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Kristen Case, *American Pragmatism and Poetic Practice: Crosscurrents from Emerson to Susan Howe*. Rochester: Camden House, 2011. xv + 160 pages.

American pragmatism is a vexing phenomenon. An indigenous American philosophy, ushering in the professionalization of the secular American intellectual life at the end of the nineteenth century, its roots may be convincingly traced to the eighteenth-century transformation of the Calvinist doctrine. On the other hand, besides the affinity to this religious lineage, pragmatism has been named a most poetic of philosophies, and rightly so, given the inescapably large debt that the classical pragmatists owe to Emerson. Deeply diverse at its genetic stem, affected by the Edwardsian reformulation of faith as experience and Emerson's continuous vacillation between Platonism and materialism, resilient to changes of intellectual fashions, significantly and successfully combining areas of linguistics, psychology, philosophy, religion and aesthetics, pragmatism truly is a most poetic of philosophies, and an illuminating companion, or context, in which to place developments in American poetry, from Emerson all the way down to post-LANGUAGE poets.

No wonder then that, periodically and with shifting perspective, American poetry critics have been reaching for pragmatist themes and analogies to read poets. A work that in many ways broke ground in this area continues to be Richard Poirier's *Poetry and Pragmatism* (1992), which becomes a reference point for numerous later studies in tracking down the complex relations and affinities that American modernist poets reveal with respect to Emerson's thought. Poirier's book is an important indication of the peculiar feature of Emerson's text, which is later going to be so intriguing to philosophers like James and to the whole Emersonian line of twentieth-century American poets: writing is a work-process of thought in the language. Hence, since it is a process, vagueness and instability are inherent in all creation in thinking and writing. This is the challenge of the mutability of truth that, as Poirer shows, is taken up by James in his pragmatist reformulations of this venerable philosophical notion. Combined with Emerson's adjacent insistence on the necessity of form, this constant tension between

making and dissolution, shapes emerging and shapes vanishing, the Emersonian and Jamesian pragmatist insights become the daily writing experiences for Frost, Stevens, and Stein.

This line of argument about poetry's living confirmation/realization of the ideas formulated by philosophers is continued and developed by many subsequent scholars. Jonathan Levine reformulates the process-oriented aesthetic as the poetics of "transition" and focuses on Stevens as its primary exponent.[1] Stevens also seems the central character in the biggest, most comprehensive of these studies, namely Joan Richardson's overwhelming *Natural History of Pragmatism* (2007). Expanding on Poirier and making use of her expert familiarity with the entirety of Stevens's problematic, Richardson reaches back to Edwards in order to document the ages-spanning continuity of the American thinking of linguistic malleability as the crucial emotional and cognitive power that shapes the so-called human reality beyond the mere division into the realms of spirit and matter. This line, in which James is the key pragmatist voice, is crowned in Richardson in the poets', notably Stevens's and Stein's, unique aesthetic formula that proves a valid counterpart to insights of twentieth-century science into the shifty and dynamic process at the subatomic level of the material world.

Another theme in this critical debate stresses the importance of Dewey's attention to material processes of work in the immediate environment of the subject. Here, among the younger critics, Michael Magee's study, bringing together Dewey and Emerson in the notion of "democratic symbolic action", is arguing for the vast political efficacy of the pragmatist aesthetics detected at work in avant-garde poets and black artists such as O'Hara, Baraka, and Ellison.[2] Poets beyond modernity, like O'Hara and Ashbery, are also discussed in the near pragmatist, post-Emersonian contexts by Andrew Epstein, who investigates how the volatile, transitive self described by pragmatists features within the unstable space of poetic rivalry and friendship extending between the texts of O'Hara and Ashbery.[3]

Kristen Case's recent book study, *American Pragmatism and Poetic Practice*, is an attempt to bring together the various strands of pragmatist-poetic themes and affinities. On the one hand, following Poirier and Richardson, Case returns to the rich cluster of continuations between Emerson and James, including James's difference with Peirce, the nominal founder of pragmatism. On the other hand, however, she is also able to make

[1] In a study called *The Poetics of Transition: Emerson, Pragmatism, and American Literary Modernism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1999).
[2] See Michael Magee, *Emancipating Pragmatism: Emerson, Jazz, and Experimental Writing* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2004).
[3] Andrew Epstein, *Beautiful Enemies: Friendship and Postwar American Poetry* (New York: Oxfrord University Press, 2006).

a move in the direction of Dewey. The result is an interesting and so far unregistered mixture of the discussed poetic styles, a lineage and network of relations that starts with Frost and Moore, skips Stevens, and veers into the more materialistic orientation of Dewey-related poetics of Williams. From that juncture on, the way is paved for other fruitful pairings, vitally expanding the list of poets discussed in connection with pragmatism: Case matches Olson with Thoreau, to show the Gloucester poet as an Emersonian continuator of Williams toward an environmental poetics, and finishes her study by returning to James, whose notions of plurality and relationality she sees as active, with a full array of their consequences, in the texts of Susan Howe. These pairings bear witness to the vast potential for recontextualization inherent in the connections between pragmatism and poetry. The connections seem natural, almost programmed by the very genealogy of the philosophical motifs and poetic developments. Based on them, Case formulates the main thesis of her study: the major strains of American poetry stem from the same family of questions that intrigued the Emersonian thinkers of classical pragmatism—Peirce, James, and Dewey—which makes poetry a text that runs a parallel commentary, a continuation, of epistemologically oriented inquiry conducted in writing conceived of as a process.

The departure point employed by Case shows her debt to the scholarship of Poirier and Richardson. We travel back, again, to the very fruitful discrepancy and fissure that fertilizes the text of Emerson. Caught between his neo-Platonist inclinations and his instinct for the actual, Emerson, more than Edwards treated at length by Richardson, is responsible for the ongoing tension in the midst of pragmatist thought—the tension between looking to things local, material, close at hand, and keeping some more abstract, remote, ideal reference points in view. This bipolarity, boiling in the exuberant excessiveness of Emerson's textual melting pots, is then seen as the major cause of difference between James and Peirce. The former, with his understanding of truth as something that "happens to an idea" when it clashes with the indeterminacies of the everyday, will be responsible, along with Dewey, for the American poets' interest in the material relations of the ordinary realm. The latter, with his insistence on keeping a distant, more transcendent end of inquiry always in view, will speak to mentalities, such as Frost's, who would rather curb the impulse of, or faith in, human-sponsored growth, unconstrained by any external bounds. It is this introduction of the Emersonian tension between James and Peirce, and the resulting list of poet-philosopher pairings, that stands behind Case's thesis. The poets not only continue; they often expand the epistemological inquiry of the classical pragmatists.

After this theoretical ground laid down by the introductory chapter, the author moves on to show how the actual-transcendental tension is profitably alive in the poetry of Ma-

rianne Moore, who is here seen as a poetic continuator of Emerson's split metaphysical alliances. Moore's famous attentiveness to the actual material detail is seen to thrive and receive its special flavor because of her ability not to lose the more ideal outposts from view. Also, seen next to Moore's verse, Emerson emerges as a founder and expositor of all those twentieth-century movements in the humanities that understood writing as a nearly uncontrollable element of its own momentum, in which the writer accepts a rhythm between his or her points formulated and then quickly dissolved. It is this rhythm that informs James's notion of truth, Peirce's sense of the necessity of form against chaos, to be then found in Frost, and Moore's ability to show her material findings in the typically American light of, as Stanley Cavell would say, the "uncanniness of the ordinary." Moore may thus be the first among twentieth-century American masters of stunning conjunctions between the abstract and the actual, Stevens being next, and Ashbery, whom by the way Case never mentions, crowning this lineage.

The most conservative motifs in the diverse family of pragmatist approaches, conservative in the area of aesthetics, epistemology, and politics, are found with Case's next pairing. She sees interesting parallels between Charles Sanders Peirce's vision of inquiry as a prolonged communal construction of meaning against the Darwinian background of chaotic forces and Frost's insistence on the necessity of form, his poetics of the "momentary stay against confusion." Peirce and Frost, although diverting on points of politics, inhabit a similar world in which the human cognitive functions are the only mainstay against the elementary abyss of chaos and conflict. Each philosophical inquiry and each poem, as "evolving structures of thought and language," are arrangements of sense against swampy groundlessness. And yet, unlike some more radical continuators of James who would like the world "as such," that is the world independent of human intervention, to be "well-lost" once and for all[4], Case reminds us how both Peirce and Frost insisted that, despite the crucial role of human inquiry, it must always be seen against the hypothesis of a transcendent layer of "objective reality," an area that must be posited as independent of the epistemological activity for it to be possible in the first place. This vacillation between the idea of abysmal chaos beneath human reality and the wish to base the human inquiry on something that is "nothing human," is perhaps the main cause for the quality of evasiveness found in both Peirce and Frost. Especially Frost constructs a difficult, many-layered epistemology that will keep escaping all easy categorization.

[4] I am referring to Richard Rorty's seminal text "The World Well-Lost." See his *Consequences of Pragmatism* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1982).

It seems, however, that the heart of Case's argument is found in the next two chapters. One of them describes the development of a specific environmental poetic, found in Williams's reformulation of Dewey's program for the reinvention of philosophy. Williams reformulates Dewey's theses into a poetics of embodied knowledge. This will lead to Olson's poetics of the "kinetic aesthetics" of the poem as environment, discussed in the next chapter. First, Williams, whose views are found in confluence with Dewey's, goes further than the philosopher in his experimentalism toward a poetic of the actual. In doing so, Williams establishes a certain dichotomy of the poetic strategy that is going to be present with later American poetries of the objectivist provenience. He will want the poem to expose the material presence of its very linguistic substance (the "word itself"), while at the same time making present the objects themselves. Both words and objects are supposed to stand alone, freed from the invading and obliterating film of symbolic thinking. Whether this strategy of trying to attain to certain entities "alone," or "in themselves," can be successful at all, or whether it aligns well with pragmatism, is one of the doubts I will address below. Whatever the case may be, however, Olson's continuation of this doubled attention—to language and to the matter of the world—leads to the concept of the poem as an active participation in one's immediate surroundings, a participation that is also a construction of an environment. This accords well with Dewey's formula of inquiry as an activity changing both the subject and the object.

In Olson, Williams's formula of "no ideas but in things" is changed into the practice of the poem as an environment, one that brings forth the material, historical, and geographical actuality of the poet's place and lets him re-find himself in it. The text "asks to be inhabited." The companion text here is, fittingly, Thoreau's proto-environmental and proto-ethnographic writing that shows the impact of the environment on the human. One of the key issues at this point, poignant especially for Thoreau, but reverberating equally clearly in Olson, is the question of the possibility if the dissolution of the human into the non-human element of the environment. Case seems to waver on this point. While admitting, with Olson, that the poem as an inhabitable environment is a measure by which the human will be redefined and re-found in its interaction with the environment, she seems also to be leaning toward the idea that the act may let come fully to the fore an element of the non-human. On the one hand, she expresses reservation about the idea of Thoreau's "abandoning the human"; on the other, she agrees with critics who speak of the non-human as a presence. It would seem that perhaps a pragmatist approach should find ways to bypass the split into the human and the non-human in a manner more decisive than Case's. The thought of the possible receding back into the non-human, which did indeed lure Thoreau at some passages of, say, *Walden,* is a result of the unsolved Emersonian-Thoreauvian romantic dilemma of feeling oneself at once alien from and

part of nature, a burden that it should be the role of pragmatism, as a corrective inheritor of Romanticism, to dispel.

Finally, Case's book makes a leap toward the very contemporary poetics of Susan Howe. This demanding post-LANGUAGE poet is discussed in the context of James's insistence that ours is a world of pluralistic and plastic relationality, in which entities never have their meanings on their own (the very notion of an entity on its own, as a stable reality, becomes suspect with James), and in which there is an ongoing reciprocity between matters of fact and the human description of them, which always is fed back into facts to change them. James's lasting achievement is raising relation itself to the role of a world building element that should be treated on a par with the idea of substance. That it had not been so treated is an act of suppression and exclusion, which is clearly seen in the undervaluing of certain grammatical structures. Thus, James rediscovers a world of active relations and dynamisms that we may sense or get access to if, among other strategies of course, we start to attend more carefully to the so far underrated parts of speech, such as conjunctions or pronouns, which far from being insignificant auxiliaries, are the very motors of experience, bespeaking of its malleable modalities. This message, already employed by Gertrude Stein, and discussed in relation to her poetics, receives a new, clearly politicized formula in the poetry of Susan Howe.

Howe's text is, according to Case, a radical realization of James's poetics of relationality. Her writing is said to show what writing might be if we digested fully the Jamesian message of the centrality of relations as the real objects of experience. But in her treatment of relationality, to attend to relations is to discover the historico-political exclusions that spatter American history. Relationality recovers whole systems of silences and deliberate blanks as the necessary underpinnings of all constructedness of narrative, history, and voice. Thus, when Howe makes her visits to the archives of venerable American universities, she proliferates their systems as an agent of the repressed voices, recalling the whole traditions and lineages of these marginalizations. Running back to the antinomian debates that troubled the Puritan orthodoxy, they also include Dickinson, whose stuttering poetic is now seen in the light of its oppositionality toward the authoritarian order of her day, finally to present Howe herself, who is found inescapably in her text, as she is related to those past voices.

Case's parings and explorations are fresh, imaginative, dynamic and provocative, even if they continue the themes that have been opened up by other critics. The book presents a fruitful personal approach that, when employed properly, is always an asset in discussing poetry. There are, however, two or three problems with the study that I would like to address in conclusion, hopefully for the sake of a fruitful discussion. First, I sense a certain leanness of the volume. In some cases one wishes for the discussion to go on

for a little longer and reach a little deeper. Howe, to give one example, is an extremely demanding poet. Her texts should not be approached solely through the mediating means of theoretical formulas. In short, the chapter on Howe seems undernourished as far as the presence of the poetic text itself goes. As it is, some of the formulations concerning the correspondence between Jamesian relationality and Howe's text seem true and right but might suffer from an air of critical banality. That "all histories are the products of human construction and imagination" is hardly any news in the contemporary humanities, and the originality of Case's own discussion of Howe in the light of James deserves something deeper and more inquisitive.

Finally, there are certain problems at the heart of the objectivist-materialist poetics of Williams and Olson that could be better addressed if the discussion were pushed beyond the epistemologies of the classical pragmatists. It might help to look into the post-Quinean linguistics of Rorty and Davidson to find distance to Williams's and Olson's rather pale and unconvincing hopes for things standing "on their own," being themselves in space, as Williams would like to have them, or of getting words to mean "not a single thing the least more than what it does mean," to give Olson's formulation called upon by Case. It is Rorty's Davidsonian continuation of James's and Dewey's message of relationality that should help us divert from the metaphors of either words or things standing on their own. With this reformulation we might as well see the environmental poem decisively NOT as a place in which the non-human becomes present, but one in which the human becomes a primary context for enlivening the merely dead matter. The poem is an environment, by all means, but it is a created place, one that has not been there before. This environment is something new and unique—not a revelation of a material essence that preceded it in the spatial, temporal or ontological order. This approach, if we agree with it, rules out "the non-human."

Such construction, however, would require us to reconsider the relation between the poetic utterance and the construction of individual subjectivity. Poems as environments, even though possibly inhabited by many, are unique habitats. No two poetic responses to one physical environment will ever be the same after all. To be one with the environment will mean the emergence of different textual selves in the case of each next "environmental" poem, unless we want to end up with the idea that there is an essence to the environmental stimulus that calls for one and the same response in the instance of each interaction. Since it would be non-pragmatist to say so, we are always left with the notion of the individual and the separate—there are thousands of inhabitants of the geographical environs of Gloucester—there is only one body of Olson's text.

The problem is, of course, that American poetic criticism finds it very hard to speak of poetry as a construction of individuality nowadays. The difficulty is responsible for