contribution to American philosophy by outstanding scholars and would make an excellent text for a course in American philosophy, both because of its thematic character and also because of its superior quality.

Allow me to offer a further insight raised by the both the scope and intentions of this book. The repetition of treatments of the four classical pragmatists does more than explore a variety of themes. From the tenor of these essays something like a consensus builds about the central texts, ideas, and characters of the subject thinkers. I think this demonstrates the philosophical stability of pragmatism, which is important in light of a period of self-doubt and critical challenges to its integrity as a coherent movement. What this volume also reveals, however, is that attempting to make a historically sound pragmatism speak to current affairs is still “the task before us.” If these treatments lack anything in terms of the pragmatic spirit, it is the tone of self-criticism necessary to develop creative opposition to ideas that presently structure our common life and expectations. I am not convinced that a pack of philosophers well versed in these ideas, well spoken as they are here, could do what the pragmatists did, that is, accomplish a redirection of current thought and practice. The problems addressed in this volume are perennial and human, and so these pragmatic treatments will remain vital and interesting. But observing vitality is like watching a documentary on mating habits. What I want, what I think these pragmatists attempted to be, is a corporate philosophical voice that combines the hope of American thinkers with the vigor of Marx in an attempt to change the world for the better. Reading these essays makes me long for a cohort of covert pragmatists, leavening our political, religious, and philosophical debates with a focused exploration of the limits of a creative reconstruction of human meaning. I count this desire as feature of the success of this collection of essays, since it has newly evoked it.

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John McCumber’s Philosophy and Freedom: Derrida, Rorty, Habermas, Foucault takes place one step removed from the turmoil
of the ‘furious labor of deconstruction’ in the 1970s and 1980s.  
1 And perhaps the book happens at an even further remove from the arch-polemical retorts to postmodernism of both conservative defenders of ‘tradition’ and critical modernist retrievals of reason from total critique. It is from a less polemical, more contemporary, space that the author offers an interpretation of four main players in the debate over philosophy’s emancipatory role in life, in culture, and in toto.

Through an exploration of the work of Jacques Derrida, Richard Rorty, Jurgen Habermas, and Michel Foucault heavily influenced by Heidegger, McCumber offers a critical narrative shaped around a common emancipatory project found in these very diverse thinkers. McCumber frames and carries out his discussion with the use of three main themes that focus his discussion of the freedom these thinkers extol and attempt to practice. They are the 1) deleterious effects of substance metaphysics on even supposedly ‘post-metaphysical’ discourse and 2) the Nietzschean figure of the ‘Great Demarcation’. For good measure, a third tool, 3) a meta-categorization of communication according to McCumber’s own developed version of poetic interaction is used to tell the “story”. 2 While McCumber’s tripartite structuring enables a fresh interpretation of these figures, there are points where the schema seems forced and a bit provincial serving to obfuscate rather than clarify these thinkers’ work.

McCumber uses the rhetorical figure of what Nietzsche called die grosse Loslosung to set the stage for the whole book. Die grosse Loslosung, translated as “the great getting-loose”, introduces the theme of emancipation, or freedom as understood as a demarcation from what has gone before, from what shapes us now in our critical and practical habits of living and interpreting. This “great demarcation” is accomplished in a four step process of “rejecting everything that once was loved, wandering in radical solitude; viewing from distant heights and finally returning to a renewed world—renewed precisely because it once furnished the start of this new, and most disjointed

1 This phrase comes from Jurgen Habermas, The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity. Translated by Frederick G. Lawrence, (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1986).

story." The great getting-loose, is then, a great demarcation, a great liberation, a great emancipation from the old and outgrown ossifying constraints of thought and experience and the philosophically dead.

But it is not a merely philosophical experience for Nietzsche, as McCumber is adamant in stressing. What Nietzsche expresses is a general characteristic of our condition, our need of a great demarcation. This liberation touches all of our own habits, those patterns that foster a heteronomous being-in-the-world rooted in a state reminiscent of Kant's notion of self-incurred tutelage. The four thinkers mentioned embody the spirit of the Great Demarcation. McCumber outlines the ways in which the critical philosophies of Rorty, Habermas, Derrida and Foucault can be fruitfully understood as carrying out this great getting-loose described in this opening passage of Nietzsche's, nicely retranslated by the author.

The second structuring theme that McCumber carries with him from previous work (and lucidly summarizes in the opening introductory chapter), is the specter of ousia. This, specifically, is the ousiodic structure of the Western philosophical tradition embodied in the persistence of the four main traits of Aristotle’s original idea of ousia, as interpreted and generalized by McCumber. The abstracted traits of ousia, that with the linguistic turn now invade our apparently insufficiently self-critical discursive practices, are as follows: There [in Aristotle’s Metaphysics] the idea was advanced that to be a being something had to have a structure in which one part or aspect...the essence... generated and/or ordered everything within the thing’s boundaries and governed its effects on the world beyond those boundaries. In addition, to boundaries and “exclusion”, the form of the hylomorphic thing

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3 Ibid., p. 3.


5 Specter is my term.

6 McCumber, p. 10.
gave it the disposition of its own order and initiative in the world. This initiative is always-already prescribed and therefore too determined and determining to be compatible with real freedom.

McCumber finds this Aristotelian inheritance to be a constraint to philosophical discourse that limits in pernicious ways the emancipation the great demarcation hails. To break from the ousiodic structure, the paradigm of ousia as a formal structure of philosophical discourse from Aristotle on, is the ultimate philosophical challenge if freedom and philosophical discourse are to coexist. McCumber then employs his third tool, a schema of poetic interaction taken from his previous work to classify the thinkers in question.

The four horsemen of the coming postousiodic culture, because the residual Aristotelian inheritance is not clarified in their attempted Loslosung, ultimately remain trapped within substance-discursive limits. Deconstruction (Derrida), ironic redescription (Rorty), communicative reconstruction (Habermas), and finally the genealogical description of ‘knowledge’ (Foucault) gesture toward the possibility of freedom in their radical attempts but finally fail productively. The failure of each is a unique lesson that McCumber thinks tells us something deep about the thinkers’ respective projects, and in the meantime support a more poetically oriented understanding of discursive interaction, of being-in-the-world in a postousiodic fashion.

McCumber’s prescriptions are slim and follow only after a deep textual analysis of these four offerings towards the great demarcation. They are presented in light of his two main narratival tropes, die Loslosung and the inertia of ousia, and with the help of his theory of poetic interaction. Against the pathologies of our Aristotelian inheritance, present in different ways in each of the books’ figures, McCumber invokes the ‘nothing’, the Heideggerian Diakon. This concept does the work of eluding Western metaphysical articulation and yet is all-important in proper philosophical understanding and freedom. Again, McCumber’s own conceptual strategies deserve more comment and justification than given in his slim text.

The benefits to structuring the book in the way McCumber are that it fosters a unique, if at times too thinly stretched, account of a common strand among thinkers all too often agonistically juxtaposed to each other. For all of their differences, there is an ethical-critical family resemblance
between the thought of Derrida, Rorty, Habermas, and Foucault. Refreshingly, the tone at the closure of the book is that of self-admitted failure, something such a short book on such deep and complex contemporary thinkers is bound to do on such a large topic as 'philosophy and freedom.'

The book is not a good reference work for those looking for more perspicacious interpretations of the thinkers, Rorty in particular. However, and this should not be overlooked, it does, in treating thinkers concerning which the commentaries could fill rooms, offer the reader with a fresh interpretation. It encourages new approaches to thinking of the relation between philosophy and freedom, particularly regarding the role of imagination in freedom. It is the kind of book that encourages one to rethink one's interpretations, if not change them drastically.


Cavell has said "Philosophy is in some ways the last place in the American landscape that you would look in order to write. Yet, in a sense, to write your own words, to write your own inner voice, is philosophy. But the discipline most opposed to writing, and to life, is analytic philosophy" (Giovanna Borradori, The American Philosopher, 1994, p. 126). These are savory words, ones that critique the professionalization of philosophy, and that nod to the autobiographical nature of philosophy, but also claim that both philosophy and autobiography are intelligible primarily in terms of writing. So Cavell continues: "To oppose writing: I interpreted that as an opposition to the human voice, which is where I come into philosophy. This is what my first essays are about—the suppression of the human voice in academic analytic philosophy" (ibid., 126-7).

Timothy Gould's book, appearing nearly thirty years after Cavell published his first work—Must We Mean What We Say (Cambridge, 1969)—attempts to assess what has become of Cavell's voice in philosophy, and in particular how that voice has come to embody a distinctive method of philosophy. Gould’s work thus