Book reviews.


On one level, the title of his work would seem to indicate a rather straight-forward procedure—to describe the forerunners of Pragmatism, to provide a genealogy, so to speak. Here the major players for Richardson are Jonathan Edwards, Ralph Waldo Emerson, William James, Henry James, Gertrude Stein, and Wallace Stevens. Here, too, an interesting approach might be to consider who is included and who is left out—John Dewey, for example, mentioned only once in the text. But doing this would be a great disservice, for Richardson has something much more subtle and compelling in mind, something that can only be disclosed indirectly rather than described—a way of "seeing," through words, so to speak. For Richardson, "both thinking and language are life forms, subject to the same laws as other life forms." (p. ix) This means that both evolve through time in a Darwinian fashion. Indeed evolution itself was a new way of seeing which "proceeds by imperfect replication, the ongoing result of the spiraling alignments of matching and mismatching protein strands, repetition with variation" (pp. ix-x) Darwin’s new way of thinking required a new language, but also one which preserved some continuity with the past. The "new world" of America also required the acknowledgement of no certainty, but still demanded more than a totally random walk. The texts of the authors mentioned above, worked out over and through time, provided both continuity and novelty, enabling their authors to "make meaning". "The traits selected to be bred into America’s linguistic strain by the writers who are my subjects were to preserve the habit of religious experience and expression while braiding into it the most accurate representations possible of the natural world insofar as it came to be understood in their moments." (p. x) Richardson terms each of the authors mentioned above a "priest of the invisible" (p. x) and notes that each was well read in natural history and in scientific literature. All of them used earlier forms of language, e.g., the bible, and merged these together with the newly emerging naturalistic idea of the cosmos that was replacing heaven as the major metaphor. "The recombinant forms of their visions and revisions produced various hybrids that reflect continuing, asymptotic adjustments of what Emerson described as the ‘axis of vision’ to things as they are” (p. xi) —while constantly running the danger of being lost in an over-abundance of signs. In short, in Pragmatist thinking readers and authors create ways of interpretation; they are converted to new ways of thinking and hence saved, at least sometimes, from total loss or confusion. A homeostatic balance is restored, as in biology and cybernetics. Analogously, for Richardson, the “homeostatic function of the life of the mind is the work of the aesthetic.” (p. xi) These authors’ attempts to create such linguistic structures, always a dangerous one, represents “real fact in the making,” as James would say. Their texts are “leaps,” i.e., attempts to deal with the “flights of the stream of consciousness” by creating new “perches or resting places” new symbols or linguistic signs, which in turn allow new “emotional” thinking to go on. Thinking “embodies the activity of aiming for a target, *stochos,*” (p. xiv)
From this perspective, the language constantly used and reused by these authors is ever the same, yet never the same. To speak is to leap, to take a chance, hoping that you won’t say something “stale as a whale’s breath,” as William Carlos Williams would say. The language used is not only descriptive; it is not just about reality but is rather constitutive of it. Because of this, language itself becomes the subject of study and analysis. Said differently, the language employed by these authors is not just descriptive in dealing with the new, i.e., with “frontier instances” in America. Rather, the language is performative. Richardson wants to “fatten up” the context of literary and cultural history by fostering a broader interpretation of what constitutes critical reading. Her presentation “marries” science and religion, the past and future, the old and the new, and it does so in an inviting rather than a dogmatic manner. She constantly, although not completely predictably, turns and re-turns, taking up anew themes presented earlier in the text—the same ones, yet different, in an attempt not to hand the reader an “angle of vision” like a billiard ball, but rather to approach the subject obliquely, a la Henry James in his novels, thus “enabling” the reader to see anew.

The book is also self-reflexive in nature. As Richardson puts it, “My attempt is to honor … [these authors’] models in my manner and to practice the self-reflexive method of Pragmatism, incorporating into my sentences and paragraphs phrases, echoes, passages that provided and continue to provide the materials for the ‘room of the idea’ in which I have been able to imagine how this variety of intellectual experience came to be in the ongoing American experiment.” (p. xiii)

This is a book of enormous scope, and it is not for the faint of heart. It covers a tremendous amount of material, and in a very subtle and indirect manner. There is a sense in which “the medium (language) is the message,” but only in a sense. In general, Richardson wants to show how each of the thinkers mentioned was acutely aware of the scientific literature of his/her day, but also how each of them reached back into the past by using previous words in a slightly new manner. This theme of “recursiveness and amplification” pervades the book. Thus, Edwards’s use of Locke and Newton is foregrounded. Stevens’s awareness of Heisenberg, Bohr, and Planck is emphasized. The similarities between viewing light as both wave and particle and James’s flights and perchings of the stream of consciousness receives attention. The similarity, and difference, between the old and the contemporary is pointed out. Thus, “Emerson’s recursive method of transcribing and interpolating...[the] elements of natural, historical description into his writing...is also an analogue of what we know to be the manner in which DNA information is transferred along and between chromosome strands.” (p.15) Similar remarks are made concerning the work of Gertrude Stein. (p.233; 241)

This is a work that is interdisciplinary in nature, uniting or showing the important connections between religion, science, and literature, and suggesting Pragmatism as a way of highlighting the importance of this interdisciplinarity. William James, himself an interdisciplinarian, would have heartedly approved of such an effort, having been opposed to any philosophy that set up too sharp a divorce between language and life.
The project undertaken by Richardson is an enormous one, perhaps condemned in advance to eternal incompleteness, but not to just standing still or threading water. At its core is an invitation that we listen to and adapt a new way of “thinking about thinking,” different from the one found in traditional Aristotelian logic. This way of thinking is one that is recessive/progressive; it is one that takes time, and that we must be enculturated into, by means of example. It is about making visible the invisible, through language, regarding the latter as a form of life—as part of what is being studied as well as the way of studying.

It takes the reader a little while to figure out what is going on—there are so many examples, so much repetition and yet not repetition. The text itself is indeed performative rather than descriptive in nature. Although the text is both rich and complex, it is nonetheless one that is well worth the read. The author has managed to do what she applauds her selected authors with doing—to make visible the invisible without destroying it or changing it back into the permanent of the certain. She invites us to “see,” through her eyes, the texts of several thinkers in a comprehensive and, equally important, an emotionally exciting manner. If to think is to leap, or to try, so also to read this text is to take a chance. It is a chance well worth taking.

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Nicholas Rescher, Realism and Pragmatic Epistemology, Pittsburgh University Press, 2005

Nicholas Rescher has two goals in this book. One is to argue straightforwardly for realism. He claims there is an extra-mental world or “a way things are” independent of what any mind thinks about it, and that this is a necessary truth. His second goal is to support this metaphysical claim by a pragmatic consideration of inquiry and overcoming problems of epistemology. The implicit argument driving this book is that scientific reasoning, broadly construed, is a sufficient and responsible way of picturing the world and furthering inquiry. At times Rescher seems more focused on providing an apology for scientific inquiry than trying to sort out the problems of realism and knowledge. This orientation opens his argument to some significant criticism.

Rescher makes his argument for realism on the basis of operating inquiry. For example, he points out that there are always more facts than can ever be manifested in experience. He says there are “infinitistic aspects of things.” (4) This unending possibility of experience means there is something beyond the investigating mind at work. Another line of this argument is that there are “mutually preemptive conditions of realization.” For example, you can know a peach by incinerating it and measuring the caloric value, or by eating it and knowing it through the sensations of taste, smell and touch. But you cannot know the peach in both ways. This limitation indicates that there is an object, the peach, that stands beyond our mutually exclusive means of inquiry and binds them together. “Realism roots in ignorance,” (5) Rescher says, and the cognitive