

PRAGMATISM AND POETRY:

THE NEO-PRAGMATIST DIFFERENCE IN THE DISCUSSION OF CONTEMPORARY AMERICAN POETRY

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It seems that it should be easy to talk about pragmatism and poetry. There have been numerous, well-researched connections and mutual influences going back and forth between American poets and American pragmatist philosophers for decades. These affinities have been discussed by some key literary critics representing various schools of thought and generations. Richard Poirier has done a lot in his *Poetry and Pragmatism* to establish a firm linearity linking Emerson, via William James, with such key figures of American poetry as Robert Frost, Gertrude Stein, and Wallace Stevens.¹ Continuing this line, the crucial role of Emerson's concepts in influencing American modernist poetics has been affirmed by Jonathan Levin, who, with Emerson on his mind, has called this mode "the poetics of transition" in a study by the same title.² Another important critic, Frank Lentricchia, concentrating less on Emerson, has also emphasized the role that the Harvard intellectual climates, shaped by the near-pragmatist discussion maintained by James, Royce and Santayana, had on the shaping of the aesthetic poetic views of Stevens, Frost, Eliot and Pound.³ James's influence as a philosopher of the psychology of belief has been discussed, in relation to Hulme, Pound, and Stevens, by Patricia Rae.⁴ In a more recent study, Joan Richardson, a premiere Stevens scholar, constructed a much larger narrative which

shows Emerson, pragmatist philosophers, and modernist American poets, notably Stevens, as reciprocally nurturing voices belonging to one larger stream of American thought, which dates back to Jonathan Edwards and the intellectual culture of the Puritans, and which anticipates the findings of 20th century science in the fields of psychology and physics.⁵ Dewey's influences, although they seem to be referred to less frequently, have not gone unnoticed. His version of the ties binding democracy with the need for experiment had its poetic counterpart in the poetics of William Carlos Williams, a relation that has also been pointed to by John Beck.⁶

The connections between pragmatism and poetry are not limited to the modernist phase of American poetry. Among the younger generation of critics, Andrew Epstein has used Emerson's views on the contingent nature of the self to discuss the rich interplay of the aesthetic and the personal that contributed to the overall artistic success of the New York school of poetry.⁷ Michael Magee, in turn, has shown the combined influence of Emerson and Dewey on the New York poetic avant-gardes, which, precisely because of the Emersonian-Deweyan influence, produce forms of political efficacy and engagement.⁸

And yet, despite all this rich record of connections, there lingers a sense of something uncertain, undecided, a chance unrealized, a blurred area of disappointment. It seems that much more should be made of the suggested intellectual and aesthetic commerce. The map of the liaisons established so far seems very unstable and pale.

¹ Richard Poirier, *Poetry and Pragmatism* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1992).

² Jonathan Levin, *The Poetics of Transition: Emerson, Pragmatism & American Literary Modernism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1999).

³ Frank Lentricchia, *Modernist Quartet* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994)

⁴ Patricia Rae, *The Practical Muse: Pragmatist Poetics in Hulme, Pound, and Stevens* (Cranbury, NJ: Associated University Presses, 1997).

⁵ Joan Richardson, *A Natural History of Pragmatism: The Fact of Feeling from Jonathan Edwards to Gertrude Stein* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2007).

⁶ John Beck, *Writing the Radical Center: William Carlos Williams, John Dewey and American Cultural Politics* (Albany: SUNY Press, 2001).

⁷ Andrew Epstein, *Beautiful Enemies: Friendship and Postwar American Poetry* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006).

⁸ Michael Magee, *Emancipating Pragmatism: Emerson, Jazz, and Experimental Writing* (Tuscaloosa: The University of Alabama Press, 2004).

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Pragmatism and poetry remain close, but pragmatism does not seem to have produced any more lasting platform of discussion that would be influential for our thinking about poetry, and markedly different from other theoretical approaches. On the contrary, pragmatism, with its vast poetic potential, seems merely, at best, to echo the theses of indeterminacy of meaning and instability of the self that have, much more forcibly, been imposed by approaches which, in fact, operate on terrain that was originally opened by early pragmatist thought. What is an even more serious problem is the position of some critics who, like Charles Altieri, claim openly, if mistakenly, that pragmatism simply does not offer anything new or sustainable in the area of the aesthetics of the poetic text.⁹

Without engaging directly with views so openly unfavorable to pragmatism at this point, I am going to follow my opposite intuition and try to return to neo-pragmatism, in a variety of its formulations and derivations, in order to look for such perspectives on it that will show it as an aesthetic/philosophical platform offering an alternative to other currently prevailing approaches. That this is a worthwhile project is suggested by a large blank spot found in the middle of the existing work by the literary critics. None of the studies conducted by the literary critics sympathetic to

⁹ Charles Altieri, "Practical Sense – Impractical Objects: Why Neo-Pragmatism Cannot Sustain an Aesthetics," in: *Yearbook of Research in English and American Literature*, ed. Winfried Fluck, Vol. 15 (Tubingen: Gunter Narr Verlag, 1999), pp. 113-136. Altieri denies neo-pragmatism any interesting aesthetic capacity. Addressing Rorty, the critic argues that pragmatism is incapable of dealing with aesthetic objects which aim at the evasive areas that matter precisely because they escape any given set of sentence protocols. Altieri's reading of Rorty, Poirier, and Rae suggests that their argument will inevitably ignore the subtleties of the text to make it dependent on the ready-made network of beliefs and desires. Shusterman's attempt to divorce genius from extreme originality (developed in *Practicing Philosophy*) does not win Altieri's favor either, as unconvincing in its combination of meliorism and aesthetic values. For Altieri, such combination is always detrimental to the aesthetic.

pragmatism mentioned above makes an important case or argument based on the work of the contemporary neo-pragmatists. Among these, the biggest stress is, as I signaled above, on the classical phase of the development of pragmatism, the ideas of James and Dewey, and modernist poetry. Even the studies that make forays into the area of contemporary poetry treat pragmatism as if it ceased evolving, coming to a full stop with Dewey's contribution. The work of Rorty is either ignored or openly dismissed.¹⁰ Shusterman's work is not very popular among American literary critics either. What is more, there are some important writers, for example Alexander Nehamas, presenting views on aesthetics that make them important allies of pragmatist aesthetics, who also seem to be neglected in poetry studies. The result of the lack of proper attention to the potential that neo-pragmatism may bring into the discussion of poetry is that the existing pragmatist literary criticism often sounds as if it were repeating a message that already belongs elsewhere.¹¹ In the following article, I am going to refer to Rorty, Donald Davidson, Alexander Nehamas, and Richard Shusterman, in order to show in what way their writing offers a specific cluster of ideas providing inspiration for critics

¹⁰ Richardson and Epstein only glance over Rorty; Magee is openly critical and dismissive.

¹¹ By ignoring these new texts in pragmatism, the existing critical approaches miss a lot. They become easy targets for such critics as Altieri, who has shown, for example, how Poirier relies too much on Emerson, and how he belittles Stevens's play with the structure of belief. On other occasions, by not going beyond Dewey toward, say, the alliance of Rorty and Nehamas, these studies do become vulnerable to charges of instrumental treatment of the poetic text. I do not think it is an accident that a critic largely enthusiastic about pragmatism, who, like Michael Magee, has written in an illuminating manner about Frank O'Hara, has not been able to deal with O'Hara's friend and poetic rival John Ashbery. On the other hand, when they are engaged, the pragmatist views do not seem to offer much more than the message already honed by post-structuralism and deconstruction. Levine and Epstein, as well as Poirier, can, at best, point out that the message of the transient character of the self and knowledge claims was first explored and employed by Emerson and the classical pragmatists, not by the French theory.

and poets alike by reinterpreting their understanding of the tasks and potentialities of poetic language.

There is strangeness and force in the new American pragmatism, which is difficult to articulate, and which stems from its unique combination of “the will to believe,” or participate in one’s reality, despite the full awareness of its provisional and contingent character. If properly evaluated, this quality would make neo-pragmatism a more fascinating partner for contemporary poetry, which often seeks beauty that “exists by logic of strange position,” to use a phrase from the poet John Ashbery.¹² To appreciate the neo-pragmatist position would mean to enter a radically unfounded, and thus ironical, participation in the orders of reality in which their permanently unstable, and thus poetically defamiliarized character, is a spur to their change, and in which the center of significance is shifted from “matter,” “materiality,” and “language” back to the non-foundationally understood human productivity of meaning. This position, as I will try to show, is the irony of radical pragmatist post-humanism whose difference with other theories lies in its refusal to either explain or justify the human by recourse to any sort of the inhuman. When applied to poetry, this excess should result in new critical language in which the message of the “death” of the traditional lyrical subject would give way to a flexible, ironically distanced, and yet significant sense of the selves that emerge inevitably whenever a poetically enhanced play of meanings is involved.

To outgrow and move past the already aged message of the various forms of the simple demise of the authorial subject would also mean to regulate the ongoing discussion of the relation between the language of poetry, its material layer, and its relation to the material world. Over large areas of the debates circling around American poetry, the thesis of the disappearance of the traditional lyrical subject, often supported by French

post-structuralism, has gone hand in hand with the emergence of a form of objectivity sought in an enhanced adherence to the material layer of the poetic language and the bare materiality of the physical world.

The combination of the increased attention to the autonomous materiality of language and the banishing of forms of individual subjectivity is best observed in American poetry in the close proximity of the theory and practice of the LANGUAGE poets and many younger poets influenced by it. Although the LANGUAGE movement, with its derivations, does not by any means exhaust the rich and dynamic poetic scene in America, its theoretical advancement is an important indicator of the larger tendencies in American poetry. It is against the variety of materialism and its companion notion of the dispersal of the authorial self professed by this poetic/theoretical formation that the originality and difference of the neo-pragmatist program for the discussion of poetry may become visible.

The Materiality of LANGUAGE

When Charles Bernstein opens his volume of essays, *The Content’s Dream*, he develops a concept of poetry as a mode of objective thought in artificially created poetic forms, or measures. These are not, of course, to be employed for their own sake, but for their capacity of exposing the material features of language itself. Language takes center stage, as it is modulated by the artifice of the poetic form. Only in such language can significant communication take place. To be sure, this is not a communication from a “subject” or “speaker”; rather, it is the generalized, not quite personalized, “mental being” that can now enjoy a renewed contact with the world. Combining ideas on language from Wittgenstein and Benjamin, Bernstein stresses the fact that, since there are no mental essences beyond the fact of language (Wittgenstein’s lesson), “languages therefore have no speaker if this means someone who communicates *through* these languages, [not *in* them]”

¹² John Ashbery, “Le livre est sur la table,” in: *The Mooring of Starting Out* (Hopewell, New Jersey: Ecco, 1997), p. 56.

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(Benjamin's lesson).¹³ With this shift from the speaker, or language user, to language itself, we become attentive to a larger notion of language, all sorts of sign systems, or even "nameless, non-acoustic languages, languages issuing form matter."¹⁴ Among these systems, according to Benjamin, who is here closely followed by the American critic, we "recall the material community of things in their communication."¹⁵

This line is developed in a later collection of essays by Bernstein's colleague and one of the central figures of the LANGUAGE movement, Lyn Hejinian, entitled tellingly, *Language of Inquiry*. The title is important: it points immediately in the direction of the hoped for efficacy of poetry as a special language of open-mindedness and lack of prejudice characteristic of science in its neutral approach to its materials. In an essay called "Strangeness," one of the central pieces of the volume, Hejinian presents her program for such refurbishing of the poetic language that would liberate poetry's apparently natural capacity for realistic and objective adherence to the world's *physis*. The crux of the matter is to realize the necessity of moving from the order of the metaphor to that of metonymy. Metaphor, with its affinity with the symbol, belongs to a pre-established code. In short, language based on metaphor is too prone to fall victim to all sorts of pre-established traps of ideology. Metonymy, meanwhile, by relying on a greater accidentality of contiguous connections, relations that are both less predictable (not pre-imposed or prefigured by the limitations of the code) and objective, gives us a better, more condensed rendering of the material context. In other words, it is the "incremental," objectified manner of metonymy that makes it a more suitable tool of inquiry, such as the one found in science. With it, we obtain "direct and sensuous

contact with the concrete and material world."¹⁶ Should poetic language be able to follow such instruction, it would attain the desired state of realistic objectivity in which "the materials of nature speak."¹⁷

A more recent evolution of this widespread and influential tendency toward material objectivity is observed in the writings of Gerald Bruns. In his earlier works, Bruns reaches back to Mallarmé as the precursor of the idea of "pure" language, freed from its bondage to the senses and meanings of the everyday world.¹⁸ This reading of Mallarmé is later developed toward a new sense of "objectivism" in poetry, in which the modernists such as William Carlos Williams and Louis Zukofsky are early forerunners of such important experimental poets of today as Steve McCaffery or Clark Coolidge. All of these poets work with the intuition isolated by Bruns and earlier traced back to Mallarmé, according to which the poetic resides in freeing language of its everyday uses and the controlling regime of the human meanings toward the pure materiality of the sign and sound. It is in such strategies that poets like McCaffery and Coolidge manage to push poetry beyond the genre stage of the lyric. The lyric recedes and gives way to a purer, non-hierarchical use of language. A poem by McCaffery is praised as "an unmediated inscription of the materiality of the letter."¹⁹

The special interest and gain of Bruns's objectivist line is that it frees language from the apparently false and

¹³ Charles Bernstein, *Content's Dream: Essays 1975-84*, (Los Angeles: Sun&Moon, 1986), p. 62.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Lyn Hejinian, *The Language of Inquiry* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000), p. 153.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Gerald L. Bruns, of course, pushes aside the whole load of Mallarmean ideas that smack simply of a strongly metaphysical or openly religious inclination vividly present in the French poet. In his letters, Mallarmé confessed that he wanted to free language toward what he called pure poetry, "divorce it from dreams and chance" and make it aspire to "the idea of the universe." See Gerald L. Bruns, *Modern Poetry and the Idea of Language* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1974), p. 103.

¹⁹ Gerald L. Bruns, *The Material of Poetry* (Athens, Ga.: The University of Georgia Press, 2005), p. 10.

misleading filter of human ideas, which obliterate a clearer view of the world. The post-LANGUAGE poets realize Williams's project in which "what the poet is after is not realism, but reality itself."²⁰ In Bruns, this becomes a project of experiencing a non-mediated life of objects. One poet who seems to have perfected this technique, even beyond the achievement of the American post-LANGUAGE poets, is the French poet Francis Ponge. His curious descriptive forms are presented by Bruns as the true achievement of the poetic of materialism. In Ponge's texts, objects receive a treatment in which they fully come to life. There is justice done to the inanimate world that was never possible before. For Bruns, Ponge's "objectivism" is found in siding with things, for once, against the intruding presence of the human. This kind of writing lifts the sentence of oblivion, formerly imposed on the thingness of things by the humanized psychology of the traditional lyric.

The common aim of the new poetic materialism and objectivism could be variously described as the elimination of the idea of individual subjectivity, of the uniqueness or originality of the personas or voices speaking in poetry, and, ultimately, the overcoming of humanism, realizing the variously prophesized "end of man." This abolishing of individual subjectivity is already visible in Bernstein. We have seen how he works with Wittgenstein's and Benjamin's ideas on language in order to dispense with the view of the speaker as a subject who exists before language, and then comes to language in order to produce an expression of this subjectivity. Speakers exist *in* the language; they do not communicate *through* it. Could such fully linguistic existence, the being *in* the language, lead to the emergence of some sort of individualistic subjectivity? In Bernstein, whatever subjectivity may emerge, must be fully public, non-private, and thus non-individual. Writing as a form of thinking within the formats of the poetic measure creates a division in the self, its

separation from its very private experience. Whatever there was of the uniqueness in the measure (form) employed in the poem cannot testify to the emergence of the self thought of as an entity endowed with separateness or individuality. On the contrary, even though the poetic process might begin in the necessary solitude, the solitary self disappears. Writing as poetically measured thinking gives us "a privacy in which the self itself disappears and leaves us the world" (82). Since "the world" is necessarily a shared area, this, obviously, is no privacy at all.²¹

A similar disappearance of the separate, individual self is noted by Hejinian. Here, the metonymic inquiry and the resultant immediacy of contact with the material of the world simply disperses the self. The objective being of the world overwhelms and obliterates the being of an "I," however conceived. As Hejinian puts it, the "language of inquiry" simply "dispossesses" the "I." The poetic "I" is treated almost as the ego of a scientist: it must be fully objectified and erased. Hejinian quotes Adorno: "the boundary between what is human and the world of things becomes blurred."²²

The rejection of human individual subjectivity has recently received an even stronger formulation from Bruns. The critic's earlier advocacy of the new objectivism in the languages of poetry, which I have presented above, has now evolved, by way of Bruns's combined reading of Levinas, Agamben, and Deleuze and Guattari, toward the idea of a possibility of experience in which the human element itself loses all of its human identity and melts with its environment. What

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 80.

²¹ It is interesting that in the fragment from Benjamin that Bernstein quotes, the idea of the all-pervading proliferation of language makes nature dependent on its articulation through language, which, in turn, returns us to the notion of persons (it is persons who are doing the articulation). The notion of a "person" implies "personality" and separateness from other personalities. Bernstein does not take up this direction. See Bernstein, *Content's Dream*, p. 82.

²² Hejinian, *The Language of Inquiry*, p. 147.

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Bruns is trying to liberate from the cybernetic regimes of Cartesian subjectivity is what he names, after Levinas, “the human at the level of the singular – that is ‘prior to the distinction between the particular and the universal’.”²³ A human creature so conceived is less a nominative I, burdened with Cartesian tasks of representation, than a corporeal, flesh endowed, accusative *moi*, relating with the world in “a mode of sensibility or exposure to the touch.”²⁴ In this mode, importantly, the human regains contact with its flesh, rather than just having a body, the latter being a controllable construct of the homogenizing social systems.

The whole project is one of the de-creation of the subject. The “flesh” that the subject existing in the accusative mode of touch and sensibility recaptures belongs to the area of “bare life.” The term, borrowed from Agamben, signifies the state of “sovereignty” achieved by stepping into the freedom of animal non-identity, “a condition of exteriority, in which, by a sovereign decision, a human being ceases to be regarded or treated as human.”²⁵ It is in such animal “solar experience” of community with the rest of being, outside any cybernetic controlling system, that the organism achieves freedom, and sheds the misery of the human.²⁶ The entry into this mode also entails the shift to what Bruns is calling, after Deleuze and Guattari, “the body without organs.”²⁷ The “bare life” of the “body without organs” introduces the creature, now trans-human or trans-animal, into the condition of non-identity in which it escapes the false political identifications of the homogenous social order.

The discussion on and around American poetry that I am outlining is conducted by both poets and critics. So far I

have discussed the views of literary critics. Before I move on to the poets, I would like to mark the difficulty of such an easy division between theoreticians and practitioners. Among the critics discussed above, two of them, Charles Bernstein and Lyn Hejinian, are also well-recognized and influential poets. The situation in American poetry has long ceased to be one in which a poetic talent, free from the influences of theory and theoretical poetics, simply submits poetic texts to be explicated with the use of academic theoretical tools. The two practices are now much intertwined. Some American poets engage in critical prose; others, who do not, are aware of the philosophical instruments used by the critics.

There is also a larger consequence of such cross-insemination. Within the excess of interpenetrating ideas we might register an alliance of critical and theoretical concepts that have been derived inductively by the study of homegrown American traditions with ideas imported to America from continental philosophy, primarily post-Heideggerian, French post-structuralism. Gerald Bruns’s writings present a good example of such synthesis. Again, these imports do not exist in “pure” forms and are by no means an exclusive property of critics. The philosophical-theoretical concepts themselves have been so pervasive that they now inform the thinking and awareness of both those who write poems, when they write poems, and those who write critical essays, when a critical essay is what they set out to write.

And yet, with all this free evolution of concepts, writing formats, and influences, there emerges a clear affinity between the criticism of the human based individualized subjectivity present amidst the indigenous, American poetic traditions, and the huge boost given to this criticism by French, post-Heideggerian theory. It is against the background of this alliance, clearly at work amidst the LANGUAGE and post-LANGUAGE critical/poetic milieu, that the neo-pragmatist theoretical

²³ Gerald L. Bruns, *On Ceasing to Be Human* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2011), p. 16.

²⁴ *Ibid.*

²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 23.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 28-29.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 67.

difference I am going to present will become clear. Thus, before I move on to present a sketch of the neo-pragmatist stance on poetic aesthetics, I am going to briefly discuss three poets whose work testifies to the merger of American traditions and French theory.

The LANGUAGE Practice and the Death of the Individualized Subject.

The first of these poets is Jack Spicer, whose technical and procedural innovation in the 1950's more than justifies his frequent identification as a proto-LANGUAGE poet. An important figure of the San Francisco renaissance of the 1950's, Spicer created a peculiar understanding of the state in which the poet is found when approaching poetry and language. In a poem called "Thing Language," whose central metaphor brings together the mass of language and the ocean, Spicer writes: "A drop / Or crash of water. It means / Nothing. / It is bread and butter / Pepper and salt. The death / That young men hope for. Aimlessly / it pounds the shore."²⁸ The poetic utterance comes from a special space in which the voice sounds as if its source was situated somewhere in the realm of the inanimate and inhuman. The poem enters the realm of inanimate matter, and this entry is enhanced by the disjunctive, syntactically distortive form, clearly anticipatory of the later experiment of the LANGUAGE group. There is a depersonalization in these poems; what speaks is not a "persona," "lyrical subject," or "ego," but the substance of the inanimate, the world of non-organic minerals, "salt" more than "pepper."²⁹

²⁸ Jack Spicer, "Thing Language," in: *The Collected Books of Jack Spicer*, ed. Robin Blaser (Santa Rosa: Black Sparrow Press, 1999), p. 217.

²⁹ To be sure, there is a rich tradition behind this sort of perception of the poetic language resident in the midst of the American poetic tradition itself. Spicer, as a California poet, necessarily evokes Robinson Jeffers's meditations on the inhumanity of the Californian shore at Carmel in Big Sur. Even more central and imminent is the presence of Emily Dickinson whose poems explored states of linguistic consciousness that tried to pierce

While this side of Spicer's poetics could easily be approached through reference to Spicer's debt to William Carlos Williams, or Robinson Jeffers (a paradigmatic California poet), Spicer's commentators often evoke ideas derived from Foucault, Heidegger, or Deleuze. Robin Blaser uses Foucault's ideas (from the philosopher's earlier period) of the obsolescence of the human and its dependence on the totality of language, thought of as a moving mass, a vast external labyrinthine element that annihilates individual subjectivity. "Foucault's thought meets mine," writes Blaser in the essay "The Practice of the Outside," an afterword to Spicer's collected works, "man is governed by 'labor, life and language'... and these are all of them also an 'exteriority' larger than any one man or many men, unmastered and unclosed."³⁰

In a more recent reading, Geoffrey Hlibchuk sees what he calls Spicer's "topological" poetics as an important precursor of the post-modern deconstruction of the division between the inside and the outside of the human organism. What Spicer is said to sense is the melting of the human into the material worldliness of the world, as Heidegger would say. Hlibchuk reminds us that: "In Heidegger... the subject is melded with the environment to the point of inextricability."³¹ This concept is then presented in the evolution it undergoes in J. Hillis Miller, the early Foucault, and Gilles Deleuze. French thought takes the subject out of its well-delineated, corporeal separateness and seeks its porous

through the limits of "life." Dickinson herself is part of another, greater tendency, found in American Romanticism referred to as American Orphic poetry. I believe, however, that the Orphic elements in American poetry must be kept separate from the influences of contemporary theory. As I argue below, Spicer's Orphicism has a Heideggerian hue in which the relations of life and death are in reversed ratio from its Emersonian variety.

³⁰ Robin Blaser, "The Practice of Outside," in: Jack Spicer, *The Collected Books of Jack Spicer*, p. 297.

³¹ Geoffrey Hlibchuk, "From Typology to Topology: on Jack Spicer," *Contemporary Literature*, vol. 51, no. 2 (Summer 2010), p. 335.

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distributions over the environment. In Deleuze, subjectivity is transformed into a set of “intensities,” which then “diffuse the subject and ‘echo’ it across the environment.”³² Spicer’s “topology”, with its Moebius Strip refusal of the inside/outside divide, provides ample evidence of this kind of operation, argues the critic.

The disappearance of the individual voice from the poems has its anti-ideological import. The role of the poet has become that of an investigator, a dismantler of ideologies. When Stephen Burt approaches the poetry of Rae Armantrout, one of the most successful poets emerging from the LANGUAGE movement, he connects her disjunctive form with the project of debunking capitalist ideologies. Armantrout’s extreme formal care, with which she handles the most minute elements of poetic craft, becomes a device for the filtering out of fictions-spawning metaphors. However, as Burt notes, “even those perceptions become suspect for Armantrout... because they will always involve metaphor.”³³ The result is poetry of total mistrust and suspicion, including the suspicion of language and poetry itself. Obviously, the language raised to such interrogating power will not bear any notion of the speaking subject. Burt again: “Armantrout has become the poet of our contemporary frustration with what we might call the social construction of everything. After Darwin, Freud, Gombrich, Derrida, Foucault, Bourdieu, Diebold ... we know how little we can be the authors of ourselves.”³⁴

When Armantrout herself comments on the lyric, she owns up to the influence of Stein, but places it in the context of the models of poetic language found in Jacques Lacan (through Julia Kristeva). Referring to an intense play of sound and sense introduced into American poetry by Stein, Armantrout speaks of the

repressed memory of the pre-linguistic, identified by Kristeva as the *chora*, which is now heard again in the way sound undermines sense. Armantrout writes: “when a poem’s sound (the semiotic) begins to overtake its sense (the symbolic), we enter the territory of this infantile amnesia where the ‘chora’ once reigned.”³⁵ On these views, poetic quality is found in the disruption of the dominant sense structures of everyday language, what Kristeva and Lacan would call “the symbolic,” and the intrusion, or rather return, of the “semiotic” – a transgressive, and prelinguistic element.³⁶

A poetics of the dissolution of individualized subjectivity is also developed by Susan Howe, another post-LANGUAGE poet. As one of the most acclaimed innovators of poetic forms, Howe has almost completely abandoned the idea of the personal poetic utterance coming out of an identified speaker. It is the stored corpora of language, the records, archives, material inscriptions that speak. The poet is merely a compiler of sources, a collagist of the existing traces of writing, and no specific language user is ever assumed.

As an archeologist of the material preservations of discourse, Howe makes us realize that no such compilation can ever be complete, just as no rationalized discourse can ever be closed. There are always the external contents, the bits and pieces of non-sense haunting the discourse from an unutterable outside. This clearly brings to mind the Derridean notion of the space

³² *Ibid.*, p. 336.

³³ Stephen Burt, *Close Calls with Nonsense: Reading New Poetry* (Saint Paul, Minn.: Graywolf, 2009), p. 33.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 38.

³⁵ Rae Armantrout, “The Lyric,” in: *The Grand Piano: an Experiment in Collective Autobiography*, by Lyn Hejinian et al. (Detroit: Mode A, 2009), p. 38.

³⁶ Julia Kristeva, Lacan’s disciple, sees poetic language as a special case of the linguistic, a language that is different from the illusive and deceptive order of everyday codes in its capacity of breaking through it and reaching back to, or listening to the “pulsations” of, the Lacanian pre-linguistic, which Kristeva names the *chora*. It is the pre-linguistic infantile stage of the chaotic mix of life and death drives which remains in the backing of the linguistic, as the source of energy for the signifying process, a “precondition for creating the first measurable bodies.” See Julia Kristeva, *Polylogue* (Paris: Seuil, 1977), p. 57.

of writing, or inscription, as an element that reveals the absence – of the self, of the sense – much more than presence. History speaks to us, if at all, with an uncanny choir of all the voices repressed in the passage of time, in broken, staccato rhythms of disjunction and erasure. For Howe, history and self are, as for pragmatists, relational spaces, but her emphasis seems to be on the mysterious absence suffusing all relational systems. In her book, *Midnight*, she writes: “the relational space is alive with something from somewhere.”³⁷ As in Derrida, the relationality of the space of writing results in the thought of radical absence and otherness putting a check on any possibility of the stabilization of discourse. This is why Peter Nicholls, when commenting on Howe, quotes Derrida’s conceptualization of writing as the practice “focusing particularly on the material character of signification, which constantly threatens to undermine the ‘pure’ ideality of meaning.”³⁸ Such writing becomes “a place of unease,”³⁹ which prevents the work of mourning to be ever completed and keeps haunting our rationalizations with the plethora of those voices that were never firmly settled in them, the memory of which will in this way never be suppressed. The network of relations between the found materials dissolves the voice and pushes it into a precarious space between life and death. Next to writing as a relational space fueled by absence, there are frequent remarks and snapshots in Howe of older burial technologies: “In most towns in New York State there were no hearses until around 1830. The dead were borne on a shoulder bier sometimes for many miles.”⁴⁰ The death of the subject is here fully documented.

³⁷ Susan Howe, *The Midnight* (New York: New Directions, 2003), p. 58.

³⁸ Peter Nicholls, “Unsettling Wilderness: Susan Howe and American History,” *Contemporary Literature*, vol. 37, no. 4 (1996), p. 591.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 592.

⁴⁰ Susan Howe, *Frame Structures* (New York: New Directions, 1996), p. 6.

The Neo-Pragmatist Correction of the Material Deconstruction of Individual Subjectivity.

What becomes apparent in the juncture of the theory and practice of the poets and writers associated with the LANGUAGE group is a characteristic and rich theoretical-practical convergence of themes and concepts. Coming together in this cluster are motifs which find their source in the past of American poetry and others that can be traced to continental theory. Taking a lesson from American poetic predecessors, such poets as Gertrude Stein, Ezra Pound, William Carlos Williams, Louis Zukofsky, and the objectivists, their LANGUAGE and post-LANGUAGE heirs have learned to attend to the material actuality and texture of their medium, and to see the advantage of admitting and exposing the artifice of poetic form. These strategies contribute to the idea of poetry as a tool of increased self-awareness, allowing for the interrogation and criticism of ideology in disguise of naturally accepted values.

On the other hand, the kind of inflation of the role of language as an autonomous medium that the LANGUAGE poets espouse and profess is additionally attended to, explicated, reinforced, and justified with ideas derived from French, post-Heideggerian post-structuralism. In this family of views, language is an uncanny space of the dissolution of the individual subject, either annihilating it, or forcing it to seek the true sources of life beyond itself (in *jouissance*, or silence). As we have seen, Kristeva’s notion of the poetic demands that poets seek in radical, syntactic disjunction the transgressive and anarchic contact with the area of the pre-linguistic. In Lacan, Kristeva’s teacher, the subject-formation in the language is inextricable from the subject’s acquiescence and acceptance of its own mortality as the ultimate reality of existence.⁴¹ In

⁴¹ Language mortifies the subject in Lacan. *Jouissance* is beyond it, or before it, before the birth into the realm of symbols. Paradoxically, life is in the death of the subject. At one moment Lacan writes: “when we wish to attain in

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Kacper Bartczak

Heidegger and the early Foucault, language is a space of necessity that overwhelms and cancels the individual.⁴² Finally, in Derrida and his followers, language proliferates only to testify to the impossibility of any meaning formation, and any ego-formation, gesturing beyond itself, either toward silence or toward a plethora of noises that haunt all discourse and all narration as their repressed other.⁴³

The theoretical convergence outlined above can be provisionally named the poetics of the material deconstruction of individual subjectivity. Its common denominator is the decisive banishing of the idea of poetry as a space of the expression, or presence, or even formation, of individual subjectivity. Language, in its materiality, often merging with the recaptured materiality of the world, is thought to destroy such

the subject what was before the serial articulations of speech, and what is primordial to the birth of symbols, we find it in death, from which his existence takes all the meaning it has." Jacques Lacan, *Ecrits: A Selection*, trans. Alan Sheridan (London: Routledge, 1989), pp. 104-5.

⁴² The Heideggerian merger of the linguistic faculty and the experience of death is well-known. In recent theory it was perhaps most forcibly argued by Giorgio Agamben who reminds us of Heidegger's "essential relation between language and death," in which "language is the voice and memory of death." See Giorgio Agamben, *Language and Death: the Place of Negativity*, trans. Karen Pinkus and Michael Hardt (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2006), p. xi, 46. As for Foucault, at least in his early development, it is language, as a Dionisiac labyrinth erasing the individual, that represents the realm of death and authenticity. In his early book on Raymond Roussel, whose uncanny poetry of radical impersonality and procedurality, anticipates the experiment of the Oulipo group, Foucault wrote that it makes us "confront the unbearable evidence that language comes to us from the depth of the perfectly clear night, and is impossible to master." See Michel Foucault, *Death and the Labyrinth: The World of Raymond Roussel*, trans. Charles Ruas (London: Continuum, 2004), p. 41.

⁴³ In an as yet unpublished paper, presented at a conference "Theory That Matters: What Practice After Theory" in Łódź, in April 2010, Tadeusz Ślawek, a leading Polish authority on Derrida, states: "long pages of Derrida's work are, paradoxically, trying to reach and perhaps name the essential silence: the speaker has been speaking for so long and with such a strain and scream that his voice has gotten husky."

subjectivity, prevent its formation, and expose it as one of the illusions of an outdated, ideologically suspect humanism.

What pragmatism and neo-pragmatism have to offer the discussion of American poetry is a correction of the poetics of material deconstruction. The pragmatist views on language, the relation between language and physical matter, between language and corporeality, communication, the individuality of the work of art, suggest that we can easily have a humanity without essence, which does not mutilate the world of things by its mere presence among them, but brings this world into existence, and that we can also have embodied, individual subjectivity without detrimental ideological blindness. Even more, pragmatism suggests that, in the arts, we actually always do have those qualities, and that their compulsive avoidance may be a kind of ideological overwriting itself. While it is naïve to expect poetry to be a place where subjectivities receive an "expression," poetry, being a special state of language, necessarily carrying network combinations of human stances, will see the ongoing emergence of subjectivities. In the remaining section of this essay, I am going to outline the neo-pragmatist position on language, aesthetics, the idea of self-formation through entering the poetic process, and the ironies attendant on this act.

Let us start with language itself. In pragmatism, language is not a space external to and inimical to individual subjectivity, but a tool of inter-subjective communication inseparable from the emergence of subjects. Language is the result of human plurality and sociality. The need of communication is primary and precedes, conditions, without incapacitating, the processes of self-formation: the human comes into being through the presence of other humans and communication with them. Already in Dewey, it is the need of communication that makes language a part of the world, but not in the sense of a thing having an essence, but as an operating human faculty that allows

humans to change inchoate external impulses into the things we know. In *Experience and Nature*, Dewey wrote: “that things should be able to pass from the plane of external pushing and pulling to that of revealing themselves to man... that the fruit of communication should be participation, sharing, is a wonder by the side of which transubstantiation pales.”⁴⁴ Individuals and inanimate things exist because of the medium of communication. Dewey again: “Where communication exists things in acquiring meaning thereby acquire representatives, signs and implicates, which are infinitely more amenable ... more permanent and more accommodating, than events in their first estate.”⁴⁵ The “first estate” is out there, but it is not a locus of any meaning that could or should be recuperated. There is no pre-linguistic (Lacan, Kristeva) or extra-linguistic (Derrida) *jouissance*, which should be accessed for the rejuvenation of the linguistic. No extra-linguistic realm dictates anything, or determines the ensuing movement of signification and communication.

It is the process of communication and the emerging signification that constitutes *all* of the environment, with all of its energy. Thus, when Donald Davidson opens his book on “truth and predication,” *truth* appears not so much a result of the accurate aligning of signs with any world outside the signs, any “first estate,” but rather the condition and environment in which signification may occur at all, a force field that keeps the interlocutors in play as agents responsible for the play. It is they who speak, not the “world,” not “things in themselves” in their stipulated freedom from the human regime. “Truth” and significance, the life and death of signs, happen in the area of human discourse, are thoroughly human phenomena, and belong in everyday, normal situations. Davidson continues: “the problem the pragmatists were addressing – the problem of how to relate the truth to human desire, beliefs, intentions...

⁴⁴ John Dewey, *Experience and Nature* (Chicago: Open Court, 1929), p. 138.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 138-9.

seems to me the right one to concentrate on in the thinking about truth,”⁴⁶ and he connects Dewey with Rorty: “Rorty captures Dewey’s intention of removing truth from a realm so exalted only philosophers could hope to attain.”⁴⁷ For Davidson, human beliefs, desires (and thus pleasures), in fact all of human psychological life, have their life in and through the space of linguistic exchange, truth being the name of the human commitment to this space, not the name of the accuracy of representation. There is no sign exchange that can be called language if it does not carry with it the networks of human stances and attitudes.

Rorty and Davidson disagree on the ultimate interest, import, and value of the term “truth,” but they share the Deweyan view according to which all interest, meaning, and import reside in the vicissitudes of the communication process. The central premise of Rortyan philosophy can be found in *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*, in a fragment which succinctly summarizes the argument of *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*: “Truth cannot be out there, because sentences cannot so exist... The world is out there, but descriptions of the world are not.”⁴⁸ In Dewey, Davidson, and in Rorty, the world does not speak, and the notion that there is an independent entity called “nature” suffering the regime of human notions becomes unintelligible. The world outside the human does not offer any system of signification; whatever it comes to “signify,” emanates from the human element.

The world is lost in this discourse, “well-lost,” as Rorty put it in one of his essays, but the loss applies only to the non-human world: what is lost, or eliminated, is the idea that the non-human offers any instruction for the human. In fact, the world in the neo-pragmatist

⁴⁶ Donald Davidson, *Truth and Predication* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2005), p. 9.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*

⁴⁸ Richard Rorty, *Contingency Irony, and Solidarity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press), p. 5.

discourse is regained, and it is regained on new rights and new conditions. As Rorty argues convincingly in “The World Well-Lost,” drawing largely on Davidson’s refutation of the scheme-content distinction, the world is always with us. As long as we speak, as long as we maintain the communication process going and our commitment to it fresh, we maintain and preserve the world and are in touch with it. There is no gap between human language and things. By speaking, we remain related to the world. It is the human discourse that is the world.⁴⁹ With the pragmatist take on language, we see that the radical other of “death,” found in the area of language by Heidegger, Agamben, Lacan, or by the early Foucault, or the “life” of inanimate matter, the “things themselves,” can only be figures for the further proliferation of discourse, the further life of the organism’s linguistic activity, the further self-creation and proliferation of the human capacity for wanting new shapes for its world.

This understanding of language and communication has tremendous consequences for our understanding of what the literary language may be. First, to say that we are in touch with the world all the time, as Rorty and Davidson say, is to remove the burden of representation from among the tasks of language. What it also means, however, is that we have no recourse to the drama of the human as a filter disturbing either the great Non-Being of the universe of death or the life of things. Secondly, the deconstructive notion that literature, as a richly self-annihilating play of language, is the highest consciousness of the dissolution of meaning under the pressure of this extra-linguistic “outside” has no footing after the lesson of neo-pragmatism.⁵⁰

⁴⁹ Richard Rorty, “The World Well-Lost,” in: *Consequences of Pragmatism* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1982), p. 13.

⁵⁰ Such is the idea of literature coming out of the books of Paul de Man and J. Hillis Miller. Their approach uses a distinction between the less self-aware, empirical languages of the everyday, and the more insightful and self-aware languages of literature, that testify, in a kind

The first consequence will shed light on the relation of the human and the world of objects, and I will return to it below. The second consequence changes our understanding of the status of literary discourse. There is no radical break between the languages of everyday discourse and literary languages. There is only a shift in the environment and context of the communication – in its urgency. In everyday discourse, determined by all kinds of economic rules, for example Grice’s conversational maxims, or Davidson’s “charity,” there is a high degree of urgency, which curbs the indeterminacy inherent in all linguistic exchange and pushes toward limited communicative goals. In the non-everyday, or, say, “literary” communication, such urgency is removed. This, however, does not – cannot – mean the removal of the linguistic or a breaking through, by means of fragmented syntax, dissected word formation, or “pure materiality of the letter,” to the “other side” of language, the “pre-linguistic” in any of its numerous theoretical guises. The literary, or the poetic, is still linguistic, unless we want to speak of other aesthetic disciplines, such as music or visual arts (whatever is meant, for instance, by the “pure materiality of the letter” must be either picture or music – not language). The removal of the urgency governing everyday conversation does not mean abandoning the realm of language as a tool that was honed in the conversational and communicative contexts. The aesthetic language of literature is not radically different from the language of everyday conversation, since, as it is clear in Dewey and Davidson, the latter are already indebted to the aesthetic. The difference is in degree, not in kind. To enter the poetic means to intensify the experimental search for new possibilities, the search that is already present in everyday exchanges, where, however, it must give way to the principle of communicative urgency. In the poetic, the ordinary communicative ploys are free to strike a new pose.

of negative transcendence, to the basic impossibility of meaning.

Furthermore, in the pragmatist perspective, the life of desire and of the human psyche is linguistic, and it contains its otherness inside the ongoing communicative process. There is no danger that in such life the heterogeneity of desire, which the cluster of views I called material deconstruction stipulates to be found “outside” of language, will be sterilized by the homogenizing tendencies of the linguistic subject. As Davidson showed in his discussions of malapropisms, an ordinary conversation already confronts the subject with otherness; otherness inheres in every ordinary linguistic situation in which individual idioms collide and exceed the platform of language as a rule-governed whole.⁵¹ It is in this Davidsonian contribution to the linguistic thought of Dewey and Rorty that we may correct the view that “language speaks man.” From the fact that the linguistic inventories are bigger and wider than any single linguistic situation cannot be inferred that it determines the rich network of collisions and distortions that will occur in every linguistic situation. Neo-pragmatism reverses the relation: it is humans, in their interactions that have a chance of rewriting linguistic maps. What speaks are humans in particular situations, and the literary is an enhancement and an exposure of this capacity.

The accelerated immersion in linguistic encounters, which is the proper function of the poetic, reformulates desire and absorbs it into the whole life of the self. Inasmuch as desire takes on significance, it is inextricably

linked to articulation, not separate from it. This is the lesson that Alexander Nehamas draws from Rorty’s scattered remarks on self-creation through the writing and reading process. Beauty is a spur of creation, but is also a spur to indefatigable pursuit of beauty and desire that happens in and through the process of interpretation.⁵²

The interpretive work is present at all levels of reality. Not even the everyday appearances of things are free from such networks. What we take to be the everyday appearance is just the absence of the need to reinterpret. Nehamas writes: “what counts as observation, as W.V. Quine insisted, is what the members of a particular group with similar background will agree to immediately, when presented with the same phenomenon.”⁵³ Necessarily, however, such agreements are always dynamic. They change and, with them, changes the appearance of things. Interpretation enters, and “since each thing resembles and differs from infinitely many others, the process can go on forever.”⁵⁴ Thus, it is even at the level of the everyday ordinariness that interpretations are present, as stabilized conventions. Aesthetic or artistic action starts when these interpretations cease to be latent. The artistic lies in the open acceleration of the work of interpretation and re-interpretation, in immersing the object in newer networks of connections and contexts (Rorty called this operation recontextualization). Nehamas again: “Nothing is what it is independently of anything else; no

⁵¹ I am referring to Davidson’s model of communication, developed in the paper “A Nice Derangement of Epitaphs,” which demands from all involved interlocutors an ongoing readjustment of their linguistic assumptions and skills. On the view that I am proposing here, although the produced modifications of the interlocutors’ linguistic inventories (their “prior theories”) continue to conform to general semantic rules, they also put pressure on those rules and thus modify convention and the linguistic network of the self. For Davidson’s paper, see *Truth and Interpretation: Perspectives on the Philosophy of Donald Davidson*, ed. Ernest LePore (Oxford New York: Basil Blackwell 1986), pp. 433-446.

⁵² Nehamas’s interpretation of the function of beauty in creation departs from the Shopenhauerian gesture in which the artist creates in order to cease to want and get out of the trap of the ever-unfulfilled desire. Against this picture, Nehamas develops a combination of Plato and Nietzsche. Alexander Nehamas, *Only a Promise of Happiness: The Place of Beauty in a World of Art* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007), pp. 131-133.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, p. 124.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*

moment, no person, no thing has a meaning in and of itself.”⁵⁵

In Nehamas we see the full realization of the consequence of pragmatist linguistics for the relations of the human with the so called realm of matter and objects. In the pragmatist view, there is no place for what Gerald Bruns is looking for in his promotion of materialist poetics, or for Hejninian’s idea active in material deconstruction, according to which “the materials of nature speak.” The search for the realm of things free from the regime of the human, or the idea of respecting the world of things on its own, becomes indefensible. The best poems of those poets who, like Ponge, or like William Carlos Williams, deal with objects, do not free their so far suppressed or ideologically distorted *nature*, but raise them into the realm of human potentiality. It is the neo-pragmatist approach that corrects our stance toward objects: shame is in place when there is a shortage of human imaginativeness, not when there is an excess of the human. Interpretation, as something inescapable, can be enslaving or liberating. It is enslaving when its presence is denied; liberating, when admitted and attended to. Art offers the latter option, by taking special care, or activating, the work of interpretation arrested by custom. When Francis Ponge confesses that “I have chosen things, objects, so that I would always have a break on my subjectivity, calling back the object as it exists when I write about it,”⁵⁶ he is mistaking excellent interpretive work, of the kind that is found in his own poems, for lack of interpretation and “objectivity.” No object was ever seen by anybody the way he sees them in his poems. The gain in seeing, obviously sharable, is subjective in the sense of emerging through a uniquely focused artistic attention.

It is also through and in this ongoing, never ending, driven-by-the-desire-for-beauty, interpretive pursuit that our being in constant touch with the world comes to

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 125.

⁵⁶ Bruns, *The Material of Poetry*, p. 87.

open our self-creative touch with ourselves. The joint perspectives of Rorty and Nehamas make inescapable not only the fact that all ordinariness is already an interpretation, but also the fact that the interpretation performed in the service of the pursuit of desire and beauty is the work of self-creation. This mechanism is already seen in the Davidsonian notion of the communicative situation: it will put relocative pressure on the linguistic networks of the self. Similarly, in Rorty and in Nehamas, all interpretation is a relocation of the values of the existing relational network, which, however, are never freely floating, impersonal entities. The relational networks of beliefs, desires, and values, are parts of living selves, and as they are transformed, so are the selves. Art and the poetic, again, are a self-aware entry into the process, and the famed death of the author is a fable. For Rorty, self-creation is an inescapable result of severing all inquiry from the task of representation. Inquiry as recontextualization necessarily beams back on the inquirer. The reading and writing processes are a special kind of recontextualization, one that proceeds without the clear goals set by the inquiry of normal science. But the removal of clearly set goals does nothing to the processes of self-creation. On the contrary, as the literary process proceeds, the self comes into contact with an array of its possible new configurations that is simply vaster than the shapes the self takes in its everyday interactions.⁵⁷

Nehamas continues these motifs in Rorty, and refocuses them on self-creation through the artistic. In the arts,

⁵⁷ I am drawing of course on a large area of Rorty’s views and writings. Perhaps there are some more definite points on this map that I could refer my readers to. For example, I think there is a consistent line that leads from texts like “Inquiry as Recontextualization” (in: *Objectivity, Relativity, and Truth*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991) to, say, “Philosophy as a Transitional Genre” (in: *Philosophy as Cultural Politics*, Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2007) to “Redemption from Egotism” (in: *The Rorty Reader*, ed. Christopher Voparil and Richard Bernstein, Malden, Mass.: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010)

the prolonged contact with works of art instigates interpretive processes that will affect the self. The work of art comes into being as a special, unique arrangement of motifs and elements. All such arrangement “constitutes an individual.”⁵⁸ Works of art, those that are created or those that are only interpreted, become integral parts of human lives: “beautiful things interpose themselves between me and what I already want. They give me new things to desire.”⁵⁹ The subject does not die in the creative processes; on the contrary, the subject is born in them. Nehamas points out that Foucault’s criticism of the notion of the author works with a narrow concept of the author as a mental state that precedes the work of art and can then be treated as a reference template for interpretation. The moment we realize that creation is an active participation in the network, we will realize that no such activity is harmless, leaving the subject untouched and unchanged. The work itself will appear as a source or hypothesis of individualized subjectivity, gaining its shape, however temporary, inside the work: “the author emerges as the agent postulated in order to account for construing a text as the product of an action.”⁶⁰ Authors and subjectivity are products of literary works, and authors are the future, not the past, of texts.

Finally, in the family of neo-pragmatist approaches, the linguisticism of Rorty and the aestheticism of Nehamas are complemented by the work of Richard Shusterman. His writings provide ample argument for the idea that while the interpretive work of self-creation is done in and through language, it is not done through language as a disembodied abstraction. It is true, of course, that there are deep differences between the radical linguisticism of Rorty and Shusterman’s someaesthetics, but these differences cannot be dealt with here for the

lack of space. I would like to note at this point, however, that the work of many major American poets involved the move of combining states of the psyche and cognition with states of the bodily. The obvious example here is Whitman for whom writing was impossible without including forms of somatic awareness. This awareness is present in Emily Dickinson, William Carlos Williams, Robert Creeley, Frank O’Hara, and many other American poets.⁶¹ Poetry then becomes a space in which language and the bodily cease to exist in the manner of precedence. Rather than one being a reflection or product of the other, they achieve in poems more reciprocal, mutually nourishing modes of being. There are kinds of language in major poetry that would never occur if they were not issued by organisms that are simultaneously linguistic and embodied.⁶²

Thus, because of the heightened reciprocity of the language of a large number of major poets and the somatic states registered by this language, I think Shusterman makes an important point, which is a necessary complementation of Rorty’s insistence that all awareness is linguistic. Without solving this philosophical difference and going for or against the claim that *all* awareness is linguistic, I only wish to point out that the consciousness produced by vast corpora of poetry is both linguistic and somatic.⁶³ This fact speaks for

⁵⁸ Nehamas, *Only a Promise of Happiness*, p. 133.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 134.

⁶⁰ Alexander Nehamas, “Writer, Text, Work, Author,” in: *Literature and the Question of Philosophy*, ed. Anthony J. Cascardi (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1987), p. 281.

⁶¹ It is very interesting to note that even as cerebral and cold a poet as Wallace Stevens proves, on closer reading, to be drawing on the somatic awareness of bodily states. Stevens’s formal discipline and his lexical extravagance coexist, render, respond to, alternately cause and reflect, the somatic states of strong but deeply restrained pleasures.

⁶² Creeley’s meticulous portraits of the material space surrounding his speakers implies his heightened sensitivity to his corporeal conditions; O’Hara’s urban topographies would be incomplete without the language of his poems carrying with them the record of the bodily states of pleasure or fatigue.

⁶³ I am aware, of course, that Shusterman’s position is more radical than mine. My reading of poetry makes me think that the linguistic and the bodily go hand in hand, nourish and enrich one another, ultimately producing states of being in which the difference between them ceases to exist. I think that Shusterman, on the other

Shusterman's central argument, which highlights somatic mindfulness as a form of subjectivity that is fuller, wider, and more capacious than merely the cerebrally understood linguisticity. This argument speaks against "ignore[ing] the body's subject-role as the living locus of beautiful, personal experience"; it "refuses to exteriorize the body as an alienated thing distinct from the active spirit of human experience."⁶⁴ The increased somatic mindfulness – whether catalyzed by language or catalyzing new linguistic formations – is definitely present in the kind of subjectivity that is emergent in complex poetic texts.

With this neo-pragmatist contribution in mind, however, we can return to one of the ideas of radical otherness and verify the ideas of those critics who, like Bruns, would like to see the body turned into "flesh" or a "body without organs" and purified of singular identity. Bruns's argument in *Ceasing to be Human* is that the decision of entering the kind of animal state that will ultimately change the controllable "body" into a bare life of flesh can produce a form of life that is interesting from the communicative and political point of view.⁶⁵

The neo-pragmatist perspective makes these approaches much less interesting and debunks them as remnants of the metaphysics of the great "outside." The work of Shusterman makes it clear that the fact that the bodily is a potential for enlarging the scope of subjectivity, against the Cartesian tradition, should not be taken as an argument for pushing the bodily into the muteness and speechlessness of featureless generality. On the contrary, Shusterman shows that the recuperation of the

hand, would rather insist that important areas of the somatic experience are just non-linguistic. In *Practicing Philosophy*, for example, he mentions "a more controversial dimension of bodily experience, a quality of somatic feeling that lies beneath linguistic formulation and often resists it." See his *Practicing Philosophy: Pragmatism and the Philosophical Life* (New York: Routledge, 1997), p. 31.

⁶⁴ Richard Shusterman, *Pragmatist Aesthetics: Living Beauty, Rethinking Art* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2000), p. 274.

⁶⁵ Bruns, *On Ceasing*, p. 67-74.

bodily sphere from the objectifying tendencies of the Cartesian heritage involves commerce between the bodily and forms of attention and thus articulateness. The bodily is freed into a form of subjectivity when it is attended to through states of somatic mindfulness, which, in my view at least, do not quarrel with greater articulateness.

The resulting inclusion of the bodily in the life of subjectivity is inseparable from the greater individuation and internal differentiation of the bodily features. Within Shusterman's somatic mindfulness, the body itself becomes more articulate, both capable of articulation, and requiring or influencing greater efforts at articulation. While Bruns's "bare body" is advertised as a form of life, it is in fact a form of blandness, personal and political disappearance. In the picture proposed by Shusterman, the body is beginning to signify more, aesthetically and politically, when the organism is capable of far deeper interpretive and differentiating contact with its somatic sphere. It is when more of the bodily can be felt, sensed, named, communicated with, accessed by language, by instruction, or by somatic or aesthetic action, that the subject has a bigger chance of politically aware relation with one's surroundings.

Conclusions: the Poetic Strangeness of Pragmatism and the Poetics of Emergent Selves.

Pragmatism is a difficult position. Its rejection of metaphysics is far more radical and insistent than in the case of other philosophical styles. Neo-pragmatism reinforces, indeed radicalizes, classical pragmatism's message of the central and inescapable position of the human element. It is the human, with its meaning making and interpretive potential, that is the sole source of what we call the world. The only "outside" is in the future shapes that the human selves can take, the newly emergent shapes of the selves.

In the work of Rorty, Davidson, Nehamas, and Shusterman, meaning, language, desire and beauty (or ugliness) are human states. What I called here the convergence of material deconstruction does not so much escape the human, as it tries to explain it either as a being that is endlessly dependent on the necessity of biological death, or a being that is determined by the “materiality of language.” In this picture, the human is explained as an accident of dead matter or as an emanation of language. The radical post-humanist irony of the new pragmatism resides in the fact that here, for once, there is a firm refusal to reach for any such explanation of the human. The neo-pragmatist humanity, understood non-essentially as a potentiality for new shapes of both singular subjectivities and their communities, is not to be explained as an accidental error of the absolute emptiness or a terminal of a linguistic network. Biological death is a fact of life, not the other way round, and language is not a space nurturing the work of active negativity, but a non-essential medium of looking for the future shapes of human selves. Rather than being an external element, language is an integral part of each self.

As such, however, the human is also infinitely strange. To refuse to justify human activity through backing it up by appeal to some sort of externality is to see humanity as permanently unexplained – thus strange. The lesson of the new-pragmatism is that there is no final knowledge of what the human may be, or what it may become. Consequently, no shape attained by the human is stable and making and unmaking are constant and inseparable elements of human reality. To say that is to enter the mode of active pragmatist irony. Unlike the absolute irony of deconstruction, pragmatist irony merely stipulates that in imaginative writing reinterpretations are constantly at work, and where this happens there appear new shapes of selves. Pragmatist irony enters when we know that we will be different; ironical self-creation happens when we start participating actively in the change.

Contemporary poetry, with its unchecked experimental impulse, is certainly a place where such participation occurs. With no support in the absolutist thought of death in language, it does not revert the selves to the non-being of dead materiality; rather, it makes the radically ironic move of pushing selves on course toward their new shapes. Also, language, although it is never entirely the speaker’s possession, bringing with it intrusive, inauthentic, ideologically contaminated constructions, is not entirely alienated from the self or the self from it. With Rorty and Davidson it is more proper to say that one can oppose the received languages. This opposition, so often registered in contemporary American poetry, will result in new specific linguistic positions: there will be more language and thus more newly evolved subjective positions. These positions will imply specific states of interaction with the world that are both linguistic and somatic (embodied). Thus the transformations that affect the self will have lasting consequences in the outside world. Neo-pragmatism does more than repeat the idea of the transitive character of all achieved linguistic states: it is also a reminder that, despite their transitivity, these states will affect the world. The neo-pragmatist poetics of the evolving self is then a platform for political stances, more feasible than the aesthetics of endless dissolution.

To sense one’s self evolving through active linguistic/poetic activities and to consciously choose this state, is to enter ironic self-creation. It is this ironic self-creation that is the consequence of the combined stance of Rorty, Davidson, Nehamas, and Shusterman. However, to enter the process and space of ironic self-creation is also to feel the strangeness of self-transformation. The state of death-in-life – a dispersion of the central Cartesian subjectivity – sensed by some of the major American poets, from Whitman, through Stevens, to the poets of contemporary disjunctiveness (such as the poets I mentioned in this essay) should be reinterpreted away from the ideas of the self’s erasure

PRAGMATISM AND POETRY:

THE NEO-PRAGMATIST DIFFERENCE IN THE DISCUSSION OF CONTEMPORARY AMERICAN POETRY

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under the larger presence of the mass of impersonal language, or the self's submission to the truth of the material world, and brought closer to the family of ideas speaking of the emergence of new selves. Each entry into the space of increased linguistic play creates a relocation and a trembling in the linguistic and somatic states of the self. The new selves, as they are glimpsed emerging in the poems, create tension between the biographical self of the writer and the text. What some poets have provisionally identified as the state of a poetic "death" can now, with the neo-pragmatist contribution, be reinterpreted as the experience of this kind of tension and dispersal. But it is not the realm of death that is so experienced – there is no play of meanings, no states of connective networks, in death.

Rather this experience is the experience of ironic self-creation: of one's own self getting destabilized in the confrontation of its new emergent selves. I think that what happens in the poetry of Howe, Armantrout, or Peter Gizzi (a continuator Spicer's legacy) and many other formally innovative American poets, is the encounter of this experience. What criticism has failed to do so far is to offer language in which poets could see their practice not so much as an obliteration of their individual subjectivity but a space of its reconfiguration. New-pragmatism provides a vital, much needed impulse toward such a reinterpretation.