
Poetry and Pragmatism is an inspired and inspiring set of reflections on the influence of Emersonian pragmatism on the poetry of Robert Frost, Gertrude Stein, and Wallace Stevens, as well as the ways in which the Emersonian pragmatists are also poets. Poirier writes, "If pragmatism works, then it works the way poetry does--by effecting a change of language, a change carried out entirely within language, and for the benefit of those destined to inherit the language" (132). His book is the consequence of lectures at Princeton University and the University of Kent at Canterbury. It consists of an introduction by the author, four chapters, discursive notes, and an extensive bibliography useful to those interested in the intersection of pragmatism, cultural studies and literary theory. Poirier's book is extremely well-written and flawlessly copy-edited.

Poirier says that he has had enough with the "easygoing trivializations" and "outright refusals" of Emerson. He is not an "amateur renegade" as Bruce Kuklick claims, nor is he to be given "close to total avoidance" (41) as does Richard Rorty. Refusals "to grant him any founding role whatever in the evolution of American philosophy," laments Poirier, "can be so amazingly unapologetic, so stubborn in their persistence, as to raise the larger question of just what it is in American culture . . . that promotes the assumption that his writing . . . does not need to be read with the discipline, with the expectation of difficulty and surprise, otherwise freely given to works not nearly as crowded with philosophical and mythological promise" (8). And though he recognizes Stanley Cavell's work on Emerson as moving in the right direction, he unfortunately only gives it a couple of footnotes.

Poirier is primarily concerned with pragmatism as a form of linguistic skepticism. Pragmatism that encourages us "to participate as readers in a recurrent discovery about the language we inherit" and "that by a conscious effort of linguistic skepticism . . . reveal[s], in the words and phrases we use, linguistic resources that point to something beyond skepticism, to possibilities of personal and cultural renewal" (11). He finds this form of skepticism primarily in Emerson, and to a lesser extent James, and shows through close readings that it is equally at work and in fact a "generative principle" in Frost, Stein and Stevens. Thoreau, John Dewey, Walt Whitman, Emily Dickinson, among others, are cited as also being part of "the tribe of Waldo," though not discussed nearly as extensively. T. S. Eliot is omitted because Poirier sees him as only a reluctant member of "the
In Chapter One, called "Superfluous Emerson," Poirier argues that Emerson's superfluousness "is an effort to refloat the world, to make it less stationary and more transitional, to make descriptions of it correspondingly looser, less technical, more uncertain" (40). In Emerson and James he finds a human need for superfluousness.

Chapter Two, "The Transfiguration of Work," shows how "Emersonian pragmatists intend to prove that writers of literature contribute no less than do day laborers, housewives, or adventurers to the dream which is America, a dream whose realization if forever being postponed" (85). For James and Emerson, literature is work with language "which just might possibly begin to help change existing realities, and only then if the work is carried on endlessly" (95). Work becomes for them "a mode of action by which an inheritance, instead of being preserved or reverently used in the present, is radically transformed into a bequest for the future" (123). The act of troping or inflecting language shows us not how to revere the past, but how to renew it.

Chapter Three, "The Reinstatement of the Vague," proposes that we ought to be grateful to language "for making life messier than ever, more blurred than we pretend we want it to be, but also therefore more malleable." Language can create a vagueness that puts us at rest inside contradictions which would be unbearable if more precisely drawn. Poirier charges that "we willingly live with the fact that by its beneficent betrayals language constantly delivers us to ourselves, and makes us known to others, within a comforting haze" (30).

In Chapter Four, "Reading Pragmatically: The Example of Hum 6," Poirier point out that the linguistic skepticism announced as "poststructuralism" has beginnings well before the publication of Derrida's De la grammatologie in 1967. Similar distrusts in language are exhibited in the work of Peirce, James, Dewey, Santayana, Frost, Stein and Stevens, as well as in the writings of Kenneth Burke, Wittgenstein, and F. R. Leavis (174). Yet without necessarily associating themselves with any of these writers, intense close readings of the way words "undo and redo" themselves were being advanced at enterprising colleges and universities well before the post-World War II period. This chapter essentially tells the story of one such class, "Humanities 6: The Interpretation of Literature"--an undergraduate course that Poirier helped teach at Harvard under the direction of Reuben Brower from 1953-1961. He recounts Hum 6, in part, to "help disrupt the calender of theory and loosen its intimidating hold" (174).

In sum, Poetry and Pragmatism is well worth reading, and possibly even rereading. Poirier's neglect to consider seriously the linguistic skepticism of pragmatists other than Emerson and James on the poets is excused, he believes, by the fact that James was a philosophy professor at Harvard when Frost, Stein and
Stevens were all students there. A stronger argument is needed to be given here. Given its stress on Emerson and Emersonianism, the "Pragmatism" of the title is a bit misleading. Something like Emersonian Poets seems more appropriate. Finally, one would have liked to have seen a case presented for his claim that James "owed far less to Charles Peirce for inventing pragmatism as a term than to Emerson for much of pragmatism's substance" (41).

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The book is divided into three main sections: Peirce's account of science, his critique of Cartesian epistemology, and his philosophy of mind and reality. There is a brief and outdated biographical introduction and a conclusion devoted to an analysis of Peirce and Hilary Putnam on realism. This book is a good read - short, sweet, and smooth. It elegantly hides the experience and labors that went into writing it. It is confessedly propaganda for Peirce's philosophy, intended to lure the interest of analysis and "as an antidote" to those pragmatists who oppose reason and science.

Because he is so intent on bringing Peirce into current philosophical dialogue, Delaney avoids any analysis of Peirce's view of science which might be conceived as "an invitation to religion." Consequently, there is no discussion of Peirce's synergism - his doctrine of continuity - or his view, expressed in 1908 in "A Neglected Argument for the Reality of God," that science, in its character as inquiry after truth (including an aesthetic dimension) will lead to acceptance of the hypothesis of God's reality. Peirce insisted in 1898 that, "It is certain that reaching the truth is that there may be some natural tendency toward an agreement between the ideas that suggest themselves to the human mind and those which are concerned in the laws of nature." And ten years later he went much farther, writing that, "if we cannot in some measure understand God's mind, . . . all science must be a delusion and a snare." Bearing in mind these strategic omissions, the book represents a lucid, perceptive, and accurate representation of Peirce's view of science and its relevance to major problems in philosophy in their contemporary form.

It struck me as I read the book how unusual it is among