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978-0-521-83748-4 - A Natural History of Pragmatism: The Fact of Feeling from Jonathan Edwards to Gertrude Stein

Joan Richardson

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A NATURAL HISTORY OF PRAGMATISM

Joan Richardson provides a fascinating and compelling account of the emergence of the quintessential American philosophy: pragmatism. She demonstrates pragmatism's engagement with various branches of the natural sciences and traces the development of Jamesian Pragmatism from the late nineteenth century through modernism, following its pointings into the present. Richardson combines strands from America's religious experience with scientific information to offer interpretations that break new ground in literary and cultural history. This book exemplifies the value of interdisciplinary approaches to producing literary criticism. In a series of highly original readings of Edwards, Emerson, William and Henry James, Stevens, and Stein, *A Natural History of Pragmatism* tracks the interplay of religious motive, scientific speculation, and literature in shaping an American aesthetic. Wide-ranging and bold, this groundbreaking book will be essential reading for all students and scholars of American literature.

JOAN RICHARDSON is Professor of English, Comparative Literature, and American Studies at The Graduate Center, City University of New York (CUNY). She is the author of the two-volume critical biography, *Wallace Stevens: The Early Years, 1879–1923* (1986) and *Wallace Stevens: The Later Years, 1923–1955* (1988) and co-editor, with Frank Kermode, of The Library of America edition *Wallace Stevens: Collected Poetry and Prose* (1997). She has been the recipient of a Senior Fellowship from the National Endowment for the Humanities, a Mellon Arts and Society Fellowship, a Woodrow Wilson Fellowship, Huntington Library Research Fellowships, and several research awards from the Professional Staff Congress of CUNY.

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JOAN RICHARDSON

*The Graduate Center
The City University of New York*



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For Raf, Anno, and Marina

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Preface

The chapters here follow the moves in the American language game that comes to be known as Pragmatism, specifically, the method of thinking described by William James in his 1907 volume. My argument opens by tracing the conceptual framing of America's native philosophy out of an earlier form of thinking brought to the New World by seventeenth-century Puritan ministers, beginning its adaptation in conditions belonging to what William Bradford called "a hideous and desolate wilderness, full of wild beasts and wild men." The impelling theological motive to build "a city upon a hill" was informed and sustained at its deepest level by the practice of typology, the manner of reading the Old Testament as prefiguring the New, extended naturally, as it were, in a strange and frightening landscape, to reading all facts, all things, as signs of continuing Divine Providence. The settlers recorded their notations in journals, sermons, and poems. What happened to the idea of Providence thus construed represents the first stirring of the mind's life in America as it pursued its Reformation project. Being lost amidst signs, in a native and naive semiotic experiment, was prerequisite to reform, if not reform itself. Spiritual conversion was to be amazed by grace and performative utterance its testimony. Truth as what happens to an idea was lived experience in this new world long before being inscribed in its philosophical method.

My subjects are figures whose work most clearly evidences the development of this thinking language that announces itself as Pragmatism: Jonathan Edwards, Ralph Waldo Emerson, William James, Henry James, Gertrude Stein, and Wallace Stevens. The argument is grounded in the premise that both thinking and language are life forms, subject to the same laws as other life forms; indeed, as we know, and as will be discussed in Chapter 3, it was language theory that provided Charles Darwin the model for what would become evolutionary theory. Evolution, as we now know as well, proceeds by imperfect replication, the ongoing result of the spiralling alignments of matching and mismatching protein strands, repetition with

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variation; detailing the relation of this process to what happens in language will begin in Chapter 2. Each of the writers I consider perceived language not only as matter but as all that matters in interpreting what Stevens called the “exquisite environment of fact.”

For the introductory chapter I borrow from Francis Bacon, by way of Darwin’s *Notebooks*, the term “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” – to describe the works under discussion because they illustrate their authors’ realization of language as an organic form, an instance of “that general law.” Of course, when “that general law” began to be recognized and eventually theorized and named as “evolution” during the extended period covered in the scope of this volume, something happened not only to the idea of truth, but to what has been called by W. V. O. Quine and Richard Rorty following him, expanding the notion, the “‘idea’ idea.” Alfred North Whitehead described this shift as well somewhat earlier when he underlined the signal contribution made by William James in applying the Darwinian information to thinking about thinking and language. Not only did James and each of the other writers examined here understand language to be an evolving form, but each experimented with it, like the pigeon breeders described by Darwin in *On the Origin of Species*, who, having observed chance variations, natural selection, chose specific traits to propagate.

The multifariousness of the New World situation, where so many forms of animal and vegetable life, ranges of geological scale, extremes of climate and weather had no names or categories in existing systems of classification, demanded of those intent on survival, of themselves and of the idea of spiritual community informing their continuing errand, acute attention to the double task of preserving in the texts they wove enough of what was familiar from the past to provide continuity with it while at the same time providing a map of the exotic physical and spiritual terrain: the result, “old wine in new bottles” – familiar words set spinning and hissing in sentential ratios, patterns of repetition, grammatical inversions, varieties of paradox, semantic expansions, evasions of predication, and contextual oxymorons stretching the inherited language to describe the new facts and to accommodate the fact of feeling in meeting them. 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. Each one, a self-appointed priest of the invisible, diligently read in current natural historical

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and scientific literature and tried in varying syntactic, grammatical, and logical arrangements to mimic what Emerson called “the method of nature.”

Darwin, as we know, revised *Origin* five times and attempted to rid his sentences of the idea of teleology, of design, trying to transform the inherited language of intention that his discoveries had disturbed. Similarly, Edwards, Emerson, William and Henry James, Stein, and Stevens repeatedly performed the reflexive gesture of looking back at the forms of language in use and at earlier forms they used, aligned those forms against newly imagined projections of the shape and movement of the cosmos that came more and more to replace the idea of heaven, and transcribed these imaginings into their verbal stock. The recombinant forms of their visions and revisions produced vigorous hybrids that reflect continuing, asymptotic adjustments of what Emerson described as the “axis of vision” to things as they are in the “flying Perfect.” At the same time, these hybrid forms offer linguistic analogues of the experience of being lost amidst signs. These analogues describe not only the fact of the experience but the “fact of feeling” inseparable from it. “Amazing grace” for the audiences of these texts was and is an exercise in Pragmatist thinking where readers/listeners devised and devise manners of reading and interpretation, *conversions* to new ways of seeing and understanding that save them from confusion.

The chapters here point to the informing texts in natural history, language theory, and science read by my subjects and discuss the ways in which what they learned inflected their ministerial mission to fashion an instrument more adequate to describe the situation in which they found themselves, stranded on the edge of a new world of physical and spiritual experience, like the Doctor of Geneva at the end of Stevens’s eponymously titled poem, without words. The solutions these writers found to fill the anguished space, the expanding void opened by the gradual disappearance of God, were, in the most primary sense, aesthetic, expressions of the feelings earlier embodied in purely religious forms, prayers, and rituals. As these latter forms decayed, their practitioners, left without the ballast of belief the forms provided, were set off-balance; the writers discussed in the pages to follow sought to restore balance by adjusting the “axis of vision” to the laws of nature. We know from biology and work extending from it into cybernetics that all organisms, from the cellular level to complex systems, depend on the self-regulating feedback process called homeostasis to maintain the internal balance necessary to life. The homeostatic function of the life of the mind is the work of the aesthetic. Recent research in neurobiology, cognitive science, and neuropsychology – that of Gerald M. Edelman, Antonio Damasio, Oliver Sacks, Jean-Pierre Changeux, John

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Tooby, and Leda Cosmides, among others (all acknowledging their debt to William James) – maps the contours of the aesthetic understood in this way; importantly, the descriptions offered by these researchers counter reductive adaptationist explanations. The aesthetic choices made by the subjects of this volume, choices shaped from attending to, in William James’s phrasing, “real fact in the making,” instance what he would describe as the method of Pragmatism, projecting imaginative structures, informed by feeling, which provide, again in his words, “resting-places” for thinking to go on. That these choices derived for these writers from their observing aspects of nature, in the desire to offer, in Stevens’s words, a new “vulgate of experience” to those still searching for something in which to believe, gave actual survival value to the hybrid forms they conceived.

The present work began years ago as I set out searching for the elements that combined to shape what Stevens called his “rude aesthetic.” Appropriately, I borrow his phrase “the fact of feeling” for my title. Following his pointings, persistently looking for the “true subject” twined and twinned in the “poetry of the subject” – the two things he described as always happening at once in poetry – brought me to the “frontier instances” I map in these chapters. Reading and rereading through Emerson’s essays and lectures has unsettled not only the way I read words on pages but everything around me, making the ordinary extraordinary, an ongoing secular conversion. Reading Edwards’s astonishing contributions has made me feel the urgency of America’s “errand into the wilderness,” an errand which continues ever more pressingly as we find ourselves bewildered by the perversion of the nation’s spiritual aspirations. My deepening reading of William James, in the context of Edwards and Emerson before him and those, considered here, following him, has transformed my habit of mind, his work serving for me as the scripture through which I interpret the fact of feeling thinking. In this I am one more in a growing congregation whose membership includes individuals one is sometimes surprised at first to meet among the brethren.*

* David Milch, for example, creator of *Deadwood* and chief writer for earlier successful television series (*Hill Street Blues*, *NYPD Blue*), attributes his noted ability for characterization to what he learned from William James about both the “physiology of thought” and “spiritual experience” as a “gradual unfolding” determined to the greatest extent by environmental factors – *Deadwood*, the latest “frontier instance,” being an illustration of these aspects. Milch, once a student of R. W. B. Lewis, had at one point conceived a twelve-part television series about the James family on which he collaborated with Lewis. Though it did not materialize, Lewis went on to write *The Jameses: A Family Narrative* and opened his acknowledgments with a paragraph expressing “a very large debt of gratitude” to Milch from whom, as he indicates, he drew “many ideas, feelings and emphases originating in [their] discussions and dry runs.”

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A preliminary version of a section of my first chapter appeared as “The Fact of Feeling: American Aesthetics” in *REAL: Yearbook of Research in English and American Literature*, vol. XV, pragmatism and literary studies, ed. Winfried Fluck (Tübingen: Gunter Narr Verlag, 1999); a portion of the Stevens chapter appeared as “Music is Thinking, Then, Sound: An Aesthetic Exercise” in *Never Again Would Birds’ Song Be The Same: Essays on Early Modern and Modern Poetry*, ed. Jennifer Lewin (New Haven: Beinecke Library, University Press of New England, 2002). A version of the second half of the Emerson chapter was presented as a lecture, “Emerson’s Moving Pictures,” at the European Association for American Studies Biennial Conference (Graz, Austria, April 2000). Portions of the William James chapter were presented at meetings of the Society for Literature, Science and the Arts (Paris, 2004; Chicago, 2005).

Readers will notice throughout my indebtedness to those who through their work have helped me learn how to read, what to do: put my ear to the ground of language to listen for shifting rhythms, halts, swerves in direction that signal movements of mind. Indispensable have been the directions offered by Stanley Cavell and by Richard Poirier, who examine, as well as exemplify in their own styles, the performative aspects of language and thinking; the acute attention to the music of words charged with the energy of particular times and places demonstrated by John Hollander; the manner of relating scientific fact to developing fiction epitomized by Gillian Beer. My attempt is to honor their 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. These materials are the facts to which my feeling, my sense of the thing – *pragma* – is attached. My hope is that both the content and form of my offering will not only illustrate the naturalization of the spiritual aspect of the life of the mind as it becomes Pragmatism – complementing Louis Menand’s indispensable historical tracing in *The Metaphysical Club* – but will, at the same time, help in clarifying what we mean by the “aesthetic” or “aesthetics” by looking at its evolution in a specific environment, thereby naturalizing it as well. My motive in attempting these ends, my own experiment, is to open the fields of literary and cultural history to broader consideration of what constitutes critical reading by taking fully into account, as did William James, the Darwinian information. Taking this information into account does not mean reading as a reductive exercise in evolutionary criticism.

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On the contrary, following James's lead, reading as it is considered and exemplified in these chapters underscores the stochastic amplification of human experience attendant on using language in reciprocal relation to thinking. Indeed, James's project was to continue Emerson's effort and restore to what we understand as "thinking" its sense in Greek where the word for thought, *stochasmos*, embodies the activity of aiming for a target, *stochos*.

My offering here would not have been possible without, in addition to the contributions made by those mentioned above, the vast body of scholarship surrounding each of my subjects. This scholarship has provided material for discussions in the graduate seminars in American Aesthetics that I have been conducting for the last few years, in and out of which my thinking has developed. My references point only to a small portion of the work of these others who have nourished me. Equally important has been my reading in philosophy, in natural history and natural philosophy, in science (including current work in evolutionary theory and neuroscience), in semiotics, in aesthetics. It has been a privilege to have been able to do my work, voice my part, and I would like now to acknowledge the personal and institutional support that most immediately provided its occasion.

Particular thanks to Luke Menand who, a few years ago, in a gesture typical of his generous collegiality, suggested to Heinz Ickstadt and Winfried Fluck of the John F. Kennedy Institute at the Free University in Berlin, who had invited him to give a talk on pragmatism at an upcoming conference, that, as he would be unable to attend, they invite me instead. The talk I gave, the core of what would become my chapter on Edwards, was heard by Ross Posnock, who afterwards asked me who was "doing the book." Heinz Ickstadt, in turn, then President of the European Association of American Studies, invited me to propose a paper for the following year's EAAS conference; the paper I proposed is a portion of what developed into my Emerson chapter. Luke Menand has consistently, since we conducted seminars jointly (and once as a troika with John Patrick Diggins) at The Graduate Center of CUNY, urged me on in pursuing my "take" on pragmatism and supported my efforts in doing so, as have Stanley Cavell and Richard Poirier in response to reading early draft sections of chapters. These Emersonian encouragements to do my work have been essential to it, as has, since the beginning of my career, that of John Hollander who, during the years he was himself at The Graduate Center, served as my adviser as I completed a dissertation on Stevens. Without John's introducing me, by way of my work, to Richard Poirier, I would not have learned to write, as well as to read, "in slow motion."

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My experience in respect to these relationships is paralleled more recently by that with another who has become indispensable to me as interlocutor in the ongoing conversation surrounding Jamesian Pragmatism, as well as in so many others – Steven Meyer, like me indebted to John Hollander and Richard Poirier for their inspired mentoring. Indeed, his thanks to them in the preface to *Irresistible Dictation: Gertrude Stein and the Correlations of Writing and Science* could, with the substitution of “Stevens” for “Stein” serve as my own. The comments Steven Meyer made as reader of a complete draft of this volume, as well as the additions he suggested, exemplify the kinds of illuminations attendant on reading in slow motion and illustrate premises we share, voiced in his preface as well: “that texts exist in relation to other texts or they do not exist at all, and that it is in uncovering these relations that the activity of reading proceeds”; “that the practice of reading is never restricted to any particular field, and always occurs between fields.” I am immensely grateful to him. I am no less grateful to Ross Posnock whose responses to my work all along the way have been truly thrilling and all the more valuable for me as he is, and notes himself, laconic by temperament. It is he who is most directly responsible for making this volume possible. I am grateful for his insight, his trust, his help, our conversations. I had not anticipated such wonderful new friendships to be among the pleasures of working on this book.

I am most fortunate, as well, in enjoying old friendships that have richly nourished me. Ann Lauterbach’s intellectual vigilance and rigor, her linguistic acuity and vitality have persistently stimulated my thinking. Our long talks over the years about Emerson, Stevens, Stein, William James, and sometimes just about this word or that have been as valuable as her comments about the sections of the book she read as it was being written. William Kelly, with whom I have been in conversation about the contours and particularities of American literature, religion, and history since we were appointed to the faculty of The Graduate Center in 1986, has been a constant source of motivation for me in that I have had to meet his insistent demands for grounding as I have tried to persuade him, the most formidable of devil’s advocates, of the central significance of Emerson and William James to thinking about thinking. His meticulous reading of the entire typescript produced suggestions which directed me precisely to the points in the argument needing further elaboration. Further, he, as President of the Center, together with Steven Kruger, Executive Officer of the Program in English, and the Research Foundation of the Professional Staff Congress of CUNY have provided the institutional support without which I could not have completed my work. I am grateful, as

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well, to my students and colleagues, my dear friends at the Center who, in response to lectures and seminars I have given have offered comments and insights that have refined my thinking, and particularly to: Morris Dickstein, Richard McCoy, Joseph Wittreich, Jennifer Bernstein, Andrea Knutson, Devin Zuber, Sharon Lattig, Maggie Nelson, Matthew Gold. I also want to acknowledge, in memory, Alfred Kazin, my colleague for a while at the Center. I was privileged in having been able to talk with him often about the writers and texts he so loved. We one day walked back and forth across the Brooklyn Bridge as he recited Whitman, punctuating lines with comments describing his ever new astonishment at the power of his words. I remain enormously indebted to Alfred's spirit. He was one of my wonderful friends.

In the years I have been writing these chapters my son has grown from uncertain and sometimes chaotic adolescence into manhood and become another of the friends on whom I depend. His reading over my shoulder, especially during this last year, produced conversations that made me rethink and rephrase many passages. Similarly, Leslie Miller, my friend for ever so long, while not a specialist in American literature but, as a publisher of seminal contemporary offerings, familiar with the general terrain, has, through her response to this volume, encouraged me that its resonance will extend beyond the academy. I am grateful for these different kinds of close readings. I am grateful, as well, to Renée Simon for her constant and invaluable support. Finally, I thank Ken Gill for providing the sacred space in which I was able to bring this work to fruition.

I am greatly indebted to Ray Ryan and the Syndics at Cambridge University Press, who, following Ross Posnock's suggestion that I submit to them my proposal and sample chapters, read and responded with enthusiasm and with confidence in what was to come. It is an honor to be included in the Cambridge list of authors. To Maartje Scheltens, Elizabeth Davey, Leigh Mueller, and the staff responsible for seeing the book through production I extend particular thanks. Maartje's genial guidance and easy efficiency in these last stages of realization, exemplifying the very best in editorial capability, have added to my good fortune in being affiliated with Cambridge University Press.

Abbreviations

The following works have been abbreviated for convenience. Quotations from them are identified by abbreviated title and page number. Complete citations can be found in the Bibliography, pp. –.

<i>A</i>	Henry James, <i>The Ambassadors</i>
<i>ABT</i>	Gertrude Stein, <i>The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas</i>
<i>Auto</i>	Henry James, <i>Autobiography</i>
<i>BC</i>	William James, <i>Psychology: Briefer Course</i>
<i>CDN</i>	Charles Darwin's <i>Notebooks, 1836–1844</i>
<i>CPP</i>	Wallace Stevens, <i>Collected Poetry and Prose</i>
<i>Crystals</i>	Donna Jeanne Haraway, <i>Crystals, Fabrics, and Fields</i>
<i>CWJ 1</i>	<i>Correspondence of William James</i> , vol. I: <i>William and Henry, 1861–1884</i>
<i>CWJ 2</i>	<i>Correspondence of William James</i> , vol. II: <i>William and Henry, 1885–1896</i>
<i>CWJ 3</i>	<i>Correspondence of William James</i> , vol. III: <i>William and Henry, 1897–1910</i>
<i>CWJ 4</i>	<i>Correspondence of William James</i> , vol. IV: <i>1856–1877</i>
<i>EL</i>	Ralph Waldo Emerson, <i>Essays and Lectures</i>
<i>GBV</i>	Richard Powers, <i>The Gold Bug Variations</i>
<i>GHA</i>	Gertrude Stein, <i>The Geographical History of America</i>
<i>HJPT</i>	Richard Hocks, <i>Henry James and Pragmatist Thought</i>
<i>HWR</i>	Jonathan Edwards, <i>Works</i> , vol. IX: <i>A History of the Work of Redemption</i>
<i>ID</i>	Steven Meyer, <i>Irresistible Dictation: Gertrude Stein and the Correlations of Writing and Science</i>
<i>JER</i>	John E. Smith, Harry S. Stout, and Kenneth P. Minkema, eds., <i>A Jonathan Edwards Reader</i>
<i>LIA</i>	Gertrude Stein, <i>Lectures in America</i>

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xviii	<i>List of Abbreviations</i>
LR	Ulla E. Dydo with William Rice, <i>Gertrude Stein: The Language That Rises, 1923–1934</i>
LWS	<i>Letters of Wallace Stevens</i>
MA	Gertrude Stein, <i>The Making of Americans</i>
NHJ	<i>The Complete Notebooks of Henry James</i>
NOW	Dennis L. Sepper, <i>Newton’s Optical Writings</i>
OF	Gillian Beer, <i>Open Fields: Studies in Cultural Encounter</i>
P	William James, <i>Pragmatism</i>
PN	Jonathan Edwards, <i>Personal Narrative</i> , in JER
PP	William James, <i>The Principles of Psychology</i>
PR	Alfred North Whitehead, <i>Process and Reality</i>
Sermons 1720–3	Jonathan Edwards, <i>Works</i> , vol. X: <i>Sermons and Discourses, 1720–1723</i>
SMW	Alfred North Whitehead, <i>Science and the Modern World</i>
SP	Jonathan Edwards, <i>Scientific and Philosophical Writings</i>
SR	Paul Jerome Croce, <i>Science and Religion in the Era of William James</i>
TL	Gertrude Stein, <i>Three Lives</i>
V	William James, <i>The Varieties of Religious Experience</i>