.

For the humanist working in American Studies, on the other hand, considerations of method are secondary. He defines his purpose without reference to any methodological restrictions, but rather in relation to a vast, apparently limitless subject matter. According to Smith, the aim of American Studies is "the investigation of American culture, past and present, as a whole."[6] The phrase "as a whole" is the key to many of the distinctive features of this interdisciplinary approach; in practice, Smith explains, it does not signal an attempt to deal indiscriminately with all kinds of behavior, but rather to select topics which involve decisive relationships.[7] Much of the interesting work in American Studies has concentrated upon points of intersection between existential reality, the collective consciousness, and individual products of mind; or to use a simpler language, between historical fact,

4 Harold D. Lasswell, Daniel Lerner, Ithiel de Sola Fool, *The Comparative Study of Symbols* (Stanford, Calif., 1952), pp. 32-33.

5 "The Emergence of American Nationalism: A Quantitative Approach," *American Quarterly*, (Summer, 1965), pt. 1, p. 321.

6 Kwiat and Turpie, p. 3 n.2.

7 The method of American Studies, in its interdisciplinary character, is comparable to the method ascribed by Lewis Mumford to the scholar who is a "generalist," that is, one whose special office is "that of bringing together widely separated fields, prudently fenced in by specialists, into a larger common area. . . . Only by forfeiting the detail can the over-all pattern be seen, though once that pattern is visible new details . . . may become visible. The generalist's competence lies not in unearthing new evidence but in putting together authentic fragments that are accidentally, or sometimes arbitrarily, separated, because specialists tend to abide too rigorously by a gentleman's agreement not to invade each other's territory." Although here Mumford is talking about the "generalist" in the field of prehistory, his definition is remarkably applicable to the aims of American Studies. For a fuller discussion, see *The Myth of the Machine* (New York, 1966), pp. 16-22.

culture, and particular works. (They may be works of art, music, engineering, political theory, philosophy, literature — in other words, any creations of man.) Thus the specific problem with which I have been concerned, and which I propose to discuss in some detail, is the interplay, in the period before the Civil War, between industrialization, the prevailing attitudes of the American people, and the work of certain major writers — Henry Thoreau and Herman Melville, for example. My purpose has been to discover the most significant relationships among these phenomena, to learn how they illuminate each other, and to see whether such an interdisciplinary approach to the culture "as a whole" provides insights not otherwise obtainable. The subject clearly does not lend itself to quantification or optimum objectivity. Although the content analyzer and the humanist share a general aim — the interpretation of symbolic behavior — they define their specific objectives in wholly different ways.

A marked difference also is evident in the criteria that each invokes in selecting materials for study. Given his prior commitment to systematic, objective, replicatible research, the empirical scholar who selects a problem susceptible to content analysis either must study all the relevant data or make a selection in accordance with the principles of scientific sampling. The significant point, so far as the contrast with the humanistic method is concerned, is that the empiricist may *not* invoke qualitative standards of selection. This restriction would seem to make it difficult, if not impossible, to give any special attention to major works of art or philosophy or other products of the "high" culture. How, for example, does the content analyst choose works of imaginative literature for the study of American attitudes toward industrialization before the Civil War? Since it hardly is possible for him to read all the writing of the period, and since it would be misleading (even if it were possible) to single out works which are in some immediately manifest sense "about" industrialization (the most complex and perceptive responses often were oblique or covert, hence not readily identifiable), the content analyzer must rely upon an arbitrary or random sampling procedure. It is almost certain, therefore, that his sample will not include either Thoreau's *Walden* or Melville's *Moby-Dick*.

The exponent of content analysis, it should be said, might meet this objection in several ways. He might exclude all imaginative literature from his sample on the ground that it seldom exercises a significant influence upon public opinion. Or he might take the best-seller list (or some other measure of contemporary popularity) as the basis for his selection of imaginative literature. To be sure, this criterion also would exclude the two masterpieces mentioned, but then we must acknowledge that even a sample of books influential with the élite

audience of the period would not include them. When first published they had few readers and virtually no influence. Nevertheless, let us suppose that the content analyzer wants to include a sample of the "high" culture in his survey of American responses to industrialization between 1830 and 1860. One obvious procedure would be for him to select a body of current opinion — current, that is, in the 1960's — as the basis for his choice. He might select the works to be analyzed from the reading lists of college courses in American literature, or from the most widely used anthologies, or from critical articles in literary journals. After all, the "high" culture of the past has been defined retrospectively. And though the resulting sample would of course be based upon a value judgment, it would be an impersonal, collective judgment — a consensus of informed opinion rather than an individual preference. The really difficult problem that the content analyst faces in dealing with imaginative literature is not the selection but the interpretation of the material.

Turning now to the criteria the humanist invokes in choosing his subject matter, it is evident, given his aim — the study of the culture as a whole — that he must have in view an abstract model, however crude, from which to derive the categories for classifying his materials. One obvious shortcoming of the American Studies movement has been a reluctance to make such models or working assumptions explicit. In the case at hand, for example, I have taken industrialization as an historical starting point or primary "event"; it signifies a vital change in the conditions of life in America at the time, a change that can be located in the category of knowledge closest to existential reality, or what Hannah Arendt has called "factual truth": that "brutally elementary data . . . whose indestructibility has been taken for granted even by the most extreme and most sophisticated believers in historicism."[8] (In the present example, economic statistics provide a rough measure of the rate of industrialization, and we have fairly reliable data on the introduction of various kinds of power machinery, urbanization, etc.) On this model the contents of the culture belong to a higher level of abstraction. The culture may be defined as a system, or interrelated group of systems, of values, meanings, and goals. Regional, class, or ethnic subcultures, as well as the literary "high" culture, must be included among the systems embraced by the national culture. The identification of these subcultures also requires a concept of the social structure — a point we shall return to. In distinguishing the two methods, however, the significant point is the indispensability to the humanist, and in spite of its ambiguous sociological status, of the category of "high" culture. Any set of criteria

8 "Truth and Politics," *The New Yorker,* (February 25, 1967), p. 52.

which did not enable him to select major works of thought and expression would be wholly unacceptable.

The judgment implicit in the concept of "high" culture marks a crucial distinction between the methods of the humanist and the social scientist. To invoke it is admittedly to employ a value judgment in the selection of data; but then, of course, all students of the humanities rely, to a degree seldom acknowledged, upon the judgment of others in selecting their subject matter. Consider the scholar who is regarded as an "expert" in American literature. In fact he is expert about a relatively small fraction of the whole body of American writing. Those works have been sifted out by an endless, collective process of evaluation. To be sure, he may have made his own sample of popular and now largely forgotten works, but he cannot be said to "know" American writing in the sense of having made an independent selection of the most significant works from that immense collection of printed matter. His inquiry necessarily begins, therefore, with the established canon — a selection, we trust, based on the collective wisdom, which presumably includes the most fully realized, complex and powerful (hence enduring) work of American writers.[9] Because this canon supposedly embodies the highest development of literary consciousness, it is a major source for the humanist in his continuing effort to recover the usable past. What requires emphasis here is the inherently, inescapably normative character of the intricate, never-ending, and imperfectly understood process which brings the subject matter of the humanities into existence.

Let me compare, finally, the modes of analysis used by each school. It is evident that two basic assumptions distinguish the procedures of the empirical historian from those of the humanist. The first and more obvious follows directly from the former's insistence upon quantifiable results. Given this requirement, he must begin by formulating his problem in such a way that it can be solved, in the words of one

9 The concept of literary "power" here refers to the inherent capacity of a work to generate the emotional and intellectual response of its readers. In recent years, largely as a result of the accomplishments and prestige of contextual scholars, this criterion has replaced the older academic standard, namely, that the value of a literary work depends upon its usefulness as a historical document. In effect this meant that the work was considered to be important to the degree that it was a source of knowledge about some body of extra-literary experience, such as the history of a language, the social life of a nation, or the "spirit of the age." Although the concept of literary power would seem at first glance to be ahistorical, it provides a more reliable and useful measure of historical significance than the older, relatively superficial test of representational value. In the method being described here, therefore, this key doctrine of the generally anti-historical "new criticism" is being incorporated into the essentially historical enterprise of American Studies.

exponent of content analysis, "by counting the appearance of a limited number of content variables in a given body of data." The second assumption is that the paraphrasable "message," either manifest or latent, is the truly significant feature of every verbal construct. Most of the procedures of content analysis rest upon these assumptions. It is a method, accordingly, that "focuses on the message, or the WHAT . . . It is the systematic, objective, and quantitative characterization of content variables manifest or latent in a message."[10]

The mode of analysis practiced by the humanistic scholar in American Studies is based upon quite different assumptions. For one thing, he assumes that the significant relationships cannot be reduced to quantifiable terms. The chasm between the two schools on this score is implicit in the quite different objects of their concern, in the difference, that is, between "culture" and "public opinion." But if the humanist cannot quantify his results, how does he meet the charge that they cannot be validated? How does he answer the empirical social scientist who says that what the humanist claims to be knowledge is indistinguishable from subjective opinion? Leaving aside the large and complicated problem of documentation or evidence in the humanities, the fact remains that here again the humanist relies, at bottom, upon the eventual achievement of a reliable scholarly consensus. He places his faith in the impersonal process of critical scholarship, trusting that in the long run it will correct or eliminate invalid observations, and that it will incorporate valid insights into the living body of knowledge.

Nor can the cultural historian go along with the content analyzer's second basic assumption, his almost exclusive emphasis upon the paraphrasable message. In analyzing verbal constructs the humanist may be as concerned with the How as the WHAT. At the outset, indeed, he postulates a distinction between the discursive and figurative uses of language, and although he cannot wholly separate them, in their purest embodiments he regards them as virtually distinct modes of discourse, one verging toward abstract logic, the other toward lyric poetry. Because the language of imaginative literature tends to be figurative, and because the controlling context of the individual work usually is imagistic or metaphoric, the message — the element reducible to a discursive statement — is only a part and not necessarily the most important part of the meaning. A large part of the meaning, in other words, resides in the inherent emotional power of the work. To fully apprehend the "content" of a novel or poem, therefore, it

10 Richard L. Merritt, "The Representational Model in Cross-National Content-Analysis," Joseph L. Bernd (ed.), *Mathematical Applications in Political Science* (Dallas, 1966), II, 46, 45.

is necessary to get at 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 am 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. But this is not the place to describe contemporary methods of literary analysis. Suffice it to say that they help to illuminate aspects of imaginative writing that are essential to its proper understanding but inaccessible to the reductive methods of the content analyzer.

So much, then, for the contrast between the two methods. It is clear that each is designed to provide different yet to some extent complementary kinds of knowledge. Content analysis enables the social scientist to reconstruct a pattern of group opinion as it existed at a particular time, unmodified by any external or retrospective observer's judgment of value. In order to gain such precise, objective knowledge, the practitioner of content analysis in effect excludes certain kinds of evidence. In theory, to be sure, the technique may be applied to any written work, but in practice it is useful chiefly for the analysis of material whose meaning is readily translated into a discursive statement. This means that content analysis is virtually useless in getting at the significance of imaginative writing. To the scholar working in American Studies, of course, this is a serious defect in the method; for him a description of the national consciousness which does not take literature into account is wholly inadequate. At bottom, no doubt, the difference comes down to opposed conceptions of what matters in the record of the past, indeed, to opposed definitions of historical reality. It is a difference implicit, to repeat, in the concepts "culture" and "public opinion." And yet it would be wrong to conclude that we are dealing with the familiar contrast between the literary and the social scientific mentalities, which is to say, between a concern with art and a concern with society. For if the American Studies movement has a distinctive goal, it is to cross that conventional academic barrier and to establish meaningful connections between the two kinds of knowledge. That is why the two methods may be regarded as complementary. By way of illustration, I shall now describe in some detail a sample inquiry in American Studies.

2. *A Sample Problem in American Studies.* The subject had caught my attention when I read a distinguished critic's remark to the effect that American writers had begun to manifest an awareness of indus-

trialization between 1880 and 1900.[11] Intellectual and literary historians tended to accept this view, but it seemed to me wrong — or at least in need of serious qualification. I had recently been immersed in the work of writers who came to maturity in the 1830's, and it impressed me as deeply informed by the concerns we associate with industrialization. Writers like Emerson, Thoreau, Hawthorne, and Melville did not, to be sure, use the word itself nor did they often write "about" the subject in the literal sense of describing social and economic change. But, like their European contemporaries, they were preoccupied with the theme of alienation — man's alienation both from nature and himself, and much of their thinking turned upon the contrast between the artificial and the natural, the urban and the rural, and the paradox of simultaneously increasing collective power and individual powerlessness. To identify these themes was simple enough, but to relate them to an awareness of industrialization was not. In theory, then, the problem was to trace the impact upon consciousness of a change in existential reality *before* that change had been fully conceptualized. In this case the most tangible evidence was the striking prominence given by the writers mentioned to images drawn from the latest industrial technology. This fact in turn gave rise to certain obvious questions. How was this body of imagery related to the themes of the particular works in which it appeared? What were the connections between such relatively sophisticated writing, the dominant culture, and the demonstrable fact of industrialization?

The choice of literary material for this study presented no particular difficulty. It was based, as I have said, upon an initial familiarity with the major writers of the period. (Their status as "major," which is to say, their place in the "high" culture, had of course been determined for me by the conventional literary wisdom.) The first step, accordingly, was to read their work closely, in its entirety, and with special attention to the links between technological imagery and cardinal themes. The aim at this stage was to locate recurrent patterns of meaning. One observation that later proved to be of value was the simple fact that machine images seemed to take on symbolic power to the degree that they were coupled with images of landscape. What struck the literary imagination, in other words, was the symbolic contrast between the new industrial technology and the natural setting, either wild or rural. The terms *image* and *symbol*, as used in American Studies, derive from literary criticism, and while no absolutely precise distinction can be drawn between them, an *image* refers

11 In what follows I am describing the approach used in writing *The Machine in the Garden, Technology and the Pastoral Ideal in America* (New York, 1964).

to a verbal recording of a simple sense perception, and it becomes a *symbol* to the degree that it is made to carry a burden of implication (value, association, feeling, or in a word, meaning) beyond that which is required for a mere reference.

The selection of materials from the general culture to represent what used to be called "the spirit of the age" was based upon more ambiguous principles. Moving out from the work of major writers, I read the work of men with lesser reputations, some of the popular or even subliterature of the period, and I examined magazines, newspapers, speeches, songs, diaries, and the graphic arts. At first the method was to read widely and at random in order to get an impression of the incidence and character of reactions to industrialization. Later I selected a few periodicals for a more extensive and somewhat more systematic study. In choosing them I was guided chiefly by the presence of relevant materials, and by the sociological identity or special bias of certain journals. From the vantage of the empirical social scientist this no doubt will seem one of the weakest features of the procedure, but there does not seem to be any obvious solution to the root problem here. The scholar wants to define certain pervasive attitudes in the culture, yet he knows that most of his sources represent the special interests of an economic class, or of a particular regional, political, religious, ethnic or vocational group. His only recourse, under the circumstances, is to take these biasses into account, and to select sources which roughly approximate a cross-section of the national culture. To do this, of course, he must have some sort of sociological model in view, and for that he inevitably relies upon the general historian.[12] The procedure, in short, is to read the current historical literature, form a conception of the social structure, and use it as a frame for the evidence.

In selecting material from the journals singled out for relatively extensive study, the procedure was an informal version of the random sample. Depending upon the apparent density of the evidence, I might decide to read one issue of a monthly magazine for each year — a different month, of course — over a span of thirty years. If that sample did not seem adequate, the process was repeated. The test of an

12 To improve the quality of the sociological model would seem to be the only way of meeting the criticism of the method raised by Alan Trachtenberg. In reviewing *The Machine in the Garden*, he says that the book "tends to oversimplify what was occurring outside of consciousness, 'out there' in society . . . . [the] treatment of the dialectic within history is not as strong nor as convincing as [the] treatment of the contradictions within consciousness." Although I would substitute the terms "culture" and "social structure" for Trachtenberg's "consciousness" and "history" (or "society"), I agree with him about the inherent weakness of the method in dealing with the unverbalized, collective, institutional aspect of past behavior. For his penetrating argument, see *The Nation* (July 19, 1965).

adequate sample was the yield of new evidence. When no new kinds of evidence were forthcoming, that is, when it seemed virtually certain that the next technological image would conform to one or another of a limited number of established patterns, the source was considered exhausted. At the more popular level the material fell more neatly into stereotypical categories. In any case, the nearest equivalent to validation here was the more or less predictable recurrence of certain patterns.

In this kind of inquiry the most interesting problems arise in establishing connections between particular works and the general culture. As all students of literature know, the relationship is always indirect, always modified by the interior history of literature itself. Let me illustrate with a specific example. My initial aim had been to discover responses to industrialization, and in the serious writing of the period I had found a recurrent use of the contrast between the machine and the natural landscape. In attempting to understand how this device comported with the larger design of the works in question, however, I came to realize that I was dealing with a modern, post-romantic, and in some respects peculiarly American version of an ancient literary mode — the pastoral. Before proceeding, therefore, it was necessary to shift attention from the interplay between literature and the extra-literary experience of the age to the relation between American writers of the period and their literary forbears. In other words, it was necessary to be clear about the pastoral mode, its origin and development, and the similiarities and differences between American and earlier versions of pastoral.

To establish a degree of continuity between Thoreau and Shakespeare and Virgil was to recognize the evolution of literature — the interior development of its forms and conventions — as a semi-autonomous feature of the culture. This is only to say that in addition to his unique experience of his own age, each writer was influenced by writers who preceded him, particularly those whose work he in some sense emulated. When the cultural historian deals with a work of physics, sociology, or music, he confronts a similar point of intersection between the interior development of an intellectual discipline and an individual's special experience. Obvious though it is, the point often is neglected, and it complicates the procedures of content analysis in ways that are seldom discussed. (How, for example, does the analyst distinguish between the conventional element in a work and a response to the immediate environment?) In the specific inquiry being described, many of the literary works which embodied a significant response to industrialization proved to be pastorals. But although they were similar in many respects to traditional versions of pastoral, they also displayed marked differences which could be attri-

buted, it seemed, to the special conditions of life in America. If there is a generalization about method to be made here, it is this: the conventional features of a work must be acknowledged and understood before the cultural historian can answer such important questions as: what made the convention relevant at the time? what modifications did the age make in the convention? how can the modifications be explained?

As a way of answering these questions, I sought and found a comparable pattern in the general culture. Here too, when technological images acquired a distinct symbolic power they tended to be juxtaposed to images of landscape. Certain traditional features of literary pastoralism also were present. The contrast between the new machine power and the native landscape served to epitomize a contrast between two styles of life, one relatively complex and sophisticated, the other simple, contemplative, and dedicated to the pursuit of happiness. In the American imagination, that is, the conventional retreat of the shepherd — or other pastoral figure — from the corrupt world to the green pasture took on new and more literal significance. It had been reenacted, or rather *en-acted* collectively for the first time, in the transit of Europeans from the oppressive environment of the Old World to the open, unspoiled terrain of the New. But it often was difficult, if not impossible, to distinguish between elements borrowed from the pastoral (a distinct literary mode), and those which had been more or less spontaneously generated in America — a kind of indigenous pastoralism blended out of evangelical Christianity and the pervasive, if attenuated, myth of America as the land of a new beginning. (The image of America as a "garden," for example, combines Christian and pastoral elements.) [13] I will return to the distinction.

But first, a word should be said about the concept of *myth* as used in American Studies. This is another term that resists precise definition, for it refers to a more complex mental construct that belongs on the continuum, introduced earlier, that leads from image to symbol. If a symbol may be defined as an image invested with significance beyond that required for referential purposes, then a myth is a combination of symbols, held together by a narrative, which embodies the virtually all-encompassing conception of reality — the world-view — of a group. The many versions of the "American myth" embody ideas of the genesis and meaning of the new nation, and according

13 Charles Sanford has correctly criticized the original account of this pastoral strain in American thought for its inadequate emphasis upon the influence of Protestant evangelicism. See his review of *The Machine in the Garden* in *American Quarterly* (Summer, 1965).

to the pastoral version the Republic was formed as a result of the movement of Europeans across the Atlantic, away from a complex society dominated by the striving for status, wealth and power, to a simpler world of rural peace, sufficiency and virtue. Emigration, as described in the myth, was a voyage of spiritual and political regeneration. But there was no need, in this particular study, to document the hold of the myth upon the American consciousness. On that score the evidence already was overwhelming.[14] In gauging the response to industrialization, however, it became necessary to distinguish between the interpretation of the myth characteristic of the dominant or general culture, and the interpretation of writers like Thoreau and Melville. For this purpose the concept of pastoral, a literary mode with a long and rich history, and the distinction between complex and sentimental kinds of pastoral, proved to be invaluable.

Pastoral conventions often had lent themselves to both serious and sentimental uses. Sophisticated writers working in the mode generally had been careful to surround the arcadian dream with something like irony; they made it difficult, that is, for perceptive readers to come away with a simple belief in idyllic possibilities. But the extraordinary promise of life in America made it relatively easy for indulgent writers to gratify the popular taste for pleasure fantasies. Thus the distinction between complex and sentimental pastoralism helped to illuminate divergent American responses to industrialization in the nineteenth century. To be sure, the image of the machine was incorporated in a pastoral design at all levels of the culture, but there were marked variations in the significance attached to the device at various levels. In the general culture on the whole, the image of the machine in the American landscape was treated as a token of hope and progress. It served, in effect, to endorse the progressive idea of history inherited from the Enlightenment, and to reconcile industrialization with the pastoral myth of a new beginning. Here the industrial power was interpreted, curiously enough, as an instrument for creating the simple, rural society envisaged in the myth. Writers like Thoreau and Melville, on the other hand, whose intellectual affinities were with the romantic counter-Enlightenment, turned the device into a dark metaphor of contradiction. For them the sudden appearance of the iron machine in the green landscape evoked a sense of the irreconcila-

14 See for example Richard Hofstadter, *The Age of Reform: From Bryan to F. D. R.* (New York, 1960); R. W. B. Lewis, *The American Adam: Innocence, Tragedy, and Tradition in the Nineteenth Century* (Chicago, 1955); Marvin Meyers, *The Jacksonian Persuasion: Politics and Belief* (New York, 1960); Charles Sanford, *The Quest for Paradise: Europe and the American Moral Imagination* (Urbana, 1961); Henry N. Smith, *Virgin Land: The American West as Symbol and Myth* (Cambridge, Mass., 1950).

bility of the nation's actions and ideals. In their work the image of industrial power, set against the professed desire for rural simplicity, becomes a vehicle for ironic and even tragic pastoralism. It discloses the widening gap between reality and myth which was — and still is — consistently obscured in the general culture.

3. *Conclusion.* With this sample project in view, some of the ways in which the two methods complement each other should be obvious. A striking weakness of the American Studies approach is its imprecise description of the general culture. For this phase of the humanist's work the procedures used by the content analyst in studying public opinion would seem to be appropriate. Certainly it would be useful to find out whether the techniques of systematic sampling and analysis can provide a more detailed and reliable picture. An experiment in collaboration also should be useful to the social scientist, if only because the insights gained from imaginative literature would be a source of provocative questions, and of significant patterns of meaning not likely to be found in the raw data usually examined by students of public opinion. Just as Freud put literary themes to clinical tests, so the content analyst might check the intuitions of the most talented writers against the accessible facts.

In suggesting the possibility of collaborative effort, however, I would not gloss over the profound gulf between the aims of the two schools, as indicated by the concern of one with "public opinion" and of the other with "culture." To the student of public opinion the important aspect of the American response to industrialization before the Civil War is to be found in documents which express widely held attitudes. His purpose is to understand collective behavior at the time. The opinions that matter most, presumably, are those which made themselves felt in action, and particularly in public affairs. Therefore it is reasonable to regard virtually any political speech or editorial comment made on the subject in 1851 as more significant than, say, *Moby-Dick*. No one will deny that at the time such documents had a greater impact upon the collective consciousness, and are more revealing of popular attitudes, than Melville's novel. Why, then, does the humanist working in American Studies consider the novel relevant? On what ground does he take it seriously as a source of insights into the relation between industrialization and mind in nineteenth century America?

The correct answer to this question too often has been obscured by extravagant claims for the value of imaginative literature as historical data. Not only must the humanist grant that *Moby-Dick* had no immediate public appeal, but he also should grant that it is no more valuable than many lesser works of fiction as a "reflection" of objective reality. Quite the contrary, so far from crediting the indefensible

claim that the best books somehow provide a more reliable mirror image of actuality, that they are more representative of "the spirit of the age," it seems more reasonable to argue that the books of the 1850's which we now value least — the truly popular novels of the age — are the most useful as historical documents of this kind. The writers whose works endure as art tend on the whole to be the most critical of — the most emancipated from — the prevailing culture. If our purpose is to represent the common life, then we should not turn to the masterpieces we continue to read and enjoy. Probably it would be best, for that purpose, to put literature aside altogether. In any event, and this is the crux of the method being defended here, I would submit that the argument for the usefulness of *Moby-Dick* in the kind of inquiry I have described is identical with the argument for the intrinsic merit of *Moby-Dick* as a work of literature. It is useful for its satisfying power, its capacity to provide a coherent organization of thought and feeling, or in a word, for its compelling truth value.

But I realize that no social scientist can accept this answer. What objective validation can there be, he asks, for ascribing cognitive value to a work of literature? The answer, of course, is that for the humanist there are no sanctions which can be called objective, which are unmodified by judgments of value. The high value attached to Melville's novel rests upon its continuing — one might say, growing — capacity, as compared with the editorial of 1851, to provide us with satisfaction, and to shape our experience of past and present. At first this may seem to be a simple distinction between the instrumental (or political) value of the editorial and the intrinsic (or esthetic) value of the novel. But even that distinction loses its force when we shift from the immediate perspective of the 1850's to the long-term perspective of the present. For in the longer perspective *Moby-Dick* clearly must be credited with having had the greater influence upon American action as well as thought. And yet, to say that the novel had a greater influence *upon* the culture is a misleading way of putting it, for it obscures the literal sense in which the enduring work of art *becomes* the culture which produced it. With the passage of time, that is, books of the stature of *Moby-Dick* comprise a larger and larger portion of the consciousness of nineteenth century America that remains effectively alive in the present. The importance we attach to the novel arises, in the last analysis, from the fact that today it is read, studied, and incorporated in our sense of ourselves and of our world, past and present. So far, then, as the book embodies a response to industrialization, it is a particularly significant response — more significant for us than one which may have had a greater influence upon public opinion at the time. But the measure of that significance cannot be located in any objective realm, uncompromised by human judgment.

It derives from choices made by human beings, hence they are the ultimate basis for the method we would call humanistic.

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