

Daughter says *Ach!*: Probing the Space Between Form and Content Via Rewriting Anzia Yeziarska as John Dos Pasos and Vice-Versa

Confronted with the task of comparing two modernist texts for the purpose of seeking a deeper understanding of both novels, I chose *How I Found America* by Anzia Yeziarska and *1919* by John Dos Pasos, hoping that their marked divergence of styles would make for a compelling pair. Their authors write so differently, in fact, I wondered what each of the texts would look like written in the style of the other. Could their plots be translated without contradicting the narrative's style? Would common themes emerge or be obscured? Having written Daughter's last Character Story in Yeziarska's style and "Dreams and Dollars" in Dos Pasos' style, my retrospective observations about the texts and my own act of writing has taught me that the each authors' style serves their literary agendas. Yeziarska's emotional, deeply internal narration contributes to her characters' passions and tenacity to succeed, while Dos Pasos' unsentimental, external narration estranges both the reader from the characters and the characters from one another, almost predicting their descent.

First, I wrote a part of Daughter's last Character Story beginning on page 323 in the style of Yeziarska. I selected Daughter because, like Yeziarska's characters, she's a young woman in an unfamiliar country, and I was struck by that similarity. Furthermore, I was curious to see if I could render Daughter's decision to kill herself and her ultimate death in Yeziarska's optimistic tone.

"My heart is broken! Every hope I had is lost and I have nobody in this whole wide world!" Daughter cried as she lay in bed. Suddenly, through the open window blew the intoxicating scent of the cyclamens, those bright harbingers of love that Daughter had seen that day on the mountain in Rome and she thought of (5) Dick Savage. Dick Savage! How her very small, dark world had opened up the day she met him! The way he spoke French and Italian so fluently, it was as if he were God sent to speak endless tongues on her behalf, to guide her in this strange city.

A wave of nausea ravished her and she closed her eyes, sucked down (10) again into that eternal spinning darkness. Why did she always have to feel things so intensely? Dick had held her to his breast, and her heart had beat so quick like the wings of birds as if to drive him back and escape, but she felt herself sink into lust for his kiss. And now their child, burning with the furious intensity of new life and their love, grew within her and Dick did not want it!

(15) Daughter moaned and beat her fists against her own weak body. “Why did I give in?” she wailed, “Why did I sacrifice what worldly good this mind could have done for something so base?” She had wanted to become like Dick, to do something that would help the new world after the war. Again she lifted her head to up and saw the bright sky outside her window. To be a poet like (20) him! To live anywhere, even on the cheapest sort of bread, filling the aching hunger in their souls with the beauty of their words!

But how could she tame the passion that choked her without Dick? She needed someone to pull her up from her wretched condition. Someone to support her and help care for their child if she wanted to spend her days at the desk with a (25) pen and not at the washtub with a scrub board, doing laundry to earn her keep. “Unbearable!” Daughter shrieked. “I didn’t travel to this country in this time of opportunity, everyone united under the auspices of a new world, to work with my hands!”

Suddenly, there was a knock at her door, and Dick had burst in and taken (30) her in his arms. Could it be? Had her sun and life truly returned? “No—no! You said you didn’t want me!” Daughter gasped, disturbed by his sudden ardor.

“No, my love,” Dick said, clasping one of her hands in his and placing his other on her stomach, “It is I who should be abandoned. I who failed to see the value of that shining future in you!”

One thing that became immediately apparent as I rewrote Daughter’s story was the impossibility of conveying the actual events of the story. Yeziarska stays so closely inside her characters’ minds and tracks their emotional movements so minutely that even though I only wrote one moment from Daughter’s story, her psychological flights sustained a plausible narrative without me ever making her leave the bed in her room. Conversely, I suddenly understood why Dos Pasos is able to cover so much plot time—because the inner feelings of his characters are largely absent. Indeed, the only clues Dos Pasos gives about Daughter’s feelings are brief and facile. When she finds out she’s pregnant, she feels nothing more than “scared”

and her decision to kill herself comes as a complete whim in the bathroom while she lunches with Barrow (Dos Pasos 324, 27). Faced with imaging how Daughter might feel in these instances, it was surprisingly easy to extrapolate her emotions in lines 11-14, especially given the themes that occur so often in Yeziarska's work as a basis to build upon, such as a preference for the new and the passionate, and a complex relationship with men and how they can help or hinder women achieve intellectual goals. Nevertheless, I found that these themes didn't seem terribly in conflict with what Daughter might be feeling in Dos Pasos' mind. Just as Rebecca is flattered by Moe's romantic attention but ultimately disgusted by his lust for material wealth in "Dreams and Dollars," (223) Daughter tells Dick "making love is magnificent... Oh, I wish I was dead" (297) in one single line, expressing a profound ambivalence about losing her virginity. Since most of Dos Pasos' female characters come off two-dimensional and fairly powerless, intensifying Daughter's feelings through Yeziarska's tone made me wonder if her wishing for death wasn't just a way of giving up but an expression of a deeper agency.

Other common themes became apparent, such as Yeziarska's idealism about America and her lofty treatment of intellectual pursuits. Although lines 26-28 sound strongly of Yeziarska, Daughter too has a strong desire to improve conditions in wartime Europe when she tells her family "others had given their lives to save the world... and... she... certainly could give up six months to relief work" (227). When I read how Daughter believed Dick would be a famous writer (324) it reminded me immediately of Rebecca's admiration for Felix because his poetry "filled the room... [with] wonder and beauty" (Yeziarska 225). Neither Rebecca nor Daughter like poetry for specific reasons other than its being a path to something higher, more ethereal. Most of all, using such explosive, internal language to explore Daughter's feelings made them more transparent and insistent in a way that is absent in Dos Pasos. Daughter tells Mr. Barrow

she can't get along with the "old cats" in the N.E.R., but she never explains why or defines what she'd rather be doing.

For this reason, it made the most sense to me to end Daughter's story optimistically. No one ever contemplates suicide or dies in any of the Yeziarska's stories we read for class. Even when Shennah Pessah from "Wings" is "crushed by her loneliness" (Yeziarska 4) she feels the sun on her cheeks and "[drinks] in the miracle of the sunlit wall." Nor could I imagine Daughter leading Mr. Barrow on romantically or dancing tightly with a Frenchman she'd just met in a bar in Yeziarska's literary world (Dos Pasos 324, 3). The fact that Yeziarska's style trumped the content of Dos Pasos' plot to the point that I felt the ending to Daughter's story must be changed points to the enormous power of Yeziarska's form and how it serves to benefit her content. Furthermore, it reveals a similar power in Dos Pasos' style—that his characters' lack of upfront emotions is part of the reason why their passions and idealism seem to fade away so easily.

Next, I wrote the story "Dreams and Dollars" in the style of Dos Pasos. Knowing from my first exercise how profoundly Yeziarska's style dictated the content of Dos Pasos' story as I rewrote it, I selected "Dreams and Dollars" because it presents a situation in which a character's values are put to the test. When Rebecca leaves the squalor of New York tenement living and discovers her sister Minnie's lavish life and Moe, a man who will financially support her if Rebecca chooses, she is forced to choose between the moral value of an austere lifestyle, close to her Russian Jewish roots, or a comfortable lifestyle with a higher degree of American assimilation. Would Dos Pasos' tendency to distance his characters from their own thoughts and feelings incline Rebecca to fall victim to Minnie's decadence?

When she got to Los Angeles, Rebecca was very impressed by the rich-looking residential houses. She found her sister Minnie's house and knocked on the door. Minnie answered. She seemed heavier than Rebecca remembered. "It's been ten years," she cried, taking Rebecca in her arms. Come meet my (5) husband, Abe. Abe was the rich banker Minnie had moved away from New York to marry. "Finally I'll have some peace," he said jovially, "Minnie's been lonely for you ever since I brought her here. Do stay and keep her company; in the meantime, you must meet Moe." "Looking like that?" Minnie broke in, "Everyone will know she came straight from Delancey street." Rebecca noticed (10) her sister's hands were covered in diamond rings and she tried to forget her own threadbare jumper. Moe arrived with a box of candy for Rebecca that was more delicious than any she had ever eaten. Dinner was even more lavish, and after she had stuffed herself Moe took her outside and showed her a gleaming red limousine. "Swelliest car on the market. I got it the minute your sister said you (15) were coming." Rebecca flushed. She knew he was after her and wondered what harm it would do to let him love her a little, but Felix was the only one for her. Moe must've seen her looking off and he asked, "What can I do to please you? Let me try a little." Rebecca thought and said, "I love music! If only I could afford the opera." Moe laughed and the slight condescension in his voice (20) made Rebecca scowl. "The music I like best is composed by the cash register. Just jingling coins in my hands makes me feel more grand than any opera I've ever heard." He went on talking about his money and Rebecca thought he was a great dullard. When she walked back in the house her Minnie and Abe were putting out brandies and ashtrays for a card party. Rebecca didn't much care (25) for cards and she though smoking was a dirty habit but Minnie insisted she play. Moe drew a chair close to his and beckoned with a hand. "Sit near me, Little Queen, I'll teach you the rules." Minnie and Abe's friends came, stuffy people in silk evening dresses and smoking jackets. The kind of money they tossed on the table would have bought Rebecca groceries for weeks. Moe kept (30) pointing at the little red hearts and numbers on his cards but she couldn't make any sense out of it because the smoke in the air made her head feel like a balloon. She asked for a drink of water and Moe brought her a glass of wine that burned her throat. "I can't do this," she said and stood. "But you're my charm! I've just won another hundred," Moe said, grasping her hand. "It's not just the (35) money," Minnie broke in, "When I play I get so excited I forget about everything. There's no past—no future—only the now—the life of the game. Please stay." Minnie's eyes were wide and Rebecca felt badly leaving her there. Her only sister. She sat again and really listened when Moe told her what a good hand looked like. When her glass got low someone filled it and she drank until (40) her head throbbed but in a pleasant warm way like her own heartbeat. Moe had an arm around her shoulders and when he whispered in her ear he would kiss it and chuckle like he had done it by mistake. His breath smelled sour and dark and Rebecca felt herself slump against him, glad that she didn't have to hold herself up any longer.

Just as it was impossible for me to rewrite more than just a moment from Daughter's story in Yeziarska's style because of her deeply internal narration, I was able to compress most of Yeziarska's 13-page story in about a page due to the near complete absence of psychological movement. In fact, I felt more like I was summarizing a plot than telling a story—something that likely indicates my own personal preference for character monologue in my own creative writing. On the other hand, escaping Yeziarska's claustrophobic closeness and volatile shifts in emotion felt liberating. I intentionally left the sentiment in line 4 that Minnie seems "heavier" ambiguous, just as Daughter describes Mr. Barrow with "The gap was very wide between his front teeth when he smiled" (Dos Pasos 326). Daughter doesn't implicitly state that she likes or dislikes this gap, but we can tell from the way she ultimately treats Mr. Barrow badly that she holds this trait against him. While Dos Pasos runs the risk of being only scenic and not specific in terms of what the characters feel, his objectivity does open up a range of emotions for his characters and also gives the reader more of a chance to form their own opinions instead of being bound so closely, as in Yeziarska's case.

Nevertheless, as soon as I began to extract myself from Yeziarska's characters' minds they became more two-dimensional. Although I chose to keep Moe's dialogue about the music of cash registers in lines 20-22, I removed his internalization about Rebecca, "A sudden pity gripped him. He longed to brighten the lonely look of this little greenhorn, put roses into her pale thin cheeks" and Rebecca's internalization about Moe, "The light that burned... in the eyes of poets... burned also in the eyes of the traders of her race" (Yeziarska 224). Knowing that Moe pities Rebecca's hardships and sincerely wishes to show her the pleasures of wealth makes his interest in her seem more than sexual, but a philanthropic and even selfless. Likewise, when Rebecca concedes that Moe's passion about making money is the same as a poet's passion for

writing, she validates him as person with dreams and not just a slave to the dollar. When I removed these things, I realized Moe had the capacity to become a much more sinister character, only concerned with possessing Rebecca sexually. Mr. Barrow undergoes a similar transformation when he tells Daughter, “You’re the only girl I’ve ever known who seemed really a beautiful pagan at heart” and begs her to be with him (Dos Pasos 330). Up until this point, he’s taken Daughter out to dinners, had many benign conversations with her, and she even describes him as “understanding an kind” (326). When he brings up the concept of paganism, however, and kisses Daughter “wetly in the ear” (330) his former niceties are overshadowed with what seems like a very sexual overture, reducing him to nothing more than an old pervert.

Thus, Dos Pasos’ tendency to simplify his characters makes them less reliable and more prone to disappointing reader expectations on the whole. For all their passion and optimism they are almost set up to fail, and this realization compelled me to let Rebecca flounder in Los Angeles’ moral degradation. Another reason I selected “Dreams and Dollars” is the story features a party, an opportunity for Rebecca’s state-of-consciousness to be altered in such a way that signals her falling away from the narrative. In lines 43 and 44, I tried to mimic Dos Pasos’ “This time she didn’t feel so bad... The spinning sun blinded her as they dropped” (Dos Pasos 332, 3). Daughter’s almost peacefully accepts her own death and the cessation of her sight as she’s “blinded” marks an end to her consciousness, her role as a focalizer in the narration. Recreating this exit, I realized its grace and aptness in a story where characters only ever seem vaguely aware of their role in the world. The violence of the plane crash is never referred to, only a fall made endless by the ceasing of narrative before the point of impact.

If I had asked the question in my thesis as to the connection between style and content for Yeziarska and Dos Pasos and attempted to answer it using only a close-reading of the texts, I

wouldn't have stumbled across revelations nearly as provocative and illuminating as having done this exercise in creative writing. Slipping into the shoes of the writers performed miracles in terms of understanding the literary choices they made and why they might have made them, and pitting these two texts together in this way was a powerful demonstration of the interdependence of form and content in literature. Most surprising to me was despite Yezierska and Dos Passos' entirely different styles and agendas, optimism and pessimism, both texts still shared themes common to modernism. Even in the act of writing I was aware that I'd opened up many more valuable avenues for comparison than the limitations of time and this paper allow, but I hope that even this preliminary exploration proves exciting, and that this topic becomes a regular option (even requirement, I daresay) for students in future courses. It's 3:38 in the morning and I've sincerely had fun.