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Book Review: West of Emerson: The Design of Manifest Destiny

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This book might find a place on the bookshelf between Sacvan Bercovitch’s The Rites of Assent and Annette Kolodny’s The Lay of the Land, perhaps next to Robert Hurlbutt’s Hume, Newton, and the Design Argument, and at least near Saul Alinsky’s Reveille for Radicals. The book’s critical purposes are “to describe the theological lineage of manifest destiny, or the quasi-sacred explanation for the way America looked to Americans in the nineteenth century” and “to see key texts of our nature canon, Nature and Walden, in this new line of descent.”

The first three chapters take up over half the book and consist of entertaining tutorials on how to recognize fraudulent Jacksonian political discourse masquerading as travel narrative and history writing (Zebulon Pike’s exoneration narrative, Stephen Long’s political evasion, and William Emory’s geographical errata). The first chapter on Lewis and Clark may be the most interesting, for in it Fresonke claims that their efforts in the Journals to find merit in antique national designs (the sublime, the Arcadian, the picturesque, or the virgin land), while noting painstakingly just how deficient those designs were, place them “first in a nineteenth-century process” of saving design from itself—manifest destiny deconstructed.

The second part is the more challenging intellectually, for it explores how Emerson and Thoreau approached the daunting task of providing alternative uses for “the rhetoric of American Providence [which] had been taken over by Andrew Jackson and the Democratic Party and reformulated as manifest destiny. . . .” Fresonke believes that Emerson tried to recombine design and providence into a new theory of “animated American nature,” allowing for a new reading of Nature that not only would lead to Spirit but also counter the Jacksonian design of destiny-in-progress.
“Thoreau and the Design of Dissent” (the most complex analysis) begins with the idea of manifest destiny as “the product of a fallen world view.” And realizing that Thoreau used Ruskin’s aesthetics of “defamiliarization,” Fresonke goes on to show that Thoreau wished to recover the innocence of the eye. So, in the end, Thoreau relies on that which the innocent eye sees—“Higher Laws”; and “such transcendence was the only relevant practice of Christianity left the modern believer. . . .”

The value of West of Emerson to this reader’s mind is in its vigorous radical schemes of discourse and its lively intellectual entertainment in exploring embedded political plots, which send us back to read Lewis and Clark, Emerson, and Thoreau as they wrestle with the language of politics.

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