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Andrew Osborn

POIRIER'S LATEST PUSH*

In the course of writing seven books since 1966, the Americanist scholar Richard Poirier has established several inexhaustible themes. Perhaps the most crucial of these is what, in his excellent monograph on Robert Frost, he called “the work of knowing.” It seems that many of our finest American writers—Poirier’s list would begin with Emerson, Melville, and a lineage of “Emersonian pragmatists,” including Whitman, Thoreau, William James, Frost, Stein, and Stevens—have portrayed the work that goes into writing as if it were physically laborious and as if to be so were a virtue (emphasis on *vir-*, as in *virile*). Adumbrating Frost’s poem “The Axe-Helve,” he finds that “work is necessary if we are to get down to the grain of things, the lines in nature which we cannot otherwise know or see.” Closely related to this figurative work-ethic is Poirier’s repeated emphasis on the work of art, not just drama, music, and dance, but literary art, as performance. Writing and reading both are most rewardingly acts of discovery that require some labor.

Poirier is America’s most cogent and committed celebrant of the species of literary difficulty that cannot be, as *The Waste Land*’s allusive difficulty can be, attributed chiefly to differences between an author’s and a reader’s interpretive communities. He favors what Whitman called, in a line of the 1860 version of “Crossing Brooklyn Ferry” later expunged, “the *push* of reading,” where this push or interpretive resistance prevents closure and exhaustion even after the whole has been parsed, the hard words looked up. Two books back he went so far as to define Literature as “that writing whose clarities bring on precipitations of density,” and he has since repeatedly expressed a like-mindedness regarding Stevens’s poetic claim that “speech is not dirty silence / Clarified. It is silence made still dirtier.” Because what he admires most in writing is often, to again quote Stevens, “intelligent beyond intelligence,” because he believes the notion of genius can coexist with otherwise

* *Trying It Out in America: Literary and Other Performances* by Richard Poirier. Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1999. xiv + 296 pages.

secular vocabularies, Poirier is an outspoken skeptic concerning the prevalent argument that literature is a social construct, created not by an author with that special something but in the microphysics of super-colliding culture conductors. In *Poetry & Pragmatism* (1992), he brought all of these themes together into a single near-Gordian knot:

While [Emersonian pragmatists] like to promulgate in theory, and exercise in practice, a mythology of public philosophy and public poetry, their works dramatize how difficult it is to use language when, if it is to be true to oneself, it must presumably be at odds with prevailing or accredited usages. One evidence of this problem is the effort to displace onto a general category of 'work'—something that can be done by anyone—the aura and privilege traditionally ascribed to literary 'texts.'

Since language allows people to communicate only because most uses of words are conventional, something akin to surface tension constantly threatens the would-be antennae of the race, who seek to probe ahead of convention with those very words.

Work. Performance. Resistance. Genius. These are Poirier's Lords of Literature. Like the gods of the Greek pantheon, they seldom congregate harmoniously. Now this foursome has been joined by a most intractable fifth: Popularity.

Actually, this fifth theme is not so much new as newly promoted. The block quotation above shows that it hasn't arisen whole out of sea spume. Yet somehow it had escaped me, prior to reading Poirier's latest collection, that he has had an abiding interest in various "difficult" writers' struggles to reach a popular audience. In *Trying It Out in America: Literary and Other Performances*, where essays on Bette Midler, George Ballanchine, Gore Vidal, Truman Capote, and the hypochondriacal autobiographer Arthur Inman are lined up among the usual suspects, Popularity stands out. And it occurs to me only now that this characteristically American desire to reconcile a democratic availability with an uncompromising will-to-innovate has perhaps been Poirier's ur-theme all along. It's the chestnut he tries to get a tighter grip on the would-be cracker of with each subsequent book, enjoying the muscularity of an effort he knows will persist. He's not alone in this pursuit. The halls of academe are full of liberal professors befuddled at how to defend their suddenly elitist-

seeming taste for the old stand-bys. How does one plug the canon without coming off like an Allen Bloom, especially if one lacks or, as likely, eschews the hierophantic bluster of a Harold Bloom?

Well, first of all, you write gorgeously lucid prose. Scrap the jargon. Incorporate many exemplary quotations—let the great authors demonstrate for themselves what makes them great. Poirier founded the belletristic quarterly *Raritan*, one of the few academic journals that forgoes foot- and end-notes, and he does all of the above, courting a non-academic readership without dumbing his arguments down. What he says of Richard Rorty in the brilliant recent essay “Why Do Pragmatists Want to Be Like Poets?” (collected in Morris Dickstein’s *The Revival of Pragmatism*, 1998) applies equally well to himself: his “ingratiating style attests to his own willingness to tie himself to other human beings; he likes to say what he thinks in quite ordinary English . . . ; he is not afraid to be understood, even at the risk of being understood too simply.”

Trying’s heightened attention to the popular affects most what Poirier has had to say about Genius and Performance. The latter takes on a modified guise, divesting in essays about song and dance some of the figurative senses he had borrowed from Kenneth Burke. Not since his 1971 essay on The Beatles has he left Performance on stage. And it is in these same essays that he weds Genius to Popularity. Writing on Ballanchine, he notes that the former “traditionally exhibits not agony in production, regardless of the agony in life, but speed and abundance.” And although “the work, on reflection and in retrospect, appears to comment on itself and on its own procedures in an astonishingly complex way . . . somehow this doesn’t prevent the work from becoming popular.” Pop culture partakes of some of the same characteristics as high culture: “there is no difference between the juxtapositions of style in sections of *The Waste Land* and the juxtapositions of [Midler’s Broadway medley] *Clams on the Half Shell*.” But whereas high culture expresses nostalgia for the “deeply rooted” myths it recycles, pop does so by trying to squeeze more consumerist value from fairly recent works designed to obsolesce quickly in the first place. The genius of a Ballanchine or a Midler abides in their bringing a classical sensibility and sophistication to the vernacular’s troves.

Poirier builds upon and reshapes each of his other, older themes in the new collection, as well. Work returns as a manifold of Manliness. We learn about Gertrude Stein’s “manly agitations” in *Tender Buttons*, Norman Mailer’s continued “obsession with buggery” in *Ancient Nights*, and David Leverenz’s case

for “the reigning ideology of manhood” during the American Renaissance. Because many of the authors to whom Poirier has dedicated his attention over the years were homosexual, or had in their histories some same-sex intrigues, sexuality has long been a shadowy presence in his books, but one left to haunt the spaces between the lines. Poirier is himself gay—a fact not so obvious from his previous writings that I had guessed. So far as I know, he has never before commented on sexual orientation’s impact on literary production, or on theories of so-called homotextuality. In *Trying*, he plays his hand. In the early chapters especially, he introduces the issue repeatedly and the book’s sole footnote acknowledges that he wouldn’t or couldn’t have written about Midler “without the assistance of [his] friend and companion the late Richard Santino.”

To an extent, his recurrent interest in the sexuality of some of his favorite writers is merely one of the avenues Poirier takes in this book to again challenge the adequacy of culturally contextual interpretations. In a chapter entitled “Elusive Whitman,” for example, he argues that one cannot rely on the poems alone for evidence of the father of American poetry’s genital proclivities.

It’s not possible to argue on the basis of his poetry that he was or was not a homosexual, though it is evident to me on the basis of his notebooks, letters, and the patterns of his personal relationships that he clearly was one. Poetry is metaphor, and it can offer none of what Iago calls ‘ocular proof’ of anyone’s sexual conduct; poetry is sound, and it’s utterly vain to listen to it for audible proof of anyone’s sexual conduct.

Of course, literary interpretation seldom seeks proof, so his point here is a bit strained. But this is all secondary to the chapter’s main thesis: namely, that a recent New Historicist study of Whitman was doomed to fail because Whitman’s genius (indeed, anyone’s genius, by definition) flouts explanation in terms of the cultural, historical, and political contexts of his day. “Why,” Poirier asks, “if the poetry is indeed as expressive of prevalent cultural assumptions as Reynolds assumes, [was it] then resistant to clarification and is still so?” Borrowing phrases from “As I Ebb’d with the Ocean of Life,” he proclaims, “Whitman’s ‘real Me’ remains ‘altogether unreach’d.’”

It is interesting, then, that in the next chapter, “Reaching Frank O’Hara,” Poirier sets up an analogy between tropes and trysts. Remarking on “In Memory of My Feelings,” he writes, “What keeps the poem going, what keeps O’Hara going as a poet (and as an aspiring lover), is the need to extricate himself from any figure with whom he has just been involved.” Thus he quietly establishes the guidelines of a literary Don’t-Ask-Don’t-Tell policy: if you know a writer is gay, go ahead and let that affect your reading, make metaphors that imply causal relationships between sex and syntax, but the converse is off-limits. Poirier doesn’t pretend to discover evidence of O’Hara’s homosexuality in his figural promiscuity. Elsewhere, the notes on sexual orientation are presented as ends in themselves. In his opening essay, a review of the collected letters of Marianne Moore, for example, Poirier works through an appreciation of her prolificness, her critical candor, her refusal to abide the use of language she considered “low,” and her reputed asexuality to settle into a somewhat more sustained interpretation of two early Bryn Mawr letters, “remarkable because they reveal her intense, close to self-shattering sexual feelings for young women.”

The least rewarding of the nineteen essays in this new collection are those few in which Poirier focuses on the faults of a reviewed author’s work. The three-part essay “Erasing America” is representative. There, the crux of his critique of all three books—Jean Baudrillard’s *America*, Martin Amis’s *The Moronic Inferno*, and one by Peter Conrad never named (erased?)—is that each of their European authors treats America as a blank screen upon which to project his own mythologies. Poirier apparently feels responsible to protect America from those who would underestimate its ability to stand up for itself. By the end, we may know that we needn’t acquire these three books—a common enough result of reading a review—but little more. Usually Poirier gives us much more, moving with dispatch from such fault-finding to make up for the disappointment with some exemplary exegesis of his own. Although the O’Hara piece was occasioned by his qualms with Brad Gooch’s *City Poet* (“Biographers of poets are seldom any help with their poetry, but Gooch can be altogether a hindrance”), Poirier redirects our attention to his own insights, biographical and otherwise. In a review of *Inventions of the March Hare*, having stated that the title “befits” Christopher Ricks’ superabundant editorial notes better than the early poems of T. S. Eliot, he turns to a more positive and useful discussion of Eliot’s masterful self-merchandising and a study of the hyacinth girl motif pervading the poet’s career.

At times, I find myself agreeing with Poirier's conclusions though not with his alleged trajectory of arrival. Oddly enough, this occurs in his readings of Stein and Emerson, about both of whom he has established himself as a fastidious, empathic close reader. Perhaps because his attention to each in the relevant passages is so focused, and yet his familiarity with both so generally intimate, he makes leaps of interpretation which can't be supported adequately in a step-by-step explanation. An example: though I can't help but agree that the word "cutlet" in a section of Stein's *Tender Buttons* refers to a vagina and that the "blind agitation" both "manly and uttermost" refers to erotic stimulation, I suspect few will find credible Poirier's suggestion that we move from *uttermost*, via puns on *outermost* and *uddermost*, to "an erect clitoris" because it sticks out and, like an udder, produces a milky excretion. I would have thought a breast the best match for these criteria.

Poirier's critical prose is a widely available pleasure because he does not allow his own linguistic skepticism to manifest itself as contradiction or what he has called "a saving vagueness" in the writing of Emerson. Whereas Emerson bragged, "I would write on the lintels of the door-post, *Whim* . . . we cannot spend the day in explanation," Poirier takes after Thoreau, for him a lesser genius, who early in *Walden* asks his readers to "pardon some obscurities, for there are more secrets in my trade than in most men's, and yet not voluntarily kept, but inseparable from its very nature. I would gladly tell all that I know about it, and never paint 'No Admittance' on my gate." Originally commissioned by such venues as *The New Republic* and the *London Review of Books*, the essays are fairly self-contained. They assume little familiarity with the authors discussed, yet they are no less scholarly responsible and sophisticated for that.

So what happens when Poirier addresses that last Lord (you thought I'd forgotten), Resistance? How does this accessible writer revamp his take on interpretive intransigence? One of my favorite essays—and given the disproportionate attention he pays it in his prologue, apparently one of Poirier's favorites, too—is "In Praise of Vagueness: Henry and William James," a supplement to "The Reinstatement of the Vague" in *Poetry & Pragmatism*. I hesitate to explain what it is *about*. The elder (William) James loathed the "stolid" preposition ("All *dumb* or anonymous psychic states have . . . been coolly suppressed; or, if recognized at all, have been named after the substantive perception they led up to, as thoughts 'about' this object or 'about' that"). Keenly aware that the pleasure of a text comes as much from the manner of telling as the matter told, Poirier cleverly integrates this self-in-

criminating sentence into his exposition of the subject: the irony of William's censure of his younger brother's ghostly demarcations and other stylistic idiosyncrasies even as he warned elsewhere of the stupidity and error resulting from conventional uses of language, especially (Poirier winks at us) our tendency to privilege substantives.

I suspect that for Poirier "In Praise of Vagueness" is also about providing a provisional answer to the question behind the eponymous question in "Why Do Pragmatists Want to Be Like Poets?" And that is: how do radical innovators of the language compel readers to pull themselves up to new prospects by their own linguistic bootstraps? How do they make resistant writing also inviting? Or to state this same thing in Richard Rorty's diction: when a strong philosopher-poet creates a new cognitive tool, a new vocabulary which is necessary even to describe its own value, how may that value be advertised to those who yet wield only the old tools, the old vocabularies? Poirier does not follow Rorty to invoke impersonal paradigm shifts; he brings the dilemma down to the face-to-face level of our conversational covenant: "the quest, the effort, the sharing depend upon an implicit agreement among all participants that a good part of the pleasure depends upon keeping a delicate, forever varying balance between sense and indecipherability, each allowed to tease the other into and out of assertions of predominance." Here he has merely found words—merely, indeed!—for what he's implicitly touted all along.

As I mentioned in passing earlier, Whitman eventually omitted a line about "the push of reading" from section 8 of "Crossing Brooklyn Ferry." The poem had never really tried to compel by its resistance in the first place. Poirier, although he has never to my knowledge mentioned the line, has lived by it and has shown that he lives by it more industriously with each book. *Trying It Out in America* should brandish an epigraph, or Poirier could scratch on his lintel: "What the push of reading [literary and other performances] could not start, is started by me personally, is it not?"