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# *Kristen Case. American Pragmatism and Poetic Practice: Crosscurrents from Emerson to Susan Howe*

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## REFERENCES

Rochester, New York: Camden House, 2011. Pp. 160 (Notes, Bibliography and Index included). ISBN-13:978-1-57113-485-1; ISBN-10:1-57113-485-9

- 1 Kristen Case's study is a timely contribution to the ongoing scholarly interest in pragmatist genealogies and affiliations within American intellectual and literary history. Case's exploration of "crosscurrents" between American poetry and the pragmatist tradition revolve affinities that "disrupt traditional, linear notions of literary inheritance" (xii). Framed by an introductory chapter on the tension between idealism and a proto-pragmatist perspective on experience in Emerson's thought, Case offers, "five pairings" (xi) that unfold convergences between pragmatism and the ways Marianne Moore, Robert Frost, William Carlos Williams, and Charles Olson engage with fundamental dualities of the Western philosophical tradition, namely, the relation and disjunction between subject and object, the self and the world. Revisiting their poetics in relation to the pragmatists' "valu[ing] experience over the inherited problems of the vocabulary of philosophy" (xii), Case claims that the 'voicing of a lyric I,' in the American poetic tradition "may be understood as a kind of disguised or illegible Other for post-Cartesian philosophy" (xiii). Overall, the book foregrounds how pragmatism sought to establish relations between the terms of dialectical pairs that Western epistemology has kept apart, and how in resonance with this homegrown philosophical tradition, American poetry is, rather than enacts, a practice of life anchored in experiences of "relations" as she argues in her last chapter on Susan Howe.

- 2 The first chapter “By Their Fruits’: Words and Action in American Writing,” returns to Emerson who as Martin Jay states, “shared with James a dual suspicion of empiricist sensationalism and abstract intellectualism, and preferred emotional intensity and hands-on practice to systematic philosophizing” (Jay 273). Case genealogically relates Emerson’s challenges to idealism and the centrality of the category of experience in his later writings to Jonathan Edwards’ attempt to bring “language back to experience” in his sermons (4). Case sees both Emerson and Edwards as important precedents for a “new secular American epistemology: one in which knowledge is inseparable from the daily practices by which we acquire it” (2).
- 3 In the second chapter “Emerson, Moore, America,” Case posits the reciprocity between mind and world as the ground where idealism is challenged in Emerson’s thought, and focuses on Emerson’s shift towards “a poetic language that allows him to build (and enact) his own complex, often self-canceling epistemology” (24). Locating the origins of pragmatism in transcendentalism, Case goes on to approach American poetry along similar lines: working across “the distance between philosophy and daily life” (28), she argues that the philosophical, as it were, work of American poetry is a form, rather than a record, of experience. In keeping with this premise, she argues that Marianne Moore too eliminates the distance between abstract thought and the practice of life. In her reading of “The Steeple-Jack,” (1932), Case focuses on the importance of seeing as an active experience, “representative of the mind’s power to impose order on the flux of experience” (31). Case reiterates the claim that the emphasis on experience as an active principle is expressive of an “explicitly American position, necessary to a young democracy struggling to balance its ideals and its material success, its emphasis on individualism with a national identity.” (35) In the conclusion, the author turns to Sacvan Bercovitch’s critique of the complicity between the ideal of “individuality” and the “individualism of bourgeois liberalism” (39), in order to make a case for her own idiosyncratic reading: yet while resisting the mediations to which Bercovitch attends, she acknowledges the incommensurability between her experience of reading and writing, and the reality of “drone airplanes...drop[ping] missiles on villages full of children in Pakistan and Afghanistan” (40).
- 4 The third chapter, “Robert Frost, Charles Sanders Peirce, and the Necessity of Form,” begins with how in contrast to its popularised image, Frost’s farm “was a place more imagined than realized” (41), given Frost’s inadequacy as a farmer. She then moves onto a discussion of how Frost’s poetry bears the tension between the “necessity” of a coherent, sustained form, and the forces of decay and adversity: Frost’s poetics are set in dialogue with the “vivid sense of conflict” (45), that as she reminds us, is “at the heart” of Peirce’s epistemology defined by the tension between doubt and belief. In an insightful discussion of the “struggle” between order, labour, and chaos, she sees formal choice as defining the mediation and the experiencing of suffering, doubt, belief, the domestic and the unfamiliar. In this chapter, relatedness is established through the way both poet and philosopher seek to come to terms with the lived, the poet taking the “local” and the “particular” as the point of departure, the philosopher, on the other hand, “beginning in the cosmos” (47). Her analysis highlights the difficulty of accommodating the poet’s and the philosopher’s public image with the tensions that find their way in their writings: Frost’s individualism clashing with “a populist image and a (seemingly) accessible writing style” and Peirce’s “populism” in politics contrasting with his “uncompromising” ideas (53).

- 5 The fourth chapter “‘As Much of Part of Things as Trees and Stones’: John Dewey, William Carlos Williams, and the Difference in Not Knowing,” begins with a narration of the author’s own everydayness, a gesture that seems to be implicitly intended to correspond to Williams’s preoccupation with the proximity, but also the disjunction between everydayness and the practice of writing. Her “pairing” of Dewey and Williams consists in an exploration of what she posits as “a new understanding of experience, one in which the subject is part of, inseparable from, the experienced event” (72). Dewey’s premise of “interaction” (73), Case reminds us, constitutes an important critique of the subject / object split: this critique becomes the backdrop against which she reads *Spring and All* and *Kora in Hell*: interesting as these resonances may be, Case bypasses the fact that the need “for radical change on the level of language” (75), and the experiments with the self’s relation to words and things primarily stem from Williams’s interest in the avant-gardes, than from his affiliation with American intellectual history; equally, the structure, and the shock tactics of *Spring and All* are informed by Williams’s interest in Dada, and from a defamiliarising approach to American culture. At times, what Case credits to the pragmatist epistemology essentially converges with what the American modernist poets found in continental modernism.
- 6 Beginning with a contrast between Olson’s relative anonymity in contemporary Gloucester, and the commemoration of the transcendentalists in Concord, the fifth chapter on “Henry Thoreau, Charles Olson, and the Poetics of Place,” focuses on the importance of place and pairs Olson and Thoreau on the basis of the ways they experience the “relation between subject and environment” (xi). This is a very productive pairing as it offers a revisionist reading of Olson and Thoreau: she wrests Olson from the lure of abstractness and an idealizing projectivism through a parallel with Thoreau’s insistent notation of the turn of seasons in the *Kalendar* where a linear and a cyclical notion and a linear experiencing of time are not perceived as incommensurable (112). Arguing that the late writings conclude Thoreau’s break from a transcendent notion of nature, throughout the chapter, Case anchors both thinker and poet in the contingencies, singularities and materialities of their discrete existences. The *Maximus Poems* are revisited in terms of Olson’s “engagement” with place, and lived history, building “an environment for the reader to temporarily inhabit” (105).
- 7 By way of conclusion, the final chapter entitled “Howe/ James” turns to the circumstances of the writing of literary history and to the cultural and historical situatedness of both poet and critic. This final take on experience is mediated through Howe’s critique of American literary history and her own relatedness to and affinity for Emily Dickinson. Case encounters Susan Howe as a nodal point for a “collage of relations” (125), and Howe’s re-turn to Dickinson is posited as a paradigm of a lived relation with a text. The study concludes with a return to the aporia and/or necessity of the separation of subject and world, and to the boundary that needs to be “trespassed” for experientially meaningful relations with literary texts. Overall, Case’s work invites us to read philosophy idiosyncratically through poetry, and encounter poetry as a testing ground for the central philosophical problem of our relation to the world.
- 8 In the beginning of the final chapter, the author affectively and affectionately positions herself in a New England lineage, and stresses that “eight of the ten writers whose work I explore are, like myself, native New Englanders” (123). Although she consistently sustains her decision not to address the questions that are raised by the presumed distinctness of an intellectual history that begins with puritanism, saying that she has not sought “to

account for the origins of pragmatism, or to define what it is (if indeed there is anything about these writers that makes them distinctively American)” (124), the emphasis on experience is posited as integral to a distinctly American cultural tradition. The politics of pragmatism are not sufficiently probed, nor are the claims about the Americanness of pragmatism problematised. For that matter, one misses a more extensive engagement with critiques of the ideological implications of pragmatism, a work that is undertaken in James Albrecht’s study in the wake of Case’s study. On a related note, neither do Case’s insights engage with the fact that, as Russell Goodman put it in *Pragmatism: A Contemporary Reader*, “the current revival of pragmatism stems from forces internal to contemporary philosophy,” (11) namely, in the wake of the legacies of deconstruction, historicism, and poststructuralism. From Russell Goodman’s important anthology to James Albrecht’s examination of varieties of individualism, critics probe the pragmatist challenge to the dichotomies of the Continental epistemological tradition, and equally address the political and cultural ramifications of the pragmatist perspectives on experience and individualism. Although this “road” is not taken, Case’s achievement lies in the way the book offers a varied and complex web of associations, relations, and dialogues through an attentive and engaging account of the experiential relation that informs her approach: as a result, the author lives up to her call for “extending the terrain of philosophy to include more of the texture of lived experience” (xiii).

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