

Referee report for Ph.D. dissertation by Blanka Maderova entitled *Self, Speech and Agency: Emerson, Melville and Bartleby – Beyond Pragmatism and Performativity*

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As referee (opponent) for this dissertation, I approve the dissertation for a doctoral defense.

This dissertation takes on an ambitious topic and draws on many valuable sources to support its claims. The basic approach seems to be to use a comparison of selected works from Emerson and Melville to paint a picture of a certain culturally and historically specific era of American thought to see how that era was ahead of its time in going “beyond” theories that were not formally developed by others until the 20th century. This approach is interesting and potentially fruitful, and certainly worthy of a doctoral dissertation topic.

As the “opponent”, most of this report is critical, and sometimes extremely so. In general it is clear that many valuable pieces of literature and theory have been processed and synthesized to produce this dissertation, and that the candidate has experienced a wide variety of worthwhile ideas and literature in the process of writing this dissertation. In addition, there is a sufficient focus to this broad reading in trying to delineate an argument about Emerson and Melville, two figures that are certainly worthy of study in English/American studies. The writing in the dissertation is confident, and especially on the sentence and paragraph level is very competent.

These qualities drive me to approve this dissertation for defense, although I have serious reservations about how the dissertation is presented as a coherent piece of research. It strikes me as a draft of a work-in-progress rather than a finished doctoral dissertation. In my criticisms below I try to show Ms. Maderova what kind of work she would need to produce to be on the level of publishable English studies research. While I have some criticisms that would demand some serious re-thinking about parts of the text, there are some relatively simple writing issues that would have improved the dissertation greatly and made the basic arguments clearer and stronger. It is unfortunate that these writing issues (which are rather structural issues) were not resolved at some point before the final submission.

My other general comment is that a “less is more” approach should have been implemented. The dissertation should have taken on less examples, less theories, less ideas and made stronger and more coherent arguments about those. I could imagine a dissertation that focuses on the current chapters 2 and 3, but developed and supported the arguments in those chapters more consistently, coherently, and thoroughly.

I find that many of my comments overlap and end up converging together even though they come from different places. This makes it a bit difficult to organize the comments, so I apologize if the presentation is not ideal. In places I address the author directly in second person.

One of my biggest concerns with this dissertation is in one sense trivial but in another sense basic. The writing on the sentence level is very proficient and stylistically the dissertation overall reads well. However, what is missing from the writing are more abstract issues. There is very little material that guides the reader through the logic of the different parts of the

dissertation, and this quality makes the dissertation very difficult to conceptualize and understand. To be honest, I'm still not 100% sure what the line of argument is, overall.

What is really missing from the writing is meta-discourse. This is writing about the writing. This content guides the reader through the text. When this kind of writing is in the dissertation, you often just tell the reader what will be done without saying why. For example, at the top of 107 you write "We shall ask now:". It's good that you are telling the reader this, but the reader has little idea of *why* we will ask that question now. You need to include more complete meta-discourse when you do have such references as well as add meta-discourse in many places where it is completely lacking.

A different but related problem is that often concepts are presented without justification as to why they deserve to be included. In fact, very little in the way of justification is given throughout the whole dissertation. On many levels, the reason why the reader should care about the statements being made is largely assumed rather than asserted and supported.

Very often the dissertation is broken up into very small sections of text, and those sections or sub-sections or sub-sub-sections (I could go on) often have titles that have little descriptive value. Titles such as "Potentiality and Expressivity" could mean anything in any dissertation. This would be less of a problem if then the content of that section made it clear why it was a separate section and how it fit into the immediate surroundings of the text and therefore the whole dissertation. But often these sections contained no such guidance, leaving the reader to make these connections, which is simply too much to ask of a reader. The section referred to above is a page-long rumination on these two topics, and the reader is left to make sense of what this has to do with Emerson, Melville, performativity, anything.

The first part of the dissertation is especially hard to read since you refer to works and ideas that are more fully reviewed later in the dissertation as if the reader already knows those works and ideas. This is another example of the relative ignorance of the experience of reading this dissertation from beginning to end. To take an obvious example, the detailed summary of "Bartleby, the Scrivener" at the beginning of the 2nd chapter is somewhat of a surprise since throughout the 1st chapter it is assumed that the reader knows the Bartleby story.

In some places the dissertation shows an apparent ignorance of how academic literary arguments are made. This is in some sense understandable but should be less prevalent in a dissertation. For example in section 1.4.2, you present a problem in the literary research. This is good, and this is a place where you do seek to establish a research context. This kind of context is missing in many other parts of the dissertation, and I appreciate it here. However, you then proceed to give your own reading without engaging that argument in the research. The reader is left wondering if you are just repeating the research already done, or if your study adds to the research, or corrects it, or what. This is a basic mode of academic research that is not followed here and that weakens the arguments you make. Again here this example shows how you don't do this correctly, but even more worrying are the many parts of the dissertation where you don't seek to provide a research context at all.

Specifically, many different theorists and philosophers are referred to in the dissertation, but none of them are discussed at length and none of them have a substantial presence in the dissertation. But several of them are referred to repeatedly throughout the dissertation as if they form some kind of theoretical basis for the literary readings. This is not sound because a

detailed consideration of those works is missing to form that basis. Plus, the fact that you present Emerson as sometimes a producer of literature and sometimes a producer of philosophy (and often don't state which genre you are considering in your readings) further complicates this loose usage of other theory/philosophy. This is not only in relation to the works of certain people, but also certain sets of ideas. In chapter 3 you bring in some research on narrative and performativity, but this doesn't seem to have a lasting effect on the argument in the chapter and by the end of the chapter the reader has no idea why the narrative material is included at all.

I found in the dissertation several examples of inconsistencies and unsupported claims that make this a rather incoherent work to me. That is really too bad, because I feel with more careful construction and thorough consideration of writing the dissertation for a critical reader, this study would have a much stronger impact by being more focused and realistic.

With both primary source and theoretical sources, there is a tendency to jump around from text to text to pick examples that support your point without a coherent reason other than the argument you want to make. This is an argumentative slight-of-hand that will not go unnoticed by careful readers. This especially happens with Emerson's works throughout the dissertation, where you will refer to different works at will to support your effort to make a general argument about Emerson. This problem is also linked to the lack-of-historicity problem (see below): sometimes you refer to different theories and works in whatever way you see fit. For example, on page 106 on the second full paragraph you seem comfortable going from Socrates to *Bartleby* to Deleuze as if they are all in the same room talking with each other.

One example of this loose reference to theorists and theories is performativity itself. There is a fair amount of discussion of what performativity is, which is good since the dissertation focuses on this theory. Still, I didn't have a clear vision of how you define the term, or what definition you use for your readings. Then the original readings through the performative lens end up using a very simple version of this idea. You seem to simply think that when "language" "does" something it is performative. This takes away the use of the theory completely. No language does nothing, using language itself is doing something, so all you do is make claims about what you think some piece of language "does" and call it performativity. This is a field that I am not expert in, so I could very well be off-base with this evaluation. But I found these readings overly simplistic and appearing to manifest a lack of understanding of the specific theory of performativity, which undoubtedly is flexible but not reducible to whenever language "does" something. One example of this is section 2.5, where you claim that *Bartleby's* speech had a "performative effect" just because what he said caused something to happen. Another example is on page 76 where you simply interpret Emerson's ideas as performative, which has a strong historical problem that you don't deal with at all.

One of the implicit assumptions of this dissertation is that Melville and *Bartleby* constitute or represent some kind of canon or accepted establishment, and you want to read Emerson in comparison to that standard and show that Emerson is as good if not better. I have various problems with this kind of approach. First, the dissertation leaves this approach implicit, which leads to confusion. Second, I'm not sure what use such a study is if it succeeds in its own goals. It seems to me to reduce literary study to an internal game of who gets the most attention, rather than using literary study to change the world. I think this study could have been conducted using these works in tandem and conversation rather than competition. Third,

I'm not sure that Melville is all that good of an establishment character to choose. It is true that there has been a kind of Melville "revival" in recent years, and especially with *Bartleby*, but that doesn't mean that he's Shakespeare. You refer repeatedly to *The Confidence-man*, and that work has certainly not received the attention it deserves yet. In a perverse way, your use of Melville as a standard for judgment probably does more to boost Melville studies than Emerson studies.

There are also several claims that you focus on Emerson and Melville because they are important to America's notion of the self. But the approach of putting Emerson and Melville in competition with each other does not bring out this development.

Throughout the study you directly compare "Bartleby" and "Emerson". This was disconcerting to me because very often the simple fact that one is a fictional construct and the other was a real historical person was ignored to the point that the claims you made were rather foolish. It is possible again that some facet of the argument was not explicitly established well enough in the dissertation to justify such a direct comparison. Plus, again, the approach overall was to show which is better, which seems kind of an unfair fight. For example, on page 119 you comment on whether Emerson would do the same thing Bartleby does. This either takes Bartleby as a real person, or assumes that Melville is not writing fiction, or that Emerson is a character. None of these makes sense. Sometimes you do something a little better and compare Bartleby to Emerson's "poet" or others of Emerson's figures that he creates, but I'm not sure that even this is a fair comparison since Emerson's figures are not really characters in a story, and thereby serve a completely different rhetorical purpose than Melville's characters do. This rhetorical difference is absent from this dissertation. In fact, you could think of many of the problems in this dissertation as rhetorical problems.

Repeated reference is made to Emerson as a precursor to Nietzsche (and indeed as a great influence on not only Nietzsche, but also Heidegger, Foucault, and others). I'm no expert in this field, but it seems to me that such a lineage is not usually assumed, and I found little in the dissertation to show me that my impression is incorrect. That is, you state it as if it is obvious and standard rather than an interpretation that needs to be supported. So I would doubt this lineage, but in any case if it really does exist better source support should have been provided. Further, even if Emerson really was such a "source" for these later philosophers (who you seem to imply have more cultural weight and feel that that is not fair), the question is: so what? Why is it important that Emerson had this influence? Why it is important for your dissertation? I can't imagine an answer to these questions.

Likewise, the repeated claim that Emerson is the "father of American thinking" is pretty clearly an overstatement that is not sufficiently explained or supported in the dissertation. In general the fan-like approach to Emerson comes off as un-academic and weakens your arguments.

Early in the dissertation there is a great concern to delineate a difference between American and European modes of thought, which is then strangely abandoned by halfway through the dissertation. This is even more strange since in the second half you refer more and more to European thinkers and writers, even by the end basing one of your four sections on Kafka.

Plus, this concern to specify the difference between a European and American mode of thinking is also one example of the lack of a sense of history (see below), since the

differences that are cited could just as easily have been presented as a historical progression than a cultural difference. There's little support for claims that "American" ways of thinking weren't going on in Europe while the country of America was being built. Comparing historical Europe and 18th-century America isn't an accurate comparison without recognizing and dealing with the historical issue.

Little attention is paid in the dissertation to the historical progression of literature or ideas. Different writers of literature and theory from different places are inserted at different times in the dissertation, seeming to follow needs from the dissertation itself rather than objective convention or an argued reason to use those works. This kind of approach could be used in a more coherent way under an understanding that a strict chronological and/or cultural line between works is questionable itself. But if this was the approach at work in this dissertation, again you should have provided some explanation and support for this approach.

In a similar way cultural boundaries are breached at will with no justification. In addition to my strong reservations about the reading provided in the fourth chapter, I see no reason why there should be a chapter on Kafka in this dissertation. Even if the chapter accomplished what it set out to do, it would just be another example of a "performative" reading of two texts. I could imagine a fourth chapter based on dozens of different texts, not just this one by Kafka. This is always a bad sign. The dissertation should show better judgment than this in what it includes and excludes.

Throughout the dissertation there are several references to the actual people who wrote these works, primarily Emerson and Melville. Claims are made about the historical people as if those claims constituted an absolutely objective statement on their work. Since the dissertation refers repeatedly to "contemporary" (really postmodern) theory that has thrown such ad hominem approaches into deep question, it is strange that you still retain a good amount of the approach that if Emerson/Melville read/did/thought something, then their writing must be read in those terms. The issue of whether Melville read Emerson and how seriously he considered Emerson seems an important question in this dissertation, and I'm not sure why that is the case. There seems to be a strong need to personalize the ideas that are written and champion the individuals that wrote them. This does not work well in general but especially in a dissertation that claims to be based on 20th-century theory.

There seems to be an obsession with finding "sources" of certain works. This is another approach that is doubtful. It seems that such a goal is impossible from the beginning and again the goal would be of questionable use even if one could determine absolutely the "source" of a piece of literature/theory. This basic method of considering what other works are related to a certain work you are focusing on is natural and can be useful. But the need to find the absolute origin of a work goes against the postmodern theory you cite throughout. This also strangely contrasts with your relative ignorance of literary history. Here suddenly the chronological line of literary production seems the most important thing where in other places writers from different times and places are discussed together with no indication that you are aware that there are stark contextual differences between them. You can't have it both ways in a coherent dissertation.

Several times the argument is made that Emerson employs a strategy of theorizing where he contradicts himself constantly in his writing, producing a situation where one can never be sure what he means. This struck me as a strange claim for a thinker like Emerson, and indeed I could not find one example given in the dissertation from Emerson's writing to support that

claim. It seems motivated by a Deleuzian or more generally postmodern imposition on Emerson's writing. But what bothers me more is that this claim does not stop the dissertation from making very absolute claims about Emerson's meaning in many of his texts. For example, you refer to "the Emersonian self" and other such consistent aspects of Emerson's work. Again, you can't have it both ways: either Emerson writes in a diffuse way and it is hard to tell what he means or he writes in a clear way and his meaning is clear. I am not familiar enough with Emerson's oeuvre to judge whether the claim of contradiction is valid or not, but through examples in the dissertation I should be able to judge for myself and those examples are missing.

Some sections of the dissertation pay close attention to specific parts of Melville's and Emerson's texts. These parts of the dissertation are valuable. But overall there are many places that scream for inclusion of close reading of parts of texts to support the basic arguments being made. You seem comfortable making claims such as those in the first full paragraph on page 45 without quoting or referring to any of Emerson's texts. This is a decidedly un-academic approach.

Another example of a problem I had understanding the logic of this dissertation was the basic reason why to focus on "late" versus "early" Emerson. First, the definition of these periods is not well established. But more importantly, the whole "early" section seems to claim that Emerson was not very special in his early writings, but his later writings really make a contribution. If that's the case, then why not focus only on his later writings in the dissertation? I don't see the contribution of including these two sections.

It is commendable that some reference is made to other Melville works, and that especially *The Confidence-man* is referred to several times. However, I have to wonder if the topic of this dissertation would have been better served by focusing on *The Confidence-man* as opposed to *Bartleby*. Later in the novel some recognition is made of the basic differences between these two texts, but in general it seems to me that the novel would have brought out the issues you are dealing with in an even more interesting way. Further, a study of *The Confidence-man* would have been a larger contribution to the research than would another study of *Bartleby*, although the inclusion of *Bartleby*, which has been studied a lot, serves your purpose of constructing Melville as the canonical standard.

The sudden turn in chapter 3 to quoting full poems without any explanation as to why completely mystified me when I was reading and especially contrasts to the rest of the dissertation, where you tend to make broad claims without referring to the original texts.

The depiction of the "Before the Law" section of Kafka's *The Trial* contains some basic errors that are inexcusable in a doctoral dissertation. First, I can find no major translation of the text that contains the words "not yet". I suppose you are referring to the first quotation from the doorkeeper in the story. They all contain the words "not now" spoken by the doorkeeper. I actually don't think this makes much difference to your argument, but in literature you have to get the words right. More serious is your claim that the doorkeeper's speech has the performative effect of preventing the man from entering. This must be a willful misreading of the text. The doorkeeper himself tells the man he can go through the gate. More or less the whole crux of the story is that it seems that the man could indeed go through the gate. The man himself decides not to. The doorkeeper only refuses to grant him permission, but there's plenty of evidence in this short piece that this permission is not necessarily needed to enter. This misreading completely undermines this whole chapter,

which is based on the idea that the “not yet” (or “not now”) has this specific performative effect. This is again being too loose with performativity as well. We don’t know why the man doesn’t go through the door. We can’t know that he would go through if the doorkeeper granted him admission. What that speech “does” is completely unclear, and it is that fact that would actually make a performative reading interesting, not that “not yet” “did” something specific.

Another major misreading related to Kafka but more seriously related to Deleuze is the designation of Melville as a figure in minor literature. You seem to think that because Melville wrote a character that does a surprising thing he is minoritarian. That is, Melville is somehow writing against an establishment and is therefore minoritarian. Deleuze is not a philosopher who can be read linearly and his theories are (like you say of Emerson) diffuse. But I think it is pretty clear that Deleuze has a pretty strong social basis to his idea of minority literature, and Melville would not qualify. In fact, Deleuze seems much less concerned with whether certain figures are “minor” and more concerned with defining a “minor literature”. Your dissertation doesn’t show how Melville fits into this social category.

I was surprised to find the “Abstract” of the dissertation at the end and that it was six pages, which is more the length of a summary than an abstract. A real abstract that briefly encapsulated the argument of the dissertation would have been welcome.