

KRISTEN CASE, *American Pragmatism and Poetic Practice: Crosscurrents from Emerson to Susan Howe* (Rochester, NY: Camden House, 2012), xv + 160 pp.

In her study of “the seeds” (xi and xii) and “the echoes of pragmatist thinking” (xiii) in American poetry, Kristen Case traces parallels in the ways that a number of pragmatist thinkers and five famous American poets have understood the relationship between writing and reality (the “picture of mind and world” xiv). Over the course of six chapters, she relates the thought of Ralph Waldo Emerson, William James, Charles Sanders Peirce, John Dewey, and Henry David Thoreau to poetic texts by Marianne Moore, Robert Frost, William Carlos Williams, Charles Olson, and Susan Howe. Thereby, in texts from pragmatism’s (pre)history to contemporary poetic production, she traces “a particular epistemology [...] in which mind and world are understood as inseparable, and the human being is regarded as, in Thoreau’s terms [in his essay “Walking”], ‘an inhabitant, or part and parcel of Nature’” (Case xi).

Case is by no means the first scholar to devote attention to the nexus between pragmatism and poetry. As she duly notes, Richard Poirier’s *Poetry and Pragmatism* (1992), Jonathan Levin’s *The Poetics of Transition: Emerson, Pragmatism and Literary Modernism* (1999), and Joan Richardson’s more recent *A Natural History of Pragmatism: The Fact of Feeling from Jonathan Edwards to Gertrude Stein* (2007) are important explorations of the subject. *American Pragmatism and Poetic Practice* builds on the groundwork laid by these and comparable studies and fills in some of their gaps by including “philosophers who have received less attention from literary critics (Dewey, Peirce, and Thoreau) and poets who are not generally considered among the inheritors of this tradition (Moore, Olson, and Howe)” (xii).

The first chapter functions as an introduction to the subsequent analyses and presents an ingenious study of starting points of pragmatist thought in Matthew 7:16-20:

Ye shall know them by their fruits. Do men gather grapes of thorns, or figs of thistles? Even so every good tree bringeth forth good fruit; but a corrupt tree bringeth forth evil fruit. A good tree cannot bring forth evil fruit, neither can a corrupt tree bring forth good fruit. Every tree that bringeth not forth good fruit is hewn down, and cast into the

fire. Wherefore by their fruits ye shall know them.

Titled “‘By Their Fruits’: Words and Action in American Writing” (1–20), the chapter traces metamorphoses of the biblical metaphor over the course of more than 170 years. Case introduces basic tenets of pragmatism by following the emergence of a philosophical “turn to practice (variously defined) as the locus of meaning” from Jonathan Edwards to Emerson and from Peirce to Dewey. Her discussion culminates in a reading of Frost’s poetic play upon the importance of “action” (15) in “After Apple Picking” (15 ff.). Case concedes that Frost “does not quote the verse” but argues not only that he was “familiar” with it, but that “the poem’s thematic content, as well as its central image, seem to point to it” (15, emphasis added). If the connection between Frost’s poem and Matthew 7:16-20 seems, indeed, a little far-fetched, the connection between the poet’s writings and pragmatist thought becomes clear in chapter three through further substantiation of the links between Frost and Peirce.

Each of the five chapters that follow pair one philosopher with one poet and highlight how both writers tackle and redefine a traditional philosophical problem in pragmatist terms. Chapter two (21–42) is devoted to Emerson’s and Moore’s “dismantl[ing] of real and ideal” (39). Chapter three (43–70), by far the longest and most interesting part of the study, discusses Frost’s and Peirce’s take on the dualism of chaos and order (54), of evolution and design (59). Chapter four investigates the collapse of the subject-object dichotomy in the works of Dewey and Williams (71–94). The fifth chapter looks at “Henry Thoreau, Charles Olson, and the Poetics of Place” and pays particular attention to the relation between subject and environment (95–122). The sixth and final chapter takes the study into contemporary times and poetry by “explor[ing] William James’s concept of relation as it is embodied in the work of Susan Howe” (xi).

Case repeatedly and convincingly demonstrates that the poets are by no means less advanced in their discursive grasp of what traditionally has been rendered the realm of philosophy. As in the case of William Carlos Williams and John Dewey, poets are frequently shown to be taking “the [philosophical] premise a step farther” (85) or “enact[ing] the [philosophical] connection between self and world” (86) that the philosophers can only describe.

Nonetheless, Case's readings leave the reader with a number of methodological questions. The most important of them concerns the rationale behind the choice of particular philosophers and authors or specific concepts that often seem merely coincidental. Of course, the choice of one author over another is always debatable, but why, for instance, must Howe's link to pragmatism be subsumed predominantly under Jamesian thought? Apart from the question of whether Howe's idea of history might have been shaped by influences that far exceed pragmatism, it is peculiar that even the (very short) discussion of Howe's *Pierce-Arrow*, the poet's homage to Peirce, leads Case to the conclusion that it "illustrates the *Jamesian* insight that histories are always made" (130, emphasis added).

A related question bears upon the status or role of Ludwig Wittgenstein in Case's study. Given that his relation to pragmatism is ambiguous at best⁵ and that he is not American, references to his concepts ("family resemblance," "language games," "literary texts [...] as forms of life," Case 2, 81, 93) should have been based in a thorough discussion of their applicability within the pragmatist context and, at least, have had some analytical impact

on the study. Unfortunately, just as the quotation of his famous dictum that "philosophy ought really to be written only as a *form of poetry*" (Case 72, emphasis in orig.), the concepts of the Austrian philosopher—randomly taken out of the context of his language philosophy—serve only as illustrations of what could have been argued without them.

In addition, Case's effort "to enact [...] a pragmatist conception of knowledge" by including reports on "several important facts that pressed upon [her] experience" in the time of writing her book (xv) remains superficial. The personal anecdotes and musings about motherhood or the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan may be entertaining, but, unlike Susan Howe's poetic historiographies or Stephen Muecke's fictocriticism, they do not add to the knowledge the book intends to enhance.

Thus, while Case does not succeed in writing literary criticism "as a *form of poetry*" (or of pragmatism, for that matter), her close readings of texts by American poets and pragmatists further illuminate important connections between American pragmatism and poetic practice.

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⁵ Judy Hensley. "Who's Calling Wittgenstein a Pragmatist?" *European Journal of Pragmatism and American Philosophy* 4.2 (2012). Symposia: "Wittgenstein and Pragmatism." Web. 24.10.2015.