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Emancipating Pragmatism: Emerson, Jazz, and Experimental
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William J. Harris

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ing a distinctly different selection of Williams's work, however, Pinsky may succeed in compelling at least some readers to view the poet's oeuvre with a fresh eye.

***Emancipating Pragmatism: Emerson, Jazz, and Experimental Writing.* Michael Magee.** Tuscaloosa: The University of Alabama Press, 2004. 247 pp. \$55.00 (cloth), \$27.50 (paper).

WILLIAM J. HARRIS
University of Kansas

Emancipating Pragmatism is both an exciting and frustrating book. Since Michael Magee's prose is sometimes strategically evasive, it is sometimes hard to decipher. Moreover, the book is thesis-ridden (which is strange considering its literary ancestor) and repetitious—the same quotations keep reappearing. Yet the spiritual and cultural ancestor of this book, nineteenth-century thinker Ralph Waldo Emerson, is equally as exciting and frustrating, at least Magee's version of him. It is a serious book, boldly showing the influence of Emerson on at first seemingly unlikely places—from jazz to William Carlos Williams, to African American culture, to the New American Poetry of the late 1950s and 1960s, to contemporary experimental writing. And this book, perhaps, makes this reviewer a little less literal-minded. Following the pragmatist John Dewey, Magee sees literary criticism as "a form of desire, of effort as action" (1) instead of seeing it more traditionally as a tool for more or less straightforward investigation into history and text.

Magee, who teaches at the Rhode Island School of Design in Providence, starts with an inspiring re-envisioning of Emerson, an Emerson who comes from recent work of such scholars as Len Gougeon and Joel Myerson, which is primarily based on the 1964 rediscovery in the Library of Congress of Emerson's lost antislavery "WO Liberty" notebook. This notebook counters the standard and persistent image of Emerson as someone who was reluctantly pushed into abolitionist activity (54), by showing him as a fiery abolitionist (2). In fact, Magee argues that Emerson became a pragmatist, a man who believes in a philosophy of action, through his commitment to abolition (89).

In great detail Magee presents Emerson's fascinating and influential theory of language since it is the theoretical bedrock of the book. This study demonstrates that Emerson's ideas about language will be employed by a variety of American writers from Gertrude Stein and William Carlos Williams to contemporary experi-

mental poets such as Susan Howe and Harryette Mullen, and to Magee himself. First, there is Emerson's symbolic activism which engages in re-reading and re-visioning American cultural symbols (8). Then there is Emerson's radical idea of language: "In order to de-authorize his texts," Magee states, "Emerson needed to adopt an extremely fluid sense of both language and selfhood . . . there is then creative reading as well as creative writing." As Emerson said, "You only read to start your own team" (61). Magee feels that Emerson employs language in the way the pragmatist William James will later call "the re-instatement of the vague." Magee defines this term as "a linguistic tactic, a mediation of the definitive nature of 'grammatical scheme' designed to make signification flexible" (95). We are also introduced to Emerson's provocative theory of reading, where the reader glances at passages randomly rather than reading sequentially, or as Emerson succinctly puts it: "The glance reveals what the gaze obscures" (68), allowing the reader to more or less disregard the author's meaning for his or her own. However, perhaps glancing does save us from total solipsism since the glance does connect the reader to the text, the world, albeit momentarily; that is, the reader is not making up the world out of whole cloth. Yet I wonder if a critic can be a rigorous historicist—Magee claims he wants to be—and also a practitioner of this mode of reading?

For our purposes, Magee's discussion of the Emerson American vernacular is the most significant since it plays into the creation of American poetry (and prose)—the turning of English into American. Magee suggests that Emerson believed the American vernacular is a product of "every race and skin, white, red men, yellow men, black men" (9). I say he suggests this because he never gives the reader enough information to know what Emerson is actually saying; a point which Magee could say isn't important because it "starts your own team." What does seem true is that Emerson does see that the American language embodies American values against aristocratic ones. We see this clearly when he shows the class basis of the conservative Scottish historian Thomas Carlyle's prose (79) and when he brilliantly attacks the American "patriots," Edward Everett's and Daniel Webster's defense of the Fugitive Slave Act of 1850 which is "in the service of the sentences of Southern judges" (6). Emerson wanted the American language to be an instrument dedicated to the defense of the common people, including slaves.

Magee makes a strong case, with more evidence this time, for the influence of pragmatism on William Carlos Williams. He observes that "Williams was encouraged by these pragmatists [Emerson, William James, John Dewey, and Kenneth Burke] to pay special attention to the American vernacular, which he, too, believed was 'the basic symbolic agency through which the British colonials

gradually transformed themselves into Americans'" (28). The influence of pragmatism rings absolutely true here.

Magee does not fully buy Brian Bremen's characterization of Williams's poetics as including "the voices that other writers either omit, repress, or seek to silence" (35). He believes that Williams could include the white working class in his writing, but could not include African American speech. He says: "Race is a roadblock for Williams, though he knows enough to keep bumping up against it" (28). In short, Williams silences African Americans. He cannot imagine black speech because he cannot imagine an African American culture. Magee remarks, "Each [black] speech act . . . grows 'original' from a romanticized void" (37). This seems to me that he is being too hard on Williams, bringing contemporary liberal values to an earlier period. That Williams could empathize with poor whites and not blacks says more about Williams's times than it says about him. In this country when did white artists start seeing blacks as human beings? Think of the caricatures created by such famous American writers as Fitzgerald, Hemingway, Mailer, Bellows, and Tom Wolfe.

Ralph Ellison is the true intellectual hero of this book. Ellison, without the aid of the new scholarship, somehow got the story right; that is, Emerson was both a pragmatist and abolitionist (98). Magee claims Ellison gained this knowledge from reading Emerson's antislavery lectures in *Miscellanies* (210). Moreover, Magee believes that Ellison brings the idea of race to pragmatism (22). Magee finds Dewey's idea of democracy lacking because it does not admit "race or ethnicity as a category relevant to the expansion of democratic designs" (21). Is the implication here that Emerson is more radical than his descendants since he could think about race? Following Emerson, Ellison's idea of the American language is racial and international. He states: "The American language, this rich, marvelous, relatively unexplored organ, is the creation of many, many people, and it began with the Indian. . . . We forget that *our language is such a flexible instrument* because it has had *so many dissonances thrown into it*—from Africa, from Mexico, from Spain, from, God knows, everywhere" (24).

The chapter on the New American poets of the late 1950s and early 1960s, "Tribes of New York: Frank O'Hara, Amiri Baraka, and the Poetics of the Five Spot," is really about O'Hara and Baraka as simply background, not central characters. Talk about silencing blacks! Magee reads O'Hara as a pragmatist, but offers little evidence. He sees pragmatists everywhere. The one person of this group who actually does seem like a pragmatist is poet Paul Goodman. Magee is also convincing that Black Mountain College, a fortress of the New American poetry, was strongly influenced by pragmatism (173). Yet in his desire to find

pragmatism everywhere, he misreads Baraka's "Three Modes of History and Culture" by thinking the poem refers to John Dewey instead of Thomas Dewey, the American politician (173, 174). This misreading lets him think the poem is about pragmatism. (In a note he says a critic tries to suggest that Baraka is discussing Thomas Dewey, but this note does not influence his argument.) However, he rightfully shows the democratic use of chatter in O'Hara; chatter "blurs the distinctions between high and low speech by designating all speech as fundamentally *colloquial*," a democratic use, extending from Emerson to Williams to O'Hara to Baraka (139–40). He shows that O'Hara does develop an aesthetic that was analogous to jazz (184). In fact, throughout the book, he has many perceptive things to say about jazz, but I do not have the space here to talk about them.

Following John Dewey, Paul Goodman says "poetic speech [is] a physical thing, a direct action on the audience" (134). If Magee had paid a little more attention to Baraka, he would have noticed that this pragmatic definition of poetry applies to Baraka's work—especially the notorious 1966 black nationalist poem "Black Art," where he observes: "We want 'poems that kill.'" Furthermore, in the same poem he implies that poems should be "useful." I think Baraka, through the New American Poetry, has been influenced by pragmatism. Overstated or not, this indicates that there is much to Magee's argument about the importance of this American philosophy.

Although at times I find his study a little too open-ended, too Emersonian, at other times, I find it filled with insights, engaging and very smart. Beyond learning a great deal about modern figures such as Williams, Ellison, and O'Hara from reading this book, I have gained a much better understanding of both Emerson and pragmatism and their importance to American literature and culture. Michael Magee is an American Scholar, a "Man Thinking."