

## Publish and Perish

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*The Utterance of America: Emersonian Newness in Dos Passos' U.S.A. and Pynchon's Vineland*, by David Dickson. Göteborg: Acta Universitatis Gothoburgensis, 1998. 215 pp. 180 SEK.

At their root, most doctoral dissertation processes remain draconian medieval torture, as most anyone who has suffered at the impersonal hands of an inquisitional doctoral committee might agree. At their worst, they can constitute a soul-stealing experience, leaving the initiate feeling compromised, belittled, shell-shocked and exhausted for months, even years, afterward. A visitor to any faculty meeting in this happy land can attest that some victims never do quite recover.

Yet, at its heart, the dissertation is indeed a rite of passage—an initiation into a pretty exclusive club. (Less than one percent of the U.S. population ever gets in—though I bet a lot of us who have done so within the last few years might sheepishly agree that, as with the sideshow at a small-town circus, it's a bit of a debate whether entrance was worth the price of admission.) Being the final leg of the long and grueling run through the graduate school gauntlet and into the academy, perhaps the process *should* be difficult, should test the mettle of those so bold as to set themselves up as experts in their field. It is proper that the process demand rigorous attention to the accumulated body of scholarship to which the neophyte is hoping to contribute. The process should demand the monkish attention to detail and commitment to excruciating precision that characterize dissertation writing almost universally. All of this painstaking attention, any academic worth his salt must agree, quite befits the final passage into an exclusive community of professional scholars.

And yet, does all this rigor produce good writing? Having read plenty of dissertations on my road to PhD-dom, and having reread my own dissertation four years after I wrote it, I have to say no. The requirement to please an entire committee of academic professionals all but guarantees that the writing will be stilted at times, overly pedantic, painfully erudite and woodenly didactic. While doctoral dissertations assuredly serve an indispensable function within the boundaries of the academy, it is a rare gem of a dissertation indeed that bodies forth professional-quality writing meriting publication unrevised.

Yet for all the generic weaknesses of David Dickson's publication (I can't call it a book, I'm afraid), real insight, sensitivity and intelligent argument peer through the cage of the scholarly apparatus that prevents these desirable qualities from quite emerging in the text.

In *The Utterance of America*, Dickson argues that Emerson's charge to the American poet not only encourages the observation of new truths in a kind of individualistic self-reliance, but demands ameliorative utterances that can call forth socially-oriented literary creativity and even foster what Cornel West describes as "an Emersonian culture of creative democracy." Dickson thus searches for "*new values*—social and ethical"—which he sees as products of dialogic processes both between present time and history, and between cultures or speech genres existing simultaneously in the present. (Bakhtin's socially-oriented translinguistic theory provides the conceptual underpinning of Dickson's argument here.) This dialogic generation of new values conflicts, however, with a "classical narrative contract" (akin to Donald Pease's "adventurer's cultural contract") "that restrain[s] Emerson's, Dos Passos', and Pynchon's efforts to articulate socially significant newness." To develop just this kind of newness—most especially in the face of the classical narrative contract's resistance—is Emerson's charge to the American poet. In Dickson's view, then, it is in quintessential Emersonian style that Dos Passos's *U.S.A.* and Pynchon's *Vineland* "attempt a negotiation between individual and social impulses, between self-reliance [in the form of] radical resistance to society, and social responsibility; between the orientation towards the future and newness on the one hand, and towards the past and tradition on the other."

Though his argument is obfuscated by genre-driven scholarly and critical appurtenances, Dickson demonstrates convincingly that this tension between the past and the future is a predominant theme in both works. For example, he identifies Dos Passos's overriding achievement in *U.S.A.* as the creation of "a fictive national consciousness" out of "'the speech of the people' as suggested in the novel's prologue." In an interesting creative twist in interpreting the various temporal and cultural valences whose polyglot comprises this "speech of the people," Dickson argues that capitalist J. Ward Moorehouse, the character most critics identify as the "monolithic corrupter of language" in the novel, is also the quintessential Emersonian American, the self-reliant man "unwilling to acknowledge tradition as his master." Brilliantly, in reconfiguring the novel's primary dialectic from capitalist/socialist to "heroization/masterlessness," Dickson recontextualizes the novel's interpretation into a close examination of narrative strategies—a useful contribution to a moribund corpus of Dos Passos criticism that often

can't seem to move substantively beyond biographical commentary and biased political judgement.

Dickson articulates this surprising reading further when he compares Bart Vanzetti's "messianic heroism" with Thorstein Veblen's "common-sense anti-heroic pragmatism." Arguing that the novel's heroes and anti-heroes are primarily concerned with the corruption of language, Dickson reminds us of Timothy O'Hara's admonition to his nephew Mac: "never . . . sell out to the sonsofbitches" — which Dickson interprets as a call for "authenticity in language." In light of this set-up, he reads Vanzetti's fate as the execution of the classical self-made man, yet he accretes another meaning onto the obviously messianic interpretation of "alienation and redemption" this section of the novel elicits: he also reads in Vanzetti's execution an "intrepid optimism reflected in the novel's defiant critique of the institution of the classical narrative contract."

To further this point, Dickson compares Vanzetti's rhetoric with Veblen's. As though to reinforce the essential exhaustion of the classical narrative contract, Dickson argues, one of Veblen's last wishes is that his body be cremated and his ashes thrown into the sea. He also wishes that there be no biography, no memorial and no circulation of his private papers. Dickson argues, "In ordering the remains of his body to be circulated in water, but prohibiting his personal remains to be circulated in language, Dos Passos' Veblen introduces a distinction between the two modes of circulation"—biologic versus linguistic. In prohibiting any linguistic circulation of his ideas and thus any "heroization" of himself, Veblen rejects the "redemptive and world-making blessings of narration" Vanzetti aspires to, and thereby "announc[es] the possible annulment [or exhaustion] of the classical narrative contract" represented by Vanzetti's heroization in the novel. Veblen's refusal of the classical role of messianic hero constitutes, for Dickson, a significant rupture in the classical narrative contract sufficient to create a space for the kind of ameliorative literary newness Emerson sought.

Dickson then turns to Pynchon's *Vineland*, where he examines two narrative irruptions in the text that he argues open a new narrative level allowing for "a venture in narration that looks beyond exhaustion . . . [though] not necessarily towards a return to traditional aesthetics." In the first instance, the narrator "steps forward" from the omniscient narrative mode to comment on the desirability of certain LSD-related experiences being "saved" to somehow illuminate later life encounters. The second narrative irruption occurs in the episode where Zoyd is on the run from Hector and Brock Vond, who have set him up for the world's biggest possession rap (half a metric ton of marijuana). When

Mucho Maas and Zoyd reminisce about their LSD experiences, the narrator intrudes with the observation that their conversation “was the way people used to talk.” According to Dickson, these narrative interruptions indicate a narrative strategy that moves beyond the mere “telling” of the story and creates a new hermeneutic space in which “the stories [the narrator] tells become part of an act of self-reflection, illustrating his own itinerary from adventurer to narrator.”

In thus characterizing *Vineland's* narration as multi-tiered and multivalent, Dickson's exploration of literary newness culminates in his reading of *Prairie*. *Prairie's* “transcendent vision of ‘her mother's real face’” while viewing 24fps films with DL exemplifies “how *Vineland's* narrator constructs the self/world encounter.” When *Prairie* sees Frenesi's face illuminated by a “hard frightening light,” she feels she is finally able to see “most accurately, least mercifully, her mother's real face.” Dickson argues that this is a “sublime event of lasting experience” for *Prairie*, for it embodies the essence of what Dickson would describe as the Emersonian self encountering the world in which it finds itself. “The climax in *Prairie's* search for her mother . . . indicates two innovations in the ‘*hermeneutic space*’: (1) a discarding of the heroism that conceals what is shattering [to *Prairie's* preconceptions of what her mother should have been] and, (2) a recognition of fiction and truth as two necessary aspects of one and the same reality.” Thus, for Dickson, “In its construction of the relation between transcendental vision and the social world, *Vineland* exempts *Prairie* from creating her own role *within preexisting* historical designs,” thus allowing for the kind of literary newness Dickson privileges in this study.

I have delineated in admittedly broad strokes some of Dickson's main points because I believe his arguments do indeed make a significant contribution to the scholarship on Emersonian literary pragmatism more generally and on these two novels more particularly. Lest anyone read an anti-intellectual or anti-academic stance in this review, let me clarify my evaluation of Dickson's effort: His work is thorough and consummately professional; it is everything a well-researched, well-thought-out and well-articulated doctoral dissertation should be.

And that, I'm afraid, is precisely what is wrong with publishing this study as a book. Is it possible that, in an increasingly catastrophic global situation for scholars, the emphatic pressures to publish have reached an even higher level of desperation in this apparent trend of some universities publishing their candidates' doctoral dissertations? I'm not suggesting this is the case with Dickson's study (I have no idea of his particular circumstances), yet it seems at least symbolic of the

phenomenon. Why publish an unrevised dissertation as a book at all? It gives the newly minted PhD a significant publication among her credentials, which may make the candidate more competitive on the job market than she would otherwise be. It might be argued, too, that such a practice makes new dissertations more widely available to the scholarly community and thus contributes to the overall health and well-being of that community.

However, what is most pernicious about this practice is that, in the end, the candidate suffers. Dickson's work might have been (and might yet be, of course) revised into a very fine book, or mined for at least two well-written and important articles that would have influenced the academy in a demonstrable way, making an excellent reputation for Dickson as a promising young scholar in the process. Yet here we see his work in its most recondite and soulless form. For if the dissertation process is soul-stealing for the candidate, how much more so do the rigors of its scholastically necessary apparatus truncate and wither real creative insight that might yet have reappeared in a later, more confident and less restrained, revision of the work? One can only hope that Dickson's excellent beginning here won't perish on the vine—not despite a lack of publication, but because of its publication in a form ill-suited to allowing this scholar's effort to be seen in its best light.

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