

WILLIAM FAULKNER, WILLIAM JAMES, AND THE AMERICAN PRAGMATIC TRADITION.
By David H. Evans. Baton Rouge, LA: Louisiana State University Press, 2008. 289 pp. \$40.00.

Is there any book reviewer whose eyebrow does not rise a fraction of an inch when she or he opens a new book to its Table of Contents and discovers a listing of five chapters: the typical earmark of a revised dissertation? I should hasten to note that the eyebrow shifts not out of any bias against dissertations *per se*, but out of sympathy for the challenges inherent in transforming the masterwork of one's Ph. D. program into a piece with necessarily different objectives. A dissertation is meant to show a very small audience just about everything one knows. The genre notoriously tempts the writer to be a tad too clever, to make somewhat outlandish arguments for the sake of being original, and to deploy a mass of syllables when considerably fewer would be preferred. A book is written to show as large an audience as possible some things that they don't know. It is addressed to people who like to get answers fast and want to be able to rely on the information they are given. Above all, it must enable its readers to see something they haven't seen before and to persuade them that this new vista is worthy of their attention. The needful metamorphosis is by no means an easy one, and the writer who does it successfully deserves sincere respect. In his book *William Faulkner, William James, and the American Pragmatic Tradition*, David H. Evans merits this kind of respect a great deal of the time; his work is thoughtful and often supremely compelling. If he has not fully freed himself from the bugbears of dissertation writing, he nonetheless gives encouraging signs of excellent scholarship to come.

The core of Evans's project is to illustrate that, despite Faulkner's own assertions that he was not a pragmatist, the novelist's work shared and perhaps emerged from some classically Jamesian assumptions about the nature of truth, for instance: That truth is contingent rather than fixed and is the product of factors like emotion, time, and narrative; that our apprehension of the world depends on the postulates we are willing to believe and on the stories we happen to find credible; and that passionate belief can matter more than fact. My copy of Evans's book is full of marginalia that say "Nice!" and "Good." He is very persuasive, for instance, in arguing that rationality is another name for the unimpeded flow of thought, and that Faulkner's famously dense and never-ending sentences reflect a sense that truth is always on the move and creating itself, rather than hardening into concrete form. Evans's observations regarding *Absalom! Absalom!* are especially lush and rewarding, as when he investigates the Emersonian subtext of both James's and Faulkner's approach to history. Evans is also firmly in command when he

analyzes Faulkner's ventures into the gothic as explorations of subjectivity and the suppression of the self.

In short, Evans does some memorable work in this volume as a thinker. As a writer, he is somewhat less effective. It is here, perhaps, that the dissertation malaise finally catches up with him, in the form of a need to take a strong, clean idea and festoon it with needless polysyllables. The following sentence and a half is symptomatic. Evans begins with a neatly turned phrase: "But if the future is not necessarily good, it is necessary." So far so good, but then comes a semicolon, followed by superfluity: "ceaseless change is the consequence of our irreducibly temporal condition. Neither atemporal transcendental principles nor the benign values of the past can guarantee that such change will be anything but ambiguous and uncertain." Anyone who has been to school long enough to decode Evans' verbiage here probably does not need his help to understand his point — that nothing stays the same, and you can never be sure what will happen next. I'm still not sure I know what was meant by "the cotton belt gemeinschaft" to which Evans refers in an early sally, though he succeeded in making me curious enough to wonder what I was missing.

Though his instincts are generally sound, Evans pushes the argumentative envelope a bit far when, in a key contention, he suggests that the pragmatist's conception of truth is personified in the figure of a confidence man. Evans's play on the word "confidence," simultaneously invoking its meaning of "faith" or "reliance" and its associations with the deceitful "con," is initially entertaining, but he fuses the two meanings so insistently that he seems to forget that believing in someone and getting rooked are two different things. He goes so far as to suggest that the con man, through his frauds and deceptions, establishes a sense of community and human bonding — that his larcenies are "a heroic act of creation." Well, they *aren't* heroic, and they *destroy* confidence and community, as anyone who was scammed by Bernie Madoff will tell you. Evans is perhaps onto something when he suggests that all communities arise out of our willingness to trust narrative fictions, but his further extrapolation that all social arrangements are con games plunges needlessly into a nihilism that neither James nor Faulkner was likely have approved.

Evans's book is, at its best moments, a generator of marvelously provocative insights. At other times, he is just trying a bit too hard. My advice is threefold: read this book for its many

flashes of brilliance; beware of the overheated prose and occasionally extravagant arguments; and never lend David H. Evans your watch.

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