CHAPTER ONE

Introduction: frontier instances

> Every science must devise its own instruments. The tool required for philosophy is language. Thus philosophy redesigns language in the same way that, in a physical science, pre-existing appliances are redesigned. It is exactly at this point that the appeal to facts is a difficult operation. This appeal is not solely to the expression of the facts in current verbal statements. The adequacy of such sentences is the main question at issue. It is true that the general agreement of mankind as to experienced facts is best expressed in language. But the language of literature breaks down precisely at the task of expressing in explicit form the larger generalities which metaphysics seeks to express.
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> Alfred North Whitehead, *Process and Reality*

THUS, IN THE BEGINNING, ALL THE WORLD WAS AMERICA[1]

Each of the chapters to follow focuses on an aspect of the life of the mind in America as it develops the habit we know as Pragmatism, specifically, the method of thinking described by William James and inflected by radical empiricism.[2] My subjects are figures whose works serve as what Charles Darwin in his *N Notebook* called, noting his borrowing from Francis Bacon, "frontier instances": "cases in which we are enabled to trace that general law which seems to pervade all nature – the law, as it is termed, of continuity."[3] The argument proceeds by amplification, a gesture mimetic of Pragmatism itself, each essay illustrating what happened over time to a form of thinking brought by the Puritans to the New World. Under the pressure of conditions on the American strand, this form of thinking began its evolution, by way of aesthetic adaptations I shall map, into Pragmatism.

The signal, if implicit, motive of Pragmatism is the realization of thinking as a life form, subject to the same processes of growth and change as all other life forms.[4] Regarding thinking in this way makes perfect sense given the centrality of *On the Origin of Species* to the work of Charles Sanders

Peirce, who first read *Origin* just after his graduation from Harvard in 1859, and to William James, who, in *The Principles of Psychology* (1890) works out the implications of the Darwinian information for the understanding of consciousness, of thought; as Darwin indicated: "– we can thus trace causation of thought.– . . . obeys same laws as other parts of structure."[5] This sense is deepened by taking a step back and recalling that the model for evolution, or development theory as it was first called, came from the study of language, a primary material embodiment of thinking.[6] Thus Pragmatism's identifying notion that truth happens to an idea did not spring fully formed and ready to do intellectual battle from the head of Peirce or James, but germinated and grew in a particular environment of fact. As Wallace Stevens reminds us, "[H]is soil is man's intelligence."[7]

A persistently disturbing element of this environment, observed repeatedly and variously by astute recorders of the American experiment, beginning with the diligent journal-keeping Puritans and running through to the poets of high modernism, was/is the incommensurability of nature, its unavailability to the categories of description embedded in the language of the settlers.[8] Nature literally amazed them. Words failed in "this new, yet unapproachable America."[9] The insistent conditions of American nature invited, and more often demanded, scrutiny of the relation between fact and feeling. These conditions had been announced from the moment of first arrival. John Winthrop's journals, Anne Bradstreet's poetry, Cotton Mather's sermons, to note only a few examples, offer abundant evidence of the effects of what William Bradford described as a "desolate and howling wilderness" on the sensibilities of those following their errand to build the "city upon a hill."

The strangeness of the New World environment to European perception, its immense scale, extremes of climate, the habits of its natives, seen through the Puritan typological scrim, made of those tracking their experience, in preparation to hear the call to election, "inquisitorial botanist[s]."[10] Under the charge to make the invisible visible, not content simply to list what they saw and heard, they felt compelled to translate these facts into signs. They made wind, thunder, and hail into lines of text which they interwove with lines from Paul, Matthew, and Mark in their attempt to find types that would provide at least a virtual reality where their spirits could find temporary rest. Francis Bacon's directive to read the Book of Nature as the Book of God was nowhere more assiduously followed than in seventeenth-century New England. In much the same way that Shakespeare's language is characterized by the counterpointing of high and low rhetorical forms mimicking the experiential diversity of the Elizabethan

world,[11] the language of sermons, journals, conversion and captivity narratives, and the poetry of the seventeenth-century colonists registers the perplexing juxtapositions of their world, stretched between the residual security offered by their foundational text, the Bible, and the actualities of the threatening landscape. Instances of these occasions are myriad. This recording of existence on simultaneous planes, the supernatural or sacred and the natural or profane, like treble and bass staffs on which notations were made, would find full expression in Emerson's style, especially after "The Divinity School Address" and *Nature* (1836).

The responses of the first settlers were strong and inflected by two strains: the feeling of the theological impulse that to the greatest extent determined the shape of the polity, and the fact of stone age nature that gradually came to be tamed somewhat in descriptions informed by increasingly specific scientific information. Left with the feeling of what happens,[12] thrown into the paradoxical situation of being both inside and outside their language at once, forced to live in the world but outside of existing conceptions of it, the most attentive and concerned seventeenth-century doers of the word were to devise solutions that were in the purest sense "aesthetic," before the term itself had become established as a category of experience. By the end of the eighteenth century, the pressure on the classical episteme, as we know from Michel Foucault, was extreme. "Aesthetics" emerged as a distinct term on the intellectual horizon at roughly the same time as different "sciences" were emerging from natural philosophy. They became the containers for what theology once held, the excess of experience described by "more than rational distortion."[13] The coincidence is not in itself surprising, but the way these categories came to function and to be understood in the evolution of American thinking is central to the argument of these chapters and to the selection of the figures who are my subjects: Jonathan Edwards, Ralph Waldo Emerson, William James, Henry James, Wallace Stevens, and Gertrude Stein. Each of these writers built an aesthetic outpost in an endeavor that was at the same time Lucretian, in taking into account the order of things insofar as it could be known, and ministerial, in performing in language the ritual responses requisite to keeping a community together, an aspect distinguishing this line of American literary experiment.

The accumulating information about American nature from the time of discovery and well into the nineteenth century came to those collecting such data in the Old World precisely as that, data *about* what they could only imagine and which they attempted to fit into a system to the greatest extent still dominated by an Aristotelian scheme dependent on the subject–predicate, substance–quality distinction. This scheme continued to ground

experience and reflections on it, even though, as Alfred North Whitehead pointed out, Descartes had already unsettled the scheme, though without realizing it, as Locke and Hume would also fail to realize in their extensions of Cartesian perceptions into empiricism and sensationalist philosophy.[14] Indeed, it should be noted in connection with Locke's thinking that whenever, in presenting his argument in *An Essay concerning Human Understanding*, he arrived at points where the logic issuing from the substance–quality basis failed him in descriptive power, he used analogy to communicate the glimmering of a new idea.[15] This intrusion of what to him would have belonged more properly to literary rather than to philosophical discourse was something that *happened to the idea* of how philosophical thinking goes on. This seemingly incidental breakdown of what was showing itself to be an outworn form was to whisper its knowledge into the ear of Jonathan Edwards.

Edwards's hungry reading of Locke was sensitive to nuances of syntax, grammar, and logic in large part as a result of his ministerial training but equally because of his lifelong habit of closely observing natural phenomena, especially the relation of physical structures and processes to the accidents of environment. His natural historian's eye is particularly instanced by his study of spiders and light. Edwards gave words and sentences the same kind of attention Darwin would just over a century later. While Darwin would rewrite *Origin* five times, persistently attempting to escape the prison of sentences expressing the very idea of design he was trying to overturn, Edwards simultaneously theorized and performed stylistic experiments that opened up spaces in his language for the play of imagination with and around what Stevens would later describe, in drawing a distinction between "the poetry of the subject" and the "true subject" out of which the former develops, as "the irrational element," the welter of feelings out of which the framing propositions of the larger containing sentences and paragraphs emerge.[16] In each "room of the idea," Edwards's term for such a conceptual/linguistic space, was the "furniture," in Locke's terms,[17] that made it a pleasing habitation for the mind in its constant searching for places of rest.[18] These "rooms," sites of rhetorical expansion, interrupt and deflect the trajectory of linear logical argument. It was as though Edwards added to the form of thought he had inherited a third dimension that altered its formal presentation in language in much the same way that the addition of perspective altered the conceptual ground of Renaissance painting. The instruments permitting this conceptual deepening, over time, would, out of their scopic possibilities, generate useful distortions of things as they were: Mercator projections, for example. Other instances are the extraordinary anamorphic

depictions of the sixteenth century where two scenes, one sacred, the other profane, are rendered on the same panel, the profane scene enfolded in the perspectival stretching of the sacred scene and perceptible only from a particular oblique point of view, or through a keyhole – as a voyeur or child curious to view the forbidden scene might glimpse – or with the aid of a cylindrical mirror.[19] Thus, two registers of perception could be presented simultaneously, the "true subject" resting within the "poetry of the subject," within the "room of the idea."

Of course, by the time Edwards came to reflect on language and experience, a mass of evidence of telescopic and microscopic accounting had accumulated in the records of the generations before him, as well as in those of his contemporaries, all examining their souls for signs of election.[20] But Edwards was the first New World representative to regard these records, as well as those recounting his own spiritual journey, as material for philosophical examination. While it is impossible to know all the reasons for his self-appointment to this office, it does seem that it was in large part Locke's *Essay*, together with Newton's *Opticks*, coming to Yale (rather than to Harvard, say) in the gift of Jeremiah Dummer to the library in 1717/18 (which year is in question), that catalyzed the various elements of his perception and precipitated his becoming America's first, if retrospectively acknowledged, philosopher.

Intensely aware of what it felt like to be overwhelmed by what could not be understood, and compelled, at the same time, as a minister in a time of spiritual degeneracy, to attempt the translation of this condition for himself and his community into an experience of being amazed by grace, Edwards found himself in a situation common to innovators in thinking and perception, that is, using techniques of persuasion as much as, if not more than, reasoned argument to effect his intention. As Paul Feyerabend observes:

> One should rather expect that catastrophic changes in the physical environment, wars, the breakdown of encompassing systems of morality, political revolutions, will transform adult reaction patterns as well, including important patterns of argumentation. Such a transformation may again be an entirely natural process and the only function of a rational argument may lie in the fact that it increases the mental tension that preceded *and caused* the behavioural outburst.
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> . . . Even the most puritanical rationalist will then be found to stop reasoning and to use *propaganda* and *coercion*, not because some of his *reasons* ceased to be valid, but because the *psychological* conditions which make them effective, and capable of influencing others, have disappeared. And what is the use of an argument that leaves people unmoved?[21]

The most extreme and public instance of this kind in the American settlement before Edwards and the Great Awakening was the Antinomian Crisis, when the rhetorical distortions so masterfully deployed by John Cotton in his sermons were taken up and extended experientially by Anne Hutchinson in the gatherings she convened to explore precisely those psychological conditions which made Cotton's words effective.[22] But, as a woman, Hutchinson lacked the canonic language and familiarity with the containing forms of argument; her discourse was all, so to speak, free play, consisting solely of the "distortions" and so was perceived as an unsheathed threat to the body politic. While her experience epitomized what was happening to the idea on which the errand into the wilderness was premised, it was necessary that this experience be represented not as a primary process, but subtly, as an adaptation or transmutation within and of traditional forms. It was in this redactive expression that Edwards succeeded. It cannot be stressed strongly enough, keeping in mind Whitehead's (note 14) and Feyerabend's observations concerning the constitution of the self in relation to environmental strangeness, that the psychological conditions of the New World experiment were such that the subject–predicate breakdown was being *felt* as terror by the "stranded" Americans.

It is important to keep in mind the continuity of successful forms of expression in the evolution of thinking, and more particularly to consider this feature in the context of language as an organic form as well, as natural and necessary to the survival of human beings as the honeycomb to bees, the structure in and by which transformations essential to the life of the community are made. Appetite and sustenance determine the one as much as the other. This realization about language has, of course, begun to emerge with some degree of clarity only recently in the period following Darwin's contribution.[23] Darwin's recurrent reminders in his published work, and even more persistently made to himself in his notebooks, of the primacy of pleasure in and for all organic forms extended to language. He struggled to make *Origin* a text that would survive. In order to accomplish this end, Darwin knew, he had to fashion his language so that it would satisfy the dual requirement of preserving a residual form to ensure continuity with the past while introducing within that form the adaptations mimicking what he had come to understand about the laws of chance and accident operating throughout nature.[24] His considerations in shaping his text were in the deepest sense of the term, as I hope to have begun to suggest, *aesthetic*.[25]

"Pleasure," the word Darwin chose to return attention to "that first, foremost law,"[26] would become William James's "interest," while Freud, pursuing the permutations of the same law, held on to the more piquant

original. Whitehead, taking direction from and continuing the work James had taken on in *Principles* – to provide in academically acceptable form an explanation of the human experience of life on the planet – chose "appetition" and "satisfaction" to describe pleasure's two-step process.[27] While we may delight in Roland Barthes's lubricious suggestions concerning the "pleasure of the text," it is more useful to turn to Whitehead for help in making clear the connections of this natural law to language, particularly because of his acknowledged debt to James. Whitehead's dry terms serve the purpose for which he designed them, to analyze the "actual entities," his term for any temporal forms subject to process.[28] In the case of language, then, to return to Darwin's concern, and to the argument of these essays, it is necessary to ask how appetition and satisfaction function.

William James in "The Stream of Thought" chapter of *Principles* offers the following observations which open up the aspect of appetition for consideration; the emphases are James's:

> If there be such things as feelings at all, *then so surely as relations between objects exist in rerum natura, and more surely, do feelings exist to which these relations are known*. There is not a conjunction or a preposition, and hardly an adverbial phrase, syntactic form, or inflection of voice, in human speech, that does not express some shading or other of relation which we at some moment actually feel to exist between the larger objects of our thought. If we speak objectively, it is the real relations that appear revealed; if we speak subjectively, it is the stream of consciousness that matches each of them by an inward coloring of its own. In either case the relations are numberless, and no existing language is capable of doing justice to all their shades.
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> We ought to say a feeling of *and*, a feeling of *if*, a feeling of *but*, and a feeling of *by*, quite as readily as we say a feeling of *blue*, a feeling of *cold*. Yet we do not so inveterate has our habit become of recognizing the substantive parts alone, that language almost refuses to lend itself to any other use . . . All *dumb* or anonymous psychic states have, owing to this error, been cooly suppressed; or, if recognized at all, have been named after the substantive perception they led to, as thoughts "about" this object or "about" that, the stolid word *about* engulfing all their delicate idiosyncrasies in its monotonous sound. Thus the greater and greater accentuation and isolation of the substantive parts have continually gone on.[29]

We recall that James begins his chapter by suggesting the imprecision of using "he thinks" or "I think" by noting, "If we could say in English 'it thinks,' as we say 'it rains' or 'it blows,' we should be stating the fact most simply and with the minimum of assumption. As we cannot, we must simply say that *thought goes on*."[30] Buried as it is, announcing the subject of the ninth chapter in a 1,400-page text, this opening seems a mild-mannered gambit, yet James would accomplish with this move the revolutionary

change in the language game that, as Whitehead observed, Descartes, and Locke and Hume following him, did not realize to be implicit in the subject–predicate, substance–quality shift he had initiated. This change does not seem revolutionary to us any longer as we have already been conditioned by the new habits James suggests be taken on, most specifically in this chapter and in different ways throughout his work, habits more recently, and, to the American market mentality, more stylishly theorized in various foreign modes of Marxist, neo-Marxist, structuralist, deconstructionist, multicultural discourse, all charging us to put the cart before the horse and realize our condition of being locked in the prison-house of language.[31] But James recognized that Emerson – "Every sentence is a prison" – had heralded this news long before:

> It is very unhappy, but too late to be helped, the discovery we have made, that we exist. That discovery is called the Fall of Man. Ever afterwards, we suspect our instruments. We have learned that we do not see directly, but mediately, and that we have no means of correcting these colored and distorted lenses which we are, or of computing the amount of their errors. Perhaps these subject-lenses have a creative power; perhaps there are no objects. Once we lived in what we saw; now the rapaciousness of this new power, which threatens to absorb all things, engages us. Nature, art, persons, letters, religions, – objects successively tumble in, and God is but one of its ideas.[32]

As I demonstrate in the chapters following, Emerson, and Edwards before him, had been enabled, no less than Darwin, by the New World experience of nature, to realize the actuality of Locke's perception concerning the effect of words and simple ideas.

The appetition of language for new forms of expression is described concisely in the passage from James quoted above – "We ought to say a feeling of *and*, a feeling of *if*, a feeling of *but*, and a feeling of *by*." James learned from Darwin and from Emerson to consider not only language but thinking, too, as a life form constantly undergoing adaptation and mutation. In his essays and lectures Emerson showed what sentences and paragraphs that mimic thinking as process look like, as natural facts subject to the same evolutionary process Darwin would theorize and exemplify in *Origin*. (As I shall detail in Chapter 3, the coincidence of Emerson's and Darwin's approximately simultaneous realizations of this process was also prepared – in addition to their experiences in New World nature – by their responses to a body of common texts.)[33] Emerson's stylistic practice significantly incorporated the prime features of nature's process as Darwin would describe: the profligacy of forms necessary to ensure the possibility of adaptation or fit to constantly changing conditions; and the physical responsiveness of an organism, in this case language, to its accidental environment – but

to return to Edwards, who began the recalibration of the instrument of language that Emerson reminds us to suspect.

IF WE DESIRE TO LIVE, WE CAN ONLY DO SO IN THE MARGINS OF THAT PLACE[34]

The unsettling of the subject–predicate, substance–quality distinction that Descartes had unknowingly instigated and that Locke had begun to exemplify in his slips into analogy, for Jonathan Edwards became the actual, if shifting, ground of experience. In sharp contrast to the Old World where traditional linguistic forms continued to reflect, for the greatest number of language users, the situation of subjects still subject to predication in social orders preserving residual feudal and/or religious ties, the New World experience, in fact, physically effected the revolution into "the modern" instanced by the collapse of the subject–object distinction. The colonists pursuing their errand were indeed accomplishing the fate signaled by the Reformation as, from the margins of their being, they regarded themselves as objects and made notations. Edwards found in Locke the sketch for a template his experience inscribed. The American situation provided him the occasion to convert Locke's perception into actuality.[35]

What Locke had begun to conceptualize as an abstraction in the mental space opened by his thinking *about* the relation between words and perception, Edwards experienced as fact. His subjectivity decentered, he regarded it/himself as the object of alien feelings. Whitehead makes the point again and again, implicitly acknowledging his debt to Darwin and William James, that it is through the body that reality is processed. In the context of the New World experiment, it is crucial to recall an observation astutely drawn by Perry Miller in his discussion of Edwards's realization about the power of words:

> Edwards works his way from the Lockean theory of language to his distinction between the "understanding of the head" and the "understanding of the heart." This is not, as in Coleridge's distinction of Understanding and Reason, a division into separate faculties. In Edwards' "sense of the heart" there is nothing transcendental; it is rather a sensuous apprehension of the total situation important for man, as the idea taken alone can never be. What makes it in that context something more than an inert impression on passive clay, is man's apprehension that for him it augurs good or evil. It is, in short, something to be saluted by the emotions as well as the intellect. *When a man is threatened, when his life is endangered, the whole man is alerted; the word then becomes one with the thing* [a natural incarnation, as it were], *becomes in that crisis a signal for positive action*. (Emphasis mine)[36]

As Whitehead concisely states in his systemizing of how propositions function: "The primary mode of realization of a proposition in an actual entity is not by judgment, but by entertainment. A proposition is entertained when it is admitted into feeling. Horror, relief, purpose, are primarily feelings involving the entertainment of propositions."[37] Following Whitehead's formulation clarifies what I have been pointing to as the aesthetic function in language: distortions in syntax and grammar are mimetic of feelings entertained, animal responses to what exists as matter of fact, whether the facts be features of the natural environment or, as Locke had begun to inflect, the realization of language itself as fact.

It is, then, exceptional only in the sense of accidental that in America the combined threat of nature and the fragility of the body politic provided the *occasion* whereby propositions implicit in the Lockean theory of language and mind became what Whitehead calls *lures for feeling*:[38] in this setting, for feeling the anomie attendant on the breakdown of the old order of things. The kind of statement that evolved was characterized by an *appetition* for forms where questions and questing reflexively undermined predication: for forms of paradox; for a preponderance of analogy; for repetitions imitating ritual and prayer; for paratactic listings of experiences and phenomena not encountered before. These features, evident in American writing beginning with the colonial period, resolve in Edwards into a self-conscious style that, moreover, and most significantly, deploys structures adopted from his close attention to natural processes. As Whitehead observes, it is the translation of the welter of emotional experience in the face of "stubborn fact"– a term he borrowed from William James and deployed persistently throughout his work – into a private, self-conscious form that marks the aesthetic. In the case of the American experience, the imported theological framework inappropriately structures this aesthetic translation, and thus distinguishes the American from the British and European aesthetic. By the nineteenth century, writers of the American Renaissance themselves began noticing this difference: Hawthorne's contrasts, for example, in *The Scarlet Letter*, between Elizabethan style, as represented by Pearl, and the colonial "plain style."[39] After Edwards, the next move in the American language game is made by Emerson who, like Edwards, was doubly prompted by theological and natural cues and thereby found in the reading of key European texts a call, "a signal for positive action." This "positive action" was his translation, his recombination in the alembic shaped of his time and place, of the word into thing, *pragma*, an incarnation: "Cut these words and they would bleed."[40] This was a ministerial performance, albeit for Emerson, from the time of *Nature* (1836), a secular one, but nonetheless a performance that