

David Robbins, thesis director

Thesis evaluation

Alzbeta Pinosova

The Concept of Self-Definition: Emersonian Principles in Richard Wright's *Native Son* and Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man*

This thesis sets itself the ambitious task of examining the works of nineteenth-century American thinker Ralph Waldo Emerson, which both during his lifetime and subsequently have offered inspiration to many and diverse readers, particularly due to their advocacy for empowerment of the individual. In Ms. Pinosova's view, Emerson's concepts of the sovereignty of the individual, the importance of self-definition, the view of life as a transitory flow, and the relationship between freedom and fate have been practically and usefully applied in the lives of many individual Americans. It is possible and useful, she therefore argues, to understand and evaluate Emerson's works through the practical effects of his concepts, in other words through the prism of pragmatism. For example, she suggests, Emerson's empowering philosophy can be of use especially to disempowered groups such as African-Americans: The Emersonian themes which are to be found in the works of various African-American non-fiction writers such as W.E.B. Du Bois, James Baldwin, Martin Luther King, Jr., and Cornel West offer testimony to this. Both Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* and Richard Wright's *Native Son*, she argues demonstrate the relevance (positive and negative) of Emersonian principles to the development of the protagonists.

Ms. Pinosova's thesis provides an exemplary analysis of Emerson's multiple significances to American philosophical and cultural traditions—including, very significantly, pragmatism (which she highlights)—and the ubiquity of his appeal and influence on Americans of all ethnic and racial backgrounds. Her particular focus is on the appeal, and practical value, of Emersonian dialectic and rhetoric to African Americans, historically one of the most disempowered, marginalized, and negatively stereotyped groups in a U.S. society and culture that theoretically valorized equality and diversity.

It is a beautifully reasoned and articulated piece of work, featuring some of the most precise and readable prose that I have yet encountered in evaluating theses at this faculty.

Ms. Pinosova demonstrates a wide and fluent knowledge of the principal schools of Emerson criticism. In the chapters in which she undertakes to relate Wright's and Ellison's work to the Emersonian tradition, she also reveals good awareness of the various and conflicting criticisms and interpretations to which those works, and their authors, have been subjected. The points that she makes about the contents, and about the pragmatic as well as literary significance, of both novels are always relevant and helpful in understanding the works, their writers, and their philosophical juxtapositions.

While placing the chapter on Wright before that on Ellison might have emphasized more effectively the importance of Wright's (and *Native Son's*) influence—positive and negative—on Ellison and *Invisible Man*, Ms. Pinosova is clearly aware of that powerful

influence, and she does present a compelling rationale for the chronologically inverted order of the two chapters in question. I accepted that rationale as she was preparing her thesis, and I affirm its validity even now.

In my view, this is one of the best theses yet prepared under my direction, and I strongly endorse the quality of its expository style, the literary analysis that it presents, and the philosophical and cultural conclusions that it offers.

Thesis evaluation: “1, vyborne”

Signed:

Prof. David L. Robbins, Ph.D.
Department of Anglophone Literatures and Cultures
May 21, 1011.

If the reader has any questions or needs additional information, please contact me at drobbins22@netzero.net.