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The metahistory of the American West

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THE METAHISTORY OF THE AMERICAN WEST

by

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**Bachelor of Arts
University of California, Irvine
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**Master of Arts
Cal State University, Fullerton
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**A dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the**

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ABSTRACT

The Metahistory of the American West

by

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In 1893, Frederick Jackson Turner published his famous thesis, "The Significance of the Frontier in American History." The thesis, as well as his subsequent writings, established the groundwork for the dialogue on the American West. That groundwork essentially captured western history as the relationship between seen and unseen forces. Implicit in Turner's work was a structural model for how visible and invisible worlds interacted with one another. When one examines the work of later scholars like Henry Nash Smith who shifted away from Turner's synthesis, it becomes apparent that there was more underpinning Smith's dissent than simply a disagreement regarding historical facts. What had actually changed was the structural model for how the two worlds intermingled. This paradigm shift for the dialectic between seen and unseen forces was at the root of the move away from Turner. The new paradigm was entirely incompatible with Turner's model. In time, the new paradigm was adapted as the structural model for what eventually emerged as the New Western history. But in the same way that Henry Nash Smith represented the bridge between two historical era, so too did New Western

history. In fact, it signified an ending as well as a beginning. While its adherents still relied on the ironic emphasis in Smith's structural model, they also, step by step, shifted back into a metaphorical mode of explanation that came more and more to resemble Turner's discarded paradigm. With metaphor and irony embroiled in an acute struggle for intellectual dominance, it was only a matter of time before a full-blown neo-Turnerian revolution would be well underway.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

ABSTRACT	iii
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS	vi
CHAPTER 1 INTRODUCTION	1
How Historians Can Talk About Unseen Forces	5
The Dialectic in American West History	18
CHAPTER 2 THE HISTORIANS	30
From Turner to neo-Turnerian	32
CHAPTER 3 THESIS	67
Frederick Jackson Turner	69
CHAPTER 4 ANTITHESIS	100
Henry Nash Smith	103
Donald Worster	122
CHAPTER 5 A NEW SYNTHESIS	160
William Cronon	163
Richard White	179
Elliott West	196
CHAPTER 6 CONCLUSION	214
Patricia Limerick and "Turnerians All"	215
Carl Becker and the "Heavenly City"	222
BIBLIOGRAPHY	232
VITA	245

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No man is an island unto himself. No great work is the product of a single mind. In acknowledgment, it was Dr. Hal Rothman who suggested the possibility of an emerging neo-Turnerian revolution. That suggestion initiated the search to find out exactly what was the revolution. Subsequently, it was Dr. Colin Loader who guided me through the writings of Hayden White and Kenneth Burke to undergird the entire structure of the project with a legitimate model for my findings. Dr. Loader was a student of Hayden White's during the time when White was writing his Metahistory. I have benefited greatly from Dr. Loader's insights, but the final rendering of White's views has rested solely with myself. If there are any criticisms, they need to be directed to me.

The present work is dedicated to Dr. Vernon Mattson. Without his confidence in my historical vision, none of this could have come to fruition. Truly, he is one of the pioneering iconoclasts of our time.

In honor of the memory and courage of the late Dr. Gerald D. Nash, I deliver this work into the hands of the historical community. Before Dr. Nash's passing, he wrote to me, "Efforts to impose one sided views in history have never succeeded in the past and are not likely to be successful in the future. *It is only a matter of time.*" Indeed, it is only a matter of time. I am sorry that Dr. Nash could not be around to see it.

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

In our classes, we are forever assuring our students that historical interpretation is a fresh and spirited adventure of the mind, a message quite wonderfully mocked by the textbooks we have assigned.¹

With the publication of Virgin Land in 1950 by the western historian Henry Nash Smith, the study of “cultural meaning” was brought to the forefront of the historical profession.² The study of “cultural meaning” was essentially a study of the distinctions between “image and action” and between “consciousness and actual conditions.”³ It represented an assessment not only of what Americans “actually had done” but also what they “thought they were doing.”⁴ With his “myth and symbol” school, Smith succeeded in “capturing the imagination of a generation of scholars” including those who had little or nothing to do with the American West.⁵ What Smith had done was legitimize discussion within an historically acceptable sociological framework for how thought, an intangible human activity, shaped or was in turn shaped by tangible, physical action. With subsequent scholars building on Smith’s dichotomy between thought and physical action, it became a standard tool in historical explanation. The term “culture” became synonymous with the interrelationship between these two components.

In looking back to assess the past fifty years of historical writing, the problem becomes clear that historians have adopted the dualism of image-making and physical action without acknowledging what that acceptance implies. What that acceptance

implies is that historians have been embedding a relationship between an invisible world and a visible world into their texts. As part of this invisible world, thought was endowed with the capacity to impact and be impacted by the physical world. With this dichotomy rooted in much of the writing on the American West, contemporary historical narrative indeed became a story about two worlds colliding—only it was not necessarily the Indians and the Cowboys this time around. Rather, it was about how the invisible world interacted with the visible one to produce certain outward effects. It was about how an unseen force, or thought, caused physical events.

There may be those scholars who strongly disagree with associating thought with an invisible world and labeling it as an unseen force. Two responses can be given to demonstrate that there are legitimate reasons for disagreeing with their objections. First, the present work is concerned with understanding how historians themselves have encoded the concept of thought into their texts. I will show that historians themselves have made thought into a vague, amorphous abstraction possessed of a life of its own separate from the physical world. When carefully analyzed, historians have linguistically expressed thought as an unknown reality which somehow persists, and somehow exists, over time and across space. Whether or not historians believe in a merely physical-chemical aspect to thought, they have not written about it that way. Historians have turned thought into an unseen force but, as a community of scholars, they have failed to examine seriously what they have done. Therefore, the historical profession has continued to talk about “cultural meaning” and image-making as though it were a down-to-earth, clearly defined process when in fact it is the same kind of mystical rhetoric which they otherwise proceed to reject. Second, historians have not defined thought

objectively. This is only natural; there is no scientific consensus for a definition of thought. At professional conferences, the very real possibility that thought is something outside the chemical reactions of the brain has been continually raised and debated. The present work does not pretend to solve the riddle of the mind except to say that thought is clearly a force possessed of a tremendous power to shape the surrounding environment. Historians have treated thought as an amorphous abstraction and it does not seem too far out of line to reference thought as an unseen force. Such a term meets both criteria of logic and consistency.

While decoding Henry Nash Smith's concept of thought, later coined by him under the term "imaginative constructions," may provide an important clue for demonstrating how American West history has been composed, it cannot be insulated from the larger context for how western historians have written an unseen force into their narratives.⁶ Included in this larger context alongside Smith's "imaginative constructions" is the work of other historians who have employed a similar dualism in their historical narratives. Of special importance are Frederick Jackson Turner's concept of "vital forces" and Richard White's theme of "energy." Turner, the founder of American West history, and White, one of the leading contemporary revisionists, both produced historical interpretations guided by their view for how unseen forces interacted with the physical surroundings. Their terms, "vital forces" and "energy," represented alternative ways in which historical interpretation could be circumscribed by the limits of their world view for how this interaction occurred. Examining these three terms in context of one another and in context of their respective adherents provides the larger context yields the following conclusion. The major shifts in writing about the American West were largely

due to fundamental revisions in how historians captured the relationship between unseen forces and the visible world.

Undoubtedly, many scholars will ask for a tighter definition of what constitutes an unseen force than what has been presented thus far. Whereas other historians have left “vital forces,” “imaginative constructions,” and “energy” as protean terms that could just about mean anything, I will try to be as clear as possible. Quite simply, an unseen force refers to a linguistic device used by a historian when he shifts into an explanation form that establishes a causal factor which is well outside of the physical senses to be the originating source of a physical effect. The main point of the work at hand is not to prove that “vital forces,” “imaginative constructions,” and “energy” exist in fact as their respective authors would have them, but rather to suggest that the historian shifts into using one of these terms, or the fundamental concept represented by the term, at that moment when he attributes causation to a non-physical property. An unseen force, as encoded in the writing of western historians, is a causative, non-physical agent. Another way to express this would be to use the words phenomenal and non-phenomenal. A phenomenon is that which is sensory; it can be perceived by one of the five senses. Something that is non-phenomenal would refer to that which is non-sensory, not sensed by sight, sound, touch, taste, or smell. Such an unseen force would be non-phenomenal. But it has already been stated that an unseen force denotes connotations of causation. Therefore, since the word non-phenomenal does not implicitly share those connotations, it is not quite an exact substitute unless one endows it with causative agency. But it is a close enough match and I will consider it endowed with causative agency as used from this point on in the text. The word that is an exact substitute is noumenon; it implies

both a non-sensory agent as well as a causal agent. Thus, the relationship of “vital forces,” “imaginative constructions,” and “energy” to the physical world is one of noumenon to phenomenon. It is one of the oldest philosophical and metaphysical relationships in recorded history.

If art imitates life, then history, as art, expresses the same relation; history imitates what is actually out there within the totality of existence. What is clear is that historians have never been able to eradicate completely an unseen world from the way they write history. Today, most historians feel comfortable discussing western history in terms of geographical places and layers of memory, but it remains to be seen just how they will react to pushing the envelope one step further by insisting that those terms be reviewed within the larger context of noumenal and phenomenal relationships. Irregardless, I follow the courageous lead of Frederick Jackson Turner’s declaration in his “Talk on Sectionalism,” “I am one of those who believes in breaking line fences, even at the risk of arrest for trespass, or disclosure of being an amateur, or something worse, breaking into the professionals’ game.”⁷

How Historians Can Talk About Unseen Forces

The question that has to be addressed is how can historians talk about unseen forces when they have no idea what they are. It seems that the only thing that could make this possible is that historians adopted specific linguistic frameworks that harmonized with their own broader world view. There were those historians who tried to avoid a dualism between phenomenal and non-phenomenal by fully immersing themselves into a

materialistic view of reality. But even then they could not completely obscure the essential division between the seen and the unseen from their language. In subtle ways, their dialogues repeated the dualism which they condemned. Few historians have pursued the training to develop their own framework for elaborating the interaction between noumenon and phenomenon. As Hayden White pointed out in his 1966 "The Burden of History," historical training has consisted of little more than "journeyman" exercises and the most "general experience of human affairs."⁸ If White's insight was correct, then what right have historians to be engaged in such dualistic discourse? And, if White was correct that historians never sufficiently developed a formal framework for resolving the deeper philosophical issues involved in historical explanation, can one hypothesize that the individual historian and perhaps society-at-large merely adopted poetic forms when speaking of this otherworldly interaction?⁹ What is meant by poetic form is Georg Friedrich Hegel's vision for the "separation of consciousness from its object and the need (and attempt) to affect a union with it once more."¹⁰ Poetry, such as Henry Wadsworth Longfellow's "Slave's Dream" or Edgar Allen Poe's "The Raven," was the byproduct of metaphorical suppositions where the lines dividing the phenomenal from the non-phenomenal became intermittently distinct and then blurred.¹¹ If historical writing is indeed poetic in form as a result of similar metaphorical suppositions for how the unseen intermingles with and separates from material reality, that would force it to conform in some degree to Hegel's vision of poetry. It is poetic form that embeds unseen forces into historical dialogue even when the historians are unaware of the form itself.

In Hayden White's groundbreaking work, Metahistory: The Historical Imagination in Nineteenth-Century Europe (1973), he labeled poetic form under the term

“metahistory.”¹² Poetic form was the deeper structure that White envisioned lay beneath peculiar forms of historical consciousness. It infused into the text a particular type of content that would be accepted or rejected depending on whether it conformed to the world view of the scholar and the spirit of the age.¹³ For White, poetic form could be configured using any one of the four tropes. A trope was a figure of speech that conveyed the historian’s idea along an easily identifiable pattern. In Metahistory, White posited the four tropes of metaphor, metonymy, synecdoche, and irony. In doing so, he drew heavily on an earlier essay by Kenneth Burke entitled “Four Master Tropes” and included in Burke’s own masterpiece, A Grammar of Motives (1945).¹⁴ Burke’s work was focused on uncovering linguistic technicalities involved in any historical, philosophical, or dramatic explanation of human action. What one notices about the first three tropes is that they are fundamentally figures of speech endowed with the function of tying things together or pulling them apart. That makes them ideal for understanding how historians either embed or disentangle unseen forces from their physical objects. In fact, it even makes one wonder whether historians are induced to embed unseen forces into their work precisely because they have adopted one or more of the tropes. Trope forms appear to lead in that direction. A trope inherently contains a specific way for expressing the relationship between noumenon and phenomenon. Depending on the trope employed, the expression changes. The trope is the metahistorical element—the poetic form beyond a simple chronology—giving history its interpretive mechanism.

To understand how each trope changes the expression of the historian and embeds a unique relationship between noumenon and phenomenon into the text, a brief review of the four tropes is required. In the same way that Hayden White dealt loosely with the

tropes in his own book, I follow suit. For the scholar who wishes to scrutinize terms according to strictly traditional standards, this work, like White's, is inappropriate. To begin with, metaphor is the mode of reasoning by which the internal qualities of an object can be substituted for the physical object itself. The physical representation recedes into the background and allows the internal qualities to define the object. The bodily organism of a man and his spectrum of values become the same when seen in terms of metaphor. Under metaphor, the bodily actions of the organism become significantly less important for defining the man as an object than the overarching ideals and spiritual notions which he carries with him while fulfilling those actions. The physical man is merged with his internal qualities; the seen and unseen coalesce into one representation. Hence, metaphor is essentially unifying. On the other hand, metonymy breaks up that unity by allowing for a cause-effect relationship to separate things into dual components. That is, any object or outward quality is presumed to have causal agents existing behind it. Objects are no longer defined in terms of their inner qualities but rather are seen as expressions of such inner qualities. In the case of the physical man and his values, the two become distinct as the values are endowed with causative agency. The set of values causes the physical man to act along a certain trend. Therefore, the physical man and the values are distinct. From this perspective, metonymy is essentially divisive. In comparison, synecdoche reunifies that division by integrating the metonymy back into metaphor or a complete whole. Metonymy may create thirty sets of divisions, but those divisions can only embody dualistic equations. In metaphor, $A=B$, $A=C$, $A=D$, and $A=E$. Metonymy differs in that it establishes that $A>B$, $A>C$, $A>D$, and $A>E$. That is, A causes these variables. It is only synecdochic reasoning that can generate the overall conclusion that $A=E$ as well as $A>E$.

at the same time. Synecdoche, rooted in the premise that the whole exists in all the parts, allows for A to serve as a causative agency while also merging that causative agency with the physical object. Therefore, A>and =B, A>and =C, A>and =D, A>and =E. The part contains the whole within it and, therefore, it is the whole itself. Thus, A= B,C, D, and E while nevertheless causing them. Under this synopsis, synecdoche has led back to metaphor. Synecdoche is an extension of metaphor which accounts for numerous variables. In metaphor, there is no mechanism to recognize that all the variables from B through E= A. It only allows for a variable to be merged with A. Synecdoche provides the mechanism for capturing the larger picture for how *all* the variables interact with A by positing that the whole exists in *all* the parts. That means A equals any variable. Hence, synecdoche is re-unifying and re-integrative.

What is most significant about these first three tropes is Kenneth Burke's observation that they "shade into one another."¹⁵ Each successive trope builds upon the one that comes before it by utilizing its structure as the foundation for the next level of meaning. For example, metaphor can exist without metonymy, and metonymy can exist without synecdoche. But in order for synecdoche to function it requires the range and the equation of the variables in metaphor and metonymy. For metonymy to function requires the unity of metaphor from which to expand. For Burke, this progression through the tropes is an automatic process. In terms of the formalist structure of the tropes, once metaphor has been established it necessarily leads into metonymy and synecdoche. Hayden White borrowed this model, suggesting that the changes of expression in individuals and society-at-large could be charted as they progressively transitioned through these modes of communication. By definition, something which happens

automatically is done unconsciously. Not only does each one of these three tropes lack an intrinsic self-conscious mechanism which would enable the historian to analyze what he was doing while adopting such a trope, but also the entire process through the three tropes is unconsciously driven. These tropes possess no principle for analyzing their procedural assumptions. But the entire process moving through these tropes is extremely productive. It is productive in that each trope goes towards the building of a foundation that culminates in the inclusion of all historical action under a single macrocosmic structure. In the example above, that structure is represented by the symbol A. Whether real or imaginary, an absolute ground to reality, or A as the originating source and cause of all the variables in a particular historical explanation, has been embedded into the work of the historian. Since all three tropes shade into one another and ultimately back into metaphor while at the same time lacking an analytical mechanism for reviewing the poetic form intrinsic to their process, the term “metaphor” can be used, except in specific instances where emphasis on a distinct tropal configuration is desired, in discussing all three tropes. As White noted, metonymy and synecdoche are “kinds” of metaphor, only they “differ from one another in the kinds of *reductions* and *integrations* they effect on the literal level of their meanings and by the kinds of illuminations they aim at on the figurative level.”¹⁶ That is, the larger metaphorical construct is really a tri-fold procedure for tying things together, disentangling them, and re-unifying them on a grander scale.

The fourth trope of irony, while still considered a kind of metaphor by Hayden White in that it plays with meaning on figurative and literal levels, is significantly distinct enough from the form-building process through metaphor, metonymy, and synecdoche that it must be examined on its own terms. The primary reason for this distinctiveness

from the other three tropes is that it is negational rather than productive. It tears down instead of building up. In order to tear down or deconstruct, irony would have to possess a mechanism for critical awareness. From its definition, it possesses just such an awareness. Irony is the “negation on a figurative level” what is “positively affirmed on a literal level.”¹⁷ In certain cases, it can work the other way around as well. Intrinsic to irony’s definition is a critical mechanism, a mechanism of denial. This makes irony “metatropological,” or extending beyond the tropes, in that it subsumes the other three tropes under its own systematic observations and criticisms.¹⁸ Unlike the other tropes, irony allows the historian to grasp how reality is manipulated by preconfigured conceptions and linguistics. In this sense, irony is no trope at all—no figure of speech—but a penetrative tool for unmasking what reality is and is not.

Where irony ceases to be metatropological is at the point where it behaves like the other tropes. It mimics the behavior of the first three tropes in that it automatically follows them in cumulative sequence. In sequence, it is the fourth trope. With synecdoche, the epitome of metaphor is reached where all higher generalizations for the seen and the unseen are subsumed under one grand macrocosmic generalization. Irony, with its negation of explanation on a figurative level, naturally develops in response to synecdoche and this vast abstraction. In denying the figurative level of meaning, irony essentially attempts to negate the existence of the non-phenomenal world. Therefore, the figurative explanations of metaphor, metonymy, and synecdoche actually provide the material from which irony unfolds. Without them, irony cannot become manifest. Its sequential development entirely depends on the three tropes issuing before it. But, as Hayden White explained, irony is not an “ultimate state but only the end of a cycle of

development.”¹⁹ For him, what followed was metaphor. At some moment, the critical aspect of ironic consciousness had to break down. Irony had to turn on itself and metaphor had to resurface.²⁰ Irony turned on itself through the realization that it did not stand alone as ultimate truth. Irony, in denying a ground to reality on the figurative level, must finally deny itself. It must deny its own representation as a higher generalization by acknowledging its own limitation as merely one possible means for examining the historical record. That is, the metatropological capacity in irony leads it to recognize its own proper place as a trope, yet only another impermanent figure of speech.

These four tropes are the linguistic techniques through which historians infuse interpretation into a chronological sequence of events. The four tropes can undergo a reductionism that contracts them into two categories: metaphor and irony. Metaphor is essentially a technique that relies on collapsing things into one another and separating them as the manner of explanation for the technical details of historical events. On the other hand, irony is a technique that achieves its specific interpretation by denying one level of the metaphorical explanation. If irony is compared with metaphor, irony denies the process of collapse and separation because it negates the framework of that dualism. Whereas metaphor allows A and E to merge, irony repudiates the existence of one or the other variable, thereby making the admixture of the two variables a philosophical impossibility. In this case, what becomes clear is that metaphor and irony are linguistic techniques for expressing philosophical positions. Embedded into metaphor is the assumption that something larger than the physical organism exists and can be collapsed into it. Embedded into irony is the intrinsic function of demonstrating something to be a philosophical absurdity. From this perspective, what metaphor and irony really represent

as interpretive techniques is the way in which historians encode, whether purposely or accidentally, their own biased world view towards either the philosophical position of realism or nominalism.

Like the tropal configurations, I am treating the philosophical configurations for realism and nominalism a bit loosely in the present work. Philosophical realism possesses a long historical record, and its meaning has not always been consistent over time.²¹ Philosophical nominalism possesses so many degrees of interpretation which gradually lead to an ever more pure nominalism that it becomes imprecise from a definitional standpoint.²² With this in mind, it is best to adopt a broad definition, such as that offered by Kenneth Burke, which encourages considerable interpretive flexibility. For Burke, realism allows for “generic terms,” or higher generalizations, to be treated as “real substances” whereas nominalism denigrates them to mere “conveniences of language.”²³ This definition presents realism in terms of its original platonic roots. Plato, the fourth century B.C. Greek philosopher, premised the existence for an order of reality beyond the material world. This meant that the human intellect could perceive above the flux of the visible world a “system of unchangeable truths.”²⁴ These unchangeable truths, stretching out from the realms of the invisible, stamped imperfect impressions of themselves onto the physical landscape during successive generations, but their ability to exist in a perfect state of being on their own level was entirely independent of this interaction with the physical world. Since the physical world was only a misleading, imperfect reflection of an ultimate truth, one had to turn instead to higher generalizations, or universals, for apprehending life’s processes. In direct opposition to realism, nominalism, perhaps most clearly formulated by William Ockham in the fourteenth century A.D., rejected Plato’s

system of unchangeable truths because it allowed for the existence of universals in reality. Ockham maintained that universals were merely “convenient mental fictions, signs standing for many particulars at once.”²⁵ By examining the particulars, one discerned just how widely individual circumstances deviated from any over-arching generalization, or unchangeable truth, placed onto them collectively. The physical world was not a flawed copy of a larger truth. Rather, the higher generalization for that supposed truth masked what was really going on within tangible existence.

In his essay, “Nominalist and Realist,” Ralph Waldo Emerson, the extraordinary nineteenth-century writer, explained the paradox behind these two terms. His example consisted of the assertion that there was a “genius of a nation” which was not to be found in the “numerical citizens” but which nevertheless “characterized the society.”²⁶ England as a nation was “strong, punctual, practical, and well-spoken,” but if one actually traveled to the island all one would find was “a great number of rich, ignorant, book-read, conventional, proud men . . . [and] old women.”²⁷ These individual findings in no way matched England as a nation. America was even more complex, Emerson observed, because the “genius” of the United States and the individual “performances” of its people varied to an even greater degree.²⁸ And yet both the vision of the nation and the personal accounts were true, he asserted. In essence, what Emerson was saying was that both philosophies led to equally valid, but significantly different, conclusions. How could this possibly be? How could apparently contradictory procedures lead to equally valid answers? For Emerson, the rejoinder was simple. He proposed that life itself was a dual process. Nominalism and its realist counterpart were simply the two methods for explaining two sides of the same coin; the coin was life or “nature.”²⁹ Emerson’s

proposition was as suggestive as it was enigmatic. He explained:

Life is made up of the intermixtures and reaction of these two amicable powers, whose marriage appears beforehand monstrous, as each denies and tends to abolish the other. We must reconcile the contradictions as we can, but their discord and their concord introduce wild absurdities into our thinking and speech. No sentence will hold the truth . . . Things are, and are not . . . All the universe over, there is but one thing, this Old Two-Face, creator-creature, mind-matter, right-wrong, of which any proposition may be affirmed or denied.³⁰

To utilize both nominalism and realism at the same moment in historical explanation proved to be an absurdity. The procedural methodology for each philosophy pre-determined a mutually contradictory outcome. Nominalism denied realism; realism affirmed what nominalism rejected. Therefore, at any interpretive juncture, the historian had to make a choice, unconsciously or otherwise. To achieve realism's firm grasp on higher generalizations, one had to turn the coin of life completely over, nominalist side down. To reach nominalism's clear-sightedness of the particulars, one had to disavow realism. Since nominalism and realism were the two sides to nature, one subsequently followed the other. "Your turn now, my turn next" was the rule of the game for these two attributes.³¹ For Emerson, it was the "secret of the world" that "all things subsisted and did not die, but only retired a little from sight and afterwards returned again."³²

Nominalism and realism successively faded out of the scene as one or the other gained dominance for a temporary duration.

In relating the philosophies of realism and nominalism to the tropes of metaphor and irony, one immediately perceives two correlations. First, realism and nominalism, by definition, each possess an affinity towards one of the tropes. Realism, in its quest for overarching generalizations, gravitates towards the metaphorical trope. Metaphor allows

these generalizations to be considered part of reality. In contrast, nominalism, in its quest to deconstruct subject matter, gravitates towards the ironic trope. Irony encourages a fragmentation that ultimately contradicts the larger historical picture. That is, irony reveals in illuminating the discrepancies between variant levels of examination. This leads to the rejection of generic terms since it denies the figurative level on which they exist. What this correlation between the binaries of realism-metaphor and nominalism-irony suggests is that if a historian embraces a realist or nominalist philosophy he will emplot that view into his text through its corresponding trope. The trope serves as the linguistic form which conveys the philosophy. Second, the transitional flux through realism and nominalism (as described by Emerson) and the transitional flux through metaphor and irony (as described by White) are homologous precisely because a philosophical position and its respective trope function within a binary system. The transition of linguistic form from metaphor to irony and back to metaphor naturally accompanies the larger philosophical shift from realism to nominalism and back to realism. This signifies that any change in historical writing fundamentally consists of two parts: the philosophical aspect and the linguistic, or poetic aspect.

Each of the binary relationships, realism-metaphor and nominalism-irony, can be subsumed under a single label. The complementary pair, realism and metaphor, can be collapsed into the term “unconscious productiveness.” The combination of nominalism and irony can be reduced to the term “critical intellect.” Recognizing that the tropes as well as their underlying philosophies successively roll through one another in a dualistic dance, the affirmation of the Russian philosopher and historian, Helena Petrovna Blavatsky, is apropos. She commented, “An age of great inspiration and unconscious

productiveness is invariably followed by an age of criticism and consciousness. The one affords material for the analyzing and critical intellect of the other.”³³ Not only are the terms “unconscious productiveness” and “critical intellect” used in a manner correlating to the rolling motion of the tropes and their respective world views, but the terms themselves capture the essence of the realism-metaphor and nominalism-irony categories. It has already been suggested that metaphor, as a linguistic tool, possesses no mechanism for analysis and self-reflection. Therefore, it is fundamentally an unconscious literary process. That is, it is a linguistic tool which escapes or bypasses the reasoning function within mental awareness. At the same time, realism is extremely productive as a world view because it provides a vast, singular, overarching generalization as the explanation form for countless, divisible and diverse people and things. The term “unconscious productiveness” clearly unites the metaphorical trope to its realist philosophy. On the other hand, the term “critical intellect” fuses the ironic trope to its nominalist philosophy. Irony, as a linguistic tool, possesses just such a mechanism for analysis and self-reflection which metaphor lacks. Therefore, irony is fundamentally a conscious literary process. Hand in hand with nominalism, which seeks to deconstruct higher generalizations through a step by step examination of historical singularities, irony becomes a powerful tool which embraces the reasoning function within mental awareness. Subsequently, the higher generalizations from the realist-metaphor perspective afford the material for the specific brand of logic from the nominalist-irony amalgamation to dissect into individual and extremely contradictory components.

In examining how historians embedded a phenomenal and non-phenomenal dichotomy into their texts, the structural frameworks of “unconscious productiveness”

and “critical intellect” directed the way unseen forces were incorporated into their interpretations. “Unconscious productiveness” introduced a metaphorical explanation of historical action which simply assumed two separate levels of existence, seen and unseen, that could be merged into a homogeneity. “Critical intellect,” being the natural temporal successor to “unconscious productiveness,” analyzed the material provided by its predecessor. That could only mean that the dialogue for seen and unseen forces would not come to an end. Instead, it would merely change form. Inseparable from the irony of “critical intellect” was the methodological process for examining two levels of existence and subsequently denying one of them. In most cases, it was the unseen force, or the over-generalized reality of “unconscious productiveness,” that was negated.

The Dialectic in American West History

The term dialectic refers to Hegel’s historical model where a thesis is negated by an antithesis which is subsequently sublated by a synthesis that becomes the new thesis.³⁴ With the synthesis, the thesis and antithesis are sublated within a new form, but each of the two parts remains partially intact. This Hegelian dialectic can be used to explain the developments in American West historiography. Realism, in conjunction with its metaphorical trope, coincides with the thesis aspect in Hegel’s model. Over time, nominalism, in conjunction with its ironic trope, usurps realism. Realism fades into the background but not entirely. Nominalism, as realism’s successor, uses the realist perspective as its material in constructing an alternate, antithetical interpretation. Once again, time moves forward and realism reasserts itself as the synthesis. But the synthesis, or third view, is a much more complex process than the first two. The synthesis is the

byproduct of both realism and nominalism, but the synthesis is constructed during that period when realism comes to the forefront of historical thought once more. While the critical insight of the nominalist position is not completely forgotten, it recedes into the distance because realism's metaphor is not capable of self-reflection. Synthesis is as much a return to metaphor as the commingling of two opposing world views. This is why dialectical tension essentially resolves into harmony. From a theoretical standpoint, the combination of realism and metaphor lacks the critical apparatus necessary to disturb that harmony.

One can develop a hypothetical scenario to elucidate just how Hegel's dialectic functions as a historical model. Three historians writing at fifty year intervals can be postulated. The first historian, A, roots his text in a realist-metaphorical style, or what has been termed "unconscious productiveness." As a result of this style, he necessarily emplots a dualism between the realm of the spirit and the physical earth, much as the metaphorical Hegel did in his The Philosophy of History.³⁵ Historian A's conceptualization of the world includes both physical and psychical aspects in nature. His metaphorical trope demands that it is so. Thus, it is the trope that establishes and maintains the thesis aspect of Hegel's dialectic. For example, the metaphorical trope in this case might serve as the groundwork for a historical argument that the geographical migration of people across the physical globe with its corresponding rise and fall of civilizations was in and of itself the movement of a larger unseen force. From this perspective, if the unseen force were working through a particular civilization, the civilization flourished. If the unseen force were withdrawn, the civilization deteriorated. The thesis for this argument on geographical migration is entirely dependent on the

metaphorical trope distinguishing between unseen forces and a visible world and then collapsing them into an identical historical action. Skipping ahead fifty years, historian B rises to prominence. He argues against the thesis that certain civilizations were grandiose and others were not. But this critical argument is solely based on the assumptions inherent to the use of an ironic trope. The ironic trope assumes that either the figurative or literal level in metaphor is patently false. In many cases, irony assumes that the figurative level is false. Even though historian B has no means of verifying this assumption, he proceeds to disclaim the superiority of certain civilizations. This disclaimer is solely dependent on removing a generalized unseen force from the field of play. Such a removal is purely a poetic and philosophical function rather than a historical one. Nevertheless, this removal, achieved by emplotting a nominalist world view into the text through the agency of an ironic trope, creates the antithesis and the subsequent historical perspective of the historian. The antithesis is a combination of nominalism and irony, or “critical intellect.” Another fifty years pass (for a total one-hundred years) and historian C dominates the historical profession. But historian B has so profoundly shaped the culture of the surrounding society that historian C cannot immediately rid himself of the intellectual climate engendered over the past fifty years—much as historian B could not completely rid himself of the metaphorical assumptions scattered out into the cultural milieu by historian A. Regarding historian C, he is deeply indebted to historian B. Irregardless, he falls back into “unconscious productiveness.” It is just here that historical contradiction occurs. Historian C may, in unison with historian B, consciously disagree with historian A’s fundamental thesis that certain civilizations rise and fall because of a larger unseen force. He may even appear to argue to that extent in his text. But that

conscious argument becomes invalid once the historian has returned to metaphor because metaphor undergirds the text with a number of unconscious assumptions. That is, metaphor embeds a causal unseen force into his writing. Whatever his conscious opinion, encoded into his text is a larger unseen force at the root of all historical action. And that includes reference to the rise and fall of civilizations. As such, historian C's argument contains the philosophical and linguistic framework to support historian A's thesis. This becomes the synthesis, or new thesis. Neither the original thesis or the antithesis disappears entirely, but the original thesis clearly reasserts itself. The more intuitive scholars looking at historian C's work likely recognize at this point that the antithesis is no longer the sole model for explaining history. The re-emergence of overarching generalizations cannot be ignored. Historians must admit the defeat of "critical intellect." The philosophical-linguistic style in "unconscious productiveness," even in total contradiction to reigning political correctness or cultural norms, implants an unseen force, though under a different name, at the source of historical causation which restores historian A's original thesis that civilization flourishes or declines based on the prevalence of such an unseen force. In the end, metaphor gets the last laugh. Since it intrinsically lacks a mechanism for self-reflection, the historians who adopt it have no way of determining just how much their metaphorical assumptions actually contradict their more overt opinions. In essence, this intrinsic shortcoming allows synthesis to resolve into harmony.

In fact, the hypothetical scenario detailed above is not so hypothetical at all. Under closer inspection, it actually describes the process by which American West historians have shifted through three distinct modes of writing from the 1890's to the 1990's.

Historians A, B, and C portray real flesh and blood men, men who clearly stand out as the transition points in American West historiography. They are Frederick Jackson Turner, Henry Nash Smith, and Richard White. In comparison, their work corresponds to the thesis, antithesis, and synthesis of the dialectic. That is, Turner presented a thesis, Smith an antithesis, and White a new synthesis. Frederick Jackson Turner, with the publication of his 1893 masterpiece, "The Significance of the Frontier in American History," ushered in an era of "unconscious productiveness" for western history. Not until some fifty years later was the Turner thesis successfully replaced by the alternative paradigm proffered by Henry Nash Smith in Virgin Land (1950). The essence of Smith's challenge, however, was not so much historical as it was philosophical and poetic. Turner, writing as a realist through a metaphorical trope, necessarily emplotted into his work the two-fold process of collapsing and separating unseen forces and the visible world into and from one another. In the same way that Hegel emplotted his conceptualization for the interaction between the phenomenal and non-phenomenal under the metaphor of the "World Spirit," so Turner emplotted the relationship between the seen and unseen under the metaphor of "vital forces."³⁶ With the metaphor of "vital forces" directing the interpretive aspect of the Turner thesis, Smith, who may or may not have presented sufficient empirical evidence to contradict Turner, made his assault on Turner by shifting into a philosophical and poetic style capable of undermining metaphor. Smith's Virgin Land was rooted in the denial of Turner's "vital forces" from a nominalist-ironic position, or "critical intellect." Smith signified the transition into an era expounding "critical intellect" over "unconscious productiveness." From the perspective of "critical intellect," the denial of Turner's "vital forces" could proceed in two different ways, but the result would be

the same. Irony could negate on a figurative level what was positively affirmed on a literal level. Or it could negate on a literal level what was positively affirmed on a figurative level. In the first case, Smith could negate Turner's "vital forces" by pointing to an alternate conceptualization for unseen forces that contradicted them. Smith utilized the concept of "imaginative constructions" as just such a negational mechanism. A "vital force" could not commingle a physical organism because a "vital force" was really just an "imaginative construction," or an illusory fancy of the human intellect. The unseen quality of a "vital force" did not match the unseen quality that a physical organism possessed. Therefore, the "vital force" did not exist. In the second case, Smith could negate at the literal level to show the figurative level of "vital forces" as false. That is, he could contrast Turner's description of a physical object with his own literal description to demonstrate that no overarching "vital force" applied. For example, a strong, healthy, beautiful buffalo (according to Turner) could be reduced to a dirty, smelly beast, thereby negating the ability to reasonably subsume the animal under a spiritual "vital force."

The primary distinction between Smith and Turner was that Turner established "vital forces" as the ground to reality, or ultimate originating source for all historical action whereas Smith established "imaginative constructions" as a negational tool to disprove the validity of that ground to reality. Through Turner's "vital forces," an outside spiritual world was conceived to interact with the physical world and trace its patterns upon it. The presence of "vital forces" reinvigorated a region with powerful ennobling influences. For Turner, all historical inquiry could be traced back to the "vital forces." Smith could not accept this over-generalization. He proceeded from nominalist assumptions. While Smith's "imaginative constructions" did at times function as causative, non-physical

agents (and therefore qualify for categorization as unseen forces), they were not linked to a more spiritual world nor were they essentially primal. “Imaginative constructions” were just as much a byproduct of the physical world as the physical world was a byproduct of them. As byproducts of an often violent and chaotically selfish physical world, “imaginative constructions” were far removed from being part of a larger spiritual context for reinvigorating the landscape. Instead, they were designed specifically to circumvent and subsequently negate the free intermingling and merging of the spiritual and physical worlds which was at the heart of Turner’s historical explanation.

While Henry Nash Smith’s paradigm reigned supreme for nearly half a century, it too would receive its challenge. In 1995 Richard White published a short book entitled The Organic Machine: The Remaking of the Columbia River which reunited western history with Turner’s philosophical and poetic style. While scholars were busy assessing his previous work, It’s Your Misfortune and None of My Own: A History of the American West (1991), which purported to be a “synthesis” using “old literature and new literature,” the significant transitional quality in The Organic Machine was overlooked.³⁷ In hindsight, It’s Your Misfortune was nothing but a restatement of the antithetical “critical intellect” developed over the past forty years from Smith’s Virgin Land to Patricia Limerick’s The Legacy of Conquest: The Unbroken Past of the American West. It certainly was not a fair combination of the Old and New Western histories dating from the 1890’s. Therefore, it was not a valid synthesis. In contrast, The Organic Machine was precisely just such a synthesis. While still maintaining much of the irony inherent to “critical intellect,” White nevertheless shifted into “unconscious productiveness,” embracing metaphor and realism through his concept of “energy.” “Energy” was both

abstract and physical at the same time. It existed at the root of all historical action. Like Turner's "vital forces," "energy" was the ultimate originating source or the ground to reality to which all living beings and things owed their existence. Those beings and things which possessed more "energy" were often reinvigorated to the point that they came to dominate the physical landscape. That conclusion, though not always consciously made explicit by White but nevertheless consistently implied through his metaphor, matched Turner's thesis. This interaction between "energy" and the visible world, as expressed in The Organic Machine, was White's real synthesis. Metaphor once again usurped irony, realism overpowered nominalism, and western history moved forward into a new era of "unconscious productiveness" as Hegel's dialectic came full circle. White's synthesis, or third aspect of the dialectic, initiated the emergence of a neo-Turnerian revolution.

Nothing evolves from within a vacuum, however, and neither did the dialectic. Other twentieth-century western historians intersected the transition points represented by Turner, Smith, and White, contributing to the intellectual culture as it rotated through "unconscious productiveness" and "critical intellect." In particular, a detailed examination including the work of Donald Worster, William Cronon, Elliott West, and Patricia Limerick is crucial to providing the historical context behind the dialectical transition points. Subsequent to the writings of Turner and Smith, Donald Worster adopted "critical intellect" and strengthened its position within a Marxist framework. While still rooted in an ironic trope, William Cronon unconsciously initiated the return to metaphor and Elliott West, following White's lead, amplified it even further. As for

Patricia Limerick, she signified the moment at which ironic consciousness turned on itself, ultimately motivating her to temper irony with more moderate consensus.

Notes

¹ Patricia Nelson Limerick, Something in the Soil: Legacies and Reckonings in the New West (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2000), 32.

² Lee Clark Mitchell, "Henry Nash Smith's Myth of the West," in Writing Western History: Essays on Major Western Historians, Richard Etulain, ed. (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1991), 263.

³ Ibid., 259.

⁴ Ibid., 253.

⁵ Ibid., 258.

⁶ Henry Nash Smith, Virgin Land: The American West as Symbol and Myth (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1978; originally published 1950), vii.

⁷ Frederick Jackson Turner, "Talk on Sectionalism," Frederick Jackson Turner Papers, Henry E. Huntington Library and Art Gallery, TU Box 14A, Folder 11 (hereafter cited as HEH TU).

⁸ Hayden White, "The Burden of History," Tropics of Discourse: Essays in Cultural Criticism (Baltimore and London: The John Hopkins University Press, 1978), 40.

⁹ Philip Pomper, "Typologies and Cycles in Intellectual History," History and Theory 19 (December 1980): 31.

¹⁰ Hayden White, Metahistory: The Historical Imagination in Nineteenth-Century Europe (Baltimore and London: The John Hopkins University Press, 1973), 88.

¹¹ In Henry Wadsworth Longfellow's "Slave's Dream," consciousness darts away from a supposedly dreaming human body only to reunite with it in the sudden nihilism of death. In Edgar Allen Poe's "The Raven," the initial scene opens with consciousness embedded in the physical organism of the narrator, though a descending slumber is about to disconnect the bond. Consciousness and physical object are temporarily conjoined. By the fourth paragraph, the independence of the soul has strengthened and it steps free of the sleeping body. The soul, not the body, responds to the gentle rapping on the door and opens it to "darkness there and nothing more." As the soul confronts the darkness, the intensity of the vision causes the soul to react, turning it "back into the chamber" and one step closer to reuniting with the physical body. Poe's "The Raven" plays with this relationship between the phenomenal and non-phenomenal worlds.

¹² White, Metahistory.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Kenneth Burke, A Grammar of Motives (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1969), 503-517.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 503.

¹⁶ White, Metahistory, 34.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁸ Pomper, 34.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 35.

²⁰ White, Metahistory, xii.

²¹ Meynick H. Carre, Realists and Nominalists (London: Oxford University Press, 1946). The point of Carre's work is to suggest the major transitions in how these terms were used and adopted.

²² D.M. Armstrong, Universals: An Opinionated Introduction (Boulder: Westener Press, 1989). Armstrong's discussion on the varying types of nominalism provides an excellent introduction to the vast array of nominalist procedures.

²³ Burke, 248.

²⁴ Carre, 7.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 101.

²⁶ Ralph Waldo Emerson, The Complete Writings of Ralph Waldo Emerson, Vol. 1 (New York: Wm. H. Wise & Co., 1929), 306

²⁷ *Ibid.*

²⁸ *Ibid.*

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 311.

³⁰ *Ibid.*

³¹ *Ibid.*, 310.

³² *Ibid.*

³³ Helena Petrovna Blavatsky, Isis Unveiled: A Master-Key to the Mysteries of Ancient and Modern Science and Theology, Vol. 1 (Pasadena: Theosophical University Press, 1950; originally published 1877), 34.

³⁴ In his book, Frontiers of Historical Imagination, Kerwin Klein established the relationship between German philosophy and Turner's historical perspective. It is worth quoting Klein's description of Hegel's dialectic. He wrote, "Here, in rough outline, is Hegel's dialectic. For Hegel history was the story of the developing self-consciousness of what he called absolute spirit, a narrative that overcame the static oppositions of traditional metaphysics without appeal to mysticism or revelation. Opposed forces lifted each other up into higher syntheses, new stages in which both original agonists were simultaneously preserved and transcended and which became the starting point for a new agon. Commentators like Albion Small, one of Turner's professors at Johns Hopkins, frequently reduced dialectic to a rigid logical scheme: Thesis + Anthithesis = Synthesis. But in Hegel's The Phenomenology of Spirit and Lectures on the Philosophy of World History dialectic looks more like a very complex story of the development of human consciousness than a 'ritualistic three-step' of logical method." Klein was clearly correct; Hegel's dialectic was far more complex than a simple three-step method. However, I have chosen to adopt the three-step method because it does faithfully retain the basic concept for tension and resolution. See Kerwin Klein, Frontiers of Historical Imagination: Narrating the European Conquest of Native America, 1890-1990 (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997), 63.

³⁵ Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, The Philosophy of History, trans. J. Sibree (New York: Dover Publications, Inc., 1956).

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ Richard White, It's Your Misfortune and None of My Own: A History of the American West (Norman & London: University of Oklahoma Press, 1991). Also see The Organic Machine: The Remaking of the Columbia River (New York: Hill and Wang, 1995).

CHAPTER 2

THE HISTORIANS

In the present work, the writings of seven major western historians are analyzed to establish the historical context for the dialectical transition points leading through “unconscious productiveness” to “critical intellect” and back to “unconscious productiveness.” The return to the philosophical and poetic roots of “unconscious productiveness,” which covered approximately one hundred years from the 1890’s to 1990’s, signified the emergence of a neo-Turnerian revolution. In order, the historians examined include Frederick Jackson Turner, Henry Nash Smith, Donald Worster, William Cronon, Richard White, Elliott West, and Patricia Limerick. What is being examined is how their respective histories were a byproduct of how they attributed causation to a non-physical property. The ways in which they viewed causation predetermined the outcomes of their analysis. Since that interpretive moment reflected the perspective for how a particular historian viewed the interaction between an unseen force and the visible world, the dialogue for understanding it necessarily turns to a study of the tropes and their corresponding philosophy. This is because the combinations of realism and metaphor, nominalism and irony are the fundamental styles through which historians emplot such a relationship within a text.

These dialectical transition points corresponded to the way historians conceptualized the interaction between the phenomenal and the non-phenomenal under three different

terms. The terms have already been enumerated: the “vital forces” for Turner, “imaginative constructions” for Smith, and “energy” for White. For the sake of continuity, these terms have been adopted throughout the work at hand even when a particular historian did not always identify his conceptualization under that term. For example, Turner’s application of the term “vital forces” in his 1893 thesis conveyed a specific conceptualization for how noumenon and phenomenon interacted. While he may not have resorted to that identical expression in later works, those works were nevertheless based upon the original conceptualization. In the case of Smith, he did not employ the term “imaginative constructions” to capture the relationship between human thought and physical culture until the twentieth anniversary printing of his book in 1970. In hindsight, the term works as a succinct catch-phrase for Smith’s overall conceptualization. As for White’s “energy,” he assumed the term from the outset in The Organic Machine but, at times, substituted the word “power” for “energy.” As to the other historians, Donald Worster conceptualized noumenon and phenomenon in much the same style as Smith, but he refrained from using the term “imaginative constructions.” On the other hand, William Cronon introduced the term “energy” into a historical context and Elliott West later fostered and embraced it. Both of these historians conceptualized “energy” along the same lines as White. Therefore, each one of these three terms, or rather the conceptualization driving the meaning of each expression, represented a distinct paradigm from which the respective historian proceeded to reconstruct history.

In the introduction, an overarching definition was provided for the terms “vital force,” “imaginative construction,” and “energy.” Grouped under the broader categorization of unseen forces, they were described as linguistic devices used by a historian when he

shifted into a style of explanation that established a causal factor which was well outside of the physical senses to be the originating source of a physical effect. To establish a non-physical causal factor, the historian must necessarily turn to realism or nominalism, metaphor or irony. The style of explanation would be either “unconscious productiveness” or “critical intellect.” As such, “vital forces,” “imaginative constructions,” and “energy” were the concrete, manifest expressions conveying an identifiable philosophical and tropal style. Thus, a thorough understanding for how western historians utilized these terms leads one to discover the larger interpretive model behind them. That discovery implies the uncovering of the distinctive nuances between three periods of historical writing, originating with a thesis, progressing to an antithesis, and finally resolving into a synthesis.

From Turner to neo-Turnerian

Frederick Jackson Turner loved collecting. In particular, he assembled a vast menagerie of pamphlets and news clippings which dove-tailed his own historical interests. On closer examination, a number of them also dove-tailed his fundamental conceptualization for how unseen forces interacted with the physical world. Therefore, it would seem that Turner’s concept for the “vital forces” was being developed alongside a broader historical context that promoted a unique, turn-of-the-century metaphorical notion for the relation between noumenal and phenomenal worlds. Tucked into Turner’s files were writings from three men who both influenced Turner as well as were influenced by Turner. They were his contemporaries and colleagues: Woodrow Wilson, Robert La Follette, and Theodore Roosevelt. All three were prominent politicians and

two of them, Wilson and Roosevelt, were historians. In recalling their views, Turner's "vital forces" receive a preliminary degree of contextual clarity.

To begin with, Turner's collection contained a February 1913 copy of Woodrow Wilson's "The New Freedom: A Call for the Emancipation of the Generous Energies of a People."¹ The selection of articles under this title ran serially in World's Work, a publication that reappeared continuously throughout Turner's files, from January to July, 1913. In Wilson's essay, "The Liberation of a People's Vital Energies," extracted from a number of his 1912 campaign addresses and miscellaneous speeches published in book form under the title The New Freedom, his words could have been mistaken for Turner's own.² In the title of the essay, Wilson immediately resorted to language that established a dualism for the human being and the "vital energies" coursing through him. Nowhere in the subsequent essay were these "vital energies" clearly defined. Wilson simply took them for granted. But what he did make clear was their causative impact on historical action. The thrust of Wilson's argument was that these "vital energies" had to be released and utilized for a culture to attain and subsequently retain its strength and vigor. Looking out upon American society through the eyes of its recently elected twenty-eighth president of the United States, he realized that all the "vital energies" of the nation's citizenry had not been emancipated or freed.³ Without complete emancipation, he prophesied the eventual stagnation of an unredeemable America. For Wilson, what happened in society was a delicate balance between how much of these "vital energies" were translated into constructive activity and how much was wasted. A country that failed to manifest these "vital energies" would spiral into decline. What Wilson established in his essay was an interpretation for historical action that depended on the

interplay of “vital energies” and the surrounding physical objects. The “enterprise” of the laborer, the “efficiency” of their factories, the “richness” of their fields, the “wealth” extracted from their land, and the “inventive genius” surging through their “brains” all relied on the liberation of people’s “vital energies.”⁴ For example, if an “enterprise” was to be successful, it required an individual invested with a tendency to risk new ventures, new methods, and new ideas. The investment of those qualities in an individual only occurred if the “vital energies” were released and present in him and his surrounding society. As such, the byproducts of those new ventures, new methods, and new ideas, or, in short, the entire spectrum of culture including institutions, technological innovations, political systems, and religious fervor, emerged only as a result of the “vital energies” fertilizing the mental and physical characteristics within a geographical region. Wilson painted a world that was totally alive on two fronts: the visible and the invisible. The world bustled, brimmed, and moved as a swirl of active interchange between two complementary realms. Wilson’s conceptualization of the unseen in American history corresponded quite closely to Turner’s “vital forces” in the American frontier.

Whether Turner saved this “New Freedom” filing because his attention was directed to it out of respect for his old friendship with Wilson or because its contents resonated so harmoniously with his own writings is unknown. Its inclusion generates no surprise for Wilson was, after all, the newly risen star ascended to the presidency. It is possible that Turner remained completely unaware that Wilson’s reliance on “vital energies” to explain historical causation matched his own. In one conversation with Wilson, however, Turner had timidly asked, “Is society an organism?” Taking Turner to one side, holding his coat lapel, Wilson whispered, “Yes, but keep it in the dark.”⁵ That Turner and Wilson

shared the same views on society as a living organism is clear. It was this theme that Turner embraced so strongly in his 1891 essay, "The Significance of History." In this piece, Turner cited both the propositions of Johann Herder and Auguste Comte: "society grows" and "society is an organism."⁶ This framework resided at the heart of Turner's boldest statement in his later 1893 thesis, "The Significance of the Frontier in American History." He wrote that "behind institutions, behind constitutional forms and modifications, lie the vital forces that call these organs into life and shape them to meet changing conditions."⁷ Society grew precisely because it was an organism and must therefore follow the laws of an organism. That is, it was an entity adapted for living by means of numerous physical and cultural components, but ultimately these components comprised a single larger infrastructure. The differentiated components, covering the vast array of institutions and political structures, had to somehow spring into existence. What caused the development of these various components? Turner replied that "vital forces" called them into existence. For Turner, the sweeping motion of the "vital forces" across the physical landscape nourished society's institutions just as the blood sweeping through the arteries nourished the body's organs. It is not exactly clear *where* these "vital forces" were except they abided *behind* the objects they brought into being. At this point, Turner, like Wilson, left unanswered where these "vital energies" or "vital forces" were and specifically how they commingled with the human organism or physical landscape. But, like Wilson, Turner made explicit what these "vital forces" did. They were the driving force behind all the variations for what humans have come to know as their visible culture. In making that point explicit, Turner, and Wilson after him, attributed historical causation to an unseen, unknown, abstract force.

Without conducting a painstaking, in-depth analysis of all the cultural and ideological idiosyncrasies running through the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the most that can be done to assess why both Turner and Wilson's work was filled with common underlying assumptions about how the physical world interacted with intangible forces is to offer a few brief suggestions. On the small scale, religion might have been a contributing factor. Wilson's Presbyterianism could have been conducive to his acceptance of this idealistic division. Despite its conservative aspect, the Presbyterian church also possessed a less sectarian element emphasizing "spontaneity, vital impulse, and adaptability."⁸ Though raised a Presbyterian, Turner's later adoption of Unitarianism, a denomination which he regarded as a convenience to label his free-thinking propensities, also harmonized with such a visionary duality. But, on an orthodox level, Presbyterianism and Unitarianism diverged. When Wilson had attempted to induce Turner over to Princeton to teach, he could not overcome the refusal of key staff members from this exclusive Presbyterian college to embrace a Unitarian into the faculty.⁹ As a Unitarian, Turner believed he would encounter problems entering into educational institutions, such as Wesleyan University, that were inimical to his religious beliefs. Clearly, what was being objected to in this case, however, was Turner's Unitarian tradition, not his underlying assumption for "vital forces." On the large scale, it appears that the conceptualization of "vital forces" transcended religious issues. The concept may have been embedded into American figures of speech far more than any consensus on religion. Paul Boyer argued that millions of Americans had already broken free of traditional religious restraints by the mid-nineteenth century.¹⁰ The small number of people who expressed lively sentiment in matters of traditional religion were relegated to

orthodox believers. This does not mean the general mass of Americans stopped attending church. It does mean that, despite continuing church attendance, the nature of their belief had been modified. What belief remained for those outside the caste of zealous orthodox adherents was the very simple idea that the soul existed and was an intangible something, though no one knew what, that somehow interacted with the visible world. The idea of a relationship between the tangible and intangible was perpetuated but severed from its Calvinist backdrop. It had been cut away from its secular doctrinaire underpinnings and replaced with high-minded civic ideals. In accord with Boyer, Mina Carson explained that a civic “religion of humanity” had developed by the late 1800’s which, while carrying forward many of the pre-existing moral attitudes, focused on bringing a “higher life” to society without the accompanying sectarian accouterments.¹¹ The emergence of this fresh civic religion coincided with the growth of philosophical Idealism, such as expounded by Josiah Royce, in the United States. In response to the rising materialism of empirical science, philosophical Idealism asserted that the physical world was derived from a spiritual world. To understand the world of phenomenon, one had to look to the realm of the invisible which was its originating causal source. Human thought aspired to capture the essence of spirit and was itself an activity expressing the purpose of the spiritual world.¹² Philosophical Idealism was essentially Hegelian revivalism in the way it viewed the spirit manifesting itself onto the physical landscape. Kerwin Klein was correct in identifying Turner as a Hegelian.¹³ As such, that placed Turner in the midst of Boyer’s shift away from traditional religion towards Carson’s “religion of humanity” and Royce’s philosophical Idealism.

In addition to Woodrow Wilson, another Turner colleague spoke from the same idealistic vision. Buried in Turner's collection of files is a copy of La Follette's newspaper, a devotional to the Progressive agenda of the great Wisconsin Senator, Robert La Follette. Turner had documented his admiration for La Follette as early as 1879 when La Follette delivered his prize-winning oration on "Iago" from William Shakespeare's play, Othello.¹⁴ In this piece, La Follette represented Iago as a "truly supernatural character" that defied "immutable moral laws" and "disrupted cosmic order."¹⁵ That was a pretty tall order for a regular physical human being to fill so La Follette had to elevate Iago, the physical person, into an "Evil Principle" that dominated the action of the play.¹⁶ Consequently, Iago did not merely represent a physical being but also some type of force that worked through that particular body. In this case, that force produced maleficent effects rather than beneficial ones. What La Follette biographer Carl Burgchardt noticed about this interpretation was that it "revealed for the first time his propensity for reducing a complex phenomenon" into a "simple melodramatic scenario where good and evil were clearly contrasted."¹⁷ There was no ethical ambiguity in this scenario for La Follette; there were Evil Principles and Good Principles directing human action and each produced its respective fruit. In the news clipping from La Follette's newspaper, dated February 19, 1910, stands emblazoned the proverb, "Abuse of power may retard, but it cannot suppress a movement based on vital principles."¹⁸ What was implied by "abuse of power" can be easily inferred by reading his speeches, such as the one delivered at the Annual Banquet of the Periodical Publisher's Association in Philadelphia, February 2, 1912.¹⁹ In this oration, he described the periodization of corporate enterprise as it transitioned through four successive stages from Jeffersonian individualism, to the

private corporation, to the combination of corporations, and finally the combination of combinations. With this consolidation came the forfeiture of democratic freedoms which Turner suspected would occur in the twentieth century with the loss of the ever-receding frontier line. But there is insufficient context in La Follette's speeches and writings for what could have been meant by "vital principles." What were they? Why had he made these principles the core of his political ideology? Did a lack of explanation in this case suggest that "vital principles" were simply taken for granted as pre-existing qualities in human life? Had the concept for their existence become so embedded in American language that it required no further elucidation to garner acceptance, even in relation to solely political contexts? It appears that conceptualizations corresponding to Turner's "vital forces" had become so ingrained in the American mind by the early twentieth century that no one questioned why they were there and gave little thought to the fact that they were there at all. The fact that they were present, however, shaped the way in which the early twentieth-century American intellect approached problems of historical causation. From a linguistic and philosophical level at least, "vital energies," "vital forces," and "vital principles" were conceived as transformative agents whose presence or absence could determine the outcome of historical action. Robert La Follette's "vital principles" stood for a set of spiritual qualities which, when actively integrated into human character and institutions, invigorated an otherwise degenerating society.

A third Turner associate, Theodore Roosevelt, shared Turner's idealism when he assumed that history was a study in the interplay between unseen forces and the physical world. Roosevelt, while most notably the twenty-sixth president of the United States, was something of a western historian himself with his publication of the Winning of the West

in 1889. While Richard Slotkin may or may not have been correct about placing Roosevelt's frontier thesis in opposition to Turner's, what is clear is that both men shared common assumptions about the "vital forces" impelling historical action.²⁰ Roosevelt had in fact been one of the earliest proponents of Turner's frontier thesis, writing to Turner on February 10, 1894, that "I think you have struck some first class ideas, and have put into definite shape a good deal of thought which has been floating around rather loosely."²¹ What was not made clear by Roosevelt was where these thoughts were floating, what was their source of propulsion, and the extent of looseness or porosity they exhibited prior to forming a definite shape. What was displayed in this remarkable passage was Roosevelt's fundamental assumption that thoughts underwent some sort of transformation that allowed them to become tangible objects. That had been Turner's own premise when he lectured a group of schoolteachers in 1892: "Thoughts and feelings flow into deeds. Here is the motive power that lies behind institutions."²² This insight originally surfaced in Turner's "The Significance of History," first published in the October-November issue of the 1891 Wisconsin Journal of Education. In that piece, Turner elaborated, "Have you thought of better things, a reform to accomplish? 'Put it in the air'... Ideas have ruled, will rule."²³ One would be hard-pressed to argue that Turner did not take this insight literally. It resurfaced over and over again in most of his writings and talks. For example, in his 1895 "Lake Forest University Lecture," he re-conjured the image, writing, "deeper than the facts of individual life, and political institutions, are the great undercurrents of society, that ocean that moves, and changes, and surges evermore beneath the ships of state that float on its bosom."²⁴ This world of ideas surged, bubbled, and seethed. For Turner and Roosevelt, there was some sort of interaction between this

world, which was left undefined as to its precise contents and qualities, and the phenomenal world. Both men envisioned the process of historical change as part of this interaction between noumenon and phenomenon.

It is perhaps Theodore Roosevelt's speeches delivered during his travels in Europe that show most clearly this interaction between noumenon and phenomenon. In "The World's Development," delivered at Oxford University, Roosevelt tackled the question whether the time of growth for a civilized Britain and United States was coming to an end. He ultimately decided that no one could tell, but what he did make plain was that the eventual determination of events would be guided by "forces that we can see and other forces that are hidden or that can but dimly be apprehended."²⁵ These forces existed in perpetual motion "all around us," working "both for good and for evil."²⁶ What constituted "goodness" for Roosevelt was clarified in his "The Uplift of Nations" delivered at the University of Berlin: peace, justice, morality, ethical development, and a sense of brotherhood. These ideals could only be retained by a nation that continued to exhibit the "virile qualities" that stimulated such traits.²⁷ When these "virile qualities" were absent, another type of quality emerged—one of an "enervating . . . softness" that drained an organism, a human being or a society, of its strength until it degenerated to a point where "barbarism" washed over it.²⁸ This statement mirrored Turner's own view. In a 1925 essay, "The Significance of the Section in American History," Turner asserted that a region, in the process of expanding westwards from the East coast, experienced a temporary rendezvous with the "vital forces," which were subsequently manifested as distinct ideologies and geographic idiosyncrasies. In the brief period when this culmination of forces settled into a region, the evolution of that particular locality

quickened, resulting in a brilliant flowering of culture that slowly disintegrated into recurrent “traditions, memories and inherited insights” possessed by local inhabitants.²⁹

The American West was a moving section for Turner because the “vital forces” energized a new region but oftentimes just as soon vacated it. The remnants of that influence, or Roosevelt’s enervating forces, required additional years for further decay. Once enervation set in, that particular region could no longer be classified as the American West. The true American West was the playground for “vital forces.”

Turner, Wilson , La Follette, and Roosevelt all embraced a concept of historical change that resonated with the same dualistic idealism. Roosevelt’s “virile qualities” acted in the same manner as Wilson’s “vital energies.” La Follette’s “vital principles” functioned just like Turner’s “vital forces.” All four men identified the same process using similar language. If a certain region or institution was possessed of these unseen “vital forces,” it would prosper and produce the type of civilization that reflected an over-arching spiritual quality. If these forces were lacking, the necessary quality to produce that more noble environment would also be absent. The rises and falls within any given society were fundamentally the precise reflections of the ability of that human culture to utilize the life energy of unseen forces. What is most fascinating is that none of these four men ever attempted to transcend, question, or dissect this concept of the “vital forces” in a way that would have given it more complexity.

In Turner’s case, a thorough examination of his private letters to family and friends makes clear that he fell far short of being a mystic searching for the details of a non-phenomenal reality. The existence of these “vital forces” may or may not have been continually on his mind, but he certainly did not struggle to learn enough about them to

determine how an invisible world actually interacted with the physical surroundings. He took their existence and the manner in which they were expressed for granted. Of the four men, Theodore Roosevelt probed the deepest, which was perhaps a result of his Freemasonic affiliation with the Matinecock Lodge No.806, Oyster Bay, New York.³⁰ To some extent, Roosevelt's fraternal membership in the order provided him with a philosophical framework which he then welded into a unique historical vision. But even Roosevelt did not provide any further details on exactly what were the "vital forces" or why they existed at all. In regard to Turner, much of his daily life appears devoid of this philosophic idealism that so openly emerged in his more speculative writings. His letters to his wife, Caroline Mae Sherwood, and daughter, Dorothy Kinsley, demonstrated a down-to-earth frankness that displayed Turner was well-grounded in practical, everyday affairs. Except for an occasional inspired utterance to a colleague (very seldom did such inspiration appear in his family records) unassumingly placed within an otherwise lengthy and factual account, his correspondence was dull and uninspiring. At times a cheerful love nip whisked its way into a family letter, such as his April 27, 1901 message to Mae, "kisses to my own wife and anything else she wants—except riches!"³¹ In general, his correspondence was anything but reminiscent of the sweeping romantic visionary that appeared in his published articles and led such fine men as Ulrich B. Phillips to proclaim, "To F.J. Turner, my first and greatest master, to whom my heart ever turns."³² The man, Frederick Jackson Turner, in everyday life was obviously not that master, but he, like a number of others from his generation, had found a method for conveying certain ideas that inspired and motivated others. Only when he was able to

“spark” so to say and grasp onto that special way of conveying information did Turner rise above the crowd. Otherwise, Turner was in fact rather mundane in his daily affairs.

The uncritical adoption by Turner, Wilson, La Follette, and Roosevelt of the “vital forces” as an integral part of historical process demands categorization. The validity for the inclusion of these elusive forces at the core of their interpretations was never questioned by themselves nor were the details sought out to substantiate their admission as significant factors. Their acceptance was the result of an “unconscious productiveness” on the part of Turner and the others. The usage of the concept was immensely productive because it provided each physical representation with an overarching whole to which any manifestation of visible change could be traced back—“the vital forces.” That made Turner’s writing both realist and metaphorical. The “vital forces” as they intertwined with physical objects in a dance of transformation and change became for Turner the basis of all historical action. That this special dance appeared to be linked with an East to West migration of human beings led some scholars, such as William Coleman, to assert that Turner’s visible “frontier process,” rather than his behind-the-scenes “vital forces,” stood “universal and omnipotent.”³³ But if indeed Turner had accepted the visible frontier process as universal and omnipotent, then it could not also have been subject to the “disruption or change or evolution” which Coleman asserted that Turner attributed to it.³⁴ For nothing that is omnipotent can be acted upon since that would imply the power of disruption and, therefore, causation rested with another source. In a letter to Carl Becker, Turner admitted that the frontier process had limited applications “to certain portions of Old World history, as well as to that of the New, and sometime it will be worked out thus.”³⁵ Beyond the frontier process was the “conception of history as a

complex of all the social sciences . . . the One-ness of the thing” that tied together subjects each as a “phase of the whole,” all the while realizing that it was “only a phase.”³⁶ In fact, what Turner did was initiate a holistic treatment of society as an organism in which specific discontinuities of institutional and cultural subsystems, labeled as the frontier process, were symptoms rather than causes. The continuum in which an infinite amount of division could take place were the “vital forces.” Therefore, what Gerald Nash actually envisioned for the twenty-first-century Western history as a departure from Turner was what Turner himself had already established. That is, the formulation of a “broad generalization” that would explain the “complex interaction between the environment of the West and the culture and values of its occupants.”³⁷ The productiveness achieved by a historian using the concept of “vital forces” was that it pointed to the source of these complex interactions and could be consistently reapplied to each situation; the unconscious part of it was that it escaped the analysis and critical examination necessary to understand exactly what was being done to the historical picture by using the term and yet it continued to be employed by Turner as the mainstay of his world vision.

To categorize Turner’s writing as “unconscious productiveness” is to only explain one of the divisions necessary for the construction of a system of classification. One category demands the existence of at least one other competing category. Any one label implies that there are circumstances that fall outside the body of that definition. In this case, the field outside “unconscious productiveness” has been termed “critical intellect.”³⁸ If Turner and the others of his generation naively and inextricably embedded the concept of “vital forces” into their work, then it is legitimate to establish a category for those who

did not. The simplistic qualities of “unconscious productiveness” would immediately become apparent to those gifted with a more analytic and less idealistic perspective. Rather than creating consensus and support for a historical vision that was holistic yet not very well understood, these upstart individuals would be more concerned with the nuances and complexities of that vision. Instead of building up an accepted historical tradition as “unconscious productiveness” did, the attempt of “critical intellect” would be to shatter its crystallized form and bring human consciousness out of its dream-like reverie. In effect, the child-like perspective of the one would afford material for the analyzing and critical intellect of the other.

This was precisely what happened in the 1950’s. The essential philosophical and linguistic structure behind the “vital forces” was not overturned until Henry Nash Smith’s Virgin Land. It is true that by the late Progressive period in the 1930’s Turner’s assumptions were being challenged. His realism and metaphor had embedded into the perception of American character a special exceptionalist quality which later Progressives, influenced by profound disillusionment subsequent to America’s involvement in the First World War, denounced.³⁹ But there was no singular, popular work which overthrew his conceptualization of “vital forces.” After Turner’s 1893 frontier thesis, the most important work prior to Smith was Walter Prescott Webb’s The Great Plains (1931). If anything, Webb’s interpretation ultimately supported Turner, not Smith. Although Webb was clearly more of a materialist than Turner, Elliott West was correct to emphasize Webb’s intuitive prowess when it came to historical vision. Webb acknowledged there was an “instant” when one could apprehend a connection among facts that “illuminated more-far more-than the facts themselves.”⁴⁰ West

commented that this kind of vision, which Webb called “patterns of truth,” was “not history in the usual sense.”⁴¹ Webb’s confession that there existed a “mystery of the influence of the plains” was driven by his feel for these “patterns of truth” behind the American West.⁴² The plains were the American West for Webb and he recognized their exceptionalist quality. The West was different in that its inhabitants underwent such a “sense of change, bodily and mental . . . a wonderful exhilaration” that it “lifted man above himself.”⁴³ Something fresh and alive coursed through the western man. Webb wrote:

When the Easterner came in contact with this man of the West, whose vision had been enlarged by a distant and monotonous horizon, whose custom it was to live and work on horseback, and who carried at his side the power of life and death over his adversaries, the Easterner was at once impressed with the feeling that he had found something new in human beings.⁴⁴

For Webb, the mystery of the American West was this “something new” in human beings. He intuited its existence but did not attempt to prove it. He possessed a feel for this interaction between a larger unknown force and the physical westerner, considering it important enough to close his book with the theme. In hindsight, the interaction between noumenon and phenomenon was “problematical and mysterious” because, as Kenneth Burke explained in A Grammar of Motives, “wherever we find a distinction between the internal and the external, the intrinsic and the extrinsic, the within and the without . . . we can expect to encounter the paradoxes of substance.”⁴⁵ The paradox was that each time one scrutinized the concept of substance, or the interaction of noumenon and phenomenon, it “dissolved into thin air.”⁴⁶ Conversely, the moment one relaxed his gaze a bit, “it re-formed again.”⁴⁷ Webb saw deeply enough into this paradox to admit of its presence while at the same time maintaining his distance so as to avoid entanglement.

That Webb's successors in the post-1950's were not as wise led them to launch a full-scale assault on the paradox of substance, claiming that an interaction between noumenon and phenomenon did not exist as such. In the end, the paradox won out. The paradox states that those who attempt to avoid using unseen forces will become entangled in them and those who do use unseen forces will never be able to define them clearly. Historians after Webb became so determined to deny the existence of unseen forces that they became hopelessly entangled in using them. At those points in which their logic broke down in terms of historical causality, the paradox reasserted itself and a dual relationship between unseen forces and the physical world emerged encoded into their works.

In line with Turner and Webb, Smith did recognize a dichotomy between the phenomenal and non-phenomenal. He asserted that "men could not engage in purposive group behavior without images which simultaneously expressed collective desires and imposed coherence."⁴⁸ This statement contained all three tropal styles conducive to Turnerian metaphor and antithetical to irony. Smith's analysis involved metaphor because "images" and their physical representations as "purposive group behavior" could be traced onto one another. They were the same thing. It was metonymic because the "images" were responsible for "imposing coherence." It was synecdochic because an image expressed "collective desires." From this perspective, history, for Smith, was still about the relationship between unseen forces and the physical world. But where Smith diverged from Turner centered on the context in which he enveloped that statement. It was through that context that he assaulted the paradox of substance, attempting to negate on a figurative level what Turner affirmed on a literal level. On a literal level, Turner had assumed that the "vital forces" were real absolutes, existing in fact and not merely

seeming to exist for certain human beings. What Smith did was negate on a figurative level what Turner had assumed quite literally. That is, Smith reconfigured the noumenal world. Substituting “imaginative constructions,” which were treated as mutable figments of the human mind, for “vital forces,” the noumenal world lost its place as an objective reality. This reconfiguration took place because, as Gene Wise noted, men like Smith were not certain that the Progressives “could see straight into realities.”⁴⁹ Consequently, they reconfigured noumena as “myths, symbols, and images.”⁵⁰ These myths, symbols, and images which for Smith constituted his “imaginative constructions” were viewed as representative of reality rather than the ground to reality itself. Therefore, on a figurative level, the figures of speech that captured an ultimate reality disappeared in Smith’s work. Myths and symbols emerged from human action and subsequently impinged on it as outside unseen forces, but those myths and symbols had become relative to a culture and its values. It is primarily this revision of Turner’s dualism on a figurative level that allows Smith to be classified as an early ironic historian functioning from a “critical intellect” framework. Smith’s use of metaphor was severely tempered by an overriding ironic agenda set up to disprove the validity of metaphor. His methodology was in contradiction with itself. In attempting to deny one level of explanation, Smith became entangled in the “paradox of substance.”

The historical profession of the post-1950’s was shaped as much by Henry Nash Smith as the pre-1950’s had been shaped by Frederick Jackson Turner. An array of books that reissued Smith’s basic philosophy appeared on the market. Leo Marx’s The Machine in the Garden (1964) explored the “region of culture where literature, general ideas, and certain products of the collective imagination meet.”⁵¹ William H.

Goetzmann's Exploration and Empire (1966) detailed how western explorers "sent back to eastern dominant culture a set of images turned into myth and subsequent attitudes towards new land."⁵² Edward White followed the same line of thought in The Eastern Establishment and the Western Experience (1968), explaining that adventuresome young men from the East possessed of an "adolescent consciousness of alternative possibilities" traveled West and then returned home as prodigal sons to reshape the "imaginative" focus on the West.⁵³ With the aid of his son, William H. Goetzmann completed his career along this line of reasoning in 1986 with The West of the Imagination, a piece which demonstrated how images were constantly reinterpreted as contact with the environment changed.⁵⁴ Even Earl Pomeroy who had discarded these dual figures of speech by time The Pacific Slope appeared in 1966 had previously been charmed enough to have pursued a brief encounter with them in his In Search of the Golden West (1957) which attempted to measure "what the West meant to tourists and those natives who lost it."⁵⁵ It obviously meant something different to each group and their specific views created certain effects which subsequently impinged on human lifestyles. In his prize-winning book, Dust Bowl (1979), Donald Worster went to innumerable troubles to prove that the patterns of human thought contributed towards the tragedy of the 1930's.⁵⁶ But Henry Nash Smith's ironic vision particularly culminated in Patricia Limerick's The Legacy of Conquest (1987), a work that epitomized an age of criticism and self-consciousness, even expanding its broad wit to encompass a moralistic judgment on Stephen Douglas's waistline.⁵⁷ Her work focused on the images that white Americans constructed as they moved into the western states. Then she set about testing the validity of these images and how they were terribly imperfect copies of physical reality.

At the moment complete success seemed imminent for this new critical version of western history as scholars like Donald Worster made heroes out of himself and his revisionist colleagues, “We have been rewriting the study [of history] from page one and watching it be accepted... I think it is time we acknowledged the achievement,” *something happened*.⁵⁸ The death blow to Smith’s historical relativism struck just as it was about to establish its own legacy of conquest. Patricia Limerick could claim that New Western history, which had predominantly grown out of the New Left social history of the 1960’s and Smith’s “myth and symbol” school, was fundamentally a “free-for-all, not a party line of political correctness,” but a thorough reading of Richard White’s *It’s Your Misfortune and None of My Own* (1991) in which he engraved Limerick’s theoretical hypothesis into textbook dogma would show that words do not always square with the facts.⁵⁹ The New Western history had crystallized around specific assumptions; scholars and society in general had accepted them. These assumptions were now about to experience the first rumblings of change.

What happened in the 1990’s was a neo-Turnerian revolution. The conceptualization for “vital forces” as a ground to reality, and emplotted through a metaphorical trope, re-emerged as the overarching historical construct that subsumed “imaginative constructions” beneath it. Only now the “vital forces” were discussed under the new term of “energy.” No one really understood what “energy” meant any more than Turner understood what the “vital forces” meant. And yet it was placed at the root of all historical action and embedded into both the scene and the actors in the same manner that Turner and the Progressives embedded the “vital forces” into machinery, agriculture, towns, and people themselves. The acceptance of “energy” on blind faith suggests that

these scholars had begun a shift away from “critical intellect” towards the “unconscious productiveness” that had marked the development of Turner’s thought. “Critical intellect” had functioned on nominalist principles which did not allow overarching generalizations in historical interpretation. Irony, as a nominalist tool, generally denied those overarching generalizations from a figurative level. How human beings thought about their environment still remained an important part of historical dialogue, but those thought structures became dependent on how organisms absorbed “energy” and translated it into action. How human beings constructed images, rather than merely being interpreted in regard to a culture and its own values, became an effect of these new absolute laws of “energy.” This assumption regarding “energy” meant the fruit of human action had to be interpreted from a mechanistic standpoint rather than a relativistic standpoint. For example, if an organism took in a certain amount of “energy,” it could do certain things. And it could do those things better than an organism that did not take in that amount of “energy.” The implication of this is that the value of “imaginative constructions” could now be measured based upon the amount of “energy” absorbed by the organism, whether societal or individual. This replicated Turner’s basic concept for “vital forces” moving into a region, energizing it, and then leaving it, resulting in its deterioration into a shadow of its former self. The human being still fabricated his own imaginative environment as a byproduct of his physical actions, but the concept of “energy” allowed the picture to be reversed once again where overriding unseen forces translated into physical action first. From this perspective, physical reality resumed its position as an accurate reflection of an ultimate ground to reality, “energy.”

In William Cronon's Nature's Metropolis: Chicago and the Great West (1991), it was his attempt to understand why human beings such as himself had created variant "imaginative constructions" that drew distinctions between the city as unnatural and the countryside as natural that led him to stumble across nineteenth-century convictions for the existence of a "superhuman energy" that seemed to radiate from cities, an "energy" that human beings might try to "manipulate or control" but never "create."⁶⁰ This "energy" at its source was independent of "imaginative constructions" and it could manifest itself through an object in the visible world such as a city or town prior to being shaped by physical action. For late nineteenth-century Chicagoans, the city "became almost a force of nature itself."⁶¹ That Cronon accepted the city as this "force of nature" was made quite clear by his own merging of city and countryside into nature. As nature's "energy," unseen forces could shape cities prior to being shaped by human thought. It does not require a wild leap of faith to envision Woodrow Wilson's "vitality of America" being superimposed by Cronon onto Chicago in the "efficiency" of its meat packers, the "richness" of its lumber resources, and the "enterprise" of the grain industry that "brought a new human order to the country west of the Great Lakes."⁶² Just as Wilson noted that "American vitality" existed in whatever region human beings possessed enough "innovative genius" to successfully extract from nature its wealth, so Cronon demonstrated that Chicago remained the "gateway city" only so long as its markets were efficient, bountiful, and enterprising. Or, simply stated, full of "energy." That Chicago declined by the 1890's suggested those qualities no longer resided in that region, leaving behind amidst "metropolitan vice" decaying memories of the city's lost past.⁶³

If William Cronon's own conflicted struggle between metaphor and irony prevented him from openly adopting the concept of "energy" at the core of his world view, it was only a sign of the times. By the early 1990's, historians had begun the preliminary shift away from "critical intellect" and back to "unconscious productiveness." Cronon was the initial transition point. But if Cronon could not so easily give up the past nor fully embrace the future, it would not take long before another historian did. In sharp contrast to his previous books, The Roots of Dependency (1983) and It's Your Misfortune and None of my Own (1991), that adopted the popular assessment that "imaginative constructions" led to differences among groups of people, Richard White reversed his position in The Middle Ground (1991) by demonstrating that whites and Indians had constructed a "common mutually comprehensible world."⁶⁴ This suggested that "imaginative constructions" were not always divisive but sometimes unifying. While that unity did not suggest White had necessarily established an ultimate ground to reality to which these common perceptions pointed, it did suggest a reversion to a holistic approach where "imaginative constructions" were not always disconnecting groups of people from one another. This new perspective set the stage for his 1995 groundbreaking work, The Organic Machine, which argued for an Indian-white world that was connected in a way historians had not seen before—at least not since Turner. In this case, White openly acknowledged that "energy" was the connecting force. He did not employ the concept of "energy" from any critical analysis that it might provide, but because "energy" was such a "protean and useful concept."⁶⁵ For White, the concept of "energy" was a productive tool just vague enough to be useful in almost any circumstance. As he wrote in his introduction, "Seen in one way, energy is an abstraction; seen another it is as concrete as

salmon, human bodies, and the Grand Coulee Dam.”⁶⁶ That definition encompassed the entire spectrum ranging from the phenomenal to the non-phenomenal. Just as Wilson’s “vital energies” expressed themselves in American factories, so White’s “energy” expressed itself in the Grand Coulee Dam. Just as Roosevelt’s “virile qualities” manifested through strong men and women, so White’s “energy” became “power” in human bodies and salmon. Just as Turner’s “vital forces” lay behind institutions, so White’s “energy” lay behind the human labor that created those institutions. What White did was shift from the “critical intellect” of the previous generation into an “unconscious productiveness” that sought to produce fresh insights rather than merely critique old ones. Unlike William Cronon who apologized for the extreme ambiguities in his own usage of the term “nature,” Richard White offered no such apologies.⁶⁷ He simply took “energy” for granted, placed it at the heart of the Columbia River, and jumped in! White had no more idea or clarification for what “energy” was than did Turner know what were the “vital forces.” Of course, White never completely retreated from certain relativist principles in that he insisted on seeing history “more and more” in terms of “relationships” but, through the conceptualization of “energy,” he implanted an absolute ground to reality beneath those relationships.⁶⁸ “Energy” transcended both culture and values. These relationships coalesced only as “energy” translated into physical action.

If Richard White took William Cronon’s nineteenth-century concept of “energy” and extended it one step further, then it was Elliott West who took that concept and made it into the whole of history. That he would eventually do so was first made apparent in The Way to the West (1995), a collection of revised essays from a 1993 lecture series. In his first selection, “Land,” he wrote, quoting Lewis Thomas, “The astonishing thing

about the earth . . . is that it is alive.”⁶⁹ Reminiscent of Turner’s and Wilson’s discussion, no longer would historians have to whisper in the dark their sentiments favoring a living earth for fear of critical backlash. Unlike Cronon who stated what nineteenth-century convictions were and then carefully masked his own views behind them, West openly adopted those convictions as his own, utilized them to explain historical action, and then went on to receive overwhelming praise from his colleagues for his penetrative historical insight. On the back of the dust jacket of his The Contested Plains (1998), Patricia Limerick had written, “West’s gifts at historical interpretation, especially in the discovery of the ties between events in the human mind and events in material reality, will set the standard for the historical profession.”⁷⁰ What Limerick missed in her brief statement was that his work did not so much reinterpret the ties between the human mind and material reality as it placed a new, overarching construct on them. Like the “myth and symbol” school which preceded him, West admitted of a “perceived environment” that consisted of “everything” an organism was “aware of in its surroundings.”⁷¹ This “perceived environment” was representational only since a “part” of it did not exist in “fact.”⁷² The mind often created false impressions of material reality. But this was the standard fare over the last fifty years since Smith and not deserving of an acclamation of “discovery” that Limerick pretended it was. Where West did indeed differ was in his adoption of an “effective environment” consisting of “everything that actually influenced” an organism and everything that the organism “in turn affected.”⁷³ Through its perceptions, an organism could shape the environment but there also existed influences that functioned prior to the imaging process. An “effective environment” accommodated both possibilities. Since it accounted for each historical possibility,

West's "effective environment," like Turner's "vital forces," served as an ultimate ground to reality. For West, those influences that went unperceived but were nevertheless real were "energy" itself. He wrote, "part of an effective environment is the energy that moves continuously around us. All organisms draw on that energy, convert it, and use it in order to live."⁷⁴ Organisms converted "energy" and used it, but did not originate it. That insight was in line with Cronon's earlier insight that human beings might try to manipulate or control a city's "energy" but never create it. "Energy" became the thing that allowed "every human event" to take place.⁷⁵ In this case, West's real contribution that set the standard for the historical profession was the relating of mind and matter back to an ultimate source. Each living thing could apply "energy" in "only a few of many available ways" depending on an organism's ability to contain it; that was a literal re-rendering of Turner and Roosevelt's nineteenth-century "vital forces" and West adopted it wholesale.⁷⁶ What West had dropped from Smith's "myth and symbol" school was the ironic figurative denial of that literal re-rendering. The way in which "energy" was able to be applied became the cause of all physical action.

At this point, two distinct camps of American thought have been identified. In the ways already described, William Cronon, Richard White, and Elliott West all participated in Turner's vision for a top-down process for the interaction between noumenon and phenomenon. Physical effects were traced back to their originating primal source. An unseen source preceded physical types. In the case of Henry Nash Smith and his adherents, the process was generally reversed. Antecedent physical reality evolved thoughts and representations that supposedly were mistakenly endowed by humans with primal qualities. Thoughts could subsequently influence physical society, but their source

of origin was in that physical society itself. This was a bottom-up process. What significance should be attributed to the fact that the recurrence of a top-down theory for this dualism was spaced a hundred years apart at the close of each century is open to debate. But it did recur. Even Donald Worster who so passionately distanced himself from Turner conceded that “nature was mainly a set of cycles, a tireless repetition of old ideas.”⁷⁷ The use of the general terms “unconscious productiveness” and “critical intellect” have been an attempt to capture these two camps of American thought.

With the dialectic having come full-circle, this brings us back to Turner’s love of collecting. And it brings us back to his collection of materials containing the writings of Woodrow Wilson, Theodore Roosevelt, and Robert La Follette that addressed the interaction of noumenon and phenomenon in very similar ways. Hayden White argued that people made sense of history “by endowing what originally appears to be problematical and mysterious with the aspect of a recognizable, because it is a familiar, form.”⁷⁸ There is a point in historical narrative at which causation is necessarily given over to unseen forces. A few intensely materialistic historians have managed to evade that point for the most part, but they have never been able to free themselves completely. As Kenneth Burke noted, “only by systematically dwelling upon the paradoxes of substances [noumenon and phenomenon] could we possibly equip ourselves to guard against the concealment of ‘substantialist’ thought in schemes overtly designed to avoid it.”⁷⁹ A pronounced aversion to an idealistic dualism often leads historians to unknowingly embrace a disguised version of such a dualism. Thus, the dualism between noumenon and phenomenon has never really been absent from historical interpretation. The problematical and mysterious nature of the “paradox of substance” has always been

part of the historical profession. It is simply that the problematic nature of such a difficult issue has been masked by enshrouding it in recognizable forms. These forms become so familiar and comfortable within the prevailing culture that they are taken for granted. Familiarity closes off further inquiry into the validity of the interpretations that the forms necessarily give to us. A culture begins to feel comfortable with the tropes it has adopted. Over time, the repetition of the trope becomes the explanation itself. Progressives like Turner, Wilson, Roosevelt, and La Follette embodied the mysterious under the same philosophical and linguistic form. The form itself might not satisfactorily explain anything nor might the historians even understand what it meant. But the historians and their generation would recognize the form, if not the significance, and would be comfortable with it. That allowed it to become part of the “explanation” of history.⁸⁰ The linguistic and philosophical form became the answer rather than the facts. For whatever reason, perhaps a change in character of the people, that form over time became unrecognizable to the ideological preconceptions of a new generation. People were no longer comfortable with that form as the correct perception of the way things really were. “Critical intellect” developed as an attempt to escape the “paradox of substance.” But every terminology only lends itself to the creation of a new recognizable form of its own. That new form became the tool of explanation in Smith’s “myth and symbol” school and in the New Western history. For Hayden White, the “explanation” of historical events on these terms was the “fictionalization” of history.⁸¹ The explanation form of explanation merely reflected that point at which human consciousness felt comfortable in its surroundings; “explanation” for either group represented the point at which inquiry stopped. That was because the process of how people make sense of the world—that is,

by attaining to recognizable forms and not necessarily by attaining to an actual objective knowledge of reality—had been completed. Turner's collection displayed one of two possible forms for delineating the relationship between unseen forces and the physical world.

Notes

All references to Frederick Jackson Turner's essays are found in Rereading Frederick Jackson Turner, ed. John Mack Faragher (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1994) unless otherwise noted.

¹ "The New Freedom," HEH, TU file drawer 17A, Folder 6.

² Woodrow Wilson, The New Freedom: A Call for the Emancipation of the Generous Energies of a People, intro. William E. Leuchtenburg (New Jersey: Englewood Cliffs, 1961).

³ Ibid., 166-167.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Frederick Jackson Turner to Andrew C. McLaughlin, 8 June 1927, as quoted in Wilbur R. Jacobs, The Historical World of Frederick Jackson Turner (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1968), 142.

⁶ Turner, "The Significance of History," 18.

⁷ Turner, "The Significance of the Frontier in American History," 31.

⁸ Lefferts A. Loetscher, The Broadening Church: A Study of Theological Issues in the Presbyterian Church since 1869 (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1957), 1-9.

⁹ David E. Cronon, "Woodrow Wilson, Frederick Jackson Turner, and the State Historical Society of Wisconsin," Wisconsin Magazine of History 71, no. 4 (1988): 300. Also, see Loetscher's The Broadening Church, 14. Loetscher made it clear that Presbyterianism and Unitarianism differed so radically in their theology that a Presbyterian minister whose teachings even vaguely resembled Unitarianism could be accused of "heresy" and removed from his position.

¹⁰ Paul Boyer, Urban Masses and the Moral Order in America, 1820-1920 (Cambridge and London: Harvard University Press, 1978).

¹¹ Mina Carson, Settlement Folk: Social Thought and the American Settlement Movement, 1885-1930 (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1990), 198. For a discussion of the early marginalization of the church, see Nancy Cott, The Bonds of Womanhood: "Women's Sphere" in New England, 1780-1835 (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1977).

¹² Bhagwan B. Singh, The Self and the World in the Philosophy of Josiah Royce (Springfield: Charles C. Thomas Publications, 1973), 7.

¹³ Klein, Frontiers of Historical Imagination, 63.

¹⁴ Ronald Carpenter, The Eloquence of Frederick Jackson Turner (San Marino: The Huntington Library, 1983), 219-225.

¹⁵ Carl Burgchardt, Robert M. La Follette, Sr.: The Voice of Conscience (New York: Greenwood Press, 1992), 15.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Ibid., 20.

¹⁸ La Follette's newspaper, HEH, TU File Drawer 16A, folder 11.

¹⁹ Robert La Follette, La Follette's Autobiography (Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1960) 322-342.

²⁰ Richard Slotkin, "Nostalgia and Progress: Theodore Roosevelt's Myth of the Frontier," American Quarterly 33, no. 5 (1981): 608-637. It must noted that, like Turner and Wilson, Roosevelt was also raised within the Presbyterian church.

²¹ Theodore Roosevelt to Frederick Jackson Turner, 10 February 1894, HEH, TU Box 1, Folder 55.

²² John D. Hicks, "Wisconsin Press Issues Writings of F.J. Turner," The Summer Cardinal 2, no. 7 (12 July 1938): 1-2, HEH, TU Box 60, Folder 1.

²³ Turner, "The Significance of History," 29.

²⁴ Turner, "Some Sociological Aspects of American History: Lake Forest University Lecture," (1895), HEH, TU File Drawer 15A, Folder 4, No. 1.

²⁵ Theodore Roosevelt, "The World's Development," Theodore Roosevelt's Speeches in Europe (New York: C.S. Hammond & Company, Publishers, date unknown), 119.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Roosevelt, "The Uplift of Nations," Theodore Roosevelt's Speeches in Europe, 68.

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Turner, "The Significance of Sections in American History," 202.

³⁰ Chicago Scottish Rite Magazine, (May 1965): 73.

³¹ Frederick Jackson Turner to Caroline Mae Sherwood Turner, 27 April 1901, HEH, TU Box F, Folder 27.

³² Merrill A. Crissey to Caroline Mae Sherwood Turner subsequent to Frederick Jackson Turner's passing, undated, HEH, TU Box 47, Folder 62.

³³ William Coleman, "Science and Symbol in the Turner Frontier Hypothesis," American Historical Review 72, no. 1 (1966): 23.

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ Frederick Jackson Turner to Carl Becker, 1 December 1925, as quoted in Ray Allen Billington, The Genesis of the Frontier Thesis: A Study in Historical Creativity (San Marino: The Huntington Library, 1971), 233.

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ Gerald D. Nash, Creating the West: Historical Interpretations, 1890-1990 (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico, 1991), 417.

³⁸ Again, I am indebted to Helena Petrovna Blavatsky's choice of the term "critical intellect."

³⁹ David Wrobel, The End of American Exceptionalism: Frontier Anxiety from the Old West to the New Deal (Kansas: University of Kansas, 1993).

⁴⁰ Elliott West, "Walter Prescott Webb and the Search for the West," in Richard W. Etulain, ed., Writing Western History: Essays on Major Western Historians (Albuquerque University of New Mexico, 1991), 177.

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² Walter Prescott Webb, The Great Plains (New York: Grosset and Dunlap, 1931), 489.

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ Ibid., 495.

⁴⁵ Burke, A Grammar of Motives, 47.

⁴⁶ Ibid., 56.

⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸ Smith, Virgin Land, ix.

⁴⁹ Gene Wise, American Historical Explanations: A Strategy for Grounded Inquiry (Homewood: The Dorsey Press, 1973), 84.

⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁵¹ Leo Marx, The Machine in the Garden: Technology and the Pastoral Ideal in America (New York: Oxford University Press, 1964), 4.

⁵² William H. Goetzmann, Exploration and Empire: The Explorer and the Scientist in the Winning of the American West (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1966), x.

⁵³ G. Edward White, The Eastern Establishment and the Western Experience: The West of Frederick Remington, Theodore Roosevelt, and Owen Wister (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1968), 71. In Richard Hofstadter's The Age of Reform, he recognized a unique youth mentality developing by the late 1890's and leading into the early twentieth century. Youths had a "quickening sense of the inequities, injustices, and fundamental wrongs" during this period. See Hofstadter, The Age of Reform: From Bryan to FDR (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1955), 164-166.

⁵⁴ William H. Goetzmann and William N. Goetzmann, The West of the Imagination (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1986).

⁵⁵ Earl Pomeroy, The Pacific Slope: A History of California, Oregon, Washington, Idaho, Utah, and Nevada (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1966) Also see Pomeroy's In Search of the Golden West: The Tourist in Western America (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1957).

⁵⁶ Donald Worster, Dust Bowl: The Southern Plains in the 1930's (New York: Oxford University Press, 1979).

⁵⁷ Patricia Nelson Limerick, The Legacy of Conquest: The Unbroken Past of the American West (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1987), 92. In regard to Stephen Douglas, Limerick wrote, "It is no doubt added to the effectiveness of this speech that Douglas's own appearance complemented the metaphor. He was very short—and did not grow longitudinally over time—but he did, through the 1850's, encapsulate the drama of national expansion through the middle. No one put a hoop around Stephen Douglas; no one said, 'Thus far and no further,' and, judging from the photographs, a hardworking tailor evidently performed for Douglas's waistlines the same function Douglas performed for the nation—freeing it of the constrictions and boundaries of earlier compromises." Limerick would do well to remember that satire cuts both ways and, in the end, is unfair to everyone. Shall we discuss the waistlines of prominent female figures during the 1800's? Or would that be considered insensitive by New Western standards?

⁵⁸ Donald Worster, "Beyond the Agrarian Myth," Trails: Toward a New Western History, ed. Patricia Nelson Limerick, Clyde A. Milner II, and Charles E. Rankin (Kansas: University Press of Kansas, 1991), 7. A fascinating study would be to uncover

the extent to which New Western historians, such as Donald Worster, Patricia Limerick, William Cronon, and Richard White, colluded with one another in deciding how they were going to go about “revising” American West history. That there was some degree of collusion in establishing the New Western paradigm is clearly evident.

⁵⁹ White, It's Your Misfortune and None of My Own: A History of the American West.

⁶⁰ William Cronon, Nature's Metropolis: Chicago and the Great West (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1991), 13.

⁶¹ Ibid.

⁶² Ibid., 97.

⁶³ Ibid., 350.

⁶⁴ White, It's Your Misfortune and None of My Own. Also see Richard White's The Roots of Dependency: Subsistence, Environment, and Social Change among the Choctaws, Pawnees, and Navajos (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1983). Finally, see White's The Middle Ground: Indians, Empires, and Republics in the Great Lakes Region, 1650-1815 (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1991). In the last work, it is true that a “common mutually comprehensible world” was created, but it also true that such a world subsequently fell apart.

⁶⁵ White, The Organic Machine, ix.

⁶⁶ Ibid.

⁶⁷ Cronon, Nature's Metropolis, xix.

⁶⁸ White, The Organic Machine, ix.

⁶⁹ Elliott West, “Land,” The Way to the West: Essays on the Central Plains (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1995), 13.

⁷⁰ Elliott West, The Contested Plains: Indians, Goldseekers, and the Rush to Colorado (Kansas: University Press of Kansas, 1998).

⁷¹ Ibid., xix.

⁷² Ibid.

⁷³ Ibid.

⁷⁴ Ibid., xxi.

⁷⁵ West, The Contested Plains, 332.

⁷⁶ Ibid.

⁷⁷ Donald Worster, Rivers of Empire: Water, Aridity, and the Growth of the American West (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985), 261.

⁷⁸ Hayden White, "The Historical Text as Literary Artifact," Tropics of Discourse: Essays in Cultural Criticism (Baltimore and London: The John Hopkins University Press, 1978), 98.

⁷⁹ Burke, The Grammar of Motives, 57.

⁸⁰ White, "The Historical Text as Literary Artifact," Tropics of Discourse, 99.

⁸¹ Ibid.

CHAPTER 3

THESIS

Not one of Frederick Jackson Turner's essays can be properly understood without taking into account how he embedded unseen forces in his work. Turner's historical writings consistently presented the frontier in terms of an interaction between an underlying ground to reality rooted in an invisible world and a surface physical reality rooted in a visible world. The main flaw that Hayden White saw in such historical writing was that it merely "assumed a world view" and then treated it "as if it were a cognitively responsible philosophical position."¹ In contrast, philosophers of history developed a philosophy wherein its logic validated the historical-ness of its world view. Turner was partially guilty of this flaw for merely assuming a world view consisting of "vital forces." He adopted the realist world view of his time and enwrapped it in a metaphorical tropal language most conducive to its expression. To vindicate Turner, Kerwin Klein masterfully uncovered clear philosophical underpinnings drawn from German historicism that Turner adapted to confirm his world view.² Nineteenth-century German historicism functioned from the premise of a dualist idealism and Turner's dichotomy of "vital forces" and the physical world was simply the American extension.³ Peter Hans Reill demonstrated how Wilhelm Von Humboldt, the founder of German historicism, drew on Enlightenment Vitalism in treating physical action as an "immanent principle of self-movement whose sources lay in active powers residing within matter itself."⁴ In his

1821 essay, "On the Historian's Task," Humboldt established the historical relationship between noumenon and phenomenon.

The historian's task is to present what actually happened. An event, however, is only partially visible in the world of the senses. To only look at outward events and not actual inner truth would mean choosing actual error in order to escape the potential danger of error. The truth of any event is predicated on the addition of that invisible part of every fact.⁵

Humboldt continued, stressing that certain individuals and nations were, at various times, able to manifest more of a spiritual idea than other people or countries. In fact, individuals and nations might leave behind records of grand deeds and events but more important than these accomplishments was the "spiritual individuality" they impressed on the landscape.⁶ That this "spiritual individuality" could only be "recognized in the events themselves" meant that Humboldt was encoding the relationship between noumenon and phenomenon as metaphor.⁷ For Humboldt, "spiritual individuality" could be collapsed into physical action, thereby merging them into a homogeneity. Successive German historicists, and some of their American counterparts who were influenced by them, never abandoned Humboldt's underlying concept. And neither did Turner. Turner's 1891 "The Significance of History" was a serious attempt to underpin the idealism of his world view with a cognitively responsible philosophical position drawn from the German historical school. But not only was this essay his only serious attempt to construct a cognitively responsible philosophical position but it also fell far short of providing a clearly defined terminology for understanding immanent spiritual principles and outward manifestations. As a result, Turner's work took for granted the use of philosophical realism and tropal metaphor as the familiar form acceptable to the Progressive "zeitgeist," or spirit of the age, for constructing historical interpretation. This familiar

form, or what has been labeled “unconscious productiveness,” was what distinguished Turner’s frontier theory as the initial thesis of a three-pronged dialectic running through the course of the twentieth century.

Frederick Jackson Turner

Georg Friedrich Hegel maintained that history was the “prose representation of a dialectical interchange between externality and internality, as that interchange was *lived*.”⁸ For him, the process of life itself was dual. Therefore, historians, in attempting to capture life’s processes, must embed this fundamental division into their work. No better example for Hegel’s argument can be offered than by presenting an overview of Craig Miner’s preface in West of Wichita (1986). Miner envisioned historical research not merely as a procedure of “reading and writing” but also as the expenditure of a tremendous “emotional energy.”⁹ In this case, the phenomenal signifiers of physical action, reading and writing, accompanied the non-phenomenal signifier of emotional energy. Miner explained that the motivation for writing his book “came not from documents” but from “my strong sense of the High Plains of Kansas as a special and powerful region, a sense that has been part of my consciousness since childhood.”¹⁰ From these statements, Miner considered historical writing as much a noumenal process as a phenomenal process. Some sort of vague, emotional energy was integrated into the very process of reading and writing. In addition, a non-phenomenal sense, as part of his consciousness, drove him to complete the manuscript. In line with Hegel, Miner clarified that, at least for him, the process of living was an interchange between externality and internality. But Miner did not stop there. Miner subsequently transposed the existence

for a two-fold process to life itself onto his contextualization of Kansas history. For example, he stated that western Kansas existed “partly as a feature of the planet and partly in the psyches of those who saw it.”¹¹ Here Miner suggested, though he did not sufficiently carry the suggestion through the scope of his book, that western Kansas was a physical object subject to sensory perception but also that it abided in a non-sensory world, in relation to the phenomenal, possessing a life of its own separate from any immediate physical contact. Miner concluded, “I sense that the blue hills seen always on a limitless horizon . . . has had as important an effect on my father’s character and outlook as they had had on his father’s or his grandfather’s and that the lack of everyday proximity would not keep the blue hills from also swaying me.”¹² Irregardless of his physical proximity to the blue hills, the perpetual ennobling influence of the idea of them would, entirely independent of the physical realm, continue to assert itself in transforming his internal character and consequently his external actions. Thus, an accurate historical representation of the lives of his father, grandfather, and great-grandfather had to take into account the same interchange between externality and internality that Miner himself at that very moment was *living*. In light of Miner’s preface, Hegel may well have been correct in his assertion that history was the prose representation of the dual interchange between externality and internality taking place in the process of life itself. At the very least, Miner’s preface suggests that the place to begin to understand historical writing is with the real life experiences of the historian.

In examining the writings of Frederick Jackson Turner, his real life experience, an experience which did in fact correspond to Miner’s external/internal interchange, underpinned his sense of history. In 1893, Turner formulated his famous frontier theory

in “The Significance of the Frontier in American History.” This frontier theory received fuller explication by Turner in his follow-up essay, “The Problem of the West,” in 1896.

The frontier and the West were the same: a region in which the interchange between externality and internality transformed human character. Turner wrote:

The West, at bottom, is a form of society, rather than an area. It is the term applied to the region whose social conditions result from the application of older institutions and ideas to the transforming influences of free land. By this application, a new environment is suddenly entered, freedom of opportunity is opened, the cake of custom is broken, and new activities, new lines of growth, new institutions and new ideals, are brought into existence. The wilderness disappears, the ‘West’ proper passes on to a new frontier, and in the former area, a new society has emerged from its contact with the backwoods. Gradually this society loses its primitive conditions, and assimilates itself to the type of the older social conditions of the East; but it bears within it enduring and distinguishing survivals of its frontier experience. Decade after decade, West after West, this rebirth of American society has gone on, has left its traces behind it, and has reacted on the East.¹³

Turner was a man who, though clearly not a conscious mystic, filled his papers with brilliant metaphors designed to communicate how pioneer ideals, frontier individualism, and American exceptionalist democracy all developed from human contact with the wide-open spaces of virgin forests and unexplored lands. In part, he wrote this way because it was his real life experience. Born in 1861 in the wilderness town of Portage, Wisconsin, Turner did in fact grow up to believe that he had lived on the edge of society where “savagery,” to quote Turner, met “civilization.”¹⁴ That is, Portage was on the edge of two cultures, Native American and European American. European American was the appropriate label for Portage in the late nineteenth century because, as Ray Allen Billington (Turner’s chief biographer) stressed, Portage actually consisted of a hodgepodge of first generation immigrants from Holland, Scotland, Wales, and Germany.

Only a small portion of the population was American born. From his own life experience in Portage, it seemed obvious to Turner that a new nationality was being born as these diverse groups intermixed and that an old nationality, the American Indians, was dying out in the process of white expansion westwards. Turner came to realize he was raised in a different place than the East. He “felt” the influence of the frontier wilderness around him.¹⁵ He sensed that it had changed him and intuited that it had changed others as well. That Turner subsequently transposed this personal feeling for how the frontier had transformed him and his Portage neighbors into an overarching generalization that the frontier, with each stage of human advance, must necessarily transform all who came into contact with it should come as no surprise. As Billington pointed out, Turner was a die-hard Emersonian; he read Emerson and loved Emerson. His 1883 oration on “The Poet of the Future,” a piece inspired by Ralph Waldo Emerson’s own essay entitled “The Poet,” was a tribute to his idolized mentor.¹⁶ That Turner should transfer his own experience to the general “self-consciousness of mankind” was a reflection of Emersonian realist metaphor.¹⁷ In his essay, “History,” Emerson wrote, “There is one mind common to all individual men. Every man is an inlet to the same and to all the same.”¹⁸ In his “American Scholar,” Emerson continued, “Going down into the secrets of his own mind he has descended into the secrets of all minds...the deeper he dives into his privatest, secretest presentment, to his wonder he finds this is the most acceptable, most public, and universally true.”¹⁹ For Turner, the frontier changed others because it had changed him. From this perspective, it was only natural that the transformative quality of Turner’s own real life frontier experience should have become the immutable ground to reality rooted into his historical interpretation.

In his daily life, Turner repeatedly came into contact with the great wilderness outdoors and, each time, his internal character underwent something of a religious experience. In terms of orthodox religion, David Noble correctly argued that Turner left behind most of the Christian implications of his predecessor, George Bancroft.²⁰ But Turner's contact with the wilderness blazoned forth as an epiphany of its own. Turner loved fishing and hiking. Poet Henry David Thoreau's words were apt for describing Turner's outdoor adventures, "His fishing was not a sport . . . but a sort of solemn sacrament and withdrawal from the world, just as the aged read their Bibles."²¹ Like his fishing, Turner took special joy in his romps through the tall forests of the Maine coast. One of the more endearing photographs of him was taken in 1904 on a hike accompanied by his daughter Dorothy. With hands confidently resting at his hips and standing poised next to her as only a proud father could, the pair were towered over by the majestic tree line receding in the distance.²² In "The West and American Ideals," Turner wrote of his experience crossing the Cascades on the way to Seattle and how his "heart was stirred" by the "whirling spaces of woods and peaks" through which he passed.²³ In later letters to Dorothy, he detailed his outdoor excursions with the most thrilling imagery, such as in his description of the Southern California mountains with their "snowy peaks hung in the air, silvery and blue."²⁴ Obviously, these wilderness encounters deeply affected Turner. He agreed with his companion on the way to Seattle that the "crowded tenements and noisome alleys of the eastern cities and the Old World" needed to be "let loose in the vast forests and ore-laden mountains to learn what life really is!"²⁵ For Turner, nature reigned in its pristine glory and it was at its shrine that he worshipped most constant.²⁶

Within a historical context, Turner's belief that contact with the vast open-spaces of the American landscape would transform human character was not unusual. In fact, it was common during the Progressive period. Jane Addams, the famous social reformer and founder of Hull-House in Chicago, underwent a terrible emotional struggle each time when, after her students finished their learning sessions, those poor children had to return to the harsh urban streets from which they had come.²⁷ It broke her heart. She realized that she could only take those children away from their impoverished, overcrowded environment for a short time each day. Hull-House remained in Chicago, but Addams longed for the vast open-spaces of an American West where her children could develop mentally, morally, and physically free of the inner city's pollution and vice. Katherine Tingley, another Progressive social reformer, recognized that Chicago, like New York, was "too big . . . too lively for real harmony to exist."²⁸ Consequently, she uprooted the headquarters of her Universal Brotherhood and Theosophical Society organization from New York and transplanted it, with new educational facilities and all, to the beautiful sandy beaches of Point Loma near San Diego, California by the early twentieth century. At that time, Point Loma was still rather a frontier town and San Diego had not undergone its transformation into a metropolis. For Tingley, the Point Loma environment would strengthen the minds of her "Raja-Yoga" children as well as their bodies.²⁹ She endearingly wrote her students:

To think that you are getting the sweet breath of life out of the ozone at Point Loma, in the garden, with the sweet air, mountain air, and desert air blending, which is said to make the purest ozone in the world! This goes for building up your health, making new life and keeping your minds clean and strong.³⁰

When Henry James, the American master of the psychological novel, visited Southern

California in 1904, he felt more “imaginatively alive” in San Diego than elsewhere.³¹

Speaking of the “oranges and olives, fresh from the tree” and himself lying “awake nights to listen, on purpose, to the languid lisp of the Pacific,” James marveled at how “everything sinks in and fertilizes and renews in its golden promise.”³² Turner’s own feelings for the impact of the Far Western region on human character were mirrored in the general tenor of the Progressive period between the 1890’s and the 1930’s. Historian Jackson Lears captured this general tenor of Progressivism when he remarked that the “new idiom” for the period was “therapeutic rather than religious; it promised self-fulfillment through intense experience rather than salvation through self-denial.”³³

In a very special photograph of Turner taken in September 1916 while on an excursion hiking in Montana near McDonald Lake Glacier Park, Turner was once again framed by a forest of huge trees towering so far into the distant sky that their tops were lost in the dazzling sunlight. Turner was just barely visible down at the bottom of the photo, thereby adding emphasis to the immensity of trees stretching their limbs upwards surrounding him on all sides. If one turns the photograph over, one finds penned on the backside in Turner’s handwriting, “F.J.T. With heart bowed down.”³⁴ This phrase captured the awe he must have felt in the presence of such magnificence. From a linguistic standpoint, what Turner did to capture that awe and magnificence was root the phrase in a metaphorical trope. What this essentially means is that the word “heart” did not refer to the physical organ (for how could that bow?) but rather to some unknown quality for which the word “heart” had come to represent. Kenneth Burke stated it best:

Language develops by metaphorical extension, in borrowing words from the realm of the corporeal, visible, tangible and applying them by analogy to the realm of the incorporeal, invisible, intangible; then

in the course of time, the original corporeal reference is forgotten,
and only the incorporeal, metaphorical extension survives.³⁵

The “heart” was still doing the bowing only now the “heart” had become a metaphorical extension of the physical object. The “heart” as an intangible, invisible unknown had been endowed with the ability to act. That is, the “heart” could bow. In the same way, “bowed down” did not refer to the actual physical process of stooping over but rather possessed its own metaphorical extension derived from the internal qualities most associated with physical bending which are respect and assent. Since respect and assent are aspects of consciousness or the way people think, “heart” as a metaphorical extension became consciousness itself. Therefore, Turner’s use of the language “with heart bowed down” exhibited a metaphorical extension that showed human consciousness acting by shifting into a condition of respect and assent. To what was human consciousness bowing in respect? It was bowing to the overarching magnificence of the divinity of the forest. “F.J.T. With heart bowed down,” read Turner’s note. That is how Turner described this photograph of himself standing amidst a grove of trees. He did not describe what was taking place in the picture in terms of physical action, but rather he gave the power of action over to noumenal forces (in this case, consciousness and its action) and then described what happened in the physical scene in those terms.

If an observer viewed the photograph of Turner at Mc Donald Lake Glacier Park through an alternate tropal lens, he would see an entirely different picture than the one Turner envisioned. Turner’s metaphor allowed his own physical organism, filled with blood and bile as it were, to be identified with the noble ideas flowing through his consciousness. Dropping the metaphor which allowed the non-phenomenal to be collapsed onto the phenomenal even when the two were apparently incongruous, all one

would see was a tiny, weak man in the foreground of some rather tall trees. Perhaps some of those trees were rotting. Or perhaps Turner discarded some trash on the ground. For the observer viewing the picture from this perspective, he would immediately take note of the incongruity between consciousness and physical action, henceforth refusing to allow them to be mutually interchangeable. Going a step further, he might even deny, based on the contradictory physical evidence, that a noble consciousness could be present in such a scene. This is precisely the view one attains to when employing an ironic trope. When the figurative level of explanation contradicts the literal level, the ironic observer denies the figurative level of explanation, or the metaphorical trope in this case. In contrast, Turner's metaphor allowed the two levels of explanation to be contradictory and yet still both be true. In "The Problem of the West," Turner established his rationale for this position by making it clear that although the western frontiersman may have been physically "rude" and "gross," he was an "idealist withal."³⁶ A rude and gross physical exterior did not prevent a noble consciousness from being collapsed onto the crude bodily organism, thereby defining the quality of that organism in much more positive terms. Thus, consciousness, in accord with the Philosophical Idealism of his time, existed independently of physical matter but could also be integrated with it to redefine the quality of physical matter.

The issue as to whether unseen forces could function separate from physical matter underwent intense debate among the scientific community in the late nineteenth century. To a certain extent, Turner was familiar with the scientific views of his time. For the most part, the science of the late nineteenth century denied the existence of a "vital principle" separate from "atomo-mechanical laws."³⁷ Any possible "informing, ever-present,

moving-power and life principle” owed its origins to physical processes.³⁸ Under this assumption, the phenomenal world brought the non-phenomenal into manifestation. But there were a fair number of dissidents who urged that there was a “vital principle without which no molecular combinations could ever have resulted in a living organism.”³⁹ For these dissidents, the non-phenomenal acted first and independently of physical matter. The more radical scientists held that unseen forces were “self-active” principles.⁴⁰ Only subsequently did physical processes come into play.

The position held by these more radical scientists emerged initially to challenge the materialism of Darwinian theory and later developed to account for the revolution in science from a “matter-based physics” to an “energy-based physics” which took place in the final years of the nineteenth century.⁴¹ On closer inspection, these radical scientists were part of a broader intellectual movement sweeping across Europe to America during this period. This movement represented a “New Vitalism” and its foremost proponent was the French philosopher, Henri Bergson.⁴² Although Wilhelm Von Humboldt’s earlier Vitalism never completely died out, post-1850’s thinkers functioned from deeply materialist convictions that dampened its overt influence. Henri Bergson, along with other great thinkers like Hans Driesch, re-invigorated Vitalism in their rebellion against the rank materialism of their age. According to T.S. Eliot, Bergson’s Vitalism became an “epidemic” in Great Britain by 1911 and, as Thomas Quirk noted, the reaction was “even more enthusiastic” in the United States, eventually outstripping the popularity of renowned psychologist William James.⁴³ What Bergson’s New Vitalism proposed was that there existed an “elan vital,” translated into English as “vital impulse” or “vital force,” that manifested through physical form. The “elan vital” was not physical itself or

at least not at its purest, spiritual level. At whatever point this “elan vital” broke through onto the physical plane, there resulted an infusion of vigor and energy, creation and evolution.⁴⁴ But the outpouring of the “elan vital” proved to be limited and soon exhausted itself in its very manifestation.⁴⁵ It energized physical matter but only for a temporary duration. As for the human being, he was not the “elan vital” in its most spiritually pure form, but rather he was an admixture of “elan vital” already “loaded with matter.”⁴⁶ That matter, physical in substance, distinguished itself from pure “elan vital” in that it was the “congealed parts,” dross, or lees of its parent substance, the pure “elan vital.”⁴⁷ As such, the human brain was not, strictly speaking, the “organ of thought nor of feeling nor of consciousness” but simply an organ that allowed consciousness, feeling, and thought to be kept “tensely strained on life” by allowing the pure “elan vital” to freely flow through it.⁴⁸ Consciousness was not produced by the physical brain. Instead, a well-functioning brain allowed the “elan vital” to manifest through it, thereby creating the conditions for a keen and perceptive consciousness. The brain’s role as a tool of the “elan vital,” and consequently consciousness, was why there needed to be but a “slight modification of the cerebral substance for the whole mind to be affected.”⁴⁹ From this perspective, Bergsonian Vitalism was strongly monistic at the same time that it was strongly dualistic. The “elan vital” was the source of all life as well as the spiritual essence of physical matter. The “elan vital” acted as the ground to reality but could also be integrated with its byproduct or physical form. This relationship served as a perfect metaphor, conforming to Hegel’s poetic form where consciousness must be separated from its object and then united with it once more.

In regard to Turner's writing, his early ideas, expressed in his 1878 Portage High School graduation speech entitled "The Power of the Press," already adhered to a view that placed "vital forces" prior to physical action. That they did so at such an early age for Turner before he had mastered the scientific theories of his day suggests that his style may have been unintentionally shaped by a surrounding cultural or religious atmosphere rather than any conscious implementation on his part. Or it could be that his "transcendent objectives" in dealing with "learning, democracy, and Christian values" simply catered to the adoption of some form of tropal language that was either chosen to match his own views or shaped his views as he employed that specific trope.⁵⁰ From a philosophical perspective, the search for transcendence necessarily implies that the writer believed something existed above and independent of the limitations of the material universe. Even if a writer considered transcendence a possibility without knowing any of the details regarding such transcendence, would not that contribute to a literary style that automatically embedded spirit and matter into his text? In "The Power of the Press," the young Turner tried to capture the significance of John Guttenberg's invention of letter press printing. In the very first sentence, he established a pattern of speech that continued throughout his career which allowed him to adopt pre-existent "vital forces" as a valid approach to historical dialogue. In this case, his tropal configuration was metonymical as opposed to metaphorical in order to account for the causative effect of these "vital forces" on physical action. He wrote, "About four centuries ago was born in the brain of John Guttenberg, an idea destined to be the propagator of learning, of Christianity, and of civilization, and thus to sway the future of the world."⁵¹ Instead of romanticizing the individual, he reduced John Guttenberg, the physical person, to a secondary vehicle.

He removed the physical person of Guttenberg as the causative agent. He gave primary agency, a means used to secure some effect, to idea rather than physical action. The idea instilled knowledge, shaped religion, and uplifted culture. It is crucial that the idea was born “in” the brain as opposed to “from” the brain of John Guttenberg. If idea was born “from” the brain, then his statement would reflect the positivist materialism of late nineteenth-century science that insisted unseen forces were simply physical atomomechanical operations. That would have negated Turner’s tropological groundwork because it would have mitigated any distinction between spirit and matter. But the word “in” clearly made the linguistic style of the statement conform to the type of dualistic metonymical relationship between spirit and matter as envisioned by Kenneth Burke. Burke explained that metonymy was “a ‘metaphorical extension’ back from the intangible into a tangible equivalent. Burke wrote that the “the first ‘carrying over’ from the material to the spiritual” was “compensated by a second ‘carrying over’ from the spiritual back *into* [emphasis added] the material”.⁵² Turner’s statement moved beyond the simple metaphor of the earlier “heart” example which lacked a cause-effect relationship. In that case, physical matter became so identified with the unseen qualities that it could recede into the background and still appear to be the subject talked about. In this case, physical matter and idea were also closely identified, but the historical dialogue demanded some sort of cause-effect relationship. That necessitated the creation of a hierarchical relationship that distinguished the dualism to explain causation. In this case, idea as a “vital force” shaping physical action was placed above matter, thereby establishing a world view wherein the unseen forces could exist independent of matter.

The metonymical relationship established between idea and matter, however, did not specify the nature of their qualities beyond the fact that one caused the other to occur. It did not clarify where idea and matter stood in relationship to the whole of the historical process. But Turner embedded the key to that answer later in the essay. And that subsequently moved Turner into the trope of synecdoche. Reaching a fervent pitch at the climax of the piece, Turner exclaimed, “Truly, there was something more than human in Guttenberg’s idea! The invention of printing was almost divine in its character.”⁵³ That something “more than human” existed in idea meant that idea was a higher quality than human-ness. Considered from a scientific point of view, being human consists of having a physical body, a highly developed brain, the powers of articulate speech, and abstract reasoning and imagination. Reasoning and imagination may account for the personality, prejudices, and preferences of the individual from his more ignoble passions to his beautiful noble sentiments, but Turner’s idea was placed beyond that. And it was the idea, not the sentiments of human-ness, that shaped the institutions of the world. Nevertheless, idea only possessed power because the “divine” resided in it. “Divine” is a very loose term, but it obviously signified a higher quality than an idea. That the “divine” worked through an idea allowed the idea to achieve a certain level of efficiency in the same way that an idea worked through physical matter to create machinery which in turn produced greater efficiency. By introducing the “divine” as the overarching construct to idea and matter, Turner created a three-tiered division that allowed the qualities of each to be defined, albeit in the simplest of ways. As agents in historical action, physical matter was the lowest component, idea the middle component, and the divine the highest. At each step of the way, the smaller segment recapitulated the larger tendency of the

whole because it had been infused with the qualities of the component above it. The microcosm reflected the macrocosm. That relationship went beyond metonymy and merged into synecdoche.

In his more mature works, Turner became very comfortable with these figures of speech culled from his real life outdoor experiences as well as the broader intellectual climate which emerged during his youth. Within his later essays, Turner thought nothing of disentangling the immaterial world from the material world and giving it a historical life of its own by allowing it, in Bergsonian fashion, to act independently of physical matter. In their own way, the adoption of metaphor, metonymy, and synecdoche all contributed toward that end. They all provided mechanisms for giving the unseen world a historical vehicle. In his 1914 "The West and American Ideals," Turner wrote, "A famous scientist holds that the universal ether bears vital germs which impinging upon a dead world would bring it to life."⁵⁴ Then he confirmed the assumption, "So, at least it is, in the world of thought, where energized ideals put in the air and carried here and there by the waves and currents of the intellectual atmosphere, fertilize vast inert areas."⁵⁵ In this passage, he confessed that the unseen world possessed its own processes that had to be taken into consideration. Ideas moved along their own "waves and currents" through an invisible "intellectual atmosphere" where, if "energized" just right, they could exert an uplifting influence on the "vast inert areas" of human thought-life. But, just like Bergson's "elan vital," the energizing influence of the "vital germs" within a region eventually dissipated. Those "vast inert areas" of human thought-life, initially invigorated by the "vital germs" but later enervated in their absence, corresponded to what Turner later termed in "The Significance of the Section" as worn-out "memories, traditions, an

inherited attitude of life.”⁵⁶ For as long as “idealistic influences” reigned supreme within a given region (both Turner and Bergson recognized the “vital forces” and the “elan vital” had to be selective in where they manifested since they could not manifest everywhere at once), they strengthened everyone in that region. They gave to the “pioneer farmer and city builder a restless energy, a quick capacity for judgment and action, a belief in liberty, freedom of opportunity, and a resistance to the domination of class which infused vitality and power into the individual atoms of this democratic mass.”⁵⁷ According to Turner, the reason that “vital germs” or “vital forces” especially existed within a frontier region was because the environment forced human beings to develop innovation, individualism, and self-reliance. While this view has been criticized by modern scholars, what is significant about it was how closely it corresponded to Bergson’s own view for why the “elan vital” manifested in certain places. In his 1911 essay, “Life and Consciousness,” Bergson explained:

When is it that consciousness attains its greatest liveliness? Is it not at those moments of inward crisis when we hesitate between two, or it may be several, different courses to take, when we feel that our future will be what we make it? The variations in the intensity of our consciousness seem then to correspond to the more or less considerable sum of choice, or, as I would say, to the amount of creation which our conduct requires.⁵⁸

For Turner, the “vital forces” manifested when an individual was required to demonstrate the frontier qualities of innovation, as Bergson’s “creation,” and self-reliance, as Bergson’s “sum of choice.” These were qualities which Turner asserted became dominant in the frontiersman during the process of his falling back onto his own willpower to conquer an inhospitable wilderness frontier.

The reason that Turner conceptually envisioned the American West as a moving section continually progressing westwards as opposed to simply being a single, permanent, geographical place was tied into his view of the “vital forces.” His view was two-fold. First, human beings themselves called down the manifestation of the “vital forces” through their conduct as they came into contact with the wilderness and creatively transformed it to suit their needs. Since geographical migration across the American continent generally proceeded East to West, the “vital forces” reappeared in successively western regions. Second, the “vital forces,” being conceived as independent from the physical world, possessed a historical process of their own. That is, they possessed a purpose. Realism tends to be teleological. Turner’s realism was no exception. The teleology in Turner’s work comes from the fact that his “vital forces” did possess their own purpose within the historical process. Turner’s central declaration in his 1893 thesis has already been stated, “Behind institutions, behind constitutional forms and modifications, lie the vital forces that call these organs into life and shape them to meet changing conditions.”⁵⁹ That declaration did not stand alone in his text however. Only a few pages later, Turner elaborated just how these “vital forces” went about their business shaping the physical realm in his reference to an “expansive power.”⁶⁰

It appears then that the universal disposition of Americans to emigrate to the western wilderness, in order to enlarge their dominion over inanimate nature, is the actual result of *an expansive power* [emphasis added] which is inherent in them, and which by continually agitating all classes of society is constantly throwing a large portion of the whole population on the extreme confines of the State, in order to gain space for its development. Hardly a new State or Territory formed before the same principle manifests itself again and gives rise to a further emigration; and so is it destined to go on until a physical barrier must obstruct its progress.⁶¹

This statement embedded an independent unseen force, under the alternate label

“expansive power,” into human beings which possessed a purpose of its own—to gain space for its development—and consequently agitated society to achieve that purpose. The “expansive power” was doing the agitating. This “expansive power” operated independently of the physical world for its motivation (its own need to develop), but once it touched the physical realm it became a causal agent that manifested itself periodically to spur on human migration so that its own development could be achieved. The relation of noumenon to phenomenon was causal and teleological at the same time. Travelers emigrated to the West because an unseen force compelled them to do so and at a rate that matched its own timetable, not their timetable. During the process in which this intangible “expansive power” affected the physical environment, its presence left patterns on the landscape. Through reading those patterns, the tangible could be identified with intangible. That was Turner’s metaphor. His extension of this basic metaphor into metonymy was in establishing the phenomenal world as the extrinsic manifestation of such agents as “vital forces” and “expansive powers” presumed to exist behind the phenomenal world.

Throughout Turner’s career, a tropal language akin to metaphor that legitimized the separation and integration of noumenon and phenomenon was his preferred style. At times in his writing, one can discern those special moments when Turner became actively engaged in making an interpretive choice, though not necessarily consciously conceived in tropal terms, for one style of tropal language as opposed to another. In his prose, metaphor, metonymy, and synecdoche all merged into one general category of metaphor. Turner embraced this general category of metaphor while rejecting any semblance of ironic emplotment. One example of this rejection of irony was briefly alluded to in

“The Problem of the West” where Turner allowed ideas and physical characteristics to be at odds with one another yet he allowed both to retain their accuracy in representing historical reality. Later in the essay, this rejection of irony was evident in Turner’s critique of the view of one of his contemporaries, Professor M. Boutmy. Boutmy had previously argued that “the striking and peculiar characteristic of American society” was that it was not so much “a democracy” as “a huge commercial company for the discovery, cultivation, and capitalization of its enormous territory.”⁶² In truth, the United States was primarily a “commercial society, and only secondarily a nation.”⁶³ To have accepted this statement would have required the concept of “a nation” from a literal level to be replaced by the figurative impression of a commercial enterprise, comprising the whole of the United States, crawling its way across the American expanse. That would be irony at its most sublime. While Turner may have been willing to accept that Boutmy’s description “hit the substantial fact,” he nevertheless declared it a “serious misapprehension” because it did not take into account the relation of ideals to society.⁶⁴ For Turner, ideals and physical action had to be established within a substitutive relationship where they could each be merged into the other as metaphor before historical explanation could proceed. That is saying the same thing as that the rejected Boutmy’s statement not because it missed the fact but because it was not configured metaphorically. Turner obviously did not say, “This is not metaphor—I do not like it.” But his choice to turn to unseen forces before discussing the so-called historical facts demonstrated that he was not comfortable discussing American society as this vast corporate machine until he had settled into his own way of talking about it. That is, ideals and energy were conceived by him to be part of the historical facts. Only after Turner established this new

American society as “Energy, incessant activity” would Turner confess that “America is like a vast workshop . . . No admittance here, except on business.”⁶⁵ Whereas an ironic configuration would have placed the physical extension of a “huge commercial company” at center stage, metaphor reduced it to an offshoot of energy’s “incessant activity.” “Energy,” like “vital forces” and “expansive power,” became the key historical actor and its physical counterparts became a way to read where it had been and what it had done.

One can turn to Turner’s menagerie of news clippings for insight into the broader contextualization behind his anti-ironic position. In particular, one clipping from a 1909 issue of American Magazine bears special relevance. Turner had cut out an article entitled “In the Interpreter’s House” which discussed how a negative perspective on human action led to “picturesque” and “excessive” interpretations that distorted historical truth.⁶⁶ The article proposed to demonstrate how a short history of the United States would appear when written from such a negative view. From such a negative view, the history of the United States could be summed up as follows, “The whole nation was steeped in profligacy and vice. The rich were without exception corrupt and immoral.”⁶⁷ By this point, Turner had already underlined the article’s core message. It does not take much stretch of the imagination to superimpose this negative view, which would have the entire United States corrupt and immoral (especially the wealthy), onto Boutmy’s own view. In essence, Boutmy’s irony was functioning from a negative view of history that was just as excessive and picturesque, and hence falsifying, as Turner’s more positive metaphorical view. Turner knew history could be written from a counter perspective, but he did not write from that perspective because he believed it contorted the historical

picture. Irony replaced the figurative level of explanation in metaphor with its own figurative level. Since irony still retained a figurative level, however, it was just as fallible to overstating historical fact.

If Turner's favored trope was metaphor, that favoritism had to have been motivated by an overriding philosophy which found metaphor conducive to its general tenets. Metaphor allows for the existence of noumenon and phenomenon in historical explanation. Noumenon, since it extends beyond the five senses, can only be expressed as an abstract generalization. As an abstract generalization, it can only be conceptualized as the vague, originating source of perceptible, phenomenal manifestations. In this position, noumenon stands as the ground to reality for all historical action. Therefore, the use of noumenon in a historical text implies that the author is working from a realist framework. That is, realism integrates abstract generalizations, or over-arching generalizations, and a ground to reality into interpretation. The embeddedness of noumenon, as that ground to reality, in a historical piece signifies the driving power of realism. No sentence better captured Turner's philosophical realism than the one drawn from "The First Official Frontier of the Massachusetts Bay" which stated that the "very essence" of the American frontier was the "graphic line which records the expansive energies of the people behind it, and which by the law of its own being continually draws that advance after it to new conquests."⁶⁸ It is nothing new to suggest that the frontier was "universal and omnipotent" for Turner.⁶⁹ William Coleman and many others have already done that. But it is new to explain why. The frontier acted according to the "law of its own being" and that meant it had not been caused by anything. The frontier was a combination of noumenon and phenomenon. Its "expansive energies" could be metaphorically collapsed

onto the physical humans trudging westwards. But causation rested with an unseen force, this unknown “law of its own being.” Hence, Turner’s frontier was “universal and omnipotent” because it stood as the ground to reality necessary to the operations of a realist philosophy.

In discussing vocabularies used by writers which signified that a ground to reality was being employed, Kenneth Burke noted that over-arching generalizations of “freedom and necessity” were the two most commonly exercised.⁷⁰ Whenever they appeared, one knew they were in the “presence of ‘God-terms,’ or names for the ultimates of motivations.”⁷¹ Freedom and necessity were the two primary over-arching generalizations comprising Turner’s frontier. The earlier example from “Contributions,” in which Turner integrated “idealistic influences” into both the pioneer farmer and the city builder, demonstrated that freedom was tied up with the expression of “energy” and “vitality” while the example from “The First Official Frontier” argued for the necessity of the frontier process through the automatic unfoldment of its own laws. Numerous other similar illustrations abound: “Destiny set [the American] in a current which bore him swiftly along through such a wealth of opportunity that reflection and well considered planning seemed wasted time;” “[Democratic society] was a mobile mass of freely circulating atoms, each seeking its own place and finding play for its own powers and for its own original initiative;” “We see the vigorous elements of all nations . . . peaceably congregating and mingling together on virgin soil . . . led together by the irresistible attraction of force and broad principles.”⁷² In each case, there was an unseen force present which was connected to the concept of freedom or necessity. In the first quote, the word “destiny” signified one’s predetermined lot in life, whether of the individual or the group. “Destiny” meant there

was a pattern to life upon which historical action had to conform. The pattern of “destiny,” whatever that might have been, became the law by which physical action proceeded. It is not difficult to see how “destiny” and the law of the frontier’s own being could be substituted for one another. Both possessed their own law of being that subsequently shaped the process of the human landscape. “Destiny” fulfilled Burke’s requirement for necessity pointing to a ground of reality. When “destiny” was involved, things could have happened no other way. As to the second quote, it was the consummate expression of freedom. When looking at human beings in many historical situations, they are terribly constrained by physical experiences that seem to shackle the human body. How could one argue that the West or democratic society (which were the same for Turner) was truly blessed if such constraints were visible in the historical picture? For Turner, the answer was simple. All one needed to do was shift to a different level of observation where those constraints were no longer visible. For example, if a person was perceived to be constrained, the organism could be reduced to its smallest component parts and then examined again from this new perspective. Within the altered framework, the previous confinements no longer pertained to the organism at this reduced level. When faced with the obvious restrictions and constraints in the everyday life of the westerner, Turner shifted the level of observation by conjuring up images of the atom with its respective “powers” and “initiative” finding free play. In this revised world, a world viewed from such a radically different perspective, the physical constraints of daily life in the West no longer existed. These “freely circulating atoms” satisfied Burke’s requirement for freedom. Nor is it a far cry to equate those atoms with the “vital germs” travelling through Turner’s “universal ether.”⁷³ Finally, in the third quote, the

“irresistible attraction of force and broad “principles” once again satisfied the category for necessity. Turner described an unknown force too powerful to be resisted that drew certain people together. He never explained why this force did it, but it is not too hard to identify the properties of this force with his notion for an “expansive power” which pushed people around the continent in order to “gain space for its own development.”⁷⁴ This force did what it had to do out of necessity to cultivate its own fulfillment. It possessed purpose. It was teleological.

Turner may have placed these unseen forces as a ground to reality, but that does not mean the way he expressed it linguistically could not also have resulted in a deflection of the reality which he attempted to convey. The phrase “deflection of reality” refers to the fact that Turner’s language could have inhibited his ideas from accurately capturing the way unseen forces and the physical world interacted. All three examples given above conformed to Burke’s “paradox of substance.” If one attempted to scrutinize the unseen world, it disappeared. But if one relaxed his gaze, it re-formed again. How can one capture this interaction between two worlds in historical writing if the interaction itself eludes an easy grasp? And what if that interaction is at the core of a historian’s world view? He must stretch rational limits even to reach for a simplified vocabulary to express this interaction. If, as Burke asserted, “men seek for vocabularies that will be faithful reflections of reality ,” then it can be assumed that Turner did the same.⁷⁵ Turner had some notion swirling around in his head of how large-scale historical processes worked and he hoped to put it down on paper. Just as men seek for vocabularies that are faithful reflections of their reality, so they must “develop vocabularies that are selections of that reality.”⁷⁶ In Turner’s case, being a realist interested in a “mass history” that captured the

development of the American people as a collective whole meant that his selections had to point to a broader ground to accommodate all of their actions.⁷⁷ Such phrases as “destiny,” “democratic society,” and “irresistible attraction of force” were some of his selections to explain the visions in his head of what pushed a collective human society westward across the continent. The process of Turner’s thought itself in conceptualizing what happened historically prior to his actually writing it down included the concept of an invisible propeller behind the patterns of visible movement. These phrases enumerated above, as well as others such as “vital forces,” “expansive power,” and “energy,” were his selections to reflect the reality of that propeller. As Burke noted, however, any selection of reality “must, in certain circumstances, function as a deflection of reality.”⁷⁸ In its selectivity, it became a “reduction.”⁷⁹ The reduction in turn became a “deflection when the given terminology, or calculus, was not suited to the subject matter which it was designed to calculate.”⁸⁰ Turner’s choice of language for metaphor, metonymy, and synecdoche all fit into this category of deflection and improper terminology. The terminology of metaphor spoke of an invisible world when it was in fact supposed to describe the visible world. Metonymy was supposed to describe the invisible world but in fact couched its speech in physical terms. The terminology of synecdoche allowed the subject matter at the macrocosmic level to be described from the microcosmic level, thereby creating a disjunction between fact and perceived reality. For example, Turner asserted that pioneer farmers and city builders were composed of “individual atoms.” Then he proposed that this mass of people was democratic. Implicit in any deduction from this combination is that there are “democratic atoms.”⁸¹ This is a fallacy in the same way that human beings may be comprised of chemicals and human beings can talk,

but that does not mean there are “talking chemicals.”⁸² But synecdoche condones such a deduction. Hence, metaphor, metonymy, and synecdoche all allow historical subject matter to be discussed with a terminology not suited to explain that subject matter. To really understand what Turner was saying one would have to expand these reductions back into their original meanings. For Turner, what did he actually mean by an “irresistible attraction of force?” What was “destiny?” But such clarification is impossible because, with these terms being tied up with the theoretical noumenal quality behind physical substance, any concrete definition necessarily vanishes into thin air. That suggests that the terms on their own can neither be analyzed or defined. They are used but without any means to understand them. As for Turner, he included no explanatory commentary to decode them. That is why they were deflections of reality in his writing. Defying analysis and definition, the inclusion of such terms by Turner meant his history corresponded to the “unconscious productiveness” of historians in which they do not know what they are doing, but they nevertheless employ terms because they are so useful and protean that they serve as structural underpinnings to any and all possible conceptions of historical action. The “unconscious productiveness” of Turner’s language, a mixture of realism and metaphor, corresponded to Burke’s “paradox of substance.” Turner’s historical writing, as the thesis in a three-pronged dialectic, was essentially a formulation for the way he approached that paradox. Turner’s frontier was the historical expression of a very specific world view for how noumenon and phenomenon interacted.

Notes

¹ White, Metahistory, 14.

² Klein, Frontiers of Historical Imagination.

³ Jurgen Herbst argued that American universities adapted the German historical schools to their own unique American environment. See Jurgen Herbst, The German Historical School in American Scholarship: A Study in the Transfer of Culture (New York-Ithaca: Cornell, 1965).

⁴ Peter Hans Reill, "Science and the Construction of the Cultural Sciences in Late Enlightenment Germany: The Case of Wilhelm Von Humboldt," History and Theory 33 (1994): 345-366.

⁵ Wilhelm Von Humboldt, "On the Historian's Task," History and Theory 6 (1967): 57-58.

⁶ Ibid., 69-70.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ White, Metahistory, 89.

⁹ Craig Miner, West of Wichita: Settling the High Plains of Kansas, 1865-1890 (Kansas: University Press of Kansas, 1986), vii-viii.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Turner, "The Problem of the West," 61-62.

¹⁴ Ray Allen Billington, The Genesis of the Frontier Thesis (San Marino: The Huntington Library, 1971), 13-16.

¹⁵ Ibid. Patricia Limerick often referred to Turner's western history as the view from Portage and her own as the view from Banning, California.

¹⁶ Ray Allen Billington, Frederick Jackson Turner: Historian, Scholar, Teacher (New York: Oxford University Press, 1973), 10. For Turner's "The Poet of the Future," see Carpenter, The Eloquence of Frederick Jackson Turner, 122-123. For Emerson's "The Poet," see Emerson, The Complete Writings of Ralph Waldo Emerson, Vol. 1, 239-251.

¹⁷ Turner, "The Significance of History," 19.

¹⁸ Emerson, "History," The Complete Writings of Ralph Waldo Emerson, 125.

¹⁹ Emerson, "The American Scholar," The Complete Writings of Ralph Waldo Emerson, 32.

²⁰ David W. Noble, Historians against History: The Frontier Thesis and the National Covenant in American Historical Writing Since 1830 (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1965), 40.

²¹ Henry David Thoreau, A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers (New York: The Library of America, 1985), 22.

²² Wilbur R. Jacobs, ed., America's Great Frontiers and Sections: Frederick Jackson Turner's Unpublished Essays (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1965), 157. Turner was a genuine family man and the early death of two of his beloved children, Mae Sherwood and Jackson Allen, in 1899 must have made his outings with Dorothy that much more special.

²³ Turner, "The West and American Ideals," 148.

²⁴ Frederick Jackson Turner to Dorothy Turner Main, 2 March 1927, HEH, TU Box F, Folder 27.

²⁵ Turner, "The West and American Ideals," 148.

²⁶ Thoreau, A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers, 53.

²⁷ Jane Addams, Twenty Years at Hull-House with Autobiographical Notes (New York: The MacMillan Company, 1910), 380-387.

²⁸ Katherine Tingley to the boys of Lotus Home No.9, 26 May 1919, copy in author's files.

²⁹ The Sanskrit term "Raja-Yoga" translates into English as "Royal Union." Katherine Tingley's education system stressed the need to balance all of the student's various faculties; the proper environment helped establish this balance. For more information on Katherine Tingley's education system, see Emmett A. Greenwalt, California Utopia, Point Loma: 1897-1942 (San Diego: Point Loma Publications, Inc., 1978). Also see William M. Ashcraft's article, "The Child, Theosophy, and Victorian American Culture at Point Loma," in Theosophical History: A Quarterly Journal of Research, vol. 7, no. 2 (April 1998): 64-83. For a rebuttal to Ashcraft's placement of Tingley's education as Victorian instead of Progressive, see the present author's comments in "Communications," Theosophical History, vol. 7, no. 6 (April 1999): 215-216.

- ³⁰ Katherine Tingley to Lotus Home No.9, 26 May 1919.
- ³¹ Fred Kaplan, Henry James: The Imagination of Genius (New York: William Morrow and Co., 1992), 493.
- ³² Ibid.
- ³³ T. J. Jackson Lears, No Place of Grace: Antimodernism and the Transformation of American Culture, 1880-1920 (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1994), xii.
- ³⁴ Photograph of Frederick Jackson Turner at McDonald Lake Glacier Park in Montana, HEH, TU Box 58.
- ³⁵ Burke, A Grammar of Motives, 506.
- ³⁶ Turner, "The Problem of the West," 69.
- ³⁷ Helena Petrovna Blavatsky, The Secret Doctrine: The Synthesis of Science, Religion, and Philosophy, Vol. 1 (New York: The Theosophy Company, 1925; originally published 1888), 538, 485.
- ³⁸ Ibid., 602.
- ³⁹ Ibid., 603.
- ⁴⁰ Ibid., 524. According to Blavatsky, these dissidents included Joseph de Maistre (1754-1821), Benjamin Ward Richardson (1828-1896), Jean-Louis Armand de Quatrefages de Breau (1810-1892), Charles H. Le Couturier (b.1819), and Dr. A. Winchell (1824-1891).
- ⁴¹ Frederick Burwick and Paul Douglass, eds., The Crisis in Modernism: Bergson and the Vitalist Controversy (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 1. The 1897 identification and measurement of the charge to mass ratio of the electron by J.J. Thomson spurred on this shift into a new physics.
- ⁴² Hans Driesch, The History and Theory of Vitalism, trans. C.K. Ogden (London: MacMillan and Co., 1914), 170.
- ⁴³ Burwick and Douglass, eds., The Crisis in Modernism, 3.
- ⁴⁴ Henri Bergson, Creative Evolution, trans. Arthur Mitchell (New York: Dover Publications, Inc., 1998; originally published 1911), 142.
- ⁴⁵ Ibid.

- ⁴⁶ Bergson, Creative Evolution, 239.
- ⁴⁷ Ibid.
- ⁴⁸ Henri Bergson, "The Soul and the Body," Mind-Energy: Lectures and Essays, trans. H. Wildon Carr (Connecticut: Greenwood Press, Publishers, 1975; originally published 1920), 59.
- ⁴⁹ Ibid.
- ⁵⁰ Allen Bogue, Frederick Jackson Turner: Strange Roads Going Down (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1998), 15.
- ⁵¹ Carpenter, The Eloquence of Frederick Jackson Turner, 117.
- ⁵² Burke, A Grammar of Motives, 506.
- ⁵³ Carpenter, The Eloquence of Frederick Jackson Turner, 119.
- ⁵⁴ Turner, "The West and American Ideals," 142.
- ⁵⁵ Ibid.
- ⁵⁶ Turner, "The Significance of the Section," 202.
- ⁵⁷ Turner, "Contributions of the West to American Democracy," 95.
- ⁵⁸ Bergson, "Life and Consciousness," Mind-Energy: Lectures and Essays, 15.
- ⁵⁹ Turner, "The Significance of the Frontier in American History," 31.
- ⁶⁰ Ibid., 35.
- ⁶¹ Turner, "The Significance of the Frontier in American History," 35.
- ⁶² Turner, "The Problem of the West," 66-67.
- ⁶³ Ibid.
- ⁶⁴ Ibid.
- ⁶⁵ Ibid.
- ⁶⁶ "In the Interpreter's House," American Magazine (February 1909): 425, HEH, TU file drawer 16A, folder 17.

⁶⁷ “In the Interpreter’s House,” American Magazine, 425.

⁶⁸ Frederick Jackson Turner, “The First Official Frontier of the Massachusetts Bay,” The Frontier in American History (New York: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston, 1962; originally published 1920), 52.

⁶⁹ Coleman, “Science and Symbol in the Turner Frontier Hypothesis,” American Historical Review, 23.

⁷⁰ Burke, A Grammar of Motives, 74.

⁷¹ Ibid.

⁷² Turner, “The West and American Ideals,” 140, 155. Also see “Middle Western Pioneer Democracy,” 161-163.

⁷³ Turner, “The West and American Ideals,” 140.

⁷⁴ Turner, “The Significance of the Frontier in American History,” 35.

⁷⁵ Burke, A Grammar of Motives, 59.

⁷⁶ Ibid.

⁷⁷ Wilbur R. Jacobs, ed., Frederick Jackson Turner’s Legacy: Unpublished Writings in American History (San Marino: The Huntington Library, 1965), 25.

⁷⁸ Burke, A Grammar of Motives, 59.

⁷⁹ Ibid.

⁸⁰ Ibid.

⁸¹ Turner, “Contributions of the West to Democracy,” 95-96.

⁸² Burke, A Grammar of Motives, 59.

CHAPTER 4

ANTITHESIS

The publication of Henry Nash Smith's Virgin Land in 1950 represented the defining transition point in the move away from Frederick Jackson Turner's "unconscious productiveness" to a new philosophical and tropal style of historical writing. This new style has been labeled "critical intellect." While the late 1920's and 1930's produced some degree of preliminary shifting, those years did not produce a single defining historian who would shape the coming age. Only in the 1950's with the emergence of Henry Nash Smith did that single defining historian appear. In a sense, Smith became a prophet for American West historians because it seemed he had successfully challenged Turner. In fact, American West historians embraced Smith because his adoption of a nominalist philosophy and an ironic trope provided an interpretive framework supportive of the left-liberal and Marxist political stances emerging in the historical profession by the 1960's. Smith's own moderate left-liberal political position may not have gone far enough for some of his more radical critics who objected that his assumptions of "American exceptionalism, national consensus, and the existence of the rational individual" led to a "reaffirmation of the bourgeois capitalist state and its white male elite," but it is clear that his nominalist view for "imaginative constructions" and his implementation of an ironic trope were typically Marxist.¹ This is not to say that Smith was himself a Marxist or that the left-liberals within the profession were necessarily

Marxist. It does suggest that Smith's combination of nominalism and irony produced an interpretation that was supportive of those shared intellectual, moral, and political values held both by the left-liberals and the Marxists. The same philosophical and linguistic structure lay beneath the historical interpretations of both groups. This is extremely significant because it explains why the succeeding generation of historians adopted his vision rather than Turner's vision. Smith's new intellectual system took hold precisely because it contained assumptions that were palatable to the increasing number of New Left historians entering the profession. Smith and the field of American Studies which he helped to create have generally been described as a transition emerging from the postwar enthusiasm of 1945 that paved the way for the full-blown cultural studies of the 1960's. The cultural studies of the 1960's brought out the Marxist perspective of the New Left which subsequently retained Smith's position on the relationship between unseen forces and the physical world because it overlapped with their own pre-established ideology. The New Western History, gaining momentum through the 1960's until it culminated in Patricia Limerick's official declaration of its existence at the 1989 Santa Fe "Trails" Conference, adopted the same framework because it was leftist or Marxist oriented. New Western historians felt comfortable with Smith's world view.² Smith's world view became the "zeitgeist," or spirit of the age, for the post-1950's. It would be oversimplifying matters a bit to suggest that the shift from Turner's "vital forces" to Smith's "imaginative constructions" was solely the result of a shift towards a Marxist perspective, but this did constitute an aspect of what happened. In fact, a case can be made for the correlation between a Marxist perspective and "imaginative constructions." The significance of this correlation is that the Turnerian "vital forces" were replaced by

Smith's "imaginative constructions" simply because the historical field was gradually becoming rooted in an ontology that corresponded to a Marxist perspective.

In this case, the antithesis of the three-pronged dialectic running through the twentieth century derived its interpretive framework from how historians encoded the interaction between unseen forces and the physical world into their work. Just because Marxism was materialistic did not mean that it was not a metaphysics designed to explain the origin of things. Marxism was as much a metaphysics as Philosophical Idealism or Vitalism. It simply proposed that the origins of things was in physical matter itself as opposed to spirit. That very assumption set the stage for the use of an ironic employment to deny the figurative level in metaphor which assumed the existence of spirit. That assumption also established a nominalist procedure for undermining the validity of spirit as the ground to reality.

With Smith directly challenging the figurative level of explanation and the over-generalized ground to reality in Turner's writing, he would also find himself confounded by the "paradox of substance." Just because Smith shifted away from "unconscious productiveness" to a "critical intellect" which allowed the previous historical generation to be critiqued and analyzed did not mean he eluded that paradox in making such a shift. In fact, the adoption of an ironic trope, since it attempted to deny metaphorical conceptualizations for unseen and seen worlds, centralized the relationship between noumenon and phenomenon at the core of Smith's work. Smith's Virgin Land would not stand or fall based on its presentation of historical fact; it would stand or fall based on whether subsequent scholars agreed with his ironic way of re-arranging the relationship between noumenon and phenomenon. This is true because it is the philosophical and

tropal arrangement for noumenon and phenomenon that leads the historian to his ultimate interpretation for historical fact. Later historians gave their support to Smith's philosophical and tropal arrangement because it essentially encoded into history a New Left moral and political position. Donald Worster, the leading Marxist New West historian of the 1970's and 1980's, embraced Smith's linguistic style in constructing his history. Like Smith, Worster used this new linguistic style to reorganize the ways in which one thought about the relationship between noumenon and phenomenon. That revised formulation for how these two worlds interacted necessarily led to a revised interpretation for what was the meaning of any particular historical action. Physical events were being re-interpreted at figurative levels through Hayden White's "preconceptual" ways of thinking long before historians resorted to any physical facts in support of their case. As such, dealing with figurative levels of thought placed Smith and Worster into a head-on collision with "the paradox of substance." For the most part, the integrity of Smith's and Worster's work survived the collision. "Critical intellect" would remain dominant as the antithesis to Turner's thesis from the 1950's through the 1980's. But the fact that irony was supposed to be a trope that could be utilized to see through the flaws of metaphor and yet itself became embroiled in the confusion of a "paradox of substance" would lead to the eventual downfall of "critical intellect" as the definitive tool for historical interpretation.

Henry Nash Smith

There is no better place to start to see the shift from "unconscious productiveness" to "critical intellect" than in the 1969 twentieth anniversary preface of Henry Nash Smith's

Virgin Land. By this time, the distinctions between the two schools of thought were becoming sufficiently pronounced for Smith to recognize that his own work, originally published in 1950, had only been a rudimentary transition bridging two extremes. In Virgin Land, Smith argued that human beings as they encountered new environments created images of what life was and how it ought to be. These images subsequently impinged on how human beings decided to transform the landscape around them. Smith hoped to reduce the ambiguities introduced into historical works as a result of Turner's "unconscious productiveness" by determining just what was the relationship between human thought and physical action. But later critics from the 1960's and 1970's arrived at the conclusion that Smith was just as guilty of vague definitions and an imprecise terminology when it came to his "imaginative constructions."³ They argued that, like Turner, he had embedded a strong but false dualism between the phenomenal and non-phenomenal into his work. One would have thought Laurence Veysey was speaking of Turner when he condemned Smith's approach to the construction of myths within human imagination, "The myth was narrowed, and all too soon, it became an abstraction dictating as it were a vast person. The myth moved actively; it was the subject of many verbs."⁴ Perhaps Bruce Kuklick's criticism was the most damaging as it demolished Smith's distinction between mind and the physical world altogether and equated him with a long line of misled "platonists" who adopted an inadequate theoretical position that allowed "a set of eternal ideas existing independently of the individuals thinking about them" to be placed in opposition to the physical world.⁵ Critics were appalled that he had exhibited physical "empirical fact" and "products of the imagination" on a "different plane."⁶ To them, that dualism oversimplified the more sociological underpinnings for

which they looked. Veysey wrote that Smith's "bleak dualism" left unanswered a most basic question: "why certain 'myths' and not others should arise in a particular social or physical climate."⁷ Smith had no answer because he had eliminated Turner's "vital forces" as the underpinnings of human thought and behavior. The concept of "vital forces" would have allowed Smith to assert that human beings mythologized in certain ways simply because these "vital forces" were energizing that particular region. Smith's relativism prevented him from adopting such a base while, at the same time, his over-emphasis on "collective mentalities" as opposed to physical institutions and their down-to-earth structural processes (something which he regretted later) denied him the more materialist base required by his later peers.⁸ Smith had not altogether given up realism at the same time he was fighting against it. That meant Smith was a man caught between two worlds—the one going out and the other coming in. What the preface to the twentieth anniversary printing showed was just how much Smith had in fact succeeded in bringing attention to the problem of the relationship between noumenon and phenomenon in historical dialogue. The profession had moved so quickly in the new direction that it soon passed him, forcing him to back-track twenty years later and apologize for his own shortcomings in establishing figures of speech that ultimately deflected the clarity which he had hoped to give to the subject—that is, the precise relationship between the mind and the physical environment. He apologized that his "metaphor of distinct planes was too severely fixed and dualistic," thereby formulating a reductionism, both in language and idea, that prevented a more integrative approach to the two worlds.⁹ The transition into "critical intellect" which Virgin Land represented was recognized as just that. It was

an initial transition and not the full-bloom world view that would eventually develop from it.

Henry Nash Smith did establish, whether completely successful or not in applying it in his own work, an objection to figures of speech that obscured meanings. He especially objected to Frederick Jackson Turner's "conception of nature as the source of occult [hidden] powers" because it depended on "metaphors that threatened to become themselves a means of cognition and to supplant discursive reasoning."¹⁰ He proceeded to quote from a section of Turner's "Contributions of the West" in which a "beneficent power emanating from nature" was shown "creating an agrarian utopia in the West."¹¹ The agent, this "beneficent power emanating from nature," was in fact an undefined "ennobling influence" that brought forth the type of American character that Turner saw unique to each successive west.¹² "Ennobling influence" merely served as another term for "vital forces." Smith lamented that the difficulty with Turner's concept of nature was that it had become the source for "spiritual values."¹³ For Turner, these spiritual values lay underneath all human ideals and physical action. On closer examination, it becomes clear why Smith felt this way. In "Contributions," Turner had merely replicated the "divine, idea, and physical matter" structure that first appeared in "The Power of the Press." In fact, the closing phrase from "Contributions" repeated it exactly: "Let us see to it that the ideals of the pioneer in his log cabin shall enlarge into the spiritual life of a democracy where civic power shall dominate and utilize individual achievement for the common good."¹⁴ All three levels existed here: spirit overarched ideals which subsequently developed into responsibly directed human behavior. This was Turner's world view as opposed to a cognitively responsible philosophical position. As Kenneth

Burke pointed out, when a world view attempted to encompass an ultimate ground to reality such as a spiritual base (what Burke called “God-terms), the “concepts become poorer in contents or intension in proportion as their extension increases, so that the content zero must correspond to the extension infinity.”¹⁵ The “vital forces,” being interchangeable with the frontier and treated as universal and omnipotent, necessarily reached the conceptual extension where they became undefinable. “God-terms” explained “too little by explaining too much.”¹⁶ Smith maintained that Turner’s metaphors had essentially become “God-terms” that obscured historical meaning.

Laurence Veysey and Bruce Kuklick were correct in that Smith allowed his own figures of speech to construct a world in which unseen images could be spoken of as separate agents that overarched physical action, but they missed the more penetrating insight that these “imaginative constructions” nevertheless were not “God-terms” like Turner’s were. For Smith, “notions” of a northwest passage to India could “motivate” human exploration or the “myth of the garden” could determine the future of the Mississippi Valley.¹⁷ Clearly, Veysey could see that Smith was thoroughly enmeshed in the “paradox of substance.” He complained, “When all happenings in American history have been rechristened in mythological terminology[that is, the relationship between images and empirical fact], the end result is apt to be . . . more elusive and synthetic than clarifying.”¹⁸ But Veysey missed the most important point. Smith’s “imaginative constructions” were first and foremost byproducts of physical action. Only after they had been created by physical human beings tramping westwards could they subsequently impinge on their western institutions. That is significantly different from Turner’s “vital forces” that often preceded physical action. The difference is wide enough to argue that

Smith's unseen forces were not in fact "God-terms" like Turner's. It is true that Smith's "imaginative constructions" sometimes "exerted a decided influence on practical affairs," but they were distortions (irrespective of his apologies and back-tracking) of empirical fact, not the ground to it.¹⁹ In Turner's case, when the historian returned to the unseen forces or spoke of them as unseen agents he came closer to capturing an ultimate ground of truth. Not so in Smith's case. As one returned to overarching ideals he did not encounter immutable spiritual values. Instead, Smith demonstrated that these so-called spiritual values were actually constructed over a period of time. They underwent change and at no time were they any better or any more immutable than any other. The great civic qualities which Turner saw as the productions of "vital forces" were reconfigured by Smith into trivial figures of speech, no longer meant to be taken "serious," that degenerated more and more into "exaggerated stereotypes."²⁰

These immutable spiritual forces were at the root of Turner's explanation for physical action even when not specifically referenced. To explain history with the inclusion of "God-terms" such as the "vital forces" allows the historian to employ what Burke called the principle of parsimony.²¹ Parsimony is a reduction in language in which the words themselves only convey a partial explanation of what is actually meant. First, the historian postulates "a sense of things as *powers* or *acts*."²² Then he differentiates between agent and act, making the "invisible soul" the agent and the "visible material process" the act.²³ Subsequently, realizing that agent and act describe the same thing and that the agent is always present in an unchanging form, the terms for the invisible force can be dropped and the description curtailed simply to terms of visible action. But the invisible force remains implicit in the structure of physical action. If it was premised that

the process of “raining” was the act of a God, it could be expressed, “the God is raining.”²⁴ Under “the principle of parsimony,” the historian can omit the unseen force, simply saying, “It is raining.”²⁵ It becomes burdensome for the historian to have to repeatedly refer back to the causal agent which he has by this time taken for granted as a convenience. In understanding the relationship between unseen forces and the physical world, Turner’s frontier thesis has to be seen in this light. He described classes of society rolling “one after the other” into successive western regions, progressively developing from the savage to the trapper to the pioneer to the farmer and finally the coming of industry and civilization.²⁶ That description of evolution by Turner was essentially parsimonious. The “God-term” of the “vital forces” had been set up at the beginning of the essay as the agent of his historical action. It was a constant; it was always there. As an agent, it was never supplanted by anything else. Turner quoted from Peck’s New Guide to the West (1837) a “suggestive passage” which reflected his own views and stylistic language.²⁷ Without the reduction of parsimony, the passage would appear as follows:

Generally, in all the western settlements, three classes, like the waves of the ocean, have rolled one after the other [because the “vital forces” successively incarnated in each group]. First comes the pioneer [because the “vital forces” incarnated in them first], who depends for the subsistence of his family chiefly upon the natural growth of vegetation, called the ‘range,’ and the proceeds of hunting. His implements of agriculture are rude [because that is the extent to which he could absorb the “vital forces”], chiefly of his own make . . . The next class of emigrants purchase the lands, add field to field, clear out the roads, throw rough bridges over the streams, put up hewn log houses with glass windows and brick or stone chimneys, occasionally plant orchards, build mills, schoolhouses, courthouses, etc, . . . and exhibit the picture and forms of plain, frugal civilized life [because that is what the “vital forces” allow them to do]. Another wave rolls on [because that is how the “vital forces” work]. The man of capital and enterprise come [because it is their turn to absorb the “vital forces”]. The settler is ready to sell and take advantage of the rise in property, push farther into the interior and become, himself, a man of capital and

enterprise in turn [because the “vital forces” have likewise influenced him] . . . Thus wave after wave is rolling westward [because that is the pattern of the “vital forces”]; the real Eldorado is still farther on [because that is where the “vital forces” will appear again].²⁸

What has happened in this case is the agent has been extrinsically dropped but intrinsically implied (as noted by the inclusion of brackets). At the extrinsic level, one is left solely with the concept of “motion” of physical action, a reduction or parsimony of the actual intent of the intrinsic level.²⁹

In contrast, the reduction of a “God-term” as a function of parsimony did not exist in Smith’s work like it did in Turner’s. Rather, Smith’s unseen forces competed with one another, resulting in a mutability that disallowed them to be considered as an ultimate ground. In chapter sixteen of Virgin Land, entitled “The Garden and the Desert,” he demonstrated how the “myth of the Great American Desert” was overcome by the “myth of the garden.”³⁰ The “imaginary figure of the wild horseman of the plains” was destroyed and replaced by the stout yeoman.³¹ One set of intrinsic qualities which the West was formerly imagined to possess was now replaced by another. The qualities of the westerner which Turner took literally as perpetually self-existent were in fact a purposeful manipulation of images by human beings with an intent to produce specific physical actions. Smith showed how Samuel Aughey and Charles Dana Wilbur, as representative examples of their time, helped to construct the “myth of the garden” in newer western regions so that it would appeal to people to emigrate. For them, the success of a region depended on the men living there and their relationship to nature; it was a huge “concert of forces—the human energy or toil, the vital seed, and the polished raindrop that never fails to fall in answer to the imploring power or prayer of labor.”³² This new vision, carefully fabricated by its often less-than-worthy proponents, took hold

of the American mind and replaced previous views. By creating a scene where these “imaginative constructions” conflicted with one another and therefore changed each other, Smith showed the impermanency of the unseen forces on a figurative level. What Turner believed on a literal level (that unseen forces were permanent things) Smith demonstrated to be false on a figurative level (the unseen forces in fact were not). That was Smith’s overriding irony in Virgin Land. It was the point at which he rejected metaphor in favor of an ironic trope. And it meant there was no stable unseen force consistently grounding human action. That was the point at which he rejected realism in favor of nominalism. As such, there was no “principle of parsimony” operative in Smith’s work. This removal of the “principle of parsimony” was a function of his nominalist philosophy. The “vital forces,” as convenient mental fictions, had been removed because they over-generalized individual particulars.

As to Smith’s irony, his entire story revolved around it. Some aspects of metonymy and synecdoche appeared, but they did not drive the piece. When such synecdochic passages as “[James Fennimore] Cooper was able to speak for his people on this theme [the relationship between freedom and law] because the forces at work within him closely reproduced the patterns of thought and feeling that prevailed in the society at large” showed up, they were quickly subsumed in importance to the ironic trope.³³ Smith was not interested in understanding how the individual (Cooper) related to his larger community in terms of macrocosm and microcosm but rather how that individual was caught between the endless contradictions of his own society (between the opposites of freedom and law). The ironic trope under-girded the entire contents of Book Two, comprising chapters five to ten. He opened this second section with “Daniel Boone:

Empire Builder or Philosopher of Primitivism” in which he worked towards the conclusion that it was an absurdity to label Boone either as a “harbinger of civilization and refinement” or a “cultural primitivist.”³⁴ Instead, he argued, the “image of the Wild Western hero could serve either purpose.”³⁵ The qualities commonly associated with either the primitivist or the refined gentleman were merely constructed stereotypes and not real at all. No one could actually possess them as they were envisioned; they did not exist as outlined. The qualities of either character were the result of an image that itself was not real either. That meant the qualities could not be abstracted back to a source of ultimate truth. For Smith, the human being was more complex than a simple stereotype. Kenneth Burke explained how, as an aspect of the “paradox of substance,” people can work on different levels at the same time. He illustrated how a “soldier may be *nationally* motivated to kill the enemies of his country, whereas *individually* he is motivated by a horror of killing his own enemies.”³⁶ Defining the soldier in that way established a win-win situation if one were to employ the ironic trope in interpreting his actions. Irony is all about showing how something may appear true at one level but false at another level. No matter what position one takes in regard to the soldier’s real view of killing, it can always be shown as false when viewed from a different level (nationally vs. individually). And that is what Smith did in his example of Daniel Boone. The image of Boone corresponded to Burke’s role of the soldier only the national and individual motivations of the soldier were replaced with cultural primitivism and gentlemanly refinement. Just as the soldier could be defined at two different levels, so could Boone’s image. And that was precisely the framework needed for the ironic trope to function. Smith set it up perfectly.

The successive chapters in Book Two operated within the same framework. In chapter six, Smith placed Leatherstocking from The Last of the Mohicans in the same relationship to freedom and law as Daniel Boone had been placed in relation to cultural primitivism and harbinger of civilization.³⁷ Leatherstocking's "conflict of allegiances" between the two was "truly ironic" because he could not possibly fully live up to either one of them.³⁸ In chapter seven, Smith continued the theme arguing that the "Wild Western hunter," descended from the Leatherstocking figure, could reach "full status as a literary hero only at the cost of losing contact with nature."³⁹ As was demonstrated in chapter eight, Smith's new literary hero had to be transformed into a "canon of civilization and progress."⁴⁰ But the virtues of this canon were no more tenable or permanent than those associated with the canon of primitivism. That they were fundamentally unattainable meant the canon could only degenerate further into a ridiculous spectacle of myth. So argued Smith in chapters nine and ten. By contrasting primitivism and progress on a figurative level, Smith was able to throw doubt on them at the literal level. An individual might be motivated by both primitivism and progress (just as the soldier was motivated at both a national and individual level), but he could not be motivated by just one. For Smith to have admitted that would have meant the different levels necessary for the ironic trope to function would be missing. Irony insists on comparison and the relativism of that comparison. By comparing the unseen qualities supposedly inherent in both primitivism and progress and showing them both as transient, Smith eliminated the possibility that they could be placed as the ground to reality on the literal level or what he referred to as empirical fact.

Since Smith did not allow unseen forces as the ground to reality, he could only move in one direction: materialism. Materialist doctrine generally asserts that physical matter is “eternally existent” and “impenetrable.”⁴¹ For matter to be eternally existent means that there is no room for a base beneath it. There can be no two eternals. For matter to be impenetrable implies that there can be no “vital forces” acting outside the organism. There can be no qualitative energies from outside the organism which it must absorb to perform certain functions. In regard to the permanency of matter, Smith drew the distinction between empiric fact and what human emotion and imagination would make of it. For him, empiric fact always came down on the side of physical expression. The American West may have contained people who tried to create impressions of what it actually was, but the American West was “nevertheless there, a physical fact of great if unknown magnitude.”⁴² The physical fact was reality; the unseen forces were not.⁴³ Smith embedded unseen forces into his text not because they pointed to reality, but because they served as examples for how metaphor could be broken down through critical analysis. His irony sought to disprove the validity of unseen forces taken on a literal level. It took him to the same conclusion that Professor M. Boutmy had reached before. America was not so much a democracy as a huge commercial company stretching across the landscape. Smith wrote, “In view of actual conditions in the West, the ideal of the yeoman society could be considered nothing but a device of propaganda manipulated by cynical speculators.”⁴⁴ That meant Smith had essentially utilized ideals not as indicators of reality but as a negation of what reality was. In order to demonstrate that the ideal was nothing more than cynical propaganda, Smith’s view required that the historian critically analyze what was actually happening on the physical level. In its philosophy,

this analysis of the ideal from a physical perspective was nominalist. This completely contradicted Turner's realistic use of ideals, and hence metaphor, which was supposed to point to empiric fact at the physical level. Smith's use of ideals and metaphor did the exact opposite; ideals and metaphor pointed away from empirical fact. Smith played with "imaginative constructions" to subvert the validity of unseen forces in getting at reality. This was both ironic and materialist.

In regard to the impenetrable-ness of physical matter, what annoyed Smith the most was that the physical landscape and the human being could be infused with unseen forces that gave them special qualities which others conceived to be real. After quoting Philip Freneau's early vision of the American West, he condemned it for "bathing" the "stately trees, the buffalo (somehow transformed into mild sweet-breathed dairy herds), and the bland climate" in a "golden mist of utopian fantasy."⁴⁵ Smith has been accused by his peers for being metaphorical but Smith's criticism of Freneau, a criticism which subsequently motivated the book's entire argument, was in fact anti-metaphorical. Refer back to Turner's photograph from McDonald Lake Glacier Park for a moment. Turner had inscribed on the reverse side of the picture, "F.J.T. With heart bowed down." It has already been explained how Turner allowed the physical heart to possess an intangible extension which endowed it with qualities beyond what the substance of matter had given it. Smith was objecting to that type of metaphor in this case. Freneau's "stately trees" implied that the physical tree was infused with an intangible essence that gave it a quality not perceptible to the physical senses. Smith objected to this otherworldly identification. As well, he marveled at how Freneau transformed the buffalo into "mild sweet-breathed dairy herds." For Freneau to have done so required him to extrapolate the existence of an

intangible quality and then define the physical buffalo in terms of it. That was pure metaphor in which matter was penetrated by an unseen force; Smith objected to it early on. If so, this seems to be the most direct inference that Smith objected to Turner's "vital forces" and their inherent metaphorical structure.

By rejecting the metaphorical trope in this way, what Smith was really objecting to was any world view that made an unseen force stronger than the physical agent. For him, such "intimations reached beyond logical theory."⁴⁶ That this was indeed his view becomes most clear when examining his argument against the safety-valve theory. The safety-valve theory maintained that the vacant lands opening up in the West would help solve the problems associated with American industrial progress. The West would act as a balance to the East by allowing the "vital forces" to manifest somewhere and simultaneously relieve some of the pressures in the East. As Turner noted, "society seemed able to throw off all its maladies by the very presence of these vast new spaces."⁴⁷ Robert Athearn in The Mythic West hinted at what the safety-valve really was. Depending on the topography, there was vertical "space" and/or horizontal "space."⁴⁸ Mountains offered feelings of sanctuary while the plains offered a broad perspective. But the physical mass of the mountains alone could not affect a person that way; it was the interrelationship between the mass of the mountain and the "space" around it—vertical "space" in this case—that created the "expanses" that shaped men's minds and attitudes.⁴⁹ For Athearn, "space" was an intangible expression tied into the physical landscape and yet it was not the physical landscape itself. "Space" was the quality that allowed the physical landscape to have its magical effect on people. That meant "space" had to be some sort of energy that could impart its own spiritual qualities to an observer

through his contact with the environment. Thus, the safety-valve theory actually preached that an ultra-powerful unseen agent influenced the intrinsic nature of men. The subsequent change in their character would help them to deal with the new outward problems of the industrial age. In dealing with the safety-valve theory, Smith chose to reduce this ultra-powerful agent to an “imaginative construction,” which meant it had been transformed into a will o’ the wisp issuing from any average man’s imagination. Whereas Turner’s “vital forces” were often not merely the byproduct of man’s mind, Smith’s “imaginative constructions” were. Smith discarded the “pleasing suggestion” that a “beneficent nature stronger than any human agency” actually existed.⁵⁰ Instead, by placing the safety valve theory as a mere “imaginative construction,” he was able to show that what certain nineteenth-century men and women believed on a figurative level was not true on a literal level. The “empirical fact” was that the safety valve theory masked “poverty” and “industrial strife.”⁵¹ Once again, this was irony at its most subtle. Smith set up the relationship between “imaginative constructions” and physical action as metaphor, but the dual levels of existence were treated solely as a useful mechanism for employing an ironic trope that had as its goal the negation of metaphor’s ability to point to an ultimate ground of reality.

But was Smith’s severe distaste for placing unseen forces as a ground to reality just a world view that he assumed to be correct or did his thought have a foundation in a cognitively responsible philosophical position? Did he display a coherent theoretical base for his world view or did he simply accept it because it simply seemed to be the right world view to take on? Bruce Kuklick and Alan Trachtenberg criticized him for not exhibiting a cognitively responsible philosophical position. Trachtenberg wrote of

Virgin Land, “Its informing theory nowhere gets a theoretical exposition: the book prefers to exemplify rather than theorize.”⁵² Kucklick and Trachtenberg were criticizing Smith (their predecessor) for precisely the same error that Smith had found in Turner (his predecessor). Both Turner and Smith possessed an imprecise terminology and framework when it came to defining unseen forces. Both Turner and Smith gravitated towards a very basic world view conforming either to philosophical realism or nominalism, but neither historian had defended their historical theories with a substantial theoretical exposition. What they did instead was employ a trope that automatically encoded that world view into their text as historical explanation. The tropal category of metaphor or irony reflected their world view. What Kucklick and Trachtenberg were really trying to do with their criticism of Smith was push him even further into the materialist camp. Smith had gone much of the way, but Kucklick wanted him to go even further. He urged scholars like Smith to re-examine the plausibility of their world views in light of the work of Gilbert Ryle in The Concept of Mind (1949). Like Karl Marx, Ryle argued that there were unseen forces and a physical world, but the unseen forces were so closely identified with seen forces that they were in fact the same thing. He explained, “The realm of the mental is not a realm of inner things, but a realm of observable activities and processes.”⁵³ The mental state was in the physical action itself and therefore unseen forces totally disappeared in Ryle’s schemata. This position would correspond to metaphor except for two distinctions. First, metaphor allows for the integration *and* separation of noumenon and phenomenon. Ryle’s schemata did not allow for such a separation. Second, in the process of that integration and separation, the validity of noumenon, or the spiritual world, is never denied. Ryle’s schemata denied the spiritual

world. Consequently, Ryle's perspective was an even more materialist view than what Smith had adopted. With Kuklick attempting to push Smith towards Ryle's more extremist perspective, the possibility could be raised that Smith was only the preliminary transition figure between the idealism of the Progressives and the radical materialism of the New Left.

In later years, Smith did get support from colleagues arguing that he did have a strong theoretical base underpinning his work. In the same way that Kerwin Klein defended Turner's world view by demonstrating that it mirrored the philosophical positions of Hegel and Johann Droysen, so Brian Atterby argued that Smith's world view resembled that of Wilhelm Dilthey. Dilthey was much more materialistic than either Droysen or Hegel and that view clearly matched Smith's own. Dilthey believed that "our innermost selves are formed from cultural materials: language, customs, laws, institutions, and art."⁵⁴ On the other hand, these "cultural structures" also expressed "the beliefs, habits, and desires of individuals."⁵⁵ Dilthey allowed things to happen both ways by configuring a circular argument. Outward forms (physical customs, physical institutions, etc.) created the inner self (thoughts, feelings, consciousness) yet in turn the inner self as the newly acquired desires and beliefs of the individual subsequently transformed those "cultural structures." Nowhere was it necessary to deal with an ultimate ground to reality in this arrangement because the circular argument was self-contained. This was Smith's theoretical base as well. Smith's "inner self" or the human mind was a metaphor for the outward forms of the cultural structures but it was not a ground to reality. In fact, there was no ground or ultimate reality in Smith's argument. Smith allowed the human mind as

“imaginative constructions” to shape outward cultural structures and yet the mind itself was a byproduct of those same structures.

This was a significantly different argument than Hegel’s. Rather than having outer physical forms and the internal self revolving around on the edge of the circle, he had them raying out from an imaginary point. In the process of that raying out from this point, a distinction arose between the inner self, or the divine part of man, and his desires/beliefs. The inner self produced the desires and beliefs (according to its own time-scale and need for development) which made the cultural structures possible. This concept eliminated the arrangement where cultural structures and desires/beliefs re-created one another. Instead, the capacity of the inner self to replicate itself grew consistently weaker as it rayed out through desires/beliefs into cultural structures until those components were too feeble to retain an impress except in the most unconscious way.⁵⁶ This argument placed the inner self as the ground to reality. Unlike Dilthey’s inner self, it was not produced by anything. Rather, it was the source of all historical action. Turner adopted this proposition wholesale. His “divine” was the inner self, his “ideals” were desires and beliefs, and “physical matter” was the cultural structures. Turner allowed both desires and beliefs as well as cultural structures to degenerate the further they were removed from their central life-giving source.

Neither Smith or Turner worked out the details for defending their acceptance of one or the other theoretical base. They merely assumed a position and then applied it to a historical situation without really having a clue as to whether it was true or not. Dilthey’s arrangement was more conducive to Smith because it did not assume an ultimate truth. For Smith’s irony to function, he had to start with components that could be shown as

untrue. That is because irony only exists by subverting the truth in opposing components. An ultimate ground to reality would have demolished Smith's tropal configuration. Hegel's thought was more conducive to Turner because it was based on an ultimate truth. Since an ultimate truth was assumed to exist, the use of metaphor was validated. If an unseen ground to reality existed, then it was only natural to search for it behind the veil of physical matter.

With the publication of Virgin Land in 1950, the door was opened for Dilthey's more materialist, theoretical base which Smith forwarded as his world view to supplant Turner's idealist, Hegelian vision. By the close of the book, Smith believed he had laid down the "new intellectual system" that was "requisite before the West could be adequately dealt with in literature or its social development understood."⁵⁷ Indeed, Smith's world view became the dominant system of thought in the post-1950's. The construct of "vital forces" disappeared as they were merged into the more ordinary desires and beliefs of human beings. Human consciousness became a mere byproduct of cultural structures. Unseen forces still existed in contemporary historical texts. It is just that as "imaginative constructions" rather than "vital forces" they could more easily be manipulated to serve the rising materialism of the historical profession. Now everyone wanted to show how "the ideal yeoman society" could be considered nothing but a device of propaganda managed by cynical speculators. The stage for an age of "criticism and consciousness" had been set. Irony was its master trope and, under Donald Worster's Marxist interpretation, Smith's "new intellectual system" would achieve full-bloom form.

Donald Worster

In order to understand Donald Worster, it is necessary to understand the philosophical and tropal structures underlying Marxism. Like Henry Nash Smith's left-liberal position, Marxism functions on nominalist and ironic principles. It has been described in the previous section that Smith's "imaginative constructions" were essentially about removing a Hegelian "superagent" as the cause of physical action.⁵⁸ Hegel's view was that human consciousness served as the mediator that allowed the needs and will of an ultimate ground to reality to express itself physically. That meant the physical world was a byproduct of unseen forces. In contrast, Smith embraced Dilthey's more materialistic conception that emphasized human consciousness as a mere byproduct of a physical world. This view rejected the possibility of "vital forces" moving across the landscape inspiring human consciousness to interact with the environment in new and progressive ways. In its method, Marxism mirrored the Dilthey-Smith orientation. As Kenneth Burke noted, Karl Marx subverted the Hegelian relationship, "deriving the character of human consciousness in different historical periods from the character of the material conditions prevailing at the time" rather than from any unknown superagent."⁵⁹ Burke continued, explaining how Nikolai Lenin saw "consciousness, reason, and sensation" as derivative of matter."⁶⁰ Friedrich Engels similarly held that "thought and consciousness were products of the human brain."⁶¹ Marxism did not allow for any ultimate unseen force from which physical action was derivative. Nothing existed beyond physical reality. For example, if Marx and Engels were looking at the daily events within a city and they had to discern just what was the historical truth for what went on in that city, their conclusions would vastly differ from Hegel's. That difference can be accounted for in

their method for viewing the relationship between unseen forces and the physical world. Take the issue of justice for example. Marxism would define justice along lines of class nominalism, observing the interactions between people within the city and noticing inequalities between rich and poor. Class nominalism did not go as far as pure nominalism in rejecting realism in that class nominalism did allow individuals to be categorized under the generalized terms “bourgeoisie” and “proletariat” based on their economic standing. Having noted this quasi-realist aspect of Marxism, Marxism nevertheless predominantly functioned on nominalist principles. The notion of justice for the Marxists was reached by direct observation of how the events appeared solely at the physical level. Since there were so many nuances in the relationships between people, many different examples of justice would exist but no overarching idealized construct of justice could be extracted from the overall situation to cover them all. The city as a unit could not be called just if there were cases of what appeared to be injustice at the individual levels and subsequently the class levels. As noted, Marx did proceed to generalize these individual levels into two class levels, but the result of the generalization was still a “dialectical materialism” pitting two very physical groups of people against one another as opposed to being a noumenal/phenomenal dichotomy as found in Hegel’s realist generalizations.⁶² In nominalism, each and every physical event would have to be viewed on its own to ensure that what was actually being meted out was justice before such a declaration of a just city could be made. In contrast to Marx, Hegelians sought a higher concept of justice, an “ideal justice” derived at a “higher level of generalization,” that allowed there to be a justice prevailing above and despite what appeared as injustice from the limited physical perspective.⁶³ For example, some individuals might be hurt

during certain historical processes, but justice was still being served because they were part of a larger purpose, the agenda of an unseen superagent, which in and of itself was just. But the Marxists countered that such an ideal justice masked a material injustice, which meant that the ideal justice was not real at all. For them, higher levels of generalization masked “disunities” within the generalization itself when viewed from a different level of observation.⁶⁴ That Marxist methodology denied the existence of a non-phenomenal superagent meant that their concept of justice was predetermined by that denial. The way they viewed the relationship between the unseen and the physical world dictated the way they moralized physical events.

Henry Nash Smith’s “imaginative constructions” confronted the theme of justice with the same methodology as the Marxist perspective. Once the ideal of the yeoman society with its vast expanses and free land had been removed as the higher generalization for what was the American West, Smith could approach the issue of what the West really was by looking at individual examples. And he too, though somewhat more loosely than Marx, categorized these individual examples under a class nominalism for wealthy and poor. His selection included a number of “cynical speculators” and therefore, based on examining each one of the singular cases, he labeled the West as unjust.⁶⁵ Smith could arrive at this conclusion because his “imaginative constructions” resembled a Marxist perspective rather than an Emersonian one like Turner worked through. Emersonian tendencies were fundamentally Hegelian when it came to constructing higher generalizations for physical events. In Ralph Waldo Emerson’s essay, “Nature,” there was a passage that clearly indicated he believed there was a higher level of justice than what a simple observation of physical events appeared to show. He wrote:

The charming landscape which I saw this morning is undubitably
 Made up of some twenty or thirty farms. Miller owns this field,
 Locke that, and Manning the woodland beyond. But none of them
 owns the landscape. There is a property in the horizon which no man
 has but he whose eye can integrate all the parts... This is the best part
 of these men's farms, yet to this their warranty-deeds give no title.⁶⁶

For Emerson, there may have been individual ownership of specific properties which meant there would have been inequalities between rich and poor within that region. But he did not label the region unjust because of that physical observation. Instead, his concept for justice came from what he perceived as the “unifying idealism” of the region.⁶⁷ Whatever physical inequalities that existed were mitigated in light of how the individual physical discrepancies all fit into a larger nobler context. Justice existed in the fact that, while there may have been an unequal distribution of who owned the farms, no one could own the landscape. The landscape served as the tool of a higher generalization in this case.

At an individual or class level, the overzealous businessman might dominate the physical scene but Emerson did not look to that when defining what a particular region was like. And neither did Turner. Turner dealt with the issue of justice and the inequality of physical wealth in a way that mirrored Emerson's vision as opposed to Smith's. In the most obvious example that showed he believed historical reality had to be defined in terms of higher generalizations, Turner wrote:

But the very task of dealing with vast resources, over vast areas, under the conditions of free competition furnished by the West, has produced the rise of those captains of industry whose success in consolidating economic power now raises the question as to whether democracy under such conditions can survive. For the old military type of Western leaders like George Rogers Clark, Andrew Jackson, and William Henry Harrison have been substituted by such industrial leaders as James H. Hill, John D. Rockefeller, and Andrew Carnegie.

The question is imperative, then, What ideals persist from this

democratic experience of the West; and have they acquired sufficient momentum to sustain themselves under conditions so radically unlike those in the days of their origin? In other words, the question put at the beginning of this discussion becomes pertinent. Under the forms of the American democracy is there in reality evolving such a concentration of economic and social power in hands of a comparatively few men as may make political democracy an appearance rather than a reality? The free lands are gone. The material forces that gave vitality to Western democracy are passing away. It is to the realm of the spirit, the domain of ideals and legislation, that we must look for Western influence upon democracy in our own days.⁶⁸

This passage demonstrated just how aware Turner was of the concentration of wealth in a few hands. He recognized that physical conditions had changed so much that the ideals which had explained American history before might no longer be valid. By solely looking at physical conditions, one could argue that democracy was not longer just. But Turner realized that physical conditions could often belie the truth behind historical events. As pointed out before, he admitted there was an extreme materialism pervading the early pioneer movements, but this did not make that entire historical process materialistic. At the physical level, materialism may have been rampant among people. But above all that there was an “idealistic conception” of vacant lands and a new order of things that more closely and accurately defined what was going on physically.⁶⁹ Turner’s abstraction for an idealistic conception was a higher generalization like Emerson’s unifying idealism. Only by understanding the higher generalization could one understand the physical scene. So too in the instance with the concentration of wealth. Instead of deriving his historical interpretation that American society was unjust based on the physical reality that wealth was being concentrated among the rich, he declared one must in fact turn to the “realm of the spirit” if one was to interpret those physical events

properly.⁷⁰ Turner believed there was a higher concept of justice than that to which physical conditions pointed.

What the Marxist perspective and Smith's "imaginative constructions" shared in common was their denial of higher generalizations. That higher generalizations could be denied was only possible by using the ironic trope. On a figurative level, Turner assumed that a higher generalization could be true—a higher code of justice for instance. But his detractors argued that once viewed on a literal level, the higher generalization was negated. That was the "critical intellect" aspect of irony—negating a previous assumption by examining it from a different level of explanation. That was the method adopted by Smith and the Marxists. The purpose for their irony was the intention to paint a relativist and materialist picture of historical events. In the case of the American West, this meant a more tragic portrait of the human condition was the end-result. To what else could the breaking down of the idea that the yeoman farmer was inspired by divine forces lead? Hayden White explained that the Marxist perspective heavily utilized metonymy and synecdoche, but these tropes were subordinate to its initial overriding purpose: to "translate Irony into Tragedy."⁷¹ For White, tragedy was an explanative device used by historians to allow them to moralize the end-result of their historical findings. A tragic framework proposed that not only were the past and present situations bad but the future would be even worse. The only consolation was that the agent viewing the scene of desolation could at least learn something from the experience. If irony was essentially about de-establishing the validity of higher generalizations and tragedy was the end result of that ironic procedure, that meant tragedy was the byproduct of how historians theorized about the relationship between noumenon and phenomenon. Tragedy resulted

simply because the historian removed higher generalizations (concepts that could exist independently of physical explanation just like the “vital forces” could) from their way of thinking. The best example is the one concerning concentration of wealth in the hands of a few. Without a higher generalization for the concept of justice, the historian could only arrive at a tragic conclusion. Simply stated, the widening gap between rich and poor led to oppression and abuse. But if there were a higher concept of justice, such as that everyone living in America received the benefit of experiencing the vitality and energies associated with a growing and rapidly expanding country, then the physically derived concept of injustice was displaced. There was no tragedy involved from this overarching metaphorical perspective. The New Western historians, using Smith’s “imaginative constructions” and the Marxist perspective, never were able to disprove that energies and vitalities did not make a region special; they only shifted to a different tropal category that did not take these things into account because its concepts were solely physically derived.

Donald Worster was part of that New Western history and he, along with colleagues like Patricia Limerick and Richard White, paved the way for a broader acceptance of Smith’s tropal shift. But why did these historians adopt Smith’s historical approach in the first place? In part, the New Westerners would argue that it was accepted because they conceived it to be a more historically accurate position than what Turner’s metaphor had to offer. And they would admit to some extent, albeit reluctantly in a few cases, that its acceptance stemmed from their own experiences in the protest movements of the 1960’s—which just happened to be leftist or Marxist. The 1960’s brought about a radical transformation of the intellectual environment in the historical profession. Historians

became more critical and self-conscious. But the main reason a new approach was accepted was because the Marxist conception of how the interaction between noumenon and phenomenon occurred allowed for “imaginative constructions” instead of “vital forces.” Marxism’s ontology did not allow physical things to have an essence beyond physical matter. Working from that framework, the New Western historians had no option but to turn the unseen world into one big imaginary construct of misplaced hopes and illusory dreams.

Donald Worster’s Marxist ontology gave him a natural conduit connecting New Western history to Smith’s “imaginative constructions.” Marxist ontology was a paradoxically complicated dance that needs to be examined more closely before simply labeling it as materialistic. In fact, it allowed both for materialism and idealism at the same time. Marxist ontology was materialistic in claiming many of America’s ideals to be false, but it was also idealistic in that it only labeled those ideals as false because it was combating materialistic interests. Marxism sought to free men of the “false bondage of materials” at the same time it insisted “materials were all that existed.”⁷² That meant Marx’s idealism could only be expressed in terms of physical matter and therefore, though it pretended to be idealistic, that idealism never really created a dichotomy between noumenon and phenomenon. It could be idealistic materialistically but not spiritually. That is, the Marxists stressed the material basis rather than the spiritual basis of man’s inner fulfillment. This paradox between materialism and idealism resided at the heart of Donald Worster’s writings and served as the informing ontology that shaped his historical outlook. He openly struggled to explain himself in his 1993 book, The Wealth of Nature, in which he described his philosophical position as “antimaterialistic

materialism.”⁷³ On the one hand, he praised materialism and hoped to see “a little more materialism of the right kind” enter “politics, economics, highway engineering, music, and newspapers.”⁷⁴ On the other hand, he criticized society for taking a “narrowly materialistic attitude” toward materialism.⁷⁵ Worster’s “antimaterialistic materialism” was nothing other than Marx’s idealistic materialism. Like Marx, Worster saw that man’s inner fulfillment would come not by looking towards the spirit but from a “greater awareness of the materiality of the planet, its limits, diversity, and dynamics.”⁷⁶

To be working from a Marxian ontology meant that there had to be a specific combination of materialism and idealism in a historian’s compositions. The materialist aspect had to concur that everything was ultimately derived from physical matter. Physical matter was the basic building block of the universe and the only essence of being. Since spirit had been denied in that initial premise, Marxist idealism could only refer to the states of physical matter. Marxism was idealistic in that it maintained that a set of material conditions could be translated into another more refined set of conditions through the transformation of the physical environment itself. Both aspects appeared in Worster’s first full-length solo effort, Nature’s Economy: A History of Ecological Ideas. Oftentimes when one reads an interpretation of an author’s work one learns more about the perspective of the interpreter than the author under study. Such is the case with Worster’s analysis of Henry David Thoreau’s philosophy. In his section on “Mechanism versus the Life Force” in chapter four, Worster wrote that Thoreau, like many of the environmental naturalists, promoted an “animism, pan-animism, or pan-vitalism” that argued the most important part of a physical being was its “anima, or vital spirit.”⁷⁷ At first, it appeared that Worster would be forced to interpret Thoreau’s concept for “vital

spirit” in the same way Turner viewed his “vital forces.” That is, “vital spirit” and “vital forces” were transcendent of physical matter. That would seem to make an environmentally responsible position such as Thoreau’s dependent on a metaphorical understanding of the relationship between seen and unseen worlds. But Worster was specifically fighting against metaphors in Nature’s Economy, criticizing them for being “nonrational ways of perceiving and communicating” that distorted accurate ecological approaches.⁷⁸ Something had to be done; Worster was arguing that metaphors distorted an environmentally responsible position and yet the man who he portrayed as the most environmentally responsible was guilty of those same metaphors. Ingeniously, Worster argued in chapter five that this “pagan animism” of Thoreau’s “vital spirit” was in fact “radically contrary” to transcendentalism.⁷⁹ Worster interpreted this “vital animating energy” as part of the material world rather than the spiritual one. It was of the “earth earthy.”⁸⁰ By interpreting Thoreau’s “vital spirit” as antagonistic to transcendence, Worster imbued physical matter with the power of creation. All things might be derived from this “vital spirit” but it was considered an aspect of matter itself. Transcendence was displaced as the ground to reality. This meant that metaphorical conceptions of existence could much more easily be treated as false idealisms. By rooting the vitality of the earth and its objects in matter itself, Worster removed any need of spiritual forces and the particular tropal language accompanying them. That ensured the materialism of his environmental history.

As to Worster’s idealism, he was caught in the same paradox faced by all Marxist idealists. How can one insist that all beliefs and institutions are byproducts of their material culture and yet at the same time impose an unchanging set of moral principles

from which to examine those cultures? While Marx insisted that man's beliefs were byproducts of their physical conditions, he himself argued against being able to look at history from within the value measures of the culture itself. For him, there had to be an outside measure to accurately delineate historical meaning. But for there to be an outside unchanging measure implied that all facets of culture did not arise from transient material conditions. How else could there be an outside moral measure that defied the changing of material conditions? Hence, all ideas and beliefs *except the moral measure* were generated by material conditions! Worster bought into this paradox in Nature's Economy. On the one hand, his intent was to "include ecology in the purview of historicism, which holds that all cultural events, beliefs, and institutions are valid relatively, suited to or at least rooted in their times."⁸¹ He questioned the idealism of the scientific establishment because in fact it catered to the needs of its own community rather than necessarily reflecting objective truth. Once born, ideas could "pursue a life of their own" and "become shapers and molders of perceptions elsewhere," but that the entire framework of the book showed ideas as false and emerging from material conditions conducive to that falsity naturally led to a tragic view.⁸² Rather than being regenerative as in Turner's interpretation, ideas created illusions which subsequently motivated people to commit to wrong actions. On the other hand, Worster's intent was to develop a "gentler, more self-effacing ethic toward the earth," one that must lead the historian to "judge the past critically where it has taken us another way."⁸³ That "gentler ethic" represented Worster's idealism.

Worster's idealism for a superior ethical treatment of the earth was clearly not tragic in scope. Instead, it suggested a message of hope and reconciliation for the future. As his

career progressed into the 1990's, he displayed more and more of this ethical idealism which actually appeared to be anti-tragic. In one of his later works, The Wealth of Nature, he indeed established the tragic circumstance where the "ecological crisis" had become "*the* crisis of modern culture," calling into question not only the "ethos of the marketplace or industrialization but also . . . the story of man's triumph by reason over the rest of nature."⁸⁴ But rather than leaving the reader stranded without hope or consolation as tragedy required, he concluded this work with strong comedic insight. By the term "comedy" or "comedic" what is being referred to is Hayden White's conceptual antithesis to tragedy. Whereas tragedy envisioned a bleak unresolved future for society, comedy placed a happy resolution at the end of its story. Society's problems were reconciled by its ultimate betterment. Worster maintained in The Wealth of Nature that there was indeed a resolution to society's problems. He proposed a solution in establishing ultimate moral creeds for judging sufficient levels of resource consumption and economic growth that would contribute to competent restrictions once those levels were exceeded. And, in fact, Worster recognized that it was "inevitable that such a shift would occur at some point."⁸⁵ All one needed now was the "new Adam Smith" who would "reveal the direction in which we ought to fly."⁸⁶ That was hardly a tragic conclusion considering the tragic framework in which it was structured.

Hints of the same contradiction between tragedy and comedy appeared in Dust Bowl and Rivers of Empire. His book Dust Bowl revolved on the irony that the noble ideals of the citizens of Cimarron County, Oklahoma, and Haskell County, Kansas, were actually delusions that worked against the inhabitants and the environment in the long run. The concept of hope itself was demonstrated to be intensely flawed. Optimism could actually

be a “form of lunacy.”⁸⁷ People’s responses to the environment had been an ecological disaster. Their responses had primarily been motivated by themes of capitalist expansion and greed that subsequently destroyed what held the land together—grass—and resulted in the blizzard dirt storms. In his most ironic tone possible, Worster asserted that if plains ecology was not a failure, then “success had a strangely dusty smell about it.”⁸⁸ This insight represented the materialistic irony subverting the nobility of human ideals into a tragic scene. But if the first 242 pages of Dust Bowl were ironic and tragic, the last page was not. Something happened; Worster’s speech shifted to the comedic mode. In the middle of all the tragedy made apparent by the ironic trope, he skillfully inserted his comedic finale: “Man, therefore, needs another kind of farming by which he can satisfy his needs without making a wasteland. It would be fitting if we should find this new agriculture emerging someday soon in the old Dust Bowl.”⁸⁹ Like a rising phoenix shaking off its charcoal ashes, the problems of the old Dust Bowl society could be reconciled in the potential rebirth of the right kind of society on its worn-out remnants. No conclusion could be more comedic than that. Rivers of Empire followed the same pattern. Throughout the piece, Worster shredded the mythical ideal that the American West, which to him was the desert West, led to freedom and democracy. That optimism was misplaced, argued Worster, and he employed irony to show that it actually led to consolidation of wealth and empire. And nothing was “more certain in the modern West than that the next stage after empire would be decline.”⁹⁰ That was a tragic supposition drawn from the irony of subverting the value of mythical ideals. But, like in Dust Bowl, he shifted from a tragic explanation to a comedic one in the very last paragraph of the book, asserting that if the desert West might be “relieved from some of its burdens of

growing crops, earning foreign exchange, and supporting immense cities,” it might in fact “encourage a new sequence of history” to “irrigate” the “spirit more than the ego” and lead to an “incipient America of simplicity, discipline, and spiritual explanation.”⁹¹ In that phrase, Worster took on such Turnerian overtones that, if it was separated from the larger context, one would think Worster was a comedic historian!

Something much deeper and more complex was happening with Worster’s underlying contradiction than just that he could not make up his mind whether to emplot his narrative tragically or comically. Hayden White has already been quoted as stating that Marxism’s initial purpose was to translate irony into tragedy. But in fact White showed that its purpose did not end there. Indeed, irony had to be emplotted tragically but, ultimately, tragedy had to be manipulated into comedy.⁹² A Marxist perspective could be recognized because it utilized the ironic trope to run through the stage of tragedy into a comic grand finale. That Worster bought into this transitional structure (above and beyond his anti-capitalist rhetoric) is evident when he encoded the Marxist perspective into his interpretation. The apparent contradiction of a tragic to comic shift, brought about through the ironic trope, corresponded to Marx’s moral emplotment of history. It was no contradiction at all but a way to use tropal language to moralize history along specific ideological lines.

In his article, “Trashing the Trails,” Richard White boldly dealt with such themes as irony, tragedy, and comedy, drawing a distinction between the Old West historians like Turner who tended to write comedy and the New West historians who primarily worked through tragedy or irony. That late nineteenth-century and early twentieth-century historians possessed a comic ideology was a sign of the times. Lewis Perry made that

clear enough when he wrote of the period that the university and institutional culture always held before them “a dimly-seen something towards which they stretched forward their hands.”⁹³ That “something” allowed for comic resolution; one merely had to grasp it or move progressively closer to grasping it. In contrast, White maintained that the New West historians of the late twentieth century either leaned towards tragedy or irony. For him, Worster, the “best environmental historian of the West,” wrote tragedy as opposed to irony, “Things don’t end well in the Dust Bowl or Rivers of Empire; we confront our own fatal flaws.”⁹⁴ But other New West historians, apparently less focused than Worster, were, according to White, diverted by the “logic of their own view of human-created environments” into the “far less satisfying mode of irony.”⁹⁵ These ironic historians “found people attempting one thing and very often achieving another.”⁹⁶ White’s argument that Worster was tragic instead of ironic is difficult to accept for two reasons. First, Worster’s Dust Bowl and Rivers of Empire were all about human-created environments molded into his own view that the opportunity to extend capitalist measures through the conquest of an arid environment by technological made-made innovations led to tyranny and monopolization. That meant the structural content of Worster’s work focused on human-created environments just like the ironic historians. Nothing here made him distinctive from them. Second, Worster’s logic was the consummate expression of showing how people attempted one thing but how they actually achieved another. That would make Worster ironic. Richard White’s error in not recognizing the primary importance of Worster’s irony was due to what Gilbert Ryle called a “category mistake.”⁹⁷ A “category mistake” is when two categories (irony and tragedy, for example) are placed on the same level when in fact one belongs above the other. Ryle’s

example was that the University of Cambridge belonged to a higher category than its constituent colleges. He wrote:

A foreigner visiting Oxford or Cambridge for the first time is shown a number of colleges, libraries, playing fields, museums, scientific departments and administrative offices. He then asks 'But where is the University? I have seen where the members of the Colleges live, where the Registrar works, where the scientists experiment and rest. But I have not yet seen the University in which reside and work the members of your University.' It has then to be explained to him that the University is not another collateral institution, some ulterior counterpart to the colleges, laboratories and offices which he has seen. The University is just the way in which all that he has already seen is organized. When they are seen and when their co-ordination is understood, the University has been seen. His mistake lay in his innocent assumption that it was correct to speak of Christ Church, the Bodleian Library, the Ashmolean Museum *and* the University, to speak, that is, as if 'the University' stood for an extra member of the class of which these other units are members. He was mistakenly allocating the University to the same category as that to which the other institutions belong.⁹⁸

Irony and tragedy stand in relation to one another as the University stood to the museum. As Hayden White explained, the tropes (metaphor, metonymy, synecdoche, and irony) were the underlying source to methods of moral emplotment like tragedy and comedy. They belonged at a different and higher level. The overarching trope used the method of emplotment to create the moral of the story. If Hayden White was correct that in Marxism the ironic trope moved through the sub-categories of tragedy and comedy, then irony stood to them as the University did to its colleges. Marxism bought into a pre-established pattern. Seen in this light, Worster's tragedy, being a product of his own Marxist ideology, must be seen as the initial expression of irony. Irony produced his tragedy. Subsequently that tragedy was ultimately transformed into a comedic explanation. That meant Worster's perspective fulfilled Hayden White's view of Marxism as the translation of the ironic trope into tragedy and, finally, comedy. Whereas the Old West historians

immediately perceived comedic resolution (and worked hard to prevent that comedy from shifting into tragedy), the New West historians, just as much a product of their times, underwent an ironic to tragic/comic shift that replicated a Marxist framework in order to get there.

This tragic/comic shift was essentially a byproduct of Marxism's idealistic materialism or, in Worster's word, to an antimaterialistic materialism. The materialist aspect initially produced a tragic narrative, but the subsequent application of idealism to the emplotment transformed it into comedy. Materialism producing a tragic emplotment is best seen in Worster's condemnation of "growth," "progress," "the westward movement," and the "march of freedom" for being false ideologies hiding the flesh and blood struggle of imperialist violence for economic dominance that was really going on.⁹⁹ Like most Marxists, Worster objected to these types of higher generalizations because they masked physical reality. By denying the higher generalization for the westering experience to be categorized under one of these four classifications, Worster was employing irony to obtain a materialist result. A figurative explanation of growth and progress could be demonstrated as untrue when examined on a literal level—which meant on a physical level in this case. The literal level allowed him to only take into account the pleasures and abuses associated with riches and social position (because they were the most directly observable) while ignoring the possible joys of a businessman starting an enterprise and bringing a new creation to life. That a business enterprise could bring new creative life to a region would have entailed a higher generalization (because it was fundamentally an abstraction) and reaffirmed the ability of Turnerian "vital forces" to settle within a specific locale. Instead, Worster presented growth and progress as

euphemisms for some singular merchant getting rich through cunning manipulation and the pleasures that merchant, and he alone (along with his class in this case) , received from his success. Interpreting things this way without a higher generalization allowed the easily demonstrable selfish qualities of an individual and the inequality of monetary distribution to be emphasized. This brand of materialism necessarily emplotted the scene as tragedy. It did not take into account the joys of life that overarched physical action.

At the same time that Worster used materialism to denounce higher generalizations as false idealisms, he was being idealistic in that he was only doing it to combat materialistic interests. In this case, he opposed the materialistic interests of the businessman. If Worster had merely *revealed* the businessman as narrowly materialistic, he still could have been considered solely as a tragic historian. Tragedy does allow for the enlightenment of members within society. But it does not allow for that enlightenment to be put into concrete action. Concrete action based on enlightened ideas would inevitably lead to the formation of a better society and that would contradict the forlorn note of tragedy. Worster's idealism asserted that a moral lifestyle could not only be conceptualized but also achieved. That meant his tragedy was antithetical to his idealism. Something had to go. And what went was the tragedy. The tragedy was replaced by comedic resolution. Two examples have already been presented where Worster shifted from tragedy to comedy at the very close of his book. One more example will be deemed to suffice so long as it makes clear that this shift to comedy was driven by his idealism. In "Good Farming and the Public Good," Worster's essay began in the usual way by undermining the validity of some generally accepted idea held by Americans. For Worster, people's "extravagant ideas" about how agricultural productivity should be

pursued led to mythic constructions that ultimately ruined American farming and damaged the public good.¹⁰⁰ The directly observable physical facts were that individual American farmers were “drowning in dreary statistics: crop reports, production charts, mortgage rates, energy bills, land and commodity prices.”¹⁰¹ This was a tragic emplotment and it was driven by the materialism of not allowing there to be a higher generalization behind the farmer’s goals and motives for what they were doing or why they were doing it. A business enterprise (in this case farming) could only be described in terms of riches and social position. Or “wealth” as Worster defined it.¹⁰² By the close of the essay, farming’s “undoing” by the misapplication of these false ideals proved to be only a temporary situation.¹⁰³ And if a situation was merely temporary that meant it could not be tragic because the problem would eventually be resolved. In fact, Worster maintained that the old farming ideals would soon be replaced by new ideals that would make the world a better place. Society was not only being enlightened by these new ideals but also becoming capable of translating that enlightenment into definite physical action. That was the real goal of idealism after all—to translate its ideals into physical reality. This agenda was inharmonious with a tragic emplotment. If ideals in fact were translated into physical reality, the problems facing the farmers would be resolved, tragedy would end, and a comic resolution be established. Worster wrote, “In the not-to-distant future, farming may come to mean again a life aimed at permanence, an occupation devoted to value as well as technique, a work of moderation and balance.”¹⁰⁴ Worster’s belief that his ideals could be enacted, and were being enacted, into physical reality was the essence of an idealism that produced a comedic resolution pointing to the creation of a utopian world.

Just what type of world did Worster create with his comedic resolution? Interestingly enough, Worster envisioned a nostalgic one where the moral future of America could be found in “less progressive corners, often in rural neighborhoods where there is still along memory running back to a time where farm folk got their living together and worked as partners with the land.”¹⁰⁵ For him, the farmers from preceding generations had passed down their noble way of life to the present generation and all society needed to do to continue the American dream was replicate the transmission. To prove his point that the rural life of the past had once truly offered the American dream, he quoted O.E. Rolvaag’s Giants in the Earth, a novel depicting Norwegian immigrants who migrated to the Dakota prairie, bringing little into that “grassland besides themselves and their old-country habits of mutual aid.”¹⁰⁶ They struggled, endured, competed in “friendly” rivalries, bought property, built homes, constructed fences, and even “prospered” to a certain extent.¹⁰⁷ In the end, what they achieved was a “wary peace with the prairie, an affectionate and understanding peace, a peace that reflected the fact that they were at peace among themselves.”¹⁰⁸ Worster explained that the challenge for contemporary society was to “retrieve that commitment to community from the past, from scattered pockets of rural life, and to find a modern expression for it.”¹⁰⁹ Except for the extreme overemphasis on social bonding, that was the Jeffersonian dream. And it was the dream Turner had adopted from Jeffersonianism and preached throughout his career!

But how is it possible to rationalize this vision of comedic resolution in Worster with the tragic irony in other works that flatly contradict what he has said while employing this comedic form? A comparison of “Good Farming and the Public Good” with “Beyond the Agrarian Myth” is revealing. In “Beyond,” Worster admitted there were

many myths about the West but the principal falsehood was the story “about a simple, rural people coming into a western country . . . and creating there a peaceful, productive life.”¹¹⁰ In this new place, human nature could supposedly “rise out of its old turpitude and depravity; sturdy yeoman farmers would have here the chance to live rationally and quietly, free of all contaminating influences.”¹¹¹ These newcomers would turn the land into the “garden of the world.”¹¹² But, for Worster, these newcomers would in truth be hypocrites rather than redeemers. Their assumption of the new land could only come about from the murder of Indian peoples, “Never mind that much blood would have to be shed first to drive out the natives; the blood would all be on others’ hands, and the farmers would be clean, decent folk dwelling in righteousness.”¹¹³ These same examples which Worster used in “Beyond” to confirm that the nobleness of farming life on the frontier was completely untrue were also used in “Good Farming” to demonstrate that rural life was indeed exemplary and a fact. In “Beyond,” Worster ridiculed the idea that a simple, rural people could move into a new land and create a peaceful, productive life. In “Good Farming,” he argued that such communities did indeed move into new lands and establish a “peace that reflected the fact that they were at peace among themselves.”¹¹⁴ In “Beyond,” Worster ridiculed the idea that yeoman farmers (private property holders) could live undisturbed and dignified amidst the “contaminating influences” of economic greed.¹¹⁵ In “Good Farming,” he argued that the farmers owned private property and even built fences but were strongly dignified. In “Beyond,” Worster implied that the idea that farmers could be “clean, decent folk dwelling in righteousness” was a myth because they now occupied land taken from slaughtered and dispossessed Indians.¹¹⁶ They lived the lives of hypocrites. But were not Rolvaag’s Norwegian immigrants in Worster’s

“Good Farming” moving into the previously held Indian lands of the Dakotas? And yet Worster presented them as righteous citizens worthy of emulation. The contradictions between the two essays are overwhelming and it would be hard to believe they were written by the same man except for one thing. They were written by a man working from a world view that allowed for tragic and comic emplotment within the same interpretive framework. Therefore, what becomes important to discover at this point is the *placement* of the emplotment style within the essays themselves. One immediately recognizes that the tragic irony in “Beyond” which treated the virtues of westering farmers as a myth was being used at the *beginning* of the essay to establish a certain moral tone. That moral tone changed by the close of “Beyond.” In contrast, where Worster brought in the comedic resolution of Rolvaag’s rural westering experience in “Good Farming” was at the *end* of the essay. Of course, the closing comedic passages had been preceded by a tragic emplotment. Thus, what this comparison shows between “Beyond” and “Good Farming” is that Worster was able to take the same evidence for a singular historical experience but put a different moral emplotment onto it depending on whether he was at the beginning or the end of the essay. The Marxist shift from tragedy to comedy dictated that one moralize a historical experience tragically at the beginning of a piece but comically at the end.

In comparison, Henry Nash Smith’s Virgin Land was emplotted in the same way as Worster’s essays with an ironic trope transitioning from tragedy to comedy. That Smith’s “imaginative constructions” and Worster’s Marxist ontology were the same thing should be clear enough by now. In both cases, irony was used to deconstruct higher generalizations. That initially produced a sense of tragedy. Worster acknowledged Smith

as the “first bonafide revisionist . . . the prophet of a new western history” who “first told us what was wrong with the old history and dared to call it myth.”¹¹⁷ Worster also mentioned something else of tremendous importance and it needs to be examined here. Worster noted that Smith believed that, while the “real world” might not quite correspond to those myths, it “may come closer to the ideal as time goes on.”¹¹⁸ In fact, Smith showed that the real world did eventually come to match the ideal. History eventually resolved into harmony. That was an idealistic vision for comedic resolution at the end of his history. And it meant Virgin Land ended as a comedy. Up through the close of chapter twenty, Smith pretty much stayed with a tragic emplotment. He had elaborated fairly clearly how the various interpreters of the west had distorted its true picture. What really happened with the westward march was an irrefutable disaster. To get this point across, Smith closed out chapter twenty with Herman Melville’s tragic vision from his poem “Clarel.”

Might be the New World sudden brought
In youth to share old age’s pains-----
To feel the arrest of hope’s advance,
And squandered last inheritance;
And cry—‘To Terminus build fanes!
Columbus ended earth’s romance:
No New World to mankind remains!’¹¹⁹

But in chapter twenty-one, the next to last chapter, Smith implemented his shift into a comedic emplotment and he did it through the personage of novelist Hamlin Garland. For Smith, Garland’s work marked the “end of a long evolution in attitudes” that had at last made it “possible to deal with the Western farmer in literature as a human being instead of seeing him through a veil of literary convention, class prejudice, and social theory.”¹²⁰ Garland had been able to see that the western farmer was neither the “yeoman of agrarian

tradition, nor a picturesque rural swain, nor a half-barbarian like Ishmael Bush, nor an amusingly unrefined backwoodsman, nor even a victim of a perverted land system.”¹²¹

The dilemma for what the western farmer really was had been resolved: he was an entity interacting in a “direct relation” with nature that conferred on him a “certain dignity” by enlarging his stature by making him a “representative of suffering humanity, of man in general.”¹²² Smith believed Garland had seen the light and stated things exactly as they were. If Smith had merely declared that “a new intellectual system was requisite before the West could be adequately dealt with” without having actually shown that the roots for that system had been put into place, he might have been able to retain his tragic emplotment.¹²³ But, in the figure of Garland, Smith showed that the roots for this new system had in fact been established. Ideals had been translated into act. That meant the dilemma where no one seemed to be able to see western history clearly had been resolved. The solution had become a physical reality. A new way of writing had been established. That was comedy.

But Smith’s transition into comedy was just as clumsily done as was Worster’s in “Good Farming.” That is, the shift from tragedy to comedy was full of contradictions. Nor was it necessarily Smith’s or Worster’s fault. It is tremendously difficult to translate ironic tragedy into comedic resolution without running into contradictions. In The Wealth of Nature (from which “Good Farming” is drawn), Worster admitted that his work “may seem to reader to be filled with contradictory ideas that the author has not quite reconciled.”¹²⁴ He continued, “I realize, for instance, that at times I express a strong sense of , and respect for, the order of nature while at other time admitting that order is a troubled idea.”¹²⁵ Worster did not seriously attempt to explain why the

contradictions were there. The reason for these contradictions were that Worster was translating irony successively through a tragic and then a comic emplotment. The seams did not always match up during the translation because tragedy was achieved by getting rid of higher generalizations whereas the comedic resolution depended on them. When Worster shifted into comedy at the close of "Good Farming," he suddenly placed the "overarching principle" of a "social bond" as the higher generalization to the physical actions of the Dakota farmers.¹²⁶ Individual physical actions were no longer judged on their own but were interpreted in their relationship to this rather invisible "social bond," a bond that developed into an equally unexplained "bond with the strange, foreign land here they settled."¹²⁷ A bond with nature had developed in spite of the plagues, grasshoppers, droughts, and blizzards that had tormented the farmers. Physical events would lead one to believe there could be no such bond. But that a bond was said to exist meant Worster was indicating the existence of a higher level of justice and relationships than what a simple observation of physical events appeared to show. From this deeper level of analysis, the truth about Worster's denial of higher generalizations (and hence Marxism's denial of them as well) was that he only denied them when working through a tragic emplotment. When emplotting comically, they became standard fare in his historical interpretation.

In short, it is impossible to get a comedic resolution solely from looking at physical facts. Donald Worster's reflections on the settlement outside the Friant-Kern Canal serve as an excellent example. The physical conditions were dirty and desperate, offering little comfort to such residents as the "old black woman sitting in isolation in the scanty shade of a peach tree, her chickens scratching in the dust, a hand-lettered advertisement,

‘Okra for sale,’ dangling from a stick.”¹²⁸ Strictly looking at the physical circumstances of the settlement, it would be impossible to emplot the scene comically. There was no hope for a physical resolution to the daily life problems faced by the settlement residents. But the scene remained a tragedy because Worster refused in this case to attach a higher generalization to it. He wrote, “There is little peace or tidiness or care, little sense of a rooted community.”¹²⁹ Worster did not usurp the physical conditions with the concept of social bonding. Therefore, the situation remained a tragedy. Only by having placed the ideal of communal bonds over physical facts could a comedic resolution be obtained. In doing so, Worster, necessarily set up a contradiction in his works because in one instance he was insisting that physical facts be examined independently of higher generalizations and in another instance he freely subsumed them to higher generalizations.

In Smith’s case, the contradictions that arose from his transition into comedy are just as apparent. Smith felt very comfortable with certain aspects in Hamlin Garland’s world view.¹³⁰ As already shown earlier, Smith believed his own work mirrored much of what Garland had already done. For Smith, Garland represented the escape from the illusory world of “imaginative constructions.” Like Smith, Garland recognized the irony involved in the yeoman ideal. It was a mask to hide the injustices of private speculators. This led to a tragic emplotment because men and women at the individual physical level were severely oppressed. Smith acknowledged that the “social theories which shaped Garland’s stories were evident enough.”¹³¹ For Garland, “land monopolists had blighted the promise of the West; the single tax would eliminate the speculator and allow the yeoman ideal to be realized.”¹³² This suggests that Garland’s work was rooted in an idealistically materialistic anti-capitalism. A physical change, such as the single tax,

could bring the ideal into existence (no need for “vital forces” here). That was materialistic. But that the change for the better could happen at all was idealistic. Smith faced one huge problem with this interpretation. What would prevent a critic from arguing that Garland’s idealistically materialistic, anti-capitalist world view was merely another false social construction? Why was not this world view simply another “imaginative construction” created out of transient cultural conditions? If so, it too would pass and prove to be unreliable. But that would have meant for Smith that Garland’s vision was simply another failure in a long line of failures. Such an admission went against Smith’s own beliefs that a new intellectual system had indeed been established and that he, Smith, belonged to that system. Smith believed that a comedic resolution to the interpretation of the West had occurred but how could he prove it if even his own hero’s ideals could be accused of merely being one more example of “imaginative constructions?” All Smith had to do was argue that Garland expressed an “emotion deeper than his conscious doctrines.”¹³³ This emotion was “humanitarian sympathy.”¹³⁴ It supposedly allowed the interpreter to see beyond literary convention, class prejudice, and social theory. In essence, it was the paradoxical, unchanging *moral measure* that undergirded all Marxist ideology. But this was the profound contradiction in Smith’s transition to comedy. For almost the entire book Smith had ranted against the existence of a ground to reality that went beyond literary convention, class prejudices, or social theory. By the close of the book, however, Smith had introduced a famous character witness, Hamlin Garland, whom he admitted was working from a specific social theory and yet supposedly bypassed these false constructions by adopting a particular moral measure, or “humanitarian sympathy,” that acted as though it were a ground to reality.

This moral measure was considered to be absolutely true-no questions asked. By holding historical events up to that moral measure and observing them, one could accurately determine the truth. Thus, in the tragic portion of Virgin Land, Smith denied a ground to reality as a function of his irony. When that tragedy shifted into comedy, a ground to reality became an essential part of his explanation.

What differentiated Henry Nash Smith and Donald Worster from Frederick Jackson Turner should be clear at this point. Turner put his idealism up front which meant higher generalizations existed from the very outset of his work. That these higher generalizations existed from the start meant that his work was immediately emplotted as comedy. In contrast, Smith and Worster put materialism up front which meant higher generalizations did not exist from the very outset of the work. This materialism was encoded in an ironic trope that initially sought to prove higher generalizations as untrue. This resulted in a tragic emplotment. But, being human just like Turner, Smith and Worster could not get rid of their own idealism and sought to make them part of the historical narrative. Once that decision was made, higher generalizations became necessary to capture that idealism. Consequently, comedic resolution emerged as the ideals (their moral measure in this case) were conceived to be ultimate truths. Whereas Turner began as comedy, Smith and Worster had to move through irony and tragedy in order to get to comedy. That process of movement from irony into tragedy was essentially a process of criticism and consciousness, or “critical intellect.” The process afforded historians the tropal language needed to analyze historical interpretations that came before them. But once the same critical historians shifted into comedic resolutions and higher generalizations, they were just as prone to the types of innocent contradictions

as found in Turner's "unconscious productiveness." Comic resolution, generally working from metaphor, metonymy, or synecdoche, did not possess the tropal tools (meaning the ironic to tragic transition) to be critical of its own efforts or another's efforts.

Thus, the most important difference to be analyzed drawn from the works of Smith and Worster as opposed to Turner is their reliance on "imaginative constructions" which replaced Turner's "vital forces." This is because the theoretics of "imaginative constructions" allowed for an ironic to tragic/comic shift whereas the theoretics of "vital forces" only allowed for an immediate comedic resolution. Whether a historian chose one form or the other served as the driving force behind that historian's interpretation. Where Richard White was correct was when he asserted that most New Western historians had adopted the mode of irony with leanings towards tragedy. That meant the Western historical field in the post-1960's appropriated Smith's "imaginative constructions" which called for the same tropal arrangement. Smith's "imaginative constructions" were fundamentally the same thing as Marxist ontology. They both shared the identical tropal form for emplotting history. This suggests that the New Western history was essentially functioning from a Marxist theoretical position. In January 1993, Gerald D. Nash published a short essay that brought attention to the fact that the post-1960's, western historical vision primarily reflected a "neo-Marxist fixation with class conflicts and imperialism."¹³⁵ Later in 1993, Nash expanded with a follow-up essay that criticized those historians "who, while reflecting Marxist assumptions, failed to make their conceptual framework explicit."¹³⁶ Nash believed that historians should reveal their ideological positions in order to inform the reader about their approach to historical scholarship. Nash received a backlash of passionate responses trying to explain where he

had gone wrong. Walter Nugent suggested that the theme of anti-imperialism which appeared in New Western history did not solely owe its origin to the Vietnam experience of the 1960's.¹³⁷ In a joint effort, Susan Armitage, Elizabeth Jameson, and Joan Jensen argued that categories of race, class, and gender were part and parcel an aspect of the social history fabric and not just a fad of New Western historians.¹³⁸ But none of Nash's critics were willing to take on his central premise: the New West historians and much of the Western historical field were working from Marxist theoretics that pre-determined the way they structured their historical discourse. Nash did not imply that historians should discontinue studying race, class, or gender. Nor did he suggest that the only time anti-imperialist sentiments were expressed was in the post-Vietnam era. What he was insisting on was that these themes had been ideologically exploited. With Henry Nash Smith, the supposed prophet of New Western history, and Donald Worster, one of the leading New Western historians, both employing a tropal configuration that was identical to Marxism, Gerald Nash seems to have been on the right track.

Notes

¹ Brian Atterby, "American Studies: A Not So Unscientific Method," American Quarterly 48 (1996): 316.

² Richard Etulain, "The New Western Historiography and the New Western History," Journal of the West 32 (October 1993): 3-4. He wrote, "the West pictured in the histories of the early 1990's is dramatically different from that which scholars and students studied before 1970." Also of interest is the preface in Trails: Toward A New Western History (Kansas: University of Kansas Press, 1991), x, in which it is admitted that the New Western history was deeply influenced by the "perspectives originating in the 1960's." Patricia Nelson Limerick, Clyde A. Milner II, and Charles E. Rankin were the editors.

³ Smith, Virgin Land, vii.

⁴ Laurence R. Veysey, "Myth and Reality in Approaching American Regionalism," American Quarterly 12 (1960): 36.

⁵ Bruce Kuklick, "Myth and Symbol in American Studies," American Quarterly 24 (1972): 439-441.

⁶ Smith, Virgin Land, xi.

⁷ Veysey, "Myth and Reality," 42.

⁸ Atterby, "American Studies," 331.

⁹ Smith, Virgin Land, 13.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 254.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 255.

¹² Turner, "Contributions of the West to American Democracy," 99-100.

¹³ Smith, Virgin Land, 257.

¹⁴ Turner, "Contributions of the West," 99-100.

¹⁵ Burke, A Grammar of Motives, 87.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 107.

¹⁷ Smith, Virgin Land, viii. Also see Veysey, "Myth and Reality," 36.

¹⁸ Veysey, "Myth and Reality," 37.

¹⁹ Smith, Virgin Land, vii.

²⁰ Ibid., 119.

²¹ Burke, A Grammar of Motives, 120.

²² Ibid.

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Turner, "The Significance of the Frontier," 44.

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Ibid., 44-46.

²⁹ Burke, A Grammar of Motives, 120.

³⁰ Smith, Virgin Land, 174-183.

³¹ Ibid., 177.

³² Ibid., 182.

³³ Ibid., 60.

³⁴ Ibid., 58.

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ Burke, A Grammar of Motives, 37.

³⁷ Smith, Virgin Land, 61.

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ Ibid., 71.

⁴⁰ Ibid., 84.

⁴¹ Burke, A Grammar of Motives, 131.

⁴² Smith, Virgin Land, 6.

⁴³ While Smith may have tried to modify his position in later years, that modification has no bearing on how his work, as originally constructed by 1950, has to be interpreted.

⁴⁴ Ibid., 248.

⁴⁵ Ibid., 11.

⁴⁶ Ibid., 253.

⁴⁷ Turner, "The West and American Ideals," 153.

⁴⁸ Robert Athearn, The Mythic West in Twentieth Century America (Kansas: University Press of Kansas, 1986), 223-228.

⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁰ Smith, Virgin Land, 206.

⁵¹ Ibid.

⁵² Kuklick, "Myth and Symbol," 435.

⁵³ Ibid., 440.

⁵⁴ Atterby, "American Studies," 335.

⁵⁵ Ibid.

⁵⁶ Burke, A Grammar of Motives, 204.

⁵⁷ Smith, Virgin Land, 260.

⁵⁸ Burke, A Grammar of Motives, 200.

⁵⁹ Ibid.

⁶⁰ Ibid.

⁶¹ Ibid. Also see an interesting account of Marx and Engels' view concerning unseen forces in Herman A.O. de Tollenaere, "Marx and Engels on Spiritualism and Theosophy," Theosophical History: A Quarterly Journal of Research 4 (April 1992): 45-49.

⁶² Instead of employing a noumenal/phenomenal dialectic like Hegel in which tension between spirit and matter produced a new society, Marx utilized a dialectical materialism. That is, the tension between the bourgeoisie and the proletariat became sublated within the creation of a new society.

⁶³ Burke, A Grammar of Motives, 173.

⁶⁴ Ibid.

⁶⁵ Smith, Virgin Land, 248.

⁶⁶ Burke, A Grammar of Motives, 176.

⁶⁷ Ibid.

⁶⁸ Turner, "Contributions of the West," 93-94.

⁶⁹ Ibid.

⁷⁰ Ibid.

⁷¹ White, Metahistory, 278.

⁷² Burke, A Grammar of Motives, 214.

⁷³ Donald Worster, The Wealth of Nature: Environmental History and the Ecological Imagination (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), ix.

⁷⁴ Ibid., x.

⁷⁵ Ibid., ix.

⁷⁶ Ibid.

⁷⁷ Donald Worster, Nature's Economy: A History of Ecological Ideas (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977), 92.

⁷⁸ Ibid., viii.

⁷⁹ Ibid., 22. I am aware that Donald Worster included a glossary of terms at the end of his book. In that glossary, Worster defined "Animism" correctly as the notion that "spirit is distinct from and superior to matter . . . an immaterial innate force." But in comparing animism to transcendentalism in the body of his text he subverted that definition.

⁸⁰ Ibid.

- ⁸¹ Worster, Nature's Economy, 345.
- ⁸² Ibid.
- ⁸³ Ibid., 346.
- ⁸⁴ Worster, The Wealth of Nature, 218.
- ⁸⁵ Ibid., 219.
- ⁸⁶ Worster, The Wealth of Nature, 219.
- ⁸⁷ Worster, Dust Bowl, 26.
- ⁸⁸ Ibid., 230.
- ⁸⁹ Ibid., 243.
- ⁹⁰ Worster, Rivers of Empire, 261.
- ⁹¹ Ibid., 335.
- ⁹² White, Metahistory, 278.
- ⁹³ Lewis Perry, Intellectual Life in America: A History (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1989), 291.
- ⁹⁴ Richard White, "Trashing the Trails," Trails: Toward a New Western History, 33.
- ⁹⁵ Ibid.
- ⁹⁶ Ibid.
- ⁹⁷ Gilbert Ryle, The Concept of Mind (London: Hutchinson of London, 1949), 16.
- ⁹⁸ Ibid.
- ⁹⁹ Worster, "Beyond the Agrarian Myth," Under Western Skies, 12.
- ¹⁰⁰ Worster, "Good Farming and the Public Good," The Wealth of Nature, 85.
- ¹⁰¹ Ibid.
- ¹⁰² Ibid.
- ¹⁰³ Ibid.

- ¹⁰⁴ Worster, "Good Farming and the Public Good," The Wealth of Nature, 94.
- ¹⁰⁵ Ibid., 93.
- ¹⁰⁶ Ibid.
- ¹⁰⁷ Ibid.
- ¹⁰⁸ Ibid.
- ¹⁰⁹ Ibid., 94.
- ¹¹⁰ Worster, "Beyond the Agrarian Myth," Under Western Skies, 6.
- ¹¹¹ Ibid.
- ¹¹² Ibid.
- ¹¹³ Ibid.
- ¹¹⁴ Worster, "Good Farming," The Wealth of Nature, 93.
- ¹¹⁵ Worster, "Beyond the Agrarian Myth," Under Western Skies, 6.
- ¹¹⁶ Ibid.
- ¹¹⁷ Ibid.
- ¹¹⁸ Ibid.
- ¹¹⁹ Smith, Virgin Land, 210.
- ¹²⁰ Ibid., 249.
- ¹²¹ Ibid.
- ¹²² Ibid.
- ¹²³ Ibid., 260.
- ¹²⁴ Worster, The Wealth of Nature, ix.
- ¹²⁵ Ibid.
- ¹²⁶ Ibid., see "Good Farming," 94.

¹²⁷ Ibid.

¹²⁸ Worster, Rivers of Empire, 6.

¹²⁹ Ibid.

¹³⁰ While some of Hamlin Garland's views may have been acceptable to Smith, others clearly would not have been. Garland clearly saw a vitalizing influence working its way westwards from the East. Such statements that "Garland loved Colorado and the Northwest for it seemed to be the way Indiana, Illinois, and Iowa were sixty years ago" can be thought-provoking. See Joseph B. McCullough, Hamlin Garland (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1978), 24. Especially when seen in light of some of Garland's own observations about "floods of middle Westerners filling the streets" of Los Angeles and the miserable living conditions in the Mid-West and Central Plains. Something special was happening to the Far West for Garland and it had nothing to do with the single tax system. See Donald Pizer, ed., Hamlin Garland's Diaries (San Marino: The Huntington Library, 1968), 42.

¹³¹ Smith, Virgin Land, 248.

¹³² Ibid.

¹³³ Ibid.

¹³⁴ Smith, Virgin Land, 248.

¹³⁵ Gerald D. Nash, "Point of View: One Hundred Years of Western History," Journal of the West 22 (January 1993): 3-4.

¹³⁶ Gerald D. Nash, "Comment on the New Western History" in "The Symposium on the New Western History," Continuity 17 (1993): 25-26.

¹³⁷ Walter Nugent, "Happy Birthday, Western History," Journal of the West 22 (July 1993): 4. Nugent's argument is all the more ironic because his argument to refute Nash contains all those Marxist elements that Nash was saying existed unacknowledged among the Western historical profession. First, Nugent implied that Manifest Destiny had to be called by its true name: Imperialism. That got rid of the higher generalization for westward expansion and encoded irony and tragedy into his interpretation. Then, after having discarded the higher generalization, he restated another higher generalization in the form of a moral measure. He wrote, "The new approach to Western history is, as it should be, anti-conquest and empathetic." That was a teleological statement that both established his particular moral view and pretended to know where history was going. Hence, Nugent reached a comedic resolution after having first passed through, however briefly in this case, a tragic emplotment.

¹³⁸ Susan Armitage, Elizabeth Jameson, and Joan Jensen, "The New Western History: Another Perspective," *Journal of the West* 22 (July 1993): 5-6. In their article, they stated, "Our point is that New Western Historians cannot accurately be characterized as a small and ideologically rigid clique." Clearly, they were correct on the first point. New Western history has attained a broad following. As to the second point, they seem to be misled. If ideology is reflected in tropal arrangements, then it can only function if those specific patterns are followed. That means ideology of any sort necessarily becomes crystallized very quickly. If they can point to a New Western historian who solely emplots from a metaphorical comedic position and still arrives at the same conclusion as a Donald Worster, then I concede to their claim. But, otherwise, Worster's ideological style is extremely rigid. It can only function within a narrowly limited tropal style.

CHAPTER 5

A NEW SYNTHESIS

In a general way, the shift away from Frederick Jackson Turner towards Henry Nash Smith and Donald Worster was a shift from realism to nominalism. Once philosophical nominalism had been embraced, irony became the trope of choice. What Kenneth Burke recognized was that the “grammatical” operation for expressing a nominalist view lent itself to one pre-determined interpretation.¹ It left the historian with “a world of individuals, united only by monetary symbols and the deceptions of an idealistic rhetoric.”² In practice, however, Burke noted that most nominalists “tempered their philosophies by an humanitarian afterthought advocating ‘joint action’ for some social aim or other,” thereby creating a class nominalism as opposed to a pure nominalism and a comedic finale as opposed to a tragic one.³ What identified the emerging New Western historians between the 1950’s and the 1980’s were these three nominalist themes for understanding human interaction: a focus on monetary symbols, a condemnation of idealistic rhetoric as deceptive, and a call for humanitarian social action. Marxist ideology, being rooted in a nominalist philosophy, was driven by these three major themes. The New Western history, also functioning from nominalism, naturally developed correspondences with Marxism, even in cases where the historian himself may not have been overtly Marxist. In regard to Smith and Worster, their shift to nominalism signified that they had adopted a grammatical procedure which directed the way human

relationships were described in terms of money and idealistic deception. For them, these were the unifying features beneath human interaction.

If one is to find the point at which American West historians transitioned out of nominalism and irony back into realism and metaphor, one must look for that point in historical writing at which an alternate unifying force (one akin to Turner's "vital forces" as opposed to themes of money, idealistic deception, and humanitarian social action) was placed underneath human interaction. Such a moment occurred in William Cronon's Nature's Metropolis (1991). Cronon, still working from a nominalist perspective, was attempting to unify the concept of city and country by breaking down the economic market relations for grain, lumber, and meat production between the two Illinois regions. In essence, he was trying to do the impossible—to unify things while using a philosophy that proceeded by breaking them down. The inevitable happened. Amidst all the irony and tragedy of a typical New Western historian, he slipped momentarily into metaphor. In doing so, he placed an alternate unifying force beneath human action: "energy." In that moment, and only in that moment, Cronon unified city and country.

The existence of that moment where city and country became unified owed itself to the temporary cessation of Cronon's otherwise typical nominalist procedures. What emerged, even if for only a brief instant, was the metaphor of realism. On a realist level, the concept of "energy" became the ground to reality underlying all human action. This differed from previous nominalist conceptions of monetary symbols and idealistic deception because, unlike them, "energy" was not created by human activity. Instead, "energy" directed and caused human activity. On a metaphorical level, a physical object could be described in terms of its own physical qualities or in terms of its being "energy."

A physical object was both abstract and concrete at the same time. Cronon made no attempt to break down the concept of “energy” into its component parts to find out if it was a valid historical tool. His failure to do this signified a lapse in his nominalism. The value of “energy” as a concept was left unexplored, taken for granted. Taking this concept for granted was the point at which “critical intellect” stopped and “unconscious productiveness” began.

If Cronon’s short foray into metaphor had remained an isolated instance, there would be no reason to take note of it. But the fact that subsequent leading New Western historians, such as Richard White in The Organic Machine and Elliott West in The Contested Plains, centered the theme of “energy” at the core of their work suggests there was a larger transition emerging. From a philosophical and linguistic standpoint, that transition was taking American West history back to its Turnerian roots, the “vital forces.” Only now the “vital forces” were labeled “energy.” That the name was changed supposedly made the use of a noumenal force in historical explanation *professionally* acceptable, but, in truth, the concept of “energy” conformed to the same philosophical and tropal style for which Turner’s writings had been so harshly condemned. What Cronon, White, and West ended up with was a new synthesis for the dialectic between “unconscious productiveness” and “critical intellect,” one which took into account the left-liberal morality of Smith’s “myth and symbol” school while at the same time shifting into metaphorical expression that, by allowing both noumenon and phenomenon to legitimately exist as possible explanative forms, usurped the strategic importance of the ironic trope in defining the interpretive content of historical text.

William Cronon

In Nature's Metropolis, William Cronon adopted a nominalist strategy that warned against higher generalizations, reduced events to monetary symbols and deceptions of idealistic rhetoric, and encouraged humanitarian social action for what he considered a viable world view. Like Smith and Worster, he did this primarily through an ironic trope and a tragic emplotment. At the same time, however, his mind also gave play to the fact that realist abstractions deserved a place in history. They could not be entirely ignored. It was this contradiction that gave Nature's Metropolis its tension, served as its driving force, and ultimately led Cronon into metaphor. The contradiction arose because Cronon tried to merge city and country into a single region, an act which fundamentally required the metaphor of the realists, through an examination of capital, or the monetary symbols of the nominalists.⁴ This conceptual framework was a complex dialectic that demanded an essentially Turnerian resolution to the apparent contradiction.

For that resolution to have been Turnerian meant that Cronon must have come down on the side of realism. If so, how could that be reconciled with his nominalist proofs that refuted the validity of higher generalizations and so-called idealistic rhetoric? The answer lies in the nature of realism itself. To understand the nature of realism better requires a brief statement of Henri Bergson's conclusions about how the human mind worked. Granted, Bergson was a product of his times, writing in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries and adhering to the Vitalist principles of his period. But what he said about how the human mind functioned has especial relevance to the topic at hand. Bergson recognized two different mechanisms of the mind: intellect and intuition (instinct in the animals). When the mind was confronted with a particular task to solve, it

either proceeded through intellect or intuition. If the mind adopted the mode of intellect, it operated by breaking down the subject matter into smaller and smaller, more and more complex parts. Intellect could only lead to greater and greater substratums of heterogeneous division. Each step of the way was carefully thought out and orchestrated. On the other hand, the mode of intuition was a process of immediate action. The mind took a leap of faith in asserting a perceived reality to be truth. The result was homogeneity, the reaching of a conclusion incapable of subdivision. No subdivision was possible because the manner in which one arrived at the conclusion was by a leap of faith and not by analytical steps. It was independent of the logical strands of thought that one found in the intellectual mechanism.⁵ For this reason, Bergson called intuition “unconscious” and the intellect “conscious.”⁶ Therefore, the processes of the mind traveled along two divergent tendencies that never met. Intellect was incapable of reversing directions (it could only further subdivide) and intuition was incapable of being analyzed as separate steps. Taking realism as Bergson’s intuition, it becomes clear why Cronon’s nominalism, which corresponded to Bergson’s perpetually subdividing intellect, had no effect on his metaphorical assertions drawn from that realism. Bergson’s view of the human mind makes it clear why a realist assertion could suddenly appear in the middle of an otherwise nominalist presentation. The reason is because there is no point at which nominalism merges into realism. Only at the moment that nominalism ends does realism appear. So, at the moment realism appears, there is no longer a critical procedure available to recognize and discredit realism’s assertions. The historian’s mind frame shifts entirely at that moment. Realism disappears just as quickly as it appeared (since there is also no mechanism for it to gradually merge into nominalism) and the

historian resumes his nominalist procedure as though nothing happened! Hence, contradiction arises in the historical text. Cronon's nominalism continually broke down historical events into component parts. Its conclusions were driven by the ironic trope. But nominalism was completely inappropriate as a tool for Cronon's overriding goal—to merge city and country into a generic nature. Nominalism, like Bergson's intellect, could not reverse directions; it possessed no tendency to unify. Thus, there had to be a point at which Cronon shifted mental gears, slipped out of using Bergson's intellect and into using his intuition. Consequently, Cronon installed a unity underneath city and country that unquestionably fused them together. That unity, Cronon's leap of faith, found expression in the metaphor of "energy."

The reason why Cronon's concept of "energy" instead of his concept of capital acted as the real unifying source for city and country becomes clear from this Bergsonian perspective. Cronon's overriding goal was to merge city and country. That meant a dualism had to be resolved into a unity. As explained in Bergson's terms, it took a specific methodology in order to do this. That methodology did not proceed by subdividing the subject matter into greater complexity, but by positing a subject matter that was incapable of being subdivided. Cronon's concept of capital clearly failed to meet the requirements of this methodology. Instead, it started with the mental perspective that the flow of capital into and out of Chicago could be broken down into more and more detail. This perspective was based on the assumption that the details could be thought through from step to step. In short, he utilized what Bergson classified as the intellectual approach to history. But Cronon did confess that there was another viable approach and even tried to use it. From the outset, he recognized that he would have to tackle the

immense problem of “abstraction” (higher generalizations).⁷ On the one hand, abstraction needed to be avoided. Things that were part of the capital flow like “prairie soils, steel plows, grain elevators, feed lots, cattle cars, and railroad rates” could not simply be reduced to a generalized man-made nature (what Cronon called second nature) because it would distort individual qualities.⁸ This was nominalist in approach; it insisted on breaking down the examination into smaller and smaller parts. An extreme, pure form of nominalism would have even required the cattle cars to be broken down into “index figures”: cattle car #1, cattle car #2, cattle car #3, and so forth.⁹ On the other hand, Cronon admitted the importance of finding larger patterns (such as in realism) in order to make any sense of this vast, chaotic array of people and objects. Therefore, he proposed that a study of capital flows could also serve as a unifying source for city and country. He argued that capital flows could contribute both to his nominalist and realist purposes. Abstraction needed to be avoided and employed at the same time; this set up the contradiction. The problem with Cronon’s procedure was that, as Bergson demonstrated, the human mind could not work in two directions at the same time. The historian had to begin his investigation either with subject matter that could be subdivided or could not be subdivided. That choice determined whether he moved towards fragmentation or unity. The way in which the mind worked prevented it from moving along divergent tendencies at the same time. Since Cronon’s concept of capital was established as something that could be subdivided (and therefore only lead to fragmentation), it could not in fact merge the dualism of city and country into a unity. What happened in Cronon’s case was that the concept of capital splintered the dualism into a “multitude of overlapping market and resource regions.”¹⁰ The historical picture became more and

more complex, more and more fractured. City and country had lost their defining characteristics not because they had merged but because their boundaries had been made so full of divisions that the lines smeared in the whirl of activity. This condition could not be resolved into the simplicity of metaphor but could only continue on its path towards more and more subdivision.¹¹ If Cronon's metaphor of "energy" corresponded to the methodology prescribed by Bergson for achieving unity, then that would explain why it usurped the concept of capital as the unifying force connecting city and country.

In this case, one must take a close look at how Cronon used the idea of "energy." In his discussion of the capital that moved into and out of Chicago, he broke that capital down into three main features: grain, lumber, and meat. Chicago was able to assemble "shipments from fields, pastures, and forests" to generate monetary wealth more efficiently and with greater "intensity" than other western cities.¹² Cronon saw value in defining the success of Chicago in nominalist terms that interpreted capital as "nothing if not the product of social relationships."¹³ For him, the flow of capital could not only be broken down into these three main features, but it also had to be broken down into the "tumultuous relationship" of human beings facing off with each other in daily life to control monetary wealth.¹⁴ Farmers and grain traders had to be juxtaposed with cowboys and cattle barons, lumberjacks and lumbermen. But Cronon also realized that the "labor theory of value" could not by itself explain the astonishing rate of Chicago's growth.¹⁵ There had to be something else. In arriving at what was that something else, Cronon transitioned into an entirely different methodology that did not proceed by breaking things down but by installing an indivisible abstraction at the root of this chaos of human events. That indivisible abstraction was "energy," not capital. What made

“energy” an indivisible abstraction was that “people . . . did not produce it.”¹⁶ This made it profoundly distinct from capital which was in fact a byproduct of human interaction. As a byproduct of human interaction, capital lent itself to being broken down into its component parts because human relationships existed at individual levels. From this it can be easily seen just how much the methodology of nominalism is dependent on the premise that people are doing the producing. What often happens when the subject matter posited by the historian is not produced by people? What happens is exactly what happened in Cronon’s case. The methodology changes; the subject matter escapes the realm of analysis and assumes the role of a metaphorical absolute. It becomes the ground to reality.

For William Cronon, “energy” came from the sun. In order to grow and thrive, all organisms, including human beings, “finally drew their sustenance from the light of the nearest star.”¹⁷ For plants, animals, and humans to act, they had to store the sun’s “energy” in their own systems. All these organisms carried around with them pieces of the sun as they went through their daily activities. Using Cronon’s phraseology, they “consisted largely of stored sunshine.”¹⁸ This was metaphor in the making. As a conceptual tool, “energy” could be extracted from or collapsed into an organism’s physical body at will. “Energy” and the physical organism became interchangeable terms. They became so interchangeable that Cronon even asserted that humans could use “stored sunshine” and “build a city from it.”¹⁹ The implications of this statement are immense. Take trees (a type of plant) for example. In their state of first nature (what Cronon considered as untouched by man), trees naturally absorbed sunlight into their fibers through photosynthesis. Poised out on the frontier edges, which Cronon labeled

hinterland or country, these trees became beacons of “stored sunshine.”²⁰ Thus, “energy” was the ground of reality to first nature or country. Nothing was placed underneath “energy”—which meant it remained indivisible or not subdivided. Now imagine a group of settlers marching out to those trees, chopping them down, and hauling them back to the proposed town site where they immediately begin construction. These settlers used the stored sunshine of their own bodies to initiate the action of cutting down the trees and assembling the town center. But, more importantly, they now constructed their city, or what Cronon called second nature, from the limbs and trunks of those trees—trees which were still treasure houses of stored sunshine! Because the city was constructed from the trees (those trees made up the physical matter of the city) and the trees were storehouses of “energy,” the city partook of the metaphorical abstraction. The city became “energy” itself. It had to do so. Since “energy” and physical matter were treated as interchangeable and the physical construction of the city consisted of trees, or stored sunshine, the city became subject to the metaphor of “energy.” Thus, “energy” was also the ground of reality to second nature or city. City and country had become merged under the same abstraction.

What Cronon had done with his metaphor of “energy” was return to a linguistic construction that paralleled the notion of “vital forces” so prevalent in the late nineteenth century. Like “vital forces,” “energy” existed behind and in everything. Like the “vital forces,” Cronon had set “energy” up as the ground to reality. Compare Cronon’s metaphor of “energy” to the metaphor of “vital forces” which he drew from nineteenth-century literary descriptions. Of “energy,” Cronon wrote:

This was the wealth of nature, and no human labor could create the value it contained. Although people might use it, redefine it, or even build a city from it, they did not produce it.²¹

In capturing the turn-of-the-century view of “vital forces,” Cronon wrote:

So attractive was the city it seemed at times to radiate an energy that could only be superhuman. Called forth by the massed resources of western nature, the city became almost a force of nature itself. Mere human beings might try to manipulate or control its energy, but never to create it.²²

It does not take a tremendous amount of imagination to admit these are the same metaphor. Cronon became trapped in his own words. It was at this point that his analytical logic broke down. Cronon ridiculed the metaphorical rhetoric of the boosters and yet bought into that same rhetoric when not directly referring to them. Cronon’s concept of “energy” essentially maintained that Chicago’s city-hinterland economy got built because of the huge “energy” reserves in the western frontier. The “vital force” concept proposed the same tenet. The city was called forth by the vitality of nature in the West. In both cases, noumenon, whether “energy” or “vital force,” was allowed to become intertwined with physical matter in a metaphorical interchange that unified their division. When settlers brought “energy-laden” trees into the township to build a city, the city took on those characteristics of “energy.” The situation was the same with the “vital forces.” As the pioneers moved westwards and established their homesteads, the vitality of the “energy-laden” trees became absorbed into their society.

Once one admits of the identical nature of the metaphors, there are implications that follow such an admission. That is, the implications impose a revolutionary new vision on American West historiography. If the “vital forces” functioned in the same way under the same metaphor as “energy” and if the concept of “energy” is fundamentally scientific,

then the Turnerian “vital forces” also have to be considered scientific. Turner’s “vital forces” were not idealistic rhetoric at all but rather conformed to a scientific way of speaking about history which was considered acceptable to late twentieth-century and early twenty-first century moderns so long as the term was re-labeled “energy.” Some hundred years after Turner’s frontier thesis the historical profession had come full circle but with “energy” being the acceptable explanative form for the “vital forces.” The paradigm that must be drawn from this is that science and metaphor can work together. Scientific empiricism does not only have to work through the ironic trope to achieve historical accuracy.

The issue can be made clearer with a short discussion of the scientific theories of “energy” and sunlight. It only makes sense that if these scientific theories were metaphorical then Cronon’s use of them in his history would make his own style metaphorical. When dealing with such concepts as “energy” and sunlight, he would necessarily construct history through the metaphorical trope. In this case, however, Cronon’s speaking of a physical organism as stored sunshine would not be the idealistic rhetoric so often associated with metaphor but it would be scientific fact. “Energy” was scientific fact at the same time it was metaphor. How was this possible? That requires an examination of the scientific understanding of “energy” and sunlight. Joan Solomon acknowledged that “energy” was one of the most difficult concepts to grasp but it had all the same re-invaded our everyday vocabulary.²³ Nineteenth-century scientists found it immensely difficult to pin down just what was “energy” and yet they undergirded entire scientific premises with its existence. In spite of Thomas Young redefining “energy” in the early 1800’s in terms of “work and power” (much as it is defined today) rather than

any “mystical indwelling animism,” scientists by the close of the nineteenth century were no closer to knowing what “energy” actually *was* than they were before.²⁴ Another pre-eminent scientist of the time, Thomas Henry Huxley, confessed that no one understood “energy” but that did not prevent it from being established as the foundation for all scientific inquiry. This led one nineteenth century critic to speculate:

Thus the whole structure of Modern Science is built on a kind of ‘mathematical abstraction,’ on a Protean ‘substance which eludes the senses,’ and on *effects*, the shadowy and illusive will-o’-the wisps of a *something* entirely unknown to and beyond the reach of science.²⁵

Leading physicist Julius Robert von Mayer expressed his views on “energy” in a paper entitled “The Motions of Organisms and their Relation to Metabolism” (1845). He explained:

In truth there exists only a *single* force [“force” and “energy” were still used interchangeably in the 1840’s]. In never-ending exchange this circles through all dead as well as living nature. In the latter as well as the former nothing happens without form variation of force!²⁶

The idea here was that “energy” caused all historical action to take place. As “energy” found itself captured in different types of physical experiences it expressed itself under variable forms: electrical energy, mechanical energy, et al. But “energy” was still “energy” irrespective of its state of manifestation. No one could clarify, however, just what that *was* separate from the forms it took on. For example, “energy” was redefined by Young the “ability to do work.” So kinetic energy became the “energy” of a moving object and potential energy became the “energy” in a stationary object. The more “energy” something possessed, the more work it could do. Nevertheless, potential and kinetic were unsatisfactory definitions of “energy” because they still only detailed its forms. The term “kinetic” only provided the means to determine whether “energy” was

present in something based on motion. The term “potential” only provided the means to determine whether “energy” was present in something based on its mass. What actually *was* “energy,” this thing that supposedly gave life to everything?

Twentieth-century science continued to cling onto the concepts of kinetic and potential energy. In that regard, it came no closer to grasping what “energy” actually was than in the previous century. But, in the early 1900’s, Max Planck revolutionized the field, opening up another avenue of inquiry which eventually became scientific dictum. What Planck proposed was that “energy” consisted of particles. Just as physical matter was composed of atoms, so “energy” had its own special corpuscular structure. “Energy” was the quanta or photons that went to construct it---*Almost*. What Planck added was that photons were actually “energy” multiplied by “time.”²⁷ That meant photons were still a compound rather than pure “energy.” Photons were still a form of “energy” and not “energy” itself. That is, certain photons had more “energy” in them than other photons. Depending on where the photons were acting in the spectrum of solar radiation determined their amount of “energy.” Radio photons, with their long wavelengths and low frequencies, carried less “energy” than X-ray photons with their short wavelengths and higher frequencies.²⁸ A photon, tied up with solar wavelengths and considered to be an “atom of light,” was now treated as a wave and a particle at the same.²⁹ Consequently, its dual nature made it impossible to determine accurately both the position and the momentum at any given moment. A photon was physical (or semi-physical at any rate) and non-physical at the same time. It could be either depending on how one wanted to describe it. In short, science posited the perfect metaphor; an object was both physical and non-physical and yet it remained the same object. Whether speaking of that object

literally or figuratively made no difference as to the truth of the statements. Both were correct. “Energy” was both phenomenal and non-phenomenal. That is what made scientific metaphor the antithesis of irony. Irony required either the literal or figurative representation to be false. Science admitted of both levels.

The form of “energy” that William Cronon was dealing with was the “sun’s energy” or “sunshine.”³⁰ That is, he was interested in the “energy” of sunlight. From the scientific perspective, visible light from the sun only made up a small part of the frequency spectrum for solar radiation. “Sunshine” in fact consisted of three components: visible radiation or light, ultraviolet radiation, and infrared radiation. Each contributed in its own way to the maintenance of life on earth. Beyond these components were the radio waves and x-rays discussed above. Like radio waves and x-rays, these three components of sunshine functioned under the rules of quantum mechanics. When light was absorbed or emitted by atoms, it behaved like packages of “energy” or photons.³¹ So light, or “sunshine,” had to be represented as a wave and a particle even though the two appeared incompatible. It too partook of this dance between the phenomenal and non-phenomenal. The solution, explained Rudolf Kippenhahn, was that light simply could not be “described in any clear-cut manner.”³² But he warned against allowing the vagueness to lead to confusion. In actuality, he insisted, it all made perfect sense.

We should not allow ourselves to be confused because light sometimes behaves like a wave, and sometimes like a handful of seed. It seems natural to describe other things in different ways, according to which of their properties we are concerned with at the time.³³

What this statement essentially admitted was that light had two qualities, a physical quality and a non-physical quality. And there was absolutely nothing wrong or

unscientific about speaking of it in terms of either quality.³⁴ Sunlight was a metaphor. It was precisely that metaphor that pointed to scientific fact.

Cronon, in his attempt to unite city and country, slipped into the “unconscious productiveness” of scientific metaphor which allowed for the interaction of noumenon and phenomenon. His primary methodology was nominalist but this was an inappropriate tool. Throughout his book, Cronon continued to function from the premise that nominalism was an appropriate tool and ultimately came to believe he had in fact united city and country. But what he had actually done by this method was simply deconstruct them into further division. To unify city and country required Cronon to briefly slide out of the logic of “critical intellect” which was so deeply embedded into Nature’s Metropolis and slip into an explanation totally divorced from that logic. As already demonstrated, scientists have not yet successfully defined “energy.” And yet Cronon embraced it wholeheartedly with no questions asked—much in the same way that Turner embraced his “vital forces.” Cronon’s metaphor did not make him unscientific or incorrect. It is just that, as science has shown, real life, seen through the examples of light and “energy,” is all about an interchange between two worlds. When Woodrow Wilson talked about the “vitality” existing in both factories and fields, it was no different than Cronon talking about “energy” in the trees. While one could argue that the metal of the factories did not store “energy” like trees did, one would be quite wrong in doing so. In fact, metal can receive stored sunshine in its own right. For example, when viewed from the perspective of the law of Conservation of Energy, metal can store that “energy” just like any other object which is put into motion. If a man, who has absorbed the “energy” of sunshine, pushes up on a lever that lifts a metal canister into the air,

“energy,” the form of which was originally stored sunshine, is transferred to that canister. The canister possesses “energy” just as the man does. Scientists do not really know what is “energy,” but that “energy” is there in the canister is a scientific fact. The transference of “energy” under the law of the Conservation of Energy implies that everything can be embedded with “energy.” That is, “energy” becomes the ground of reality to everything in the same way as Turner’s “vital forces.”

Just how much Cronon’s methodology for the concept of “energy” differed from the more standard, anti-rhetorical fare of Nature’s Metropolis can be measured by looking at his discussion for how nineteenth-century Americans viewed the railroads. He found that Americans were drawn to “two metaphors” that would “recur endlessly in booster rhetoric.”³⁵ First, railroads were a part of “destiny” (Burke’s concept of “necessity” which Turner used so often).³⁶ That meant they were part of the natural order of things, thereby submerging any division between first and second nature into an ultimate ground of reality. Metal and machine were no less part of this ground than tree or shrub. Second, this ultimate ground of reality was in fact “supernatural . . . a mysterious creative energy that was beyond human influence or knowledge.”³⁷ That the railroad was intimately tied into this ultimate ground gave the railroad take a supernatural persona. William Cronon objected to both metaphors on nominalist principles. His rejection of the first metaphor is surprising because boosters had already done what he only hoped to do. Boosters had already merged first and second nature, or city and country. What prevented him from accepting it was that the first metaphor was so closely interwoven with the second metaphor. The second metaphor asserted that first and second nature had been unified by some unseen and unknown creative “energy” which existed beyond human influence.

This proposition was completely incompatible with nominalist principles that functioned on the premise that humans did the producing, not some unseen force. Like a true nominalist trying to establish a world view where the humans did the producing within a fragmented, complex set of relationships, Cronon responded, “Those who shrouded the railroad in the language of deep mystery, making it seem the expression of a universal life-force beyond human ken, obscured the social and economic processes that lay behind it.”³⁸ Having dispensed with the metaphor of an underlying creative force, he continued with his explanation to demolish the first metaphor. Cronon maintained that the railroads as second nature were not indistinguishable from first nature.

Railroads did follow existing rivers and valleys to reach existing harbors and towns—but not because of mysterious environmental forces. Such places usually offered the largest concentrations of prospective customers for freight and passenger traffic . . . Nineteenth century rhetoric might present the railroad as ‘natural,’ but it was actually the most artificial transportation system yet constructed on land.³⁹

Working from nominalist principles, Cronon disposed of booster rhetoric with a methodical, consciously thought-out logic. This was “critical intellect.” But when he employed his own metaphor of “energy,” he totally left such methodology behind and transitioned into an entirely different way of speaking—meaning he no longer looked for the nuances of the subject matter at hand. There was no bridge, no link connecting the two methodologies. Nominalism could not *lead* into metaphor any more than metaphor could *lead* back into nominalism. One or the other had to be given up at any particular interpretive moment. Under Cronon’s metaphor, the “mysterious creative energy” that was “beyond human influence” which had been rejected when writing from his nominalist perspective suddenly reappeared as “stored sunshine.” The “universal life-

force beyond human ken” which likewise had been discarded re-emerged as the “sun’s energy.” And this “energy,” the same as the “mysterious environmental forces” which Cronon shrugged off earlier, did unite railroad to the countryside in a rather “mysterious” exchange of force and power which scientists to this day do not understand. Scientists have not claimed to have purged the world of “mysterious environmental forces.” So why should Cronon? In fact, it was Donald Worster who so brilliantly brought out in his essay, “Thinking Like A River,” just where science was really headed in regard to “mysterious environmental forces.” He referred to the new scientific “Chaos” theories which undergirded all historical action with just such “mysterious environmental forces.” Specifically, Worster explained this direction for scientific research in terms of Edward Lorenz’s “Butterfly Effect,” the notion that a “butterfly stirring the air today in Beijing park can transform storm systems next month in New York City.”⁴⁰ Scientists called this phenomenon “sensitive dependence on initial conditions” where “tiny differences in input can quickly become substantial differences in output.”⁴¹ Hamlin Garland’s booster-like metaphor (so much like Turner’s) which asserted that the city of Chicago was like a “magnet, projecting invisible lines of force that determined the dance of atoms” was not deceptive idealistic rhetoric but twenty-first century scientific explanation.⁴² All one needed to change the course of history was a couple of butterflies soaring about the “White City.”

There is no way to harmonize Cronon’s metaphor, and thus realism, with his nominalism except to suggest that it represented a slip from “critical intellect” into “unconscious productiveness.” They represent the two directions in which the human mind can work. Therefore, they represent the two ways that historians can construct their

histories. And, in the case of Nature's Metropolis, Cronon's work signified the collision point at which the metaphor of "energy," clearly a function of "unconscious productiveness" just like the Turnerian "vital forces," would once again reassert itself as the foundation of historical inquiry.

Richard White

William Cronon's accidental excursion into metaphor ignited the emergence of a neo-Turnerian revolution. Frederick Jackson Turner's "vital forces" had been reintroduced but now they went under the name of "energy." Over the next several years, bits and pieces of the metaphor of "energy" surfaced in the writings of other American West historians. This inclusion of metaphor necessarily gave their work Turnerian overtones.

In 1992, Donald Worster published an essay, "Alaska: The Underworld Erupts," as part of his book, Under Western Skies. This essay, unlike most of the others, had been specifically prepared for inclusion in the book and therefore had not been published before. The significance of this is that it showed Worster falling into the metaphor of "energy" at about the same time as Cronon, perhaps a little later. Amidst his usual tirade against the "middle and upper classes" for celebrating ideals of self-reliance and self-determination, Worster dipped sporadically into the metaphor of "energy."⁴³ Worster described the oil and coal reserves that capitalist entrepreneurs were discovering beneath the Alaskan landscape.

Oil and coal were understood . . . to be hydrocarbons derived from plant and animal material deposited in enormous quantities millions of years ago. Alaska's coal came from fossilized plants, its oil from fossilized marine life on the ocean floor that got buried by sediments.

They represented the energy of the sun collected over long periods of time compressed into dense, rich packages of power. To burn a chunk of coal is to reach deeply into the past and tap the force of the sun, not from a single moment's radiation but from all those millions of years of a rain forest's growing, getting buried in mucky bogs, being squeezed and concentrated by the pressures of the earth's crust. Tapping that fossil energy is like calling back all the protein that fed all the dinosaurs on earth for a hundred million years and gorging on it.⁴⁴

In the same way that Cronon described grain, lumber, and meat as stored sunshine, Worster's description of coal and oil conformed to the same metaphor. In both cases, science supported the reality of those metaphors. If Worster had dropped metaphor at this point and returned to his usual mixture of irony and tragedy, one could disregard his digression into metaphor as insignificant. Instead, Worster proceeded to use that metaphor as an explanative tool for historical processes. Worster proceeded to argue that a culture's ideas and physical institutions depended on the amount of "energy" harnessed by those people. For him, whites, as opposed to Eskimos, were "at once less fatalistic toward the randomness of events and less concerned about performing their role in nature's cycle of renewal" because they had absorbed huge quantities of "energy" into their society.⁴⁵ An abundance of "energy" in a particular region or community shifted the ideas of the inhabitants away from fatalism. Once ideas had changed, it was only natural that the physical institutions, such as the need for physical ritualistic renewal ceremonies, would change as well. In essence, "energy" had transformed culture at the level of human ideas and at the level of their physical institutions. That could only mean one thing. For however temporary it was, Worster had for a short time shifted out of Henry Nash Smith's relativist circular model for the relationship between ideas and institutions into Turner's three-fold realist model which introduced a ground to reality as the third factor.

Like “energy,” Turner’s “vital forces” transformed culture at both the level of idea and physicality. Worster’s “energy” occupied the same place within his model as Turner’s “vital forces.” That is, “energy,” like the “vital forces,” determined just how people thought within a region as well as how they acted in institutionalizing a physical culture. The function of “energy” within the metaphorical trope was to disrupt the relativist circle, where all one could know about things was their relationship with one another, by adding a third factor which served as a ground to reality. Ideas and physical events could no longer merely be explored in their relationship to one another, but they now had to be referenced back to this ground to reality.

In November 1994, the history department at the University of Washington, Seattle, hosted a symposium entitled, “Power and Place in the North American West.” Originally, the conference was conceived in terms of understanding why some regions came to dominate while other regions lagged behind. The conference was to serve as the “means of examining the power of some places over others.”⁴⁶ The initial title given to the program was “Metropolis and Hinterland.” It sought to clarify how places had been “affected by relations between capital and province, East and West, core and periphery.”⁴⁷ Clearly, William Cronon’s ideas in Nature’s Metropolis inspired the general tenor for this initial proposal. Why, for example, did Chicago outstrip its neighbors in becoming the primary western city in the mid-nineteenth century? It was all about “power.” The inhabitants of Chicago, when viewed as a collective whole, were somehow able to harness enough “power” to shift human and environmental relationships in their favor. In short, Chicago had more “power” than some other city. As Cronon showed, by the 1890’s when Chicago’s inhabitants were no longer able to control the

“energy” of western resources and the human relationships which directed them into the city center, Chicago’s “power” diminished. By 1893, more western areas challenged Chicago’s supremacy as the chief city. Thus, “power” vacated Chicago and moved into these newer regions. But the conference organizers discarded the “Metropolis and Hinterland” title in preference to broadening the range of questions that could be asked for how “power” and domination functioned. The organizers of the conference realized that “power” was too ubiquitous to be confined to a narrow examination. In fact, they recognized that “power” underscored all aspects of historical relationships.⁴⁸

That “power” and “place” were the themes of an entire conference attended by some of the finest minds in the historical profession was highly suggestive for just how much American West history had already begun to slide into the stylistic mode of “unconscious productiveness.” “Power” and “place” were the key motifs at the conference and yet, as Donald Meinig noticed, they had never been defined. They were acceptable scholarly terms even though nobody knew what they were. Richard White and John Findlay agreed that this oversight needed to be addressed. When they published the conference essays in book form, they declared that, unlike the symposium, the book “need not suffer the same handicap.”⁴⁹ And so they proceeded to construct tentative definitions for “power” and “place” following some of Meinig’s guidelines. What they ended up with was very interesting. Summarizing how the terms “power” and “place” had been used in the conference dialogue, White and Findlay explained that they were “protean words.”⁵⁰ Simply stated, their meanings were versatile, extremely variable, and often changing. The meanings of these words could not provide a clear-cut definition for what the historian was trying to say. To go beyond a “starting point of a definition” would prove “difficult

and unwieldy.”⁵¹ And yet the two terms remained as the main explanative tools for the history of the American West. Rereading James P. Ronda’s conclusion to his conference essay, “Coboway’s Tale: A Story of Power and Places Along the Columbia,” one would have thought Turner had done the writing if only “vital forces” had been substituted for “power.” In Ronda’s words, “power is always unstable, unpredictable like the sudden currents of a river in flood. And like the river, power is always in motion, sweeping from place to place with restless energy. And as power shifts, it transforms places.”⁵² As Turner’s “vital forces” migrated, they too transformed places. This was the real reason that Turner made a natural transition from frontier theory to sectional theory during the course of his career. Whereas frontier theory focused on how “vital forces” functioned *between* places, his theory of sections focused on how “vital forces” functioned *within* places. Frontier theory and sectional theory were complementary because they united these two aspects of history. William Cronon had the intuition to realize that Turner adopted sectional theory because he believed it could be used to “explain American history in much the same way that the frontier once had,” but what Cronon did not recognize was that the “vital forces” allowed this to happen.⁵³ Turner’s own extensive research into breaking down places into their component parts (Turner’s romp with nominalism) on sectional maps showed Turner that the frontier theory did not accommodate for action *within* places. So he shifted to sectional theory because it did. “Vital forces” were present in both theories. When the 1994 conference committee expanded the program to broaden the usability of the terms “power” and “place,” they were basically replicating what Turner had realized years before. The theme of “Metropolis and Hinterland” only accounted for relations of “power” *between* places.

A study of “power” would be limited to city-country analysis (or frontier theory) . But “power” also was a key factor for what happened within a place. “Power,” like the “vital forces” undergirded both spectrums of historical action. And, like the “vital forces,” “power” eluded definition. For these modern historians, they employed “power” as though it was a ground to reality that did not need further definition. Its use signaled a return to “unconscious productiveness.” After Turner had been hounded and reviled for half a century for using the term “frontier” as an “elastic term” that did not require “sharp definition,” it appeared that scholarly vagueness was now once again in vogue.⁵⁴

When Richard White and John Findlay compiled the conference essays, they recognized that some attempt needed to be made to tentatively define the terms which had been so prominently displayed at the heart of the symposium. The definitions they arrived at, no matter how vague, require commentary. First, the term “place” did not really refer to a place at all; it referred to a process. What is meant by this is that New West historians, like Patricia Limerick and Richard White, had earlier criticized Turner’s treatment of the frontier as a process rather than a place. For New West historians, treating a physical landscape like the frontier as a process made it conceptually too fluid and mutable to capture historical accuracy. Turner’s places, such as the frontier or the West itself, *moved or changed* depending on what the people were thinking, whether the “vital forces” still energized a region, and if western resources (including wide-open spaces as well as thickly forested timber reserves) were scarce. For Turner, the West might no longer be the West if the people of the region no longer demarcated their daily lives along the lines of democratic principles and freedom. For Turner, people’s attitudes, which were ever-changing, determined whether the West was created in any particular

place. A place changed based on how people thought within that region. In the book, The Legacy of Conquest, Limerick opposed equating place with process. Place was to be fixed. It could be mapped out. For her, the West comprised the present-day states of California, Oregon, Washington, Idaho, Utah, Nevada, Arizona, New Mexico, Colorado, Kansas, Nebraska, Oklahoma, Texas, Montana, Wyoming, North Dakota, South Dakota, Iowa, Missouri, Arkansas, Louisiana, and possibly Alaska.⁵⁵ The West as a place had a “compensatory, down-to-earth clarity that the migratory, abstract frontier could never have.”⁵⁶ Similarly, Richard White’s It’s Your Misfortune and None of My Own, a work which reinforced Limerick’s overall vision as it attempted to synthesize New and Old Western history into *the* textbook account of what really happened, argued in favor of treating the West as place.⁵⁷ In 1991, he wrote:

The geographical boundaries of the American West were not naturally determined; they were politically determined. The American West is that contiguous section of the continent west of the Missouri River acquired by the United States, beginning with the Louisiana Purchase of 1803; continuing through the acquisition of Texas, the Oregon Territory, and the Mexican Cession in the 1840’s; and ending with the 1854 Gadsden Purchase of the lands between the Gila River and the present Mexican Boundary.⁵⁸

In this statement, White viewed the West as a succession of places rather than a succession of states of mind in successively more western areas. True, the West was “gradually created” as White asserted but, for him, it was gradually created as a place.⁵⁹ By 1854 with the acquisition of its last territory, the West was stationary, easily defined by its political boundaries. The significance of White and Findlay’s starting definition for place in regard to the 1994 forum was that it reverted back to treating place as human process. Place became dynamic rather than static. Following Meinig’s suggestions, place was now primarily seen as a “spatial reality constructed by people.”⁶⁰ Place was a

“human creation,” a creation of “sense perceptions,” and a “mental imposition of order” all at the same time that it was a “parcelization of the earth’s surface.”⁶¹ That is, place became abstract and non-abstract, seen and yet not seen. As Meinig noted, place was a “transformation of space—an abstraction—into something more specific and limited.”⁶² This definition clearly was a return to a trope where there was a metaphorical extension back from the intangible into a tangible equivalent. This definition neutralized the ironic trope by allowing both the figurative and the literal to make up historical activity. In fact, historical truth was this relationship between noumenal and phenomenal. Place became process again because it was the relationship between people’s ideas and the physical landscape that defined a region. As these relationships changed, place changed. While the New West historians’ view of place may have differed on certain details from Frederick Jackson Turner, the main point to be stressed is that, once again, emphasis was being given to fluid processes rather than static places in explaining western history.

In regard to the term “power,” White and Findlay offered the “provisional idea that power was the ability of an agent—be it a person, a corporation, the state or some other entity—to influence either people or natural forces to act according to that agent’s desire or will.”⁶³ This definition implied two things. First, “power” was essentially the transference of “energy” or “energy” in motion. Something had to possess “energy” to be powerful. In reference to the previous example of the human being pressing the lever to raise the metal canister, the human, as an agent, had to exert “energy” to press down the lever. The lever, as an agent, subsequently used “energy” to raise the canister. The canister, having been influenced by both the “energy” of the person and the lever, now possessed additional “energy” of its own. It had been influenced by the “power” of the

agents. Therefore, the first implication of the definition for “power” was that “power” and “energy” were the same thing. To have “power” was to have “energy.” Richard White admitted as much when he later wrote in The Organic Machine (1995), “In English the words ‘energy’ and ‘power’ have become virtually interchangeable . . . To be powerful is to be able to accomplish things, to be able to turn the energy and work of nature and humans to your own purposes.”⁶⁴ If “power” was indeed “energy,” that meant it was prone to the same metaphors and uncertainties as the latter term. Second, something could only possess “power” if it possessed “desire” or “will.”⁶⁵ This worked fine if one only took into account the human as an agent, but what about the lever? It clearly influenced “energy,” a “natural force” as White’s and Findlay’s definition declared, to act on the metal canister. Did White and Findlay mean to assert that the lever as an agent also possessed desire or will? Or, just as illogical, was the lever to be considered as devoid of “power” because it had no desire or will? And, if that was the case, how did the lever raise the metal canister if it had no “power?” The entire issue was problematic. One could argue that the lever did not qualify as an entity. On the surface, this is fair enough. On deeper examination, it is just as problematic. One needs to turn to White’s example of a river, the main subject of The Organic Machine. For White, a river is clearly an entity: something existing complete in itself, in its own right, a subject having existence. Of course, a river really involves a complex set of relationships with the surrounding environment. In that sense, it could be said not to be complete in itself. But, using that argument, one could also insist that the human organism does not qualify as an entity. So far, so good; the river is an entity. A river influences human beings to act in certain ways. If the river’s current is strongest at its center, humans

rowing in a canoe will be forced to skirt the periphery where water meets land. The center of a river's flow possesses too much "energy" to be successfully (meaning safely in this case) transferred to the humans and the canoe. But if they paddle near the shore, the "energy" is less and can be successfully utilized. Thus, the river possesses more "power" at its center than at its edges. This analysis brings to light a problem. White and Findlay's definition of "power" state that for an agent, which would be the river in this example, to possess "power" it must have desire or will. For the river to have "power," it must therefore have desire or will. Stated simply, the river must have purpose, the desire to obtain a result and which is kept in mind in performing an action. If a river is denied purpose, as White later tried to do in The Organic Machine, then that implies that the river lacks "power." Yet it had already been established by the first part of the definition that the river was powerful. To be sure, to tread the waters of White's and Findlay's definition of "power" and still remain afloat requires more skill and ingenuity than to tread the currents of the Columbia River itself. The reason for pointing out the difficulties in which White and Findlay got themselves into over defining concepts of "power" and "energy" is to show that these terms were no more rational in the way they were used than Turner's "vital forces." Like Turner's "vital forces," they were used only because the historian was comfortable with them, not because the historians who used them actually understood how they impacted their writings. When historians used these terms, critical analysis ceased to function and they became hopelessly lost in the "paradox of substance." In regard to the terms "power," "energy," "purpose," "desire," and "will," what did they really know of any of these things?

Turning attention to the Columbia River is appropriate because no book, subsequent to the conference proceedings, more embraced the concept of “power” than did Richard White’s The Organic Machine. He substituted the term “energy” for “power” and used the term as the primary tool for understanding human beings in relation to their environment. William Cronon’s brief metaphor of “energy” had been developed into a key mechanism for elucidating historical processes. What White intended to do was “examine the river as an organic machine, as an energy system which, although modified by human interventions, maintains its natural, its ‘unmade’ qualities.”⁶⁶ This meant White was going to try to find a way to unite the artificial division between Cronon’s first and second nature. And the way he would unite them, just as Cronon had briefly united them, was through the metaphor of “energy.” He wrote, “What I have stressed are qualities that humans and the Columbia River share: energy and work.”⁶⁷ For White, that “energy” was behind both first and second nature suggested that man-made inventions and intrusions could impact first nature and yet not transform that first nature into second nature. That is, second nature disappeared; “energy” made everything seem natural. This was precisely the Chicago booster’s view in the late nineteenth century; the railroad as a man-made invention could natural. For the boosters, there was no second nature. Except for his brief excursion into “unconscious productiveness,” William Cronon could not come to terms with this view. In fact, Cronon mocked it with his irony. Little did he know that, while that mockery was intended for the boosters, it would also have to extend to the identical views expressed by his colleague, Richard White, four years later.

Richard White stressed “energy” and “work” as the unifying factors for human and environmental relationships. As to “energy,” White accepted and embraced “energy’s”

elusive quality, “I emphasize energy because energy is such a protean and useful concept.”⁶⁸ In short, White adopted “energy” precisely because it *could not* be defined. The fact that it could not be defined meant it was an extremely useful tool since it could be applied in so many ways. There was no need to pin it down in definition or limit its application in historical situations. Turner’s “vital forces” were no more or no less protean and useful than White’s “energy.” “Energy,” like Turner’s “vital forces,” was fundamentally a metaphorical relationship between the unseen forces and the physical world. The physical world could be abstracted into the invisible world through the metaphorical trope. The invisible world could then be collapsed back into the tangible world through the metonymical trope. Neither world was unreal, as irony suggested, but each possessed its valid place in historical inquiry. White explained:

The flow of the river is energy, so is the electricity that comes from the dams that block that flow. Human labor is energy; so are the calories stored as fat by salmon for their journey upstream. Seen one way, energy is an abstraction; seen another it is as concrete as salmon, human bodies, and the Grand Coulee Dam.⁶⁹

As to “work,” “work” is to “energy” what “power” is to “energy.” Like “power,” “work” can be described as having two aspects. First, “work” is the transference of “energy,” which means it has the same dimensions of “energy.” Second, “work” is to engage in activity designed to achieve a particular purpose and requiring an expenditure of considerable effort. By employing the term “work,” what White implied was that “work,” as the transference of “energy” to achieve a purpose, undergirded all human and environmental activity. But his use of the term “work” led White into the same problem he faced when using the word “power.” If something did “work,” it had to have

“purpose.” At this point, the logic for using the term “work” broke down for White. The appropriateness of the term broke down because White did not “attribute either a consciousness or a purpose to nature.”⁷⁰ Yet, in complete contradiction to that statement, he continually demonstrated nature, the river in this case, at “work” with purpose.

For example:

As we now understand rivers, they *seek* [emphasis added] the most efficient and uniform expenditure of energy possible. Rivers constantly adjust; they compensate for events that affect them. Where obstacles slow rivers, rivers *try* [italics added] to restore an even velocity; where the gradient increases or the channel constricts, rivers *try* [emphasis added] to widen or build up their bed.⁷¹

If one speaks of a river trying to do something and seeking to achieve something, that language attributes purpose to a river. Rivers “seek” and “try” to achieve certain ends. And, if a river has purpose, it, by definition, has to have consciousness. At the simplest level, consciousness can be defined as being aware of one’s surroundings. Using White’s expressions, the river is aware of its surroundings. Why else would it attempt to alter them? Granted, that awareness may be significantly different from what human beings experience. That awareness may be severely limited. It may not be “socially organized,” but it is nevertheless an awareness.⁷² This awareness or consciousness is embedded in the term “work.” Once again, one is confronted with a paradox. For something to “work,” it must have a purpose. If purpose is denied to something, then the subject “working” is no longer considered to be at “work.” If it is not at “work,” the what accounts for the transference of “energy” that is going on?

There is no way to resolve these contradictions in White’s work except to contrast the terms he was using with the world view he was using. Richard White was the product of the 1960’s, 1970’s, and 1980’s cultural context. His world view was shaped by this

context. As regards the historical profession, these were years of intense materialism. The essence of materialism, as Kenneth Burke explained, was the elimination of “purpose” as a historical tool.⁷³ In general, late twentieth-century historians ridiculed cycles, periodicity, stages of progress and recapitulation, teleology, and a purpose in nature towards which all life was supposed to advance. Refusing to admit of the validity of these terms suggested that historians had virtually eliminated necessity and purpose from nature as well as from their historical accounts. This was in sharp contrast to Frederick Jackson Turner’s world view which accepted the reality of cycles, recapitulation, stages of progress, and ultimate teleological ends.⁷⁴ The driving force behind White’s world view led him to conclude that there was no consciousness or purpose to nature despite the fact that his methodology and his terminology pointed to the exact opposite conclusion. His terms of “energy” and “work” that underpinned The Organic Machine were more akin to nineteenth-century Vitalist thought than they were to late twentieth-century materialism. In that case, what The Organic Machine represented was the tension between a late twentieth-century world view and a methodology, one which reverted back to late nineteenth-century linguistic expressions, that did not allow for a materialistic world view. Hence, the contradictions arose. White’s return to the mode of “unconscious productiveness” placed him the midst of this contradiction between his Turnerian metaphor and his contemporary world view.

Once again, one must turn to Kenneth Burke’s penetrating insight to understand just what is meant by a return to “unconscious productiveness.” Burke argued that there was a point where materialism merged into mysticism. The point at which they merged was at the concept of purpose. That is, materialism and mysticism were both reductionist when

it came to “purpose” because they involved a “narrowing of motivational circumference.”⁷⁵ The manner in which they achieved that reductionism differed, but the result was the same. Materialism accomplished the reductionism by a “deliberate elimination of purpose as a term.”⁷⁶ In contrast, mysticism unintentionally arrived at the same result by “making purpose absolute, and thereby in effect transforming it into a fatality.”⁷⁷ Ironically, what Burke noticed was that those materialist schemes that attempted to de-emphasize purpose actually accentuated it. Therefore, it was the accidental emergence of purpose in materialism that signified the return to “unconscious productiveness” because the emergence of purpose was the point at which the historian lost track of his logical, thought-out consistency. Gene Wise would have construed this return as a “strain” in the “explanation form.”⁷⁸ In his view, there was a point at which what the author intended to do and what he did diverged. Therefore, the rationale of the premise and ensuing argument disintegrated. In the case of Richard White’s “explanation form,” his logic became strained when he claimed that the examination of nature and “energy” did not imply a consciousness or purpose to nature but he nevertheless continued to embed such implications for a purpose into his text. White’s materialist attitude hoped to eliminate purpose, but it surfaced throughout the text all the same. This represented a break down in “critical intellect” because his original premise made it impossible for him to follow through on those leads pointing to purpose. Certain implications pointing to a purpose in nature were left unaddressed by him, leaving them dangling unchallenged in the body of the text. These implications were given no analysis and no serious examination. His materialist world view merged into mysticism as purpose became more and more unknowingly featured within the actions of the Columbia

River. The close of the book had a very different ending than the beginning. In his next to last paragraph, White wrote, "The river has purposes of its own which do not readily yield to desires to maximize profit..."⁷⁹ How significantly different this closure was when compared to his initial declaration, "I do not attribute either a consciousness or a purpose to nature."⁸⁰ The shift into viewing the Columbia River as having purpose was clearly part of the transition into "unconscious productiveness."

What the concept of purpose reveals is the fatal flaw in Richard White's logic. White wanted to find a way to unify man with his environment. Man was considered to be a conscious, purpose driven creature. But nature supposedly was devoid of consciousness and purpose. That meant man could never in fact become indistinguishable from nature because their *a priori* definitions were irreconcilable. If man was ever truly merged with nature, nature would no longer be nature because it now possessed consciousness and purpose—as displayed in the form of man's actions. Man, as nature, was conscious and therefore he represented nature's consciousness. To have admitted this would have been the death knell for White's contemporary world view. If man as a physical organism pointed to the consciousness of nature, then all those things which went to make up the New West historian's first nature, such as salmon, cattle, trees, and plants, would also point to the consciousness of nature. These four subjects all manipulated "energy" to fulfill certain purposes. How then could nature be said to be devoid of consciousness and purpose? In regard to the structure of his logic, Richard White clearly was not aware of what he was actually doing. He wanted to unify man and nature yet he tried to work from a preconceived world view that made them incompatible by definition. His world view separated them into first and second nature without providing a mechanism for them to be

unified. Faced with this insurmountable difficulty in uniting man and nature, it was convenient for White to slip out of that modern world view and into a nineteenth-century metaphorical trope that allowed him to do what the logic of his “critical intellect” could not do. White drew on metaphor to unify man and nature. He wrote, “Wave, water, and and wind--and human labor--can be represented in ways beyond the immediacy of actual experience. We can abstract them to a single entity: energy.”⁸¹

With White embracing a metaphorical trope in which “energy” was at once both abstract and concrete, his statements took on a double meaning. Simple statements that would have seemed straightforward in any other circumstance now had to be examined cautiously. Metaphor encodes subtle meanings into a text in a way that irony does not. Once White had adopted metaphor, these additional meanings were necessarily encoded into his text, whether he wanted them there or not. A very basic statement like, “It was, after all, the salmon that brought thousands of Indians to the Cascades, to the Dalles and Celilo Falls, the Priest Rapids and Kettle Falls,” now took on extraordinary, almost supernatural meanings.⁸² In White’s mind, salmon was a metaphor for “energy.” Salmon equaled “energy.” With salmon having to be treated abstractly as “energy,” that meant “energy” was the cause of Indians moving to new regions. “Energy” was the pull tugging people about the countryside. If “energy” was in a region, that region would prosper. If that “energy” vacated a region, that region would decline. White realized that the relationship between people and the environment created “maps of energy” that could be read historically.⁸³ It was precisely those maps that Turner was trying to understand. One only had to follow where “energy” was and how it got there to decode the historical past. Seen this way, White’s “energy” was little different than Turner’s “vital forces.”

Both pushed people to new regions and created vibrant cultures in those regions. Turner's "vital forces" could be mapped just like White's "energy." The details may have differed for White and Turner, but the metaphor was identical.

In the same way that Donald Worster and William Cronon became neo-Turnerians of a sort when they integrated the metaphor of "energy" into their interpretations, so too did Richard White. But White was more significant because he allowed the metaphor of "energy" to drive the entire discourse and methodology of what is considered a solid piece of historical scholarship. Whereas Cronon had only briefly slipped out of the ironic trope to embrace metaphor, White rooted The Organic Machine in the metaphorical trope. Hayden White's prediction for the emergence of an age of metaphor from an age of irony showed signs of coming true. Richard White's The Organic Machine, the product of a leading New Western historian, provided the first, full-fledged indication that Hayden White was correct.

Elliott West

Elliott West took Richard White's metaphor of "energy" and more fully developed it within a Turnerian framework. When Richard White employed the metaphor of "energy" to explain history in terms of an interaction between noumenon and phenomenon, he re-legitimized the metaphorical trope and its realist ground to reality. The qualities of a physical organism could be described in terms of its "energy" or its actual physical traits. The characteristics of a region could be traced by following "energy" flows within its borders. If someone had a lot of "energy," he was powerful. If someplace had a lot of "energy," it was prosperous. And "energy" could leave a region. If it did, that region

changed, oftentimes becoming but a shadow of its former self. At its most basic level, this metaphor was little different than Turner's "vital forces." In re-legitimizing the metaphorical trope, West and White legitimized Turner.

The legitimization of Turner received support in Elliott West's The Contested Plains: Indians, Goldseekers, and the Rush to Colorado (1998). West borrowed White's metaphor of "energy" and extended it to the world of ideas, underpinning ideas themselves with "energy." He expanded White's dualism of "energy" and physical matter to include a third factor: ideas. These ideas served as the medium through which "energy" would transform the landscape. With this addition, "energy" behaved more and more like Turner's "vital forces." In fact, the concept of "energy" found itself edging closer and closer to a fully Turnerian model. It was now a tri-fold interaction of "energy," ideas, and physical matter. Where Turner's "vital forces" had stimulated ideas before, now "energy" was the equivalent. When Patricia Limerick praised West's book for the "discovery of the ties between events in the human mind and events in material reality," she overlooked part of West's equation.⁸⁴ If he had merely related material events to ideas, that would have been nothing new. Henry Nash Smith had shown fifty years earlier how human perception interacted with physical reality. West advanced beyond Smith by embedding a ground to reality, or "energy," beneath both ideas and physical action. This was his version of realism. By doing this, West brought Turner's metaphor for "vital forces" up to date. In going forwards, one actually went backwards.

What West emphasized was the intermediary level between "energy" and physical action. That intermediary level was human imagination. The translation of "energy" into act could only happen if imagination bridged the gap separating the abstract and concrete

worlds.⁸⁵ The best example of this was in West's reference to the unclothed man standing out in the winter cold. The man saw a bear and it occurred to him that he could be warmer if only he had the bear's hair. He proceeded to kill the bear and make himself clothing. In this example, the crucial event for White was not the "killing of the bear, or the fashioning of a garment, but the first picturing [by the man] of himself, bear-robed, inside his own head, as he stood shivering and wondering."⁸⁶ As such, the man's imagination gave him an "enormous manipulative influence" over his surroundings.⁸⁷ Imagination gave him the ability to translate and harness "energy" into physical act. The result was that this man became extremely powerful.

The reason that West's metaphor of "energy" differed so much from Smith's "imaginative constructions" was because West identified "energy" with an "effective" environment.⁸⁸ West, influenced by the biological sciences, distinguished between "perceived" and "effective" environments.⁸⁹ A perceived environment included everything that an animal, including the human animal, was "aware of in its surroundings."⁹⁰ The perceived environment often missed much of what was actually happening and often included things that were not really there. Much of the perceived environment did not in fact exist. West's example was that of a dog barking at its own echo, "apparently deep in conversation with a perceived canine neighbor that was, in fact, the far side of the gully."⁹¹ Of course, much of what was perceived was not an illusion. The same dog might also notice rain in the sky, birds in the air, and his owner setting out water for the morning. These things were really there. In comparison, an effective environment included everything that actually influenced a person or animal irregardless of whether they perceived this reality or not. For example, antelopes and bison were

probably unaware of the nitrogen cycle and yet it was an absolutely essential fact in the perpetuation of their existence. The effective environment was real; it was the ground to reality. In certain ways, human beings held a vastly greater perceived environment than the animals. As the extent of the perceived environment grew, human perception came closer and closer to capturing an effective environment. Human perception, as imagination captured “energy,” replicated an effective environment or the ground to reality. This was significantly at variance with Smith’s “imaginative constructions.” For the most part, Smith adopted the concept that ideas could only reflect physical culture and therefore they were inherently flawed. Ideas could never replicate an effective environment. In contrast, West asserted that ideas possessed degrees of “energy” and that “energy” was part of an effective environment. He wrote, “Part of an effective environment is the energy that moves continuously around us. All organisms draw on that energy, convert it [through imagination], and use it in order to live.”⁹² “Energy” was very real for West. It accounted for “all true animation and allowed every human event: a sacred dance, paddling a boat, burning a village, sipping tea.”⁹³ A sacred dance may have been a combination of human perception and physical ritual, but this combination possessed an intimate connection to an “effective” environment, or ground to reality, through the “energy” that stimulated the imaginative process of the American Indians.

Elliott West’s basic metaphors for “power” and “energy” were drawn from Richard White. West reiterated, “As energy is captured and set to a purpose, it becomes power. The application of energy is power in its widest meaning.”⁹⁴ But whereas White had left purpose noticeably vague and underdeveloped, it was clear that for West purpose was “imagination” or “awareness.”⁹⁵ Not that West overtly referenced purpose back to

imagination or awareness, but his treatment of the three terms was identical. By definition, purpose implied some sort of consciousness which deliberately and intentionally desired to achieve some specific action. In comparison, imagination was an intuitive understanding of what needed to be done in order to achieve something. Awareness was an informed consciousness for how to go about some particular task. While it is not precisely clear just how far West would have gone in imbuing a river with imagination or awareness, it is clear that the implications involved in these terms would have come closer, even if unintentionally, to giving sentience to first nature. Rivers were certainly aware of how to utilize their “energy.” If that awareness did not arise from some degree of imagination, no matter how small, then just how did the river possess the intuitive understanding for how to go about its peculiar task of removing obstacles? Irregardless, the main point to be remembered is that West equated imagination and awareness back to purpose. Something’s imagination and awareness defined its purpose. Consequently, imagination and awareness, like purpose, led directly to “power.” What this additional correlation did for West was allow him to take the metaphor of “energy” one step closer to Turner.

This additional correlation took West’s metaphor one step closer to Turner because it firmly established the same unseen forces at the root of all physical worldly “power.” The combination of “energy” and awareness were the causes of historical action. In the case of “energy,” West utilized the metaphor of stored sunshine which Cronon had introduced and White had adopted. Just as Cronon’s forests were imbued with the sun’s force and White’s salmon were stored sunshine on the run, so too West continued the pattern in his own work. He wrote, “Every expression of plains power drew originally from the sun . . .

An Indian on a horse was literally harnessing, more directly and reliably, the energy poured out by the sun in unimaginable generosity.”⁹⁶ Later, he continued, “We are surrounded by energy. It pours down on our heads and sits waiting in all organic matter, in tree bark, centipedes, cattle bull snakes, and grass. Each life-form is constantly converting a tiny part of that abundance into an ability to do something.”⁹⁷ The conversion process of “energy” into action was entirely dependent upon how aware an organism was in regard to the possible implementations of that “energy.” Living things could only apply “energy” in a “few of many available ways” based on their degree of awareness and imagination.⁹⁸ Animals suffered much more than humans in absorbing and utilizing “energy” because their sense of awareness was so limited. Humans, on the other hand, possessed a tremendous imaginative force to re-envision the landscape, notice how it could be changed, and then to change it. In short, what differentiated the amount of “energy” that an organism could absorb and apply corresponded to their level of awareness. This mixture of “energy” and awareness gave human beings “power.” It gave them “power” to conquer the animal world. If it could do that, it could also allow certain people to be able to conquer in the human world as well. By using the imagination to manipulate the environment and capture more “energy,” one group of people could thrive and subsequently dominate another group of people who had captured less “energy.” For example, the concept of national character is supposed to express how one group of people think as opposed to what another group is thinking and doing. In essence, human character is nothing other than West’s imagination and awareness. Two people could go to the same forested area and yet they would each think about it differently. One might imagine a paper mill constructed next to the river stream and would therefore begin

to chop down the necessary timber and begin to construct it. The second person might not imagine in that way at all. He might imagine nothing different for the area other than hunting a few deer. In comparison, the habit of thought of these two men would be radically different. Subsequently, their actions would be different. Looking at these differences, the historian could safely state that the characters of these two men differed. They imagined or were aware in different ways. The significance of linking West's imagination and awareness to character was that it bridged the metaphor of "energy" to Turner's metaphor of "vital forces." If a physical organism was dependent on capturing "energy" based on the quality or type of its imagination, then that was analogous to Turner's physical actors being dependent on capturing "vital forces" based on the quality or type of their character. In West, human agents could capture "energy" only if they could imagine in certain ways. In Turner, human agents could capture "vital forces" only if they were thinking in certain ways. Since "energy" represented "power" to West and "vital forces" represented "power" to Turner, and because imagination or character allowed "energy" and "vital forces" to manifest, that meant the rise or fall of a civilization was now wholly dependent on how people thought. If the way people thought was able to capture "energy," these people gained "power." If the way people thought was able to capture "vital forces," those people gained "power." Simply stated, if two groups of people met at a city's frontier hinterland for the first time, the more powerful group would emerge victorious because of the capacity of their character to harness more "energy." West's logic implied that the Native Americans were conquered because they harnessed less "energy" than the white invaders. But West's own world view, which stressed sensitivity to the plight of Native Americans, blinded him to the implications of

his own logic. These implications were never recognized or, if they were, they were never explicitly stated.

By bridging the two metaphors of “energy” and “vital forces,” West transported Turner’s concept of the frontier into the contemporary world. For West, frontiers were “waves of new experience.”⁹⁹ Experience was nothing other than innovations in the way people imagined as they moved into new areas, the way that imagination captured “energy,” and the way that “energy” was subsequently expended to alter the physical landscape. West’s frontier was a synonym for “energy.” For Turner, his frontier began when a “new environment was suddenly entered, freedom of opportunity was opened, the cake of custom was broken, and new activities, new lines of growth, new institutions and new ideals, were brought into existence.”¹⁰⁰ What was behind all this activity driving it forwards were Turner’s “vital forces.” For West and Turner, “energy” and “vital forces” were the *real* frontiers. The frontier existed wherever “energy” and “vital forces” could be found. Patricia Limerick was right when she remarked that the “familiar dispute” whether Turner was correct about the frontier had become “trivial and arcane,” but she was wrong about the reason why.¹⁰¹ The familiar dispute was becoming trivial because the emerging metaphor of “energy” was gradually transforming the frontier concept into what Turner originally meant it to be. Rather than being about whether two people or four people or eight people lived in a region, it was about a massive collision and localization of “energy” or “vital forces” within a specific region. The frontier concept was really so much bigger than what historians had been willing to credit it with. In light of this grander picture, what historians had been doing with the frontier thesis did indeed look

trivial. The frontier thesis was in fact an overarching thesis that depicted the inner workings for the relationship between unseen forces and the physical world.

In 1988, Gerald Nash expressed doubt that contemporary historians would be able to arrive at an overarching thesis, like Turner had done in the nineteenth century, to explain the West. Nash reminisced:

It is perhaps questionable to expect an equivalent of the Turner Thesis to be formulated in the remaining years of the twentieth century. Not only has the historical profession undergone major changes in the years since 1893, but the complexities of western history after 1890 . . . vastly increased.¹⁰²

Without a doubt, things must have looked especially grim for Nash in light of the recent publication of Patricia Limerick's The Legacy of Conquest in 1987. As her book received enthusiastic accolades from a historical profession which recognized value in the fact that her work supported the virtues of its own entrenched neo-Marxist ideology, the situation could have only looked that much gloomier. With Limerick's book, it finally appeared as though Turner's coffin might have been nailed shut. Was Limerick's conquest theory the foundation stone for the next generation of American West history? In fact, the answer was no. The Legacy of Conquest was exactly what she said it was: a compilation "pulling the pieces together to combine two or three decades of thriving scholarship with a decade of thriving journalism in Western American subjects."¹⁰³ Limerick admitted that much of the most "interesting work in Western history had been done by individuals who considered themselves first and foremost urban, social business, labor, Chicano, Indian, or environmental historians—not Western historians."¹⁰⁴ That is, Limerick openly acknowledged that her own work was merely a restatement of what had already been done in social history decades before.¹⁰⁵ As such, The Legacy of Conquest

actually belonged to the past, not the future. It was the culmination of what scholars like Henry Nash Smith, Earl Pomeroy, and Howard Lamar had begun. But, in 1988, Limerick's conquest theory was the closest thing to being a substitute for the Turner thesis. The 1990's would change that because, in fact, contemporary historians did arrive at an overarching thesis, like Turner had done in the nineteenth century, to explain the American West.

Using hindsight, it is easy to see why Gerald Nash underestimated the plausibility of achieving a modern "Turner Thesis" in the last twelve years of the twentieth century.¹⁰⁶ Nash supposed that the increased complexities that had taken place in western history after the 1890's would prevent such an all-inclusive thesis. What he did not realize was that all these complexities, or the nominalist aspect of western history, possessed no bearing on whether a new rendering for an overarching thesis could be established. If the new thesis functioned under the metaphorical trope, it would be able to operate entirely independent of nominalist procedures. This is because at no point does metaphor's driving philosophy of realism ever merge into nominalism. Metaphor is therefore independent of nominalism. This was something Nash did not grasp. Nash imagined that a new equivalent of the Turner thesis would have to be carefully formulated, strategically taking into account endless, manifold intricacies. That is, Nash anticipated that the new thesis would continue to operate under the property of "critical intellect." As such, it would require an extraordinary amount of time to work out the details. But if the equivalent of a Turner thesis was not something that had to be meticulously *crafted* but merely something that historians *fell into*, that would change the situation completely. It would eliminate the time factor altogether. If history is a creative act rather than an

analytical one, change could take place rapidly. And, if historians *fell into* metaphor, it would eliminate the need to account for countless details. Metaphor ignores details. With these two factors in mind, a modern Turner thesis could be developed rather quickly. Historians could be “unconsciously productive.”

Of course, this view that an overarching thesis had been established in the 1990's requires one to interpret Turner in ways very much different than how traditional historians had interpreted him. At its core, the frontier thesis was about the interaction of human character and “vital forces.” Differences in human character, in terms of ideals, values, and culture, allowed myriad groups of people to capture variant levels of the “vital forces” and subsequently transform the landscape in diverse ways. The frontier thesis was actually a proposition that affirmed a special relationship between unseen forces and the physical world in American history. That was Turner's overarching thesis. When one examines Elliott West's The Contested Plains, one finds the same overarching thesis in place. Only West substituted “energy” for “vital forces” and imagination for character. If Elliott West had stood alone in developing and using these alternate terms, one could shrug him off as the aberration of the historical profession. But, in fact, West, like Turner, simply assimilated ideas that had already been floating about in the intellectual atmosphere for some time and adapted them to his own work. The result was that the themes of conquest, race, and gender became secondary to the overriding metaphor detailing the relationship of noumenon and phenomenon in a historical world. A new synthesis had been established.

Notes

¹ Burke, A Grammar of Motives, 251.

² Ibid.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Cronon, Nature's Metropolis, 268.

⁵ An excellent example of how history is intuitional as opposed to intellectual is seen in Walter Benjamin's statement, "The past can be seized as an image which flashes up at the instant that it can be recognized and is never seen again." This was Benjamin's "moment of danger" when historical truth can actually be seen. This moment possessed no relationship to any procedural order of logic. It was entirely independent of it.

In literature, no one captured this "moment of danger" better than Henry James in his short piece, The Beast in the Jungle. In their youth, John Marcher and May Bartram were close friends who confided to each other that there was one tragic moment in everyone's lives. That tragic moment was the metaphor for the "beast in the jungle." They spent the rest of their lives looking for that moment but never found it. They remained as friends but the relationship never developed into anything more. In one final climactic scene indicative of James' style, May, on her deathbed, revealed to John that the beast had already struck them both, but he had missed it. John went through all the details of his past life but could not uncover that tragic moment. Then May told him she had loved him all those years. In that moment when compassion for his comrade and the unrequited love she had gone through all those years flooded into Marcher's heart, the beast sprang, the "moment of danger" arose, and John Marcher saw the truth behind the unfolded history of his life. It was too much for him, he crumpled to the ground, and never saw it again.

See Walter Trachtenberg, Reading American Photographs: Images as History (New York: Hill and Wang, 1989), 289-290. Also see Henry James, "The Beast in the Jungle," The Norton Anthology of American Literature, 4th ed., Vol. 2 (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 1994).

⁶ Bergson, Creative Evolution, 145.

⁷ Cronon, Nature's Metropolis, 268.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Burke, A Grammar of Motives, 248.

¹⁰ Cronon, Nature's Metropolis, 278.

¹¹ In Turner's own research, he attempted to demonstrate the existence of a unified section by consistently subdividing and breaking down regional areas on a map. It proved a hopeless mess.

¹² Cronon, Nature's Metropolis, 148.

¹³ Ibid., 149.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Ibid., 150.

¹⁷ Ibid., 149.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Ibid., 150.

²⁰ Ibid. That Cronon did not mind equating country or hinterland with Turner's frontier is seen in his correlation of "natural abundance" residing in both. This "natural abundance" was the result of "stored sunshine."

²¹ Ibid.

²² Ibid., 13.

²³ Joan Solomon, Getting to Know about Energy—in School and Society (London: The Falmer Press, 1992), vii.

²⁴ Ibid., 12.

²⁵ Blavaktsy, The Secret Doctrine, Vol. 1, 670.

²⁶ R. Bruce Lindsay, Energy: Historical Development of the Concept (Stroudsburg: Dowden, Hutchinson, and Ross, Inc., 1975), 287.

²⁷ Gottfried de Purucker, The Esoteric Tradition, Vol. 1 (Pasadena: Theosophical University Press, 1973; originally published 1935), 460. There is an excellent discussion of Planck and quanta.

²⁸ Kenneth R. Lang, Sun, Earth, and Sky (New York: Springer, 1995), 14.

²⁹ Rudolf Kippenhahn, Discovering the Secrets of the Sun, trans. Storm Dunlop (Chichester: John Wiley & Sons, 1994), 45.

³⁰ Cronon, Nature's Metropolis, 149.

³¹ Lang, Sun, Earth, and Sky, 13-14.

³² Kippenhahn, Discovering the Secrets of the Sun, 37.

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Kippenhahn, like many scientists who are not completely prepared to accept the consequences involved in the duality of quantum mechanics, proceeded to contradict himself on this point. He continued, "It is actually a physical concept." And more, "We have learned a lot about light, but despite this, we still do not know what light really is." And why not? "The problem lies in the fact that it does not correspond to anything that we encounter in our everyday experience." But if it was a "physical concept," then it should correspond to our daily experiences. And, if it was a "physical concept," it should also not consist of two incompatible components such as being a wave and a particle at the same time.

Scientists are still struggling to accept where their field has led them—right into the middle of an unseen world that does not fit into concepts of physical reality. Niels Bohr knew that quantum mechanics was taking science into the realms of the unseen worlds and was supposed to have stated, "Anyone who is not shocked by quantum theory has not understood it." See Virginia Hanson, H.P. Blavatsky and the Secret Doctrine (Wheaton: The Theosophical Publishing House, 1988), 163. Finally, see Gottfried de Purucker's statements about the direction of science and quantum mechanics in the 1930's, "Modern Science which is so rapidly approximating to conceptions which are fully as metaphysical and indeed as mystical as anything of its kind that the Theosophical Movement [a metaphysical, spiritual, and brotherhood movement founded in 1875] has uttered speaks of these units of energy as quanta of energy or photons—which is an exceedingly good description for the quasi-astral [non-physical] and quasi-material plane where these energy quanta or photons are placed by scientific thought. See Purucker, The Esoteric Tradition, Vol. 1, 218.

³⁵ Cronon, Nature's Metropolis, 72.

³⁶ Ibid., 41. "Boosters always returned to destiny."

³⁷ Ibid., 72.

³⁸ Ibid., 73.

³⁹ Cronon, Nature's Metropolis, 74.

⁴⁰ Worster, The Wealth of Nature, 169.

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² Cronon, Nature's Metropolis, 13.

⁴³ Worster, "Alaska: The Underworld Erupts," Under Western Skies, 224.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 159.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 164.

⁴⁶ Richard White and John M. Findlay, eds., Power and Place in the North American West (Seattle and London: University of Washington Press, 1999), ix.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, x.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*

⁵¹ *Ibid.*

⁵² *Ibid.* See James P. Ronda's essay, "Coboway's Tale: A Story of Power and Places Along the Columbia," 19.

⁵³ Cronon, "Revisiting the Vanishing Frontier: The Legacy of Frederick Jackson Turner," The Western Historical Quarterly 18 (April 1987): 168.

⁵⁴ Frederick Jackson Turner, "The Significance of the Frontier in American History," 31. See Patricia Limerick's satire on the "elasticity" of the term "frontier" in "The Adventures of the Frontier in the Twentieth Century," The Frontier in American Culture, ed. James R. Grossman (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994), 67. "Velcro" and the "frontier" are the same because they both *stick*. See Cronon's statement on page 176 in "Revisiting the Vanishing Frontier:" "Frederick Jackson Turner, almost in spite of himself, gave American history its central and most persistent story. However much we may modify the details and outline of that story, we are unlikely ever to break entirely free of it."

⁵⁵ Limerick, The Legacy of Conquest, 26.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.* In the same paragraph, Patricia Limerick contradicted her own supposed "compensatory, down-to-earth clarity" for the location of the American West by stating "we cannot fix exact boundaries for the region . . . Allowing for certain shifting of borders . . . and, more changeably, Iowa, Missouri, Arkansas, and Louisiana." In describing Turner's American West as a "migratory, abstract frontier," it appears she was actually describing her own American West.

⁵⁷ In his acknowledgments for It's Your Misfortune and None of My Own, Richard White wrote, "It was John [Drayton] who suggested that the new literature on the American West, particularly the new minority histories and the literature on gender and the environment, was full enough to deserve treatment as part of a larger synthesis that included the older literature as well." The book was meant to be a synthesis of what the history of the American West really was by utilizing both the Old and New Western histories.

Michael Allen noticed there was a problem with White's synthesis. In fact, it was no synthesis at all. Regarding the book, he wrote, "Its strangest feature is its total omission of any discussion of the frontier thesis of Frederick Jackson Turner, whose name does not even appear in the index. This omission is sort of like writing a book on evolution but neglecting to mention Charles Darwin! Book reviewers have been at a loss to explain such an omission--it certainly makes no sense from a scholarly perspective. From a political perspective, however, omitting Turner's thesis from a college western history text makes perfect sense. If you disagree with someone's ideas, omit them to make sure your readers are not exposed to them." This statement brings back memories of George Orwell's Animal Farm. See Michael Allen, "The Demise of the 'New' Western History," Columbia (1995): 3-5. Also It's Your Misfortune and None of My Own, xvii.

⁵⁸ Richard White, It's Your Misfortune and None of My Own, 4.

⁵⁹ Ibid.

⁶⁰ White and Findlay, eds., Power and Place in the North American West, x.

⁶¹ Ibid.

⁶² Ibid.

⁶³ Ibid.

⁶⁴ White, The Organic Machine, 14.

⁶⁵ White and Findlay, eds., Power and Place in the North American West, x.

⁶⁶ White, The Organic Machine, ix.

⁶⁷ Ibid., x.

⁶⁸ Ibid., ix.

⁶⁹ Ibid.

⁷⁰ Ibid., x.

⁷¹ White, The Organic Machine, 12.

⁷² Ibid., 13.

⁷³ Burke, A Grammar of Motives, 291.

⁷⁴ As for modern scholarship, there are, fortunately, exceptions to every rule. I refer to two contemporary essays that develop excellent arguments in support of cycles and periodicity. First, Carville Earle and Changyong Cao's article, "Frontier Closure and the Involution of American Society, 1840-1890, Journal of the Early Republic 13 (1993): 163-179. Second, Carville Earle's essay, "The Periodic Structure of the American Past: Rhythms, Phases, and Geographic Conditions," in his book, Geographical Inquiry and American Historical Problems (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1992).

For clarification, there is no inherent contradiction in placing stages of progress within cycles. Turner believed in stages of progress, but these stages repeated themselves.

⁷⁵ Burke, A Grammar of Motives, 291.

⁷⁶ Ibid.

⁷⁷ Ibid.

⁷⁸ Wise, American Historical Explanations, see 192-209 for his discussion of "strains" in "explanation forms" and Frederick Jackson Turner.

⁷⁹ White, The Organic Machine, 112.

⁸⁰ Ibid., x.

⁸¹ Ibid., 6.

⁸² Ibid., 15.

⁸³ Ibid., 20.

⁸⁴ West, The Contested Plains, dust jacket.

⁸⁵ Ibid., 332.

⁸⁶ Ibid., xx.

⁸⁷ Ibid.

⁸⁸ Ibid.

⁸⁹ Ibid.

⁹⁰ West, The Contested Plains, xix.

⁹¹ Ibid.

⁹² Ibid., xxi.

⁹³ Ibid., 332.

⁹⁴ Ibid., xxi.

⁹⁵ Ibid., 332.

⁹⁶ Ibid., 52-53.

⁹⁷ Ibid., 332.

⁹⁸ Ibid.

⁹⁹ Ibid., xxii

¹⁰⁰ Turner, "The Problem of the West," 61.

¹⁰¹ Patricia Nelson Limerick, "Turnerians All: The Dream of a Helpful History in an Intelligible World," American Historical Review 100 (1995): 715.

¹⁰² Gerald Nash and Richard Etulain, eds., The Twentieth-Century West: Historical Interpretations (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1989), 409.

¹⁰³ Limerick, The Legacy of Conquest, 30.

¹⁰⁴ Ibid.

¹⁰⁵ Patricia Limerick divided The Legacy of Conquest into two parts: "The Conquerors" and "The Conquerors Meet their Match." The idea was that the persistence of minorities in the United States to resist whites from conquering them meant that they had never really been conquered at all. The same basic idea is found in earlier works, such as Robert Laxalt's 1977 essay, "The Melting Pot." This piece detailed how minorities in Nevada, ranging from American Indians, Chinese, blacks, and even Eastern and Central Europeans, persisted against white conquest until they had themselves become successful. See Wilbur S. Shepperson, ed., East of Eden, West of Zion: Essays on Nevada (Reno: University of Nevada Press, 1989), 30-40.

¹⁰⁶ Nash and Etulain, eds., The Twentieth-Century West, 409.

CHAPTER 6

CONCLUSION

Hayden White argued in Metahistory that metaphor and irony successively followed on the heels of one another through chronological time. For him, metaphor was naively embedded into historical texts because the historian had no way of verifying the accuracy of its representations. Irony emerged from metaphor as metaphor's conscience. While metaphor lacked the mechanism to recognize the problematical nature of its language, irony possessed just such a mechanism. Irony was "metatropological" in that, while itself a trope, it could be used to critically analyze the misrepresentations of another trope.¹ Just as nominalism neutralized the catholicity in realism, so irony cautioned against the over-generalizations in metaphor. For this reason, irony appeared negative and pessimistic. But since irony was the trope of conscience and self-consciousness, it also had to confront and destroy itself. As White wrote, "Ironic consciousness" had to be turned against "Irony itself."² This could be done by demonstrating that "skepticism" and "pessimism," which make up "so much of contemporary historical thinking," had their origins in an "Ironic frame of mind" which was "merely one of a number of possible postures that one may assume before the historical record."³ Irony could criticize but not from a secure, absolute position. It too, in a phrase, could not "hold the truth."⁴ Irony had to admit the flaws in its own methodology. White asserted that what came from this self-analysis was a "reconstitution of history as a form of intellectual activity which was at once poetic,

scientific, and philosophical.”⁵ That is, history returned to metaphor which was, for White, the “next appropriate stage in the cycle.”⁶

Patricia Limerick and “Turnerians All”

All that is needed to do now to bring Hayden White’s model for the re-emergence of metaphor in line with the developments of western history is to show the point at which, in the midst of this transition into metaphor, the ironic consciousness turned on itself. Patricia Limerick’s work best illustrates the point at which irony confronted itself. Her writings represent the harbinger for the new age of metaphor.

In strong contrast to Limerick’s The Legacy of Conquest in which she perceived herself as one of the last “messengers” who would finally nail shut the lid to Turner’s coffin, her later essays reflected an open-ness to the idea of metaphor.⁷ Whereas in Legacy Limerick identified Turner as the bad guy, herself as the good guy, and then initiated a shoot-out, her two essays, “The Adventures of the Frontier in the Twentieth Century” and “Turnerians All: The Dream of a Helpful History in an Intelligible World” revealed a much more complex perspective. Not that her treatment of Turner was any kinder than before, but she had matured to the degree where she could confess the flaws of her own historical era. This maturation was evident in her 1994 essay, “The Adventures of the Frontier.” In this piece, she acknowledged that David Wrobel’s definition for the frontier was being accepted by many historians as well as by popular American culture. Wrobel explained that, in contemporary culture, the frontier was a metaphor for “promise, progress, and ingenuity.”⁸ That was pretty much what it had stood for in Turner’s time as well. Rather than denigrating the frontier metaphor on this

ground, she admitted that it had become a “mental artifact” demonstrating such an “astonishing stickiness and persistence” that it had virtually become the “flypaper” for popular American culture.⁹ Whether or not it suited her personal preference, the concept worked as a “cultural glue—a mental and emotional fastener that, in some very curious and unexpected ways, works to hold us together.”¹⁰ What Limerick had done in this confession was revolutionary. For the past fifty years, irony had been employed by western historians in an attempt to include all the different human races, classes, and genders within one common history where all felt comfortable. Irony’s criticism of metaphor had been that it excluded certain people with its over-generalizations. With one brilliant stroke of the pen, Limerick negated the ironic methodology of all those years. At this point in her career, Limerick concluded that irony had not succeeded as a unifying source. Instead, metaphor had achieved this goal. In a surprising twist, metaphor had achieved in the end what irony originally set out to do. If so, what was the further purpose of irony? Had it outlived its usefulness?

By the time Limerick’s article “Turnerians All” appeared in 1995, she realized that The Legacy of Conquest was not meant to stand for the ages. Like Turner’s contribution to western history, she recognized that her own particular contribution was in grave danger of outliving its “period of usefulness.”¹¹ She believed that undue deference to Turner’s model in the years following his frontier thesis had cramped developments in western history and narrowed his own writing style. Limerick did not wish for her own work to limit the intellectual freedom of contemporary historians. She only wanted The Legacy to become a “stimulant, a provocation, the equivalent to the side of a swimming pool from which future inquirers could push off to gain momentum.”¹²

In this case, Limerick's ironic consciousness was seeing itself, seeing the necessity of not crystallizing into dogma, and seeing the eventuality of its own demise. Instead of separating herself and her historical genre from Turner's shortcomings, she confessed that she shared his shortcomings. She acknowledged that her historical methodology had not led to an understanding of the past that could accurately elucidate the present. Her historical methodology possessed blind spots brought about by the limitations of contemporary world views that had been accepted as dogma rather than theory. Once those world views became dogma, they blinded the historian. Like Turner, Limerick knew she had to fight against the conformist degeneration that crept into popular theories once they had gained support. Turner had struggled against conformist tendencies. Limerick found her own generation confronting the same tendencies. She believed Turner's generation had failed. Would her generation fail as well? Clearly, irony had begun to see its own limitations as a viable historical tool. Irony had caught a glimpse of its own impermanence.

In the 1980's, a small group of American West historians banded together to launch an all-out assault against Frederick Jackson Turner. They compared notes, exchanged ideas, and generally discussed how they wanted to reshape American West history. The assault was *planned* and it was intended to be *deadly*. But what happened instead stunned everyone involved, especially the leaders of the bloody coup. In "Turnerians All," Limerick marveled at the unexpected outcome of the anti-Turner showdown: "The New Western History's campaign to declare Turner irrelevant revitalized Turner's reputation . . . It restored his celebrity."¹³ In this instance, Limerick admitted there was a *campaign* to *make* Turner irrelevant. And that was the real reason why Richard White left Turner

out of his synthesis, It's Your Misfortune and None of my Own. More importantly, however, Limerick and the historical profession were now faced with confronting a revitalized Turner. Limerick noted that she had to "rethink" her assumptions and "reexamine" the patriarch of American West history.¹⁴ In that re-examination, what she recognized was of tremendous import. Scholars who opposed the New Western history had been arguing for years that Turner did in fact take into account many of the issues that interested historians of the post-1950's. Limerick finally agreed. She acknowledged that there was a "frontier antithesis" scattered about in the writings surrounding his frontier thesis.¹⁵ As part of that frontier antithesis, he really did take into account such issues as Native Americans, irrigation networks, cooperative activity, Eastern capital, and government loans. What Limerick could not completely figure out was the mystery of why "if Turner had, on his own, identified many of the principal flaws in his earlier position he did not say so directly."¹⁶ She digressed into some speculative psychological character analysis on Turner which suggested he was reluctant to identify his own mistakes in order to maintain respectability and position. To a certain extent, she may have been correct. But there is a deeper explanation, a metahistorical element, for the complexity of a frontier thesis and antithesis in Turner's work. I suggest that Turner's frontier thesis and antithesis was a dialectic, a tension between two competing tropal styles: metaphor and irony. Only one of these styles can be dominant at any given time. The other style perpetually exists, but it is subsumed in importance to the dominant style. I have show that Turner was working through metaphor. Since metaphor possesses no inherent mechanism from which to analyze, it was impossible for him to do as Limerick wished. The trope of metaphor inherently lacked the self-reflective quality that was

necessary to develop the critical aspect of the frontier antithesis. When Henry Nash Smith came onto the scene, metaphor became subdued and irony became dominant. Metaphor still existed in Smith's work but on a secondary level. Smith had his own sort of thesis and antithesis. But he only developed a portion of it, the portion that corresponded to his historical times. Finally, Richard White, who transitioned back into metaphor while attempting to retain a 1960's cultural framework in his book The Organic Machine, found himself confronted with all sorts of difficulties in logic as his own thesis and antithesis fought to gain the upper hand. With the concept of "energy," White came down on the side of metaphor. But, in adopting metaphor, he was stripped of his analytical tools for understanding the intricacies of the concept of "energy" and how he was embedding the concept into his text. In a similar fashion, Frederick Jackson Turner did not develop his frontier antithesis because to have done so would have meant going against the world view of his entire historical period as well as his own character. Whether Turner, Smith, or White, an author generally remains in step with his times. To go against the norm of one's own historical period is extremely difficult. To go against the norm on a professional level is—*suicide*. Even today, the historical profession, and American West historians, do not take well to innovation that challenges their authority. For Turner to have contradicted his own frontier thesis may well have led to his own demise and alienated him from his contemporary western historians and the surrounding popular culture. Like historians of today, he maintained sterile dogmas to retain professional standing.

According to Limerick, Turner's choice not to have developed his own antithesis "set a precedent from which the profession has never fully broken free."¹⁷ Limerick realized

that her own New Western history was in danger of becoming “familiar doctrine” that masked the truth instead of exposing it.¹⁸ She wrote, “I wanted Western American history to have many historians offering, as Turner had, forceful statements and interpretations.”¹⁹ Limerick wanted students who would “show a little more willingness to declare their independence of the matriarchs and patriarchs of the field.”²⁰ The problem is that aspiring students who do show independence of the matriarchs and patriarchs of the profession and subsequently make their own strong and forceful statements often face overwhelming disapproval from within the profession itself. Strong and forceful statements threaten the legitimacy of the status quo from both a historical and a political standpoint. The conformist nature of the historical profession is so strong that even Kerwin Klein had to apologize up front for his forceful interpretive statements.²¹ Limerick was right in her fears about “familiar doctrine” becoming too commonplace. For her own historical period, she prodded, “What are *our* blind spots? What are the elements of our social identity that limit our vision as sternly as racial assumptions limited Turner’s vision?”²² One of those blind spots emerged with the publication of Smith’s Virgin Land. Its division between ideas and physical action has become such a “familiar doctrine” that our contemporary historical notion for how historians embed the relationship between noumenon and phenomenon into their texts has been blunted. One need only mention the term “culture” and the modern historian immediately thinks of this division: ideas and physical action. But Turner’s “vital forces” and White’s “energy” go beyond the simple doctrine of ideas and physical action. In fact, they function on an entirely different structure. As a result of Smith’s “familiar doctrine,” it is difficult for historians to think of noumenon as anything other than ideas. Thus,

historians still often use the concept of ideas and physical action without any real understanding of what they are doing much in the same way that Turner did not have any real understanding for what he was doing. This simplistic dualism between ideas and physical action became our dogma, our late twentieth-century blind spot. Contemporary historians have taken ideas for granted and implanted them into their narratives without having any clear-cut notion of what they are. Patricia Limerick wrote:

Historians of the late twentieth century have not reached a plateau of comfortable self-understanding from which we can look down smugly on Turner's struggles. In truth, a confession of solidarity—"Turnerians All"—is the place where this explanation begins and ends.²³

"Turnerians All" is the place where this explanation begins and ends, wrote Limerick.²⁴ I agree with Limerick that "Turnerians All" is a well-chosen phrase. I have attempted to demonstrate that the major western historians have made certain assumptions in constructing their histories about how the unseen world intersects with the seen world. Use of the metaphorical trope emplots those assumptions one way; irony emplots them another. At times, those assumptions may have been consciously constructed and at other times unconsciously constructed. Turner himself realized this dual process, "By unconscious inheritance, and by conscious striving after the past as part of the present, history has acquired continuity."²⁵ History acquires continuity precisely because there is an age of great inspiration followed by an age of criticism. To some extent, all western historians have made assumptions and built their histories on them. It has been the attempt of the present work to challenge the assumption of many contemporary western historians that Turner alone wrote in some sort of mystical rhetoric. I have tried to show that any historian who emplots tropically necessarily adopts his own brand of mystical rhetoric.

Carl Becker and the “Heavenly City”

Patricia Limerick’s call for the theme of “Turnerians All” is a fitting conclusion for the work at hand. It is nothing new for one historical age to believe that it has surpassed the merits of the previous historical age. That the New Western historians felt that they had exceeded Turner’s generation should come as no surprise. Stretching back hundreds of years, each successive generation of historians has maintained that its scholarship represented a viable “Age of Reason” while its predecessors represented nothing more than a fool’s paradise in an “Age of Faith.” Limerick was insightful enough to see through this facade. Over time, she became aggressively consensus-oriented, positioning herself as the bridge to create harmony in a historical profession where before she had only stirred discord. But Limerick was not the only historian to see through this facade. In 1932, Carl Becker published his book, The Heavenly City of the Eighteenth-Century Philosophers and dedicated it to his famous teacher, Frederick Jackson Turner. Becker argued in The Heavenly City that, contrary to popular historical opinion, the Enlightenment thinkers of eighteenth-century Europe were just as much “men of faith” as were the thirteenth-century Medieval scholastics.²⁶ Popular historical opinion maintained that the eighteenth century was an “Age of Reason” and that its chief proponents, including Francois Voltaire, David Hume, Denis Diderot, and John Locke, all shared a “critical spirit” for “rational inquiry” and “primacy of reason.”²⁷ But Becker gracefully countered this dogma by demonstrating the fallacy of distinguishing between Medieval and Enlightenment thought based on distinctions of faith and reason. Becker explained that it could be said of the eighteenth century “that it was an age of faith as well as

reason, and of the thirteenth century that it was an age of reason as well as faith.”²⁸ He asserted that Medievalists, ranging from St. Augustine of Hippo to Dante Alighieri and St. Thomas Aquinas, were just as much “men of reason” in their own way. What distinguished the two eras, the Medieval and the Enlightenment, was not the lack of reason in one age as opposed to the other but the differences in the “unconscious preconceptions” which each group of scholars brought to the drawing table when shaping their respective historical visions.²⁹

What renders Dante’s argument or St. Thomas’ definition meaningless to us is not bad logic or want of intelligence, but the medieval climate of opinion—those instinctively held preconceptions in the broad sense, that *Weltanschauung* or world pattern—which imposed upon Dante or St. Thomas a peculiar use of intelligence and a special type of logic.³⁰

The issue for Becker was not that the Medievalists *lacked* reason, but that their sense of reason was rooted in alternative cultural preconceptions. Cultural preconceptions, whether Medieval or Enlightenment, were matters of faith. It was these cultural preconceptions that primarily determined how one composed history. Thus, Becker insisted that the eighteenth-century philosophers, who had defined their history in terms of cultural preconceptions as much as any Medievalist, were men of faith who, like the Medievalists, used reason to defend their faith. In the end, however, the conclusions that they were bound to find were the very ones with which they started.

The eighteenth-century Enlightenment philosophers pretended to have dismissed the preconceptions of a Medieval Christian faith from their analytical discourse. Yet at every turn Becker noticed their indebtedness to Christian faith even though they remained unaware of it.

In spite of their rationalism and their humane sympathies, in spite of their aversion to hocus-pocus and enthusiasm and dim perspectives,

in spite of their eager skepticism, their engaging cynicism, their brave youthful blasphemies and talk of hanging the last king in the entrails of the last priest—in spite of all of it, there is more Christian philosophy in the writings of the *Philosophes* than has yet been dreamt of in our histories.³¹

What Becker noticed was that, on the surface, the Enlightenment philosophy declared that there was no distinction between good and evil, morality and immorality, but, at a deeper level, it had established its own *moral measure* for viewing justice and injustice, the amelioration of society's ills, and the constitution of a man of virtue. The Christian "ideal of service" and the "humanitarian impulse to set things right" motivated Voltaire, Hume, Diderot, and Locke.³² When these philosophers demolished St. Augustine's "picture of salvation" for a "Heavenly City" founded on earth, they immediately rebuilt it with a "vague impressionistic image" of the virtues of a "future state."³³ When these philosophers discarded the ideal for the perfection and immortality of the soul, they replaced it with a "more generalized earthly and social *felicite* or *perfectibilite du genre humain*."³⁴ The concept of divine "grace" was translated into human "virtue."³⁵ To be esteemed a "man of virtue" was sufficiently "efficacious" to be given "social justification" and, for the Enlightenment philosophers themselves, "complete sanctification."³⁶ With wit, Becker remarked, "I suppose that Hume and Franklin, when they were in France . . . must have had this assurance [of complete sanctification] as fully as any saint of the church ever had."³⁷ The directing impulse of the Enlightenment philosophers, as it previously had been for the Medieval scholastics, was to demonstrate that "mankind had been corrupted and betrayed by false doctrines."³⁸ Their task was to destroy these false doctrines. But the very determination that these doctrines were false was purely a matter of faith. They based that determination on their own moral

humanistic preconceptions for how they viewed the world. Like the Christian apologists, the Enlightenment philosophers functioned from common themes of virtue, nobility, and the perfectibility of man. For Becker, St. Augustine's "Heavenly City" still existed at the root of eighteenth-century thought, but it had simply been shifted to "more earthly foundations."³⁹ Nevertheless, these "earthly foundations" remained a matter of faith. The historical story propounded by the Enlightenment philosophers became popular not because of facts in themselves, but because these facts were applied to events in accordance with the humanistic morality of the new faith.

In hindsight, Carl Becker's book The Heavenly City played out the "Turnerians All" theme but in relation to the Medieval and Enlightenment centuries. When one penetrated to the heart of the matter, the differences between Medieval and Enlightenment thinkers were superficial. If used to explain the changes in twentieth-century American West historiography, it illuminates our historical perspective of that era. Like the Medieval scholastics, Turner was accused by his successors for being a "man of faith." Like the Enlightenment philosophers, his successors, the New Western historians, believed they were "men of reason." As the New Western historians talked of "hanging the last king [Turner] in the entrails of the last priest [his faith in a triumphant western democracy], they merely supplanted his cultural preconceptions with their own cultural preconceptions for a slightly altered view of justice and injustice, virtue and greed, and the perfectibility of man and society in the American West. The New Western historians had not destroyed Turner's "picture of salvation" for a "Heavenly City" in the American West but had only rebuilt its foundations so that it conformed to their own faith in the morality of a left-liberal and Marxist world view. Turner was reproved for characterizing

the West in utopian terms, but, once his view had been denounced as fanciful, his critics proceeded to project their own intimations of a golden age onto the historical picture. Henry Nash Smith initiated the revision. In truth, Smith did not so much destroy Turner's "ideal of yeoman society" as supplant it with an alternative moral view.⁴⁰ Whereas Turner had envisioned yeoman society as a triumphant success, Smith introduced the concept of "suffering humanity" into the equation.⁴¹ Smith's own vision of utopia, carefully veiled behind allusions to Hamlin Garland's social theory, still idolized "the plowman" as the *perfected* westerner, but now the plowman was idolized for maintaining his "dignity" amidst failure and financial ruin.⁴² Smith could not allow the plowman to triumph. If the plowman triumphed in the American West as Turner had depicted, that left no room for Smith's personal indictment of the capitalist system. Turner's utopian vision of triumph had to be dismantled. Otherwise, such an indictment was unnecessary. Smith's utopian vision for restoring "dignity" to westerners led to Patricia Limerick's own conceptualization of history in terms of failure rather than triumph. She too wanted to restore "full human dignity to westerners."⁴³ Like Smith, Limerick could not allow Turner's triumphant western democracy into her narrative. The West had to be a failure. It had to be a failure so that her own utopian vision—that of restoring full human dignity to westerners—would have a place in the new history. In particular, Limerick wanted to restore full human dignity to minorities and women. In their fight against capitalist greed, the new western actors and actresses, unlike Turner's old actors, were portrayed to represent her ideal of virtue. They became the new *perfected* westerners. For Limerick, their inclusion in the New Western history was a matter of moral justice. Richard White went a step further. Now that minorities and women were included in this New Western

utopian vision, fish also needed to be included. White argued that, if the historical conversation about the Columbia River was not about “fish and justice,” then “we have not come to terms with our history of this river.”⁴⁴ It was at this point that environmental history intersected New Western history. The revised concept of moral justice for the New Western historians stretched beyond human beings. For them, capitalist greed had impacted the environment and the environment needed to be restored to full dignity as well.

In his book, Rivers of Empire, Donald Worster reflected on his utopian vision for the American West:

Approached deliberately as an environment latent with possibilities for freedom and democracy rather than for wealth and empire, the unredeemed desert West might be an unrealized national resource. It might be valued as a place for inspiration and training for a different kind of life. Relieved from some of its burdens of growing crops, earning foreign exchange, and supporting immense cities, it might encourage a new sequence of history, an incipient America of simplicity, discipline, and spiritual exploration, an America in which people are wont to sit long hours doing nothing, earning nothing, going nowhere, on the bank of some river running through a spare, lean land. They would come then to the river to see a reflection of their own liberated minds, running free and easy. They would want little, enjoy much. Now and then they would dip their hands into the current and drink a little. They would irrigate their spirit more than their ego. In the midst of what had once been regarded as the bleakest scarcity they would find abundance. Is it a fable, this alternative, a idyll from an inaccessible yesterday, or is it a real possibility, one being pushed along to fulfillment by the currents of history? The West will let us know.⁴⁵

For Worster, this idyllic scene symbolized a very real possibility. In Worster’s view, this new moral faith, unlike Turner’s old moral faith, could create real progress and a real advance in civilization out in the American West. In response, Carl Becker’s words are apropos:

A hundred years is a long time, and it is possible that within a hundred years a regulated economy (call it communism or collective planning as you like) may be recognized throughout the western world as the indispensable foundation of social order, peace, and prosperity, the welfare of mankind. If that should by any chance be what fortune has in store for us, it is not too fanciful to suppose that 'posterity,' in the year 2032, will be celebrating the events of November, 1917, as a happy turning point in the history of human freedom, much as we celebrate the events of July, 1789. What, then, are we to think of all these 'great days,' these intimations of utopia? Are we to suppose that the Russian Revolution of the twentieth century, like the French Revolution of the eighteenth, is but another stage in the progress of mankind toward perfection? Or should we think, with Marcus Aurelius, that 'the man of forty years, if he have a grain of sense, in view of this sameness has seen all that has been and shall be?'"⁴⁶

In moving beyond Turner's "agrarian myth," Donald Worster only succeeded in re-establishing the trails toward yet another "Heavenly City." Among many New Western historians, this new "Heavenly City" was idealized from a left-liberal and Marxist perspective that was considered superior to Turner's Progressive view of the West. It became popular only because it was in keeping with the latest trends in American thought. What the New Western historians failed to realize was that they too had created a view of the West that was no more objectively based nor any less utopian than was Turner's West. Their moral vision shaped their historical story. Like Turner, they were "men of faith." Their faith, like the "faith by which any age lives," was "born of their experience and their needs."⁴⁷ Starting out under the "banner of objectivity and with a flourish of scholarly trumpets, as if on a voyage of discovery in unknown lands," the New Western historians never "really entered the country of the past" because they could not "afford to leave the battlefield of the present."⁴⁸ As Turner so aptly wrote and Limerick reiterated, "Each age writes the history of the past anew with reference to the conditions uppermost in its own time."⁴⁹ If so, Turner's faults are our own.

Notes

- ¹ Pomper, "Typologies and Cycles in Intellectual History," History and Theory, 34.
- ² White, Metahistory, xii.
- ³ Ibid.
- ⁴ Emerson, The Complete Writings of Ralph Waldo Emerson, Vol. 1, 311.
- ⁵ White, Metahistory, 12.
- ⁶ Pomper, "Typologies and Cycles in Intellectual History," 36.
- ⁷ Limerick, The Legacy of Conquest, 31.
- ⁸ Patricia Nelson Limerick, "The Adventures of the Frontier in the Twentieth Century," The Frontier in American Culture, ed. James R. Grossman (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994), 68.
- ⁹ Ibid., 94.
- ¹⁰ Ibid.
- ¹¹ Limerick, "Turnerians All," 708.
- ¹² Ibid.
- ¹³ Ibid., 698.
- ¹⁴ Ibid., 699.
- ¹⁵ Ibid.
- ¹⁶ Ibid., 701.
- ¹⁷ Ibid., 703.
- ¹⁸ Ibid., 705.
- ¹⁹ Ibid., 708.
- ²⁰ Ibid.
- ²¹ Klein, Frontiers of Historical Imagination, x. Klein wrote, "I have dispensed with some of the conventions of postmodern scholarly writing. It has become fashionable of

late to decorate one's prose with a host of disclaimers professing one's own special situation, the inevitable partiality of any narrative, and the solemn desire to avoid totalizing forms of discourse. Such caveats have served a vital function for historians coming to terms with postcolonial politics, but I fear the fashion threatens to become an empty ritual. There is some danger that our new discursive modesty reproduces the less admirable scholarly tradition of hedging every argumentative bet. If I do not repeatedly wave flags at the reader ('We are being postmodern now'), it is not because I have reached the final summit of historiography. It is just that I think Mark Twain's famous introductory frame 'I was young and ignorant . . .' suffices nicely."

²² Limerick, "Turnernians All," 715.

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Turner, "The Significance of History," 21.

²⁶ Carl L. Becker, The Heavenly City of the Eighteenth Century Philosophers (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1932).

²⁷ Mortimer Chambers, et. al, eds., The Western Experience, Vol. II (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1987), 676.

²⁸ Becker, The Heavenly City, 8.

²⁹ Ibid., 2.

³⁰ Ibid., 5.

³¹ Ibid., 31.

³² Ibid., 41.

³³ Ibid., 48.

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ Ibid., 49.

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ Ibid., 122.

³⁹ Becker, The Heavenly City, 48.

⁴⁰ Smith, Virgin Land, 248-249.

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ Limerick, "What on Earth is the New Western History?" in Trails: Toward A New Western History, 87.

⁴⁴ White, The Organic Machine, 113.

⁴⁵ Worster, Rivers of Empire, 335.

⁴⁶ Becker, The Heavenly City, 167-168.

⁴⁷ Limerick, The Legacy of Conquest, 17.

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