

Supervisor's Review of the B.A. Thesis:

Valeria Biben: **Shaping the American National Identity: Reality and Myth of the Western Frontier**

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This thesis is an attempt to write a cultural history of the development of American national identity in the nineteenth century. The author strives to grasp this very wide and multifaceted topic in three critical ways: apart from the analysis and criticism of Frederick Jackson Turner's Frontier Thesis she focuses on the ideology of Manifest Destiny, its use as a justification of the U.S. 19<sup>th</sup>-century expansionism as well as its impact on the propagandist as well as realistic tendencies in the U.S. painting (Gast, Durand, Bingham). Importantly, the author also outlines the sombre aspects of the Western expansion, especially the forced removals and genocide of Native Americans.

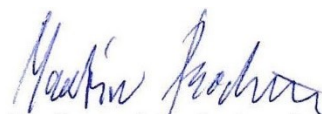
The centre of this part of the argument is an oscillation of the American West between two incompatible representations – the Myth of the West and its actual history. The latter, gradually revealed by the new western historians, is characterized by migration waves, racist violence, environmental destruction and all-pervading lawlessness, all these represented by means of fragmented, often suppressed narratives. In spite of the valuable work of new western history and ambitious attempts of some theorists to reassess the master narrative of the successful U.S. conquest, the Myth of the West still prevails and has taken its roots especially in popular representations of the U.S. American identity.

The final chapter of the thesis focusing on one of the earliest attempts to debunk the Myth of the West, Mark Twain's autobiographical travelogue *Roughing It*, should be a study of the potential of American literature, rooted in the tradition of folk verbal art (oral narrative and "tall tale"), to transform the mythical and ideological representations of U.S. identity. Unfortunately, the Twain chapter suffers from a lack of deeper understanding of the dynamic of the author's early work (a conflict between Twain's creative use of folk tradition – described, e.g., in Harry Wonham's *Mark Twain and the Art of Tall Tale* –, and his artistic aspirations to establish himself – through his acquaintance W.D. Howells – as an influential author in the East), as well as from the of the wider context and impact of Twain's humour (as discussed, e.g., in Sacvan Bercovitch's essay "Deadpan Huck"). Although it must be acknowledged that Valeria made a great effort to integrate into the Twain chapter a narrative about the meaning and power anecdotes had for people fighting for survival, she was no longer able to reflect on the meaning of Twain's humour for the positive transformation of the Western myth and U.S. national identity.

Although the final version of the thesis has been thoroughly edited, there are still some typos – e.g., "The Jolly Flatboatman" (instead of "Flatboatmen") – both in the Contents and in the text.

The thesis is an attempt to approach a wide and extremely problematic topic on which there is little consensus among U.S. historians and whose study is still in the state of flux, especially because of the efforts to "decolonize" American history. Even though not all chapters of the thesis can be said to fulfil the expectations, the overall result is better than the average of undergraduate theses at this department. Therefore I recommend the thesis to the defence and propose to grade it "very good" or "excellent", depending on the candidate's performance during the defence.

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