

Standing at a Crossroad of American Pragmatism and Postmodernism

Isono Arai

I Open to Discussion: An Introduction

We live in an age when dogma or theory is tempted to claim more for itself. Dogma-centered ideology is always dangerous, because all theory is designed to fit the purpose at hand, and it tends to dismiss the pleasure of the reading experience, and constructs a closed system. I need some qualifications and nuance here. Some theories, like deconstruction, are open ended. However, they also repeat themselves.

Contemporary interest in ideology has no development and is related to slippage in the term itself. "Ideology" refers to everything from ideas in the service of power to complex semiotic systems that are designed to provide boundaries. Ideology is concealed in the fact that ideological form creates nothing more than a set of ideological closed formations, though sometimes, ideology leads to action. We are imprisoned within ideology, as if there were nowhere beyond ideology. There are two questions I would like to consider:

1. Is everything political, ideological and dogmatic?
2. Can we totalize, essentialize, universalize everything?

During the period of the American Renaissance, Ralph Waldo Emerson transcended ideology by defining the boundless realm of spiritual quest. William James says that "Rationalism is always monistic," while "Empiricism starts from the parts, and makes of the whole a collection" and it "is not averse therefore to calling itself pluralistic," and, therefore, that "[the] rationalist finally will be of dogmatic temper in his affirmations, while the empiricist may be more sceptical and open to discussion."¹ I shall

adopt the attitude of Jamesian empiricism, and be “open to discussion.”

Pragmatism maintains a position that it is healthier to keep looking for and making up new stories than it is to insist that all of our experience must be encompassed within the structures and tensions of one single story. In other words, pragmatism asks us to question what we think the world of experience affords.

In this ideological age, pragmatism may afford the possibility of thinking the world from a perspective that is beyond ideology. I would like to approach American Pragmatism as a way of thinking, and try to find some paradigm in it.

II Stein, James, and Rorty

Richard Poirier focuses on pragmatism as a form of linguistic skepticism: “the democratic impulse shared by Emersonian pragmatists also involved a recognition that language, if it is to represent the flow of individual experience, ceases to be an instrument of clarification or of clarity and, instead, becomes the instrument of a saving uncertainty and vagueness.”² Vagueness and uncertainty generated by linguistic skepticism alludes to the chaos of language, the Tower of Babel. Poirier argues that “Emersonian linguistic skepticism” is equally at work, and he examines it as a “generative principle” in such American poets as Emily Dickinson, Robert Frost, Wallace Stevens, Gertrude Stein, and Walt Whitman. As to the vagueness of Emersonian linguistic skepticism, Poirier finds it as “the deconstructive moments of language” in the dialogue of Melanctha and Jeff in Stein’s *Three Lives*.

Here I would like to concretely take up some of Stein’s literary works, and to show my reading experience of them, keeping in mind not to close the text by any dogma or ideology. How do we contextualize Stein’s text?

Reading an avant-garde modernist, Gertrude Stein, in a pragmatic context, as a reader in the 1990s, who lives in an avant-pop condition of the arts, and who is interested in postmodernism, requires me to read Gertrude Stein in a post-pragmatic avant-pop modernistic way of reading.³

A. “Composition as Explanation”

I will discuss a novelette “Melanctha,” and a lecture essay, “Composition as Explanation.” The relationship between “Melanctha” and “Composition as Explanation” seems to be similar to the relationship between Edgar Allan Poe’s poem “The Raven” and its self-analysis, “Philosophy of Composition.” Stein says:

In beginning writing I wrote a book called *Three Lives* this was written in 1905. I wrote a negro story called *Melanctha*. In that there was a constant recurring and beginning there was a marked direction in the direction of being in the present although naturally i had been accustomed to past present and future, and why, because the composition forming around me was a prolonged present.⁴

The essay “Composition as Explanation” is structured around a few motifs or keywords, “composition,” “time-sense” of “a continuous present,” “using everything,” and “beginning again.” These motifs are explained, or, rather, Stein repeats these “words” many times in a playful manner:

Beginning again and again and again explaining composition and time is a natural thing.

It is understood by this time that *everything* is the same except *composition* and time, *composition* and the time of the *composition* and the time in the *composition*.

Everything is the same except *composition* and as the *composition* is different and always going to be different *everything* is not the same. *Everything* is not the same as the time when of the *composition* and the time in the *composition* is different. The *composition* is different, that is certain.⁵ (emphases mine)

Moreover,

Here again it was all so natural to me and more and more complicatedly a *continuous present*. A *continuous present* is a *continuous present*. I made almost thousand pages of a *continuous present*. *Continuous present* is one thing and *beginning again and again* is another thing. These are both things. And then

there is *using everything*.

This brings us again to composition this the *using everything*. The *using everything* brings us to *composition* and to this *composition*. A *continuous present* and *using everything* and *beginning again*. In these two books [*Three Lives* and *The Making of Americans*] there was elaboration of the complexities of *using everything* and of a *continuous present* and of *beginning again and again and again*.

In the first book there was a groping for a *continuous present* and for *using everything* by *beginning again and again and again*.

There was a groping for *using everything* and there was a groping for a *continuous present* and there was an inevitable beginning of *beginning again and again and again*.⁶ (emphases mine)

On the one hand, the entire essay is devoted to exploring and communicating the meaning of the motifs; but, on the other hand, Stein seems to be enjoying a language game by repeatedly writing the key words on the pages. Consequently, these words turn out of be the keywords in the essay. Stein takes these words up, elaborates them from various angles, puts them aside temporarily, then takes them up again, in the same manner as her writing of “Melanctha.”

B. “Melanctha”

The “Melanctha” story is stylized through the increasingly consistent use of repeated words and sentences. The refrains bring us back every time we seem to move forward in the text. Stein labels this intensive duration of a dramatically flattened moment the “continuous present” in the essay, “Composition and Explanation.” There she recognizes the experimental style of “Melanctha,” as I have mentioned above.

Stein stylizes repetition, the narrative strategy that secures the unity and integrity of any narrative by binding beginning and ending, and makes excessive, and therefore manifest, a narrative element that is usually kept discreet. She stylizes the beginning, and by beginning again and again and again, she differs from her previous conclusions and thus defers an ultimate one. Consequently, the vocabulary is rather limited. In other words, the number of words is multiplied. This amplification is achieved by the

repeated use of names or insistent qualifying phrases. The repetition of words impedes the progress of the discourse. The rather simple vocabulary is often used to cover over many things. At the same time, certain words, phrases, and sentences become emblematic, taking on the shape of a *mise-en-abyme*. They invoke open-ended, complex meanings and associations, and they remain vague.

Poirier, in his *Poetry and Pragmatism*, says that the “vagueness is a function of sound, of the way the inflected sounds of words is manipulated so as to take the edge off words themselves, to blur and refract them. The sounds we will be attending to allow for the most easygoing sort of utterance, like the ambling dialogue of Melanctha and Jeff in Stein’s *Three Lives*. It is as if the voice is idling, apparently not headed anywhere in particular. The sounds are often untranslatable into rational discourse, or are at least badly served by it.”⁷ Poirier calls the vagueness of poetic language “deconstructive movements of language” from a pragmatic point of view.

J. Hillis Miller says in his *Fiction and Repetition*, “ [any] novel is a complex tissue of repetitions and of repetitions within repetitions, or of repetitions linked in chain fashion to other repetitions.”⁸ Lacan, Deleuze, Derrida, Benjamin, Georges Poulet have also theorized repetition various ways.

The interesting point is that Melanctha’s story begins and ends with her relationship to Rose. Stein creates these two women as opposite characters in their characteristics. Rose reveals the other within Melanctha’s self, paradoxically, in a frame of double, or *doppelgänger* portraits. Melanctha Herbert is subtle, intelligent, attractive, unmarried, half-white, while Rose is decent, sullen, married, ordinary black, raised by a white family. Stein reflects this *doppelgänger* strategy also in the relationship between Jeff Campbell and Jem Richard. They are composed as a completely opposite pair. Jeff represents stable, methodical, Rose-like characteristics. He insists on a “regular living,” while Jem is a playboy and gambler, wandering without a job.

The conflation of beginning and ending guarantees that the story may not in fact give the reader the clue or key to Melanctha’s character. Instead,

the story becomes a performance of this character, which is represented by her repetitive act of “wanderings.” In turn, her wanderings reflect the wanderings of words in repetition.

The discourse of “Melanctha” attempts to avoid the ending by the repetitive act of beginning again and again with a repetitious refrain. In a sense, repetition, which destroys the linear progress of discourse, constructs a cyclical world, which is quite a postmodern strategy of fiction. The story is always at the beginning, or from the outset, it may begin with the ending. Here is Stein’s idea of the *continuous present*. Her idea implies an Emersonian “circle.” But Stein’s “circle” is, in fact, not a circle. The beginning and the end are slightly different. The novella “Melanctha” begins as follows:

Rose Johnson made it very hard to bring her baby to its birth.

Melanctha Herbert who was Rose Johnson's friend, did everything that any woman could [. . .]

The child though it was healthy after it was born, did not live long. Rose Johnson was careless and negligent and selfish, and when Melanctha had to leave for a few days, the baby died. Rose Johnson had liked the baby well enough and perhaps she just forgot it for a while, anyway the child was dead and Rose and Sam her husband were very sorry but then these things came so often in the negro world in Bridgepoint, that they neither of them thought about it very long.⁹

The same discourse appears in the latter part of the text, with a slight, but apparent, change:

Rose had a hard time to bring her baby to its birth and Melanctha did everything that any woman could.

The baby though it was healthy after it was born did not live long. Rose Johnson was careless and negligent and selfish and when Melanctha had to leave for a few days the baby died. Rose Johnson had liked her baby well enough and perhaps she just forgot it for a while, anyway the child was dead and Rose and Sam were very sorry, but then these things came so often in the negro world in Bridgepoint that they neither of them thought about it very

long.¹⁰

Here I would like to examine briefly Stein's concept of an endless, spiral shape of repetition, which is expressed in her idea of "A rose is a rose is a rose is a rose."

C. "A rose is a rose is a rose is a rose" . . .

The point is that nuanced repetition is really reiteration, in the manner of Stein's "A rose is a rose is a rose is a rose." When asked why she wrote it, Stein replied that the first rose was not the same as the second, the second differed from the third, and the third from the fourth. By the mere fact of being reiterative, with an intonation which is inevitably different, Stein's roses say something more: there is a supplement.

Poirier says, in *Poetry and Pragmatism* again, that "words are the signs of things" which "are the signs of words." He asks: "Is the word 'rose' a sign of a flower? Yes, but it is a flower that has by now itself become a sign of, say, love or perfection or mortality or beauty, so much so that Stein decided at one point that we have had enough of such roses: 'rose is a rose is a rose is a rose.' She has no illusions that by such iteration she can actually make this be the case with roses; she is saying, rather, that the human mind, which has already made so much of roses, can also, as that mind now works in her, decreate and then recreate the word. And even as Stein is extending James's idea of 'previous truths,' she is looking past him to Emerson, in whose 'Self-Reliance' (as I noted nearly thirty years ago, in *A World Elsewhere*), there is a passage on roses of which her own is a revision."¹¹

As Poirier mentions, the concepts of William James's pluralism shares Stein's gives consequences a different emphasis. His pragmatism is based on the concepts of pluralism, individualism, neutralism, indeterminism, and "radical empiricism." For James the question of belief is performative, that is, belief can be an action. What is "radical empiricism"? James writes:

Were I obliged to give a short name to the attitude in question, I should call it that of *radical empiricism*, in spite of the fact that such brief nicknames

are nowhere more misleading than in philosophy. I say 'empiricism,' because it is contended to regard its most assured conclusions concerning matters of fact as hypotheses liable to modification in the course of future experience; and I say 'radical,' because it treats the doctrine of monism itself as a hypothesis, and, unlike so much of the half-way empiricism that is current under the name of positivism or agnosticism or scientific naturalism, it does not dogmatically affirm monism as something with which all experience has got to square.¹²

Radical empiricism conceives of life as an interwoven, interdependent structure that can only be grasped in its fullness by being grasped in its relations, or in its fluidities. Radical empiricism amounts to the fallibilist conviction that our most stable convictions are no more than "hypotheses liable to modification in the course of future experience." James indicates both incompleteness and imperfections. Incompleteness and imperfections involve another feature of Jamesian pragmatism, that is, "indeterminism."

What is "indeterminism" in Jamesian pragmatism? He explains this concept in relation to another tendency of his philosophy: "Indeterminism thus denies the world to be one unbending unit of fact. It says there is a certain ultimate pluralism in it; and, so saying, it corroborates our ordinary unsophisticated view of things. To have view, actualities seem to float in a wider sea of possibilities from out of which they are chosen; and *somewhere*, indeterminism says, such possibilities exists, and form a part of truth."¹³

Pragmatism proposes a world of many truths rather than only one truth. But it is also a world in which most things are true only at very definite instants. This is a world, as James describes it, of "radical pluralism," "without a sweeping outline and with little pictorial nobility," a world whose order is only partial and is always being revised in response to what is different or other. Experience in such a world is unstable, chaotic, and open.

Stein, as an avant-garde modernist, calls upon the tendency in the reader to deduce further unuttered information from what is an otherwise highly diagrammatic text. This seems to be an intention behind Stein's "A rose is a rose is a rose is a rose" in so far as it lies behind the repetitive

narrative strategies. The way repetition works as it differentiates the first use of the word from the next use, and so on, makes the text endless. Put another way, the endless world represents the openness of the text.

D. Repetition / Openness

The openness of the text stands at a crossroad of American pragmatism and postmodernism, as Ihab Hassan says in his essay, "Pragmatism, Postmodernism, and Beyond: Toward an Open World." Hassan writes: "... that's the 'beyond' in my title, that's the openness I have in mind when I invoke pragmatism or postmodernism"¹⁴; and again asserts that "the new American pragmatism is a form of postmodern thought."¹⁵ If the new American pragmatism is a postmodern thought, and the openness is one of the characteristics held in common between pragmatism and postmodernism, then the openness may hold a key which opens both American pragmatism and postmodernism. In addition, much of the postmodern debate highlights the themes of difference, marginality, otherness, and simulation, and these themes seem to move, when they appear as artistic strategies, toward openness. That is what I have tried to examine in Stein's strategy of repetition. Her repetition represents endlessness, that is, openness.

The following lines of Matei Calinescu suggests a close connection between openness and repetition: "Postmodernism . . . has had the merit of reopening for us the problem of history as a field . . . as a process in which irreversibility penetrates what appears as repetition and vice versa, in short as a multiplicity of continuous/ discontinuous knowledges. . . ." ¹⁶

American pragmatism thinks of a world without absolute truth. Stein's iterative strategy as a pluralist implies a concept of chance, as James says, "I know that Chance means pluralism and nothing more."¹⁷ The idea of chance runs through pragmatism. Peirce also insists on chance together with creativity and Richard Rorty asserts that "everything is contingent."

What is "contingency" in Rorty's pragmatic view? The everyday ability to view our situation contingently would seem rather trivial on his account if it meant simply the ability to recognize that one's viewpoint is one among many which could be taken up. Rorty's principle pragmatic notion is the

“commonsensical” view of contingency. In a sense, his position is assimilated to the commonsense perspective. After all, our everyday vocabulary expresses the main characteristics of liberalism. Gesturing towards “openness,” “pluralism,” and “contingency,” Rorty approaches liberalism.

In Rorty’s view there is the familiar liberal reliance on the notion of “free choice.” This seems to link him with the Emersonian pragmatic outlook, and with Jamesian individualism, which finds its reflection in the poetry of Emily Dickinson, who associates the quest for individual liberty with natural religion, in her poems on death. In the idea of individualism, pragmatism may come to terms with Jean-François Lyotard’s disbelief of master narratives.

Rorty’s liberal pluralism supports the concept of contingency. His notion of “contingency” reveals the “pluralistic” nature of liberal beliefs and convictions:

The line of thought common to Blumenberg, Nietzsche, Freud, and Davidson suggests that we try to get the point where we no longer worship *anything*, where we treat nothing as a quasi divinity, where we treat *everything* — our language, our conscience, our community — as a product of time and chance. To reach this point would be, in Freud’s words, to “treat chance as worthy of determining our fate.”¹⁸

What do we make of Rorty’s idea that contingency is found in language? The contingency of language commits Rorty to the idea that truth is no longer “out there” in a reality beyond language but “in here” in the relations among our sentences. Rorty makes us recognize that language is a medium neither exactly of representation nor of expression. It is rather an instrument of redescription. Language in this view is more like a set of tools for performing a task than a medium for getting something straight. In other words, language generates a “process” rather than an end. In this sense, pragmatism is interested in consequences, rather than cause and effect, and in the process of language.

Pragmatism as a method does not seem to imply any final philosophical conclusions. Thus pragmatism can also be practically identified with the

scientific method.

III Chaos: An Conclusion

In *Chaos*, James Gleick documents how researchers in various fields became aware that others were working along similar lines and that what they were discovering were not aberrations but a new kind of paradigm.

Gleick begins *Chaos* with a story of Edward Lorenz, a meteorologist, who attempted to model the earth's weather in the graphic, wavy, repeating lines of the weather patterns. Lorenz stopped a sequence in midcourse, rather than start over from the beginning, and typed the mid-point values into the computer to start the sequence running again.¹⁹

Lorenz presumed that this mid-point run would match the first run exactly. To his surprise, when he compared the two lines he found that they diverged--at first only a little, but then more and more.

A minute difference in the initial conditions in the Lorenz story finds an analogy in Stein's concept of "A rose is a rose is a rose is a rose," where the first rose is slightly different from the second which is different from the second which is different from the third, and the fourth, in turn. The final result of Lorenz's research was a pattern quite different from the original. "Nothing ever happened the same way twice."²⁰

Through the example of Lorenz's scientific research, Gleick explains the indeterminacy of pure mathematics. Sciences have an illusion to obey scientific rules based on a kind of Newtonian determinism. Yet, as Einstein's relativity and Heisenberg's uncertainty show, the world is intermingled, that is, "chaotic." The interesting point is that, paradoxically, chaos theory arises from a simple deterministic system.

The emergence of the idea of chaos is virtually a casebook demonstration that scientific investigation is not simply a matter of objectively describing nature. In other words, even scientific investigation turns out to have "indeterminancies."

Gleick's *Chaos* stresses that the important idea of chaos emerged from the work of a few solidary individuals. Gleick writes: "No committee of scientists pushed history into a new channel--a handful of individuals did

it, with individual perceptions and individual goals.”²¹ In this view we may find Emersonian and Jamesian individualism.

After he explains the history of chaos theory, Gleick mentions at least three characteristics of chaos: (a) “To some physicists chaos is a science of process rather than state, of becoming rather than being”; (b) “Now that science is looking, chaos seems to be everywhere”; and (c) “Chaos breaks across the lines that separates scientific disciplines.”²² The characteristics of chaos, which insist on “process,” immanence, and breaking the borderline, can be found, I think, in postmodernism as well as in American Pragmatism.

Charles S. Peirce says, “Chaos is pure nothing.”²³ However, “chaos is everywhere,” according to modern scientific belief. And it is also mentioned by Rorty. But, firstly, to say “chaos is everywhere” itself sounds chaotic. In other words, to talk about chaos puts us in a chaotic condition. Secondly, if chaos is everywhere, it represents a face of postmodernism, that is, immanences. In his *The Postmodern Turn*, Ihab Hassan points out, “two central, constitutive tendencies in postmodernism”: one of them is “*immanences*,” the other is “*indeterminacies*.” He neologizes “indetermanence,” and explains that the term designates the two tendencies, implying *indeterminacies* lodged in *immanences*.²⁴ If the tendency of immanences is so closely combined with the other tendency of indeterminacies so as to warrant the neologism, “indetermanence,” the term suggests a feature of chaos. Or, chaos includes the meaning of “indetermanence.”

What can we learn from chaos theory? That it is “reality” itself in specific situations for specific purposes. Chaos theory changes our notion of “reality.” In other words, it reveals endless paradigm shifts. In this sense, chaos theory is closely related to the concept of openness. Both Postmodernism and American pragmatism are interested in chaos theory, which offers a view of “reality,” one not totally ordered.

NOTES

1. William James, *Pragmatism*, edited, with an introduction, by Bruce Kuklick (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 1981) 10.

2. Richard Poirier, *Poetry and Pragmatism* (Cambridge, MS: Harvard University Press, 1992) 3-4.
3. See *Avant-Pop: Fiction for a Daydream Nation*, edited by Larry McCaffery (Boulder: Fiction Collective Two, 1993).
4. Gertrude Stein, *Selected Writings of Gertrude Stein*, edited, with an introduction and notes, by Carl Van Vechten (New York: Vintage Books, 1990) 517.
5. Stein 516.
6. Stein 518.
7. Poirier 139-140.
8. J. Hillis Miller, *Fiction and Repetition* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1982) 3.
9. Stein 339.
10. Stein 449.
11. Poirier 102-103.
12. William James, *The Will to Believe and Other Essays in Popular Philosophy* (New York: Dover Publications, Inc., 1956) viii.
13. James 151.
14. Ihab Hassan, "Pragmatism, Postmodernism, and Beyond: Toward an Open World." In *The End of Postmodernism?* Ed. Heide Ziegler. (Stuttgart: Metzler Verlag, Forthcoming).
15. Hassan 8.
16. Matei Calinescu, "Postmodernism and Some Paradoxes of Periodization." In *Approaching Postmodernism*, edited by Douwe W. Fokkema and Hans Bertens (Amsterdam and Philadelphia: John Benjamins, 1986) 239-254.
17. James 178.
18. Richard Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989) 22.
19. James Gleick, *Chaos: Making a New Science* (Penguin Books, 1987) 15-18.
20. Gleick 12.
21. Gleick 182.
22. Gleick 5.
23. Charles S. Peirce, *Charles S. Peirce: Selected Writings*, edited, with an introduction and noted, by Philip P. Wiener (New York: Dover Publications, Inc., 1958) 199.
24. Ihab Hassan, *The Postmodern Turn: Essays in Postmodern Theory and Culture* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1987) 92.