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“The Abandonment of . . . Precious Things”: Richard Ford and the Limits of Pragmatism

IN RICHARD FORD’S 1995 NOVEL *INDEPENDENCE DAY*, THE PROTAGONIST and narrator Frank Bascombe links true independence to the ability to strategically forget the past: “I’m the man,” he tells us, “who counsels abandonment of those precious things you remember but can no longer make hopeful use of” (322). The particular “precious thing” he is thinking of at this point is probably his son Ralph who died of Reye’s syndrome seven years before the novel opens, and whose absence haunts all three novels in the Bascombe trilogy,¹ but his point also has a more general application. The past for Frank stands for every kind of unhelpful limitation and restriction—individual, social, and political; it stands for tradition in opposition to newness, stasis and inertia in opposition to movement and progress.²

Frank is a careful and enthusiastic reader of Emerson (whom Ford has described as the “reigning spirit” of *Independence Day*³) and agrees with

¹The trilogy consists of *The Sportswriter* (1986), *Independence Day* (1995) and *The Lay of the Land* (2006). This essay will focus almost entirely on *Independence Day*, which won both the Pulitzer prize and the PEN/Faulkner Award and is, I would argue, the most crucial of the three works.

²Frank understands “progress” in a distinctly pragmatic and non-teleological fashion. Early in the novel, when “old man Schwindell,” the owner of the realty agency he works for, challenges him to define progress, Frank thinks: “He wanted, I believe, to hear something from me to convince him I was simply *alive*, and that by doing whatever I was doing—selling houses—I was extending life and my own interest in it, strengthening my tolerance for it and the tolerance of innocent, unnamed others” (117).

³See “Richard Ford on *The Lay of the Land* Part 2.” Emerson is referred to directly or in passing at least eight times in the novel. Frank gives his son Paul a copy of “Self Reliance” and Carl Becker’s *Declaration of Independence* as “key texts” for “transmitting to him important info” and notes that “These volumes by the way aren’t a bit grinding, stuffy or boring, the way they seemed in school, but are brimming with useful, insightful lessons applicable directly or metaphorically to the ropy dilemmas of life” (8). For discussions of Becker as a pragmatist historian, see Cushing Strout and James T. Kloppenberg.

him that we can learn nothing essential from the past and that “In nature every moment is new; the past is always swallowed and forgotten; the coming only is sacred” (Emerson 2: 189). To attempt to fully remember and preserve the past is, the novel suggests, to falsely imagine that who we are is better defined by what we have already done than by what we might yet do, and thus to succumb to an unhelpful illusion of finitude and consistency. Frank notes,

Most people, once they reach a certain age, troop through their days struggling like hell with the concept of completeness, keeping up with all the things that were ever part of them, as a way of maintaining the illusion that they bring themselves fully to life. . . . Most of these things you just have to give up on. (95)

Frank’s distrust of the past as a guide to conduct and self-understanding links him strongly to the nineteenth-century tradition of Thoreau and Emerson, for whom originality and national self-determination are predicated upon a rejection of the traditions of Europe.⁴ It also attaches him to a line of pragmatist thought which is specifically American and which, although its parameters are much debated,⁵ is usually imagined as starting with Emerson and running through William James, C. S. Peirce, and John Dewey before reaching Richard Rorty, its most forceful and influential recent champion. Rorty, indeed, suggests that the American pragmatist tradition can be usefully *defined* by its strong preference for the future over the past (in all its aspects). In “Truth Without Correspondence to Reality,” Rorty writes:

Dewey urges that the quest for certainty be replaced with the demand for imagination—that philosophy should stop trying to provide reassurance and instead encourage what Emerson calls ‘self-reliance.’ To encourage self-reliance, in this sense, is to encourage the willingness to turn one’s back both on the past and on the attempt of ‘the classical philosophy of Europe’ to ground the past in the eternal. It is to attempt Emersonian self-creation on a communal scale. (*Philosophy* 34)

To turn one’s back on the past is, in Ford’s novel, as in the pragmatist tradition more generally, to open oneself to the possibility of a different

⁴For the classic discussions of this aspect of transcendentalist thought, see Larzer Ziff and F. O. Matthiessen.

⁵Emerson’s association with pragmatism remains controversial. For a useful summary of the relevant debates, see Neal Dolan 6-16.

and better future—a future free of ideas of fixed or eternal truth, a future which can be created through acts of the imagination but also, crucially, through words. For Rorty, what we take as truths are merely historically produced metaphors—good for a while but always prone to fall into disuse and be replaced. Rorty's pragmatist is (or aspires to be) a version of Harold Bloom's "strong poet" who is able, like the Nietzschean superman, not only to ignore the past but actually to remake it with words. Nietzsche, Rorty approvingly writes,

thinks the important boundary to cross is not the one separating time from atemporal truth but rather the one which divides the old from the new. He thinks a human life triumphant just insofar as it escapes from inherited descriptions of the contingencies of its existence and finds new descriptions. (*Contingency* 29)

Frank Bascombe, in a similar display of anti-essentialism, notes that "Writers . . . understand that almost everything—e-v-e-r-y-t-h-i-n-g—is not really made up of 'views' but words, which, should you not like them, you can change" (248), adding later that his "trust has always been that words can make most things better and there's nothing that can't be improved on. But words *are* required" (353).

If we accept Cornel West's definitions of American pragmatism as "a variety of creative interpretations of the Emersonian notions of power, provocation, and personality" (42) and as "less a philosophical tradition . . . and more a continuous cultural commentary or set of interpretations that attempt to explain America to itself at a particular historical moment" (5), then it seems clear that Frank Bascombe, with his strong attachment to Emersonian ideas, his belief in words as agents of change and self-creation, his liberal and anti-foundationalist emphasis on mutability as opposed to tradition,⁶ and his willingness to forget what has been in favor of a hopeful reimagining of what might be, is in many ways an exemplary American pragmatist. West offers further evidence for this previously under-examined connection with his suggestion that peculiarly American concerns with location and physical movement (concerns to which Frank is intimately connected through his job as a

⁶Frank notes in one very typical aside, "In my mind a sense of contingency and the possibility of imminent change in status underlay everything" (284). For a discussion of the link between these philosophical tendencies and his party political affiliations (he is a fervent Democrat), see Tamas Dobozsy.

realtor, and with which the novel is, symbolically speaking, almost obsessed⁷) are at the very root of the development of pragmatist thought:

This “hotel civilisation” (to use Henry James’s apt phrase) with its fusion of the uncertainty of the capitalist market with the quest for security of the home, yielded an indigenous mode of thought that subordinates knowledge to power, tradition to invention, instruction to provocation, community to personality, and immediate problems to utopian possibilities. (5)

My subsequent arguments in this essay are based on the belief that the philosophizing tendencies of *Independence Day* and the other two works in the Bascombe trilogy—tendencies which have previously been downplayed in readings of the novels⁸—are not fully comprehensible without reference to pragmatism as *the* American philosophy. As an Emersonian individualist—and to some degree an anti-intellectual⁹—Frank does not of course need or wish to recognize the rich intellectual provenance of his ideas, but for the critic the heritage should be and is quite clear. Frank’s pragmatist viewpoint is not endorsed without reserve by Ford (indeed, as I will show, the novel’s climax powerfully illustrates

⁷The use of the real estate business as a recurring symbol for some of the most basic urges and contradictions of contemporary American life is one of the great achievements of *Independence Day* and *The Lay of the Land*. To offer just one example, Frank notes that

being a realtor, while occasionally rendering you a Pollyanna, also makes you come to grips with contingency and even sell it as a source of strength and father to true self-sufficiency, by insisting you will not give up the faith that people have to be housed and will be. In this way, realty is the “True American profession coping hands-on with the fundamental spatial experience of life: more people, less space, fewer choices.” (This, of course, was in a book I read). (*Independence* 439-40)

⁸The link between Ford and pragmatism has, to my knowledge, been made only once before, by Kevin Brooks. Brooks’s essay focuses predominantly, however, on the novels’ engagement with sport as a metaphor for life.

⁹As an Emersonian, Frank has only a limited interest in any form of tradition, and his general disdain for intellectuals is made comically plain in his account of his semester teaching at Berkshire College:

What I did hate, though, and what finally sent me at a run out of town after dark at the end of term . . . was that . . . the place was all anti-mystery types right to the core—men and women both—all expert in the arts of explaining, explicating and dissecting, and by these means promoting permanence. For me that made for the worst kind of despairs, and finally I couldn’t stand their grinning, hopeful teacher faces. (*The Sportswriter* 222)

the limitations of that perspective), but it remains throughout the most compelling, persuasive and, in Boothian terms, reliable world-view on offer. *Independence Day*, written as it was in the hey-day of the neo-pragmatist revival,¹⁰ can thus be most usefully understood as a neo-pragmatist fiction—a novel which both exemplifies and also, in typically pragmatist style, questions and tests the limits of the tradition of which it is a part.¹¹

As pragmatist philosophers, such as James and Rorty, must confront the various forms of foundationalist philosophy (idealist or realist) which constitute the post-Platonic tradition and in so doing develop and refine their own ideas, so Frank Bascombe must engage, again and again, with characters intransigently attached to a fixed view of the past (and thus a fixed view of reality) which causes them to suffer but which they seem unable or unwilling to let go of. The two most striking examples of this painful and self-defeating misapprehension are Frank's fifteen-year-old son Paul and Joe and Phyllis Markham, a couple who wish to buy a house in Haddam, New Jersey, where Frank works as a realtor, but who are still unable, after forty-eight viewings, to find one that suits their requirements. It is Frank's self-imposed task to release both Paul and the Markhams from the rigidities of their own psychic histories and thus to make them in the broadest sense free.

Paul Bascombe, we are told, is "waging a complex but losing struggle to forget certain things." He is held captive by "memory, history, bad events he struggles with, can't control, but feels he should" (16). Specifically, he has not been able to come to terms with his brother Ralph's death and his parents' subsequent divorce—twin traumas which he simultaneously engages with and avoids by obsessing on the

¹⁰American neo-pragmatism coalesces around, but is by no means limited to, the later work of Richard Rorty. It arguably achieves its greatest influence in the 1990s after the publication of his *Irony, Contingency and Solidarity* in 1989, and the concomitant growth of a number of versions of literary neo-pragmatism in the work of Richard Poirier, Stanley Fish, Walter Benn Michaels, and others.

¹¹To suggest that Frank is morally reliable as a narrator is not of course to suggest that he is morally perfect, which he clearly is not. The particular mistakes he makes, however, (with Paul and with Sally, for example) do not invalidate his more general views, which, in their classically Emersonian articulation, understand human existence as a continual process of self-correction and self-transcendence. My largely positive view of Frank is not always shared by other critics, however; for a more critical interpretation of his position, see William G. Chernecky.

contemporaneous death of the family dog Mr. Toby: “now he thinks about Mr. Toby ‘a lot’ (possibly constantly), thinks that Mr. Toby should be alive still and we should have him—and by extension, of course, that his poor brother, Ralph, who died of Reye’s, should also be alive (as he surely should) and we should all still be we”(14).

At first glance, the Markhams’ problem seems rather different, but actually it has a similar root. The Markhams, particularly Joe, are psychologically paralyzed by an awareness of their own previous errors of judgment. They cannot move on because they cannot be sure they will not simply repeat the mistakes of the past:

Joe, I’m sure, has been brooding all over again this morning about his whopper miscues—miscues about marriage, divorce, remarriage. . . . All this is a natural part of the aging process, in which you find yourself with less to do and more opportunities to eat your guts out regretting everything you *have* done. But Joe doesn’t want to make another whopper, since one more big one might just send him to the bottom. (54)

The Markhams’ false solution to this dilemma is to seek an ideal—a house so obviously perfect that it could not possibly be wrong. But as Frank makes clear, such ideal houses, and by pragmatic extension ideals in general, do not exist:

Unhappily the Markhams, out of ignorance and pigheadedness, have failed to intuit the one gnostic truth of real estate . . . that people never find or buy the house they say they want. . . . Why should you only get what you think you want, or be limited by what you can simply plan on? Life’s never like that, and if you’re smart you’ll decide it’s better the way it is. (41)

Frank wishes to help Paul and the Markhams by encouraging them to let go of the past and learn, or relearn, independence—what Emerson calls in “Experience” “the capital virtue of self-trust” (3: 46). The methods he chooses to use in pursuing this end are essentially pragmatic ones. He does not argue that the way they see themselves and the world is false and another way is true (i.e., more in accord with the way things really are) because his optimistic belief in mutability means he does not believe that there is any permanent way in which things really are. Instead, he suggests that there may be other ways of seeing the world (other vocabularies, or “language games,” to use a more philosophical

terminology¹²) which are just as accurate (or inaccurate) but which will make them happier than they presently are. Rorty suggests that intellectual and moral progress occurs when one dominant metaphor or vocabulary is replaced by another, richer or more interesting one.¹³ On a smaller, more personal scale, this change is precisely the sort of result Frank is attempting to achieve. The only thing that will save the Markhams, he tells us, is to

figure out a way to think about themselves and most everything else *differently*; formulate fresh understandings based on the faith that for new fires to kindle, old ones have to be dashed; and based less on isolating, boneheaded obstinance and more, for instance, on the wish to make each other happy without neutralizing the private self. (90)

In order to get the Markhams to think differently in this way, Frank is required to replace, or help *them* replace,¹⁴ their old unhelpful metaphors with newer, (potentially) more helpful ones. This process becomes explicit when Joe Markham, while experiencing a psychological crisis in which he understands his failure to buy a house as part of a larger existential malaise ("I've completely quit becoming" [50]), tells Frank that he likes "to have a view of things from above." Frank initially finds this comment mysterious, but he returns to it later in the conversation when he offers an alternative metaphor of his own: "Maybe you ought to try looking at things across a flat plain. . . . I've always thought that looking at things from above, like you said, forced you see all things as the same height and made decisions a lot harder. Some things are just bigger than others. Or smaller" (55). To desire to see things from above, as Joe does, is to seek what Rorty calls a "God's eye view," a complete and total picture in which everything is included. It is to seek, in other words, an impregnable position of knowledge, a complete and universal language, in which contingency, chance, and

¹²Rorty takes this term from Wittgenstein's *Philosophical Investigations* and turns it to his own pragmatic uses.

¹³Rorty refers approvingly (and frequently) to Nietzsche's description of truth as a "mobile army of metaphors" and notes that intellectual and moral progress is "a history of increasingly useful metaphors rather than of increasing understanding of how things really are" (*Contingency* 9).

¹⁴For the Emersonian, as "The Divinity School Address" famously makes clear, "it is not instruction, but provocation, that I can receive from another soul" (1: 80).

change can have no effect. For both Rorty and Frank Bascombe, the desire to achieve such a viewpoint (which can never finally be achieved) creates unnecessary problems, which can best be solved not by trying, as philosophers traditionally have, to constantly seek a higher and “truer” position but by replacing one (vertical) metaphor with another (horizontal) one: “The idea of a ‘God’s eye view’ to which science continually approximates is of a piece with the idea of ‘the moral law’ to which social custom, in periods of moral progress, continually approximates. . . . Both ideas are to be replaced, pragmatists think, by metaphors of width rather than of height or depth” (*Philosophy* 82). To give up the “higher” position, to see things “across a flat plain” is to abandon a fantasy of transcendence or totalization, thus accepting and preparing to work within the inevitable limitations of any particular viewpoint or (to slightly shift the metaphor) language game.¹⁵

Frank’s task with Paul is similar in nature but significantly weightier and more challenging (because Paul is both a teenager and his son). Frank, from the beginning, doubts his ability to find a new vocabulary which Paul will understand and wish to adopt: “The worst of being a parent is my fate, then: being an adult. Not owning the right language . . . the fate of knowing much yet having to stand like a lamppost with its lamp lit, hoping my child will see the glow and venture closer for the illumination and warmth it mutely offers” (17). Although Frank’s conscious intentions with Paul remain pragmatic—he imagines his task as being not to lecture him about life but rather to raise “a canopy of useful postulates above him like stars and [hope] he’ll connect them up to his own sightings and views like an astronomer” (289)—as their trip unfolds, Paul’s infuriating resistance pushes him in practice away from his principles and towards other, ultimately less useful, tactics. In Paul’s case, it seems possible that the weight of the personal and familial past is simply too heavy to yield to moderate, pragmatic solutions. Frank insists that he and Paul share an interest in “the fissures between the

¹⁵Michel de Certeau makes a very similar point about the differences between elevated and ground-level perspectives in *The Practice of Everyday Life* (91-93). Philosophically speaking, the contrast is between totalization or commensurability on the one hand, and difference or incommensurability on the other. When taken to an extreme an emphasis on incommensurability may become relativistic and quite possibly incoherent (as Hilary Putnam has interestingly argued; see *Reason, Truth and History* 113-19). However, in this section of *Independence Day*, Frank’s suggestion works as a practical and cheerful corrective to Joe’s failed idealism.

literal and the imagined" (343)—precisely, one would expect, the point where old literalized metaphors can give way to fresh new ones—but in practice this shared interest, instead of producing newness and change, only sends them back to the futile punning and word games of Paul's "lost childhood": "*Take it for granite. A new leash on life. Put your monkey where your mouse is*" (343). Similarly, his attempt to encourage Paul to read Emerson's "Self-Reliance" (the *ur* text of American pragmatism) ends as Paul mocks Emerson's verbosity, and then deliberately rips out one of the pages of his father's treasured copy ("I just took a page from your book" [291]). By the time they arrive in Cooperstown, Frank has crucially compromised his ambitions—instead of encouraging Paul to forget the past, he has begun trying to replace Paul's bad, unhappy memories with newer, better ones. When Paul gloomily asks "What good is it to come to some beautiful place?" (i.e., Cooperstown), Frank responds: "The basic idea, I guess, is that you'll remember it later and be a lot happier.' I could add, 'So if you've got some useless or bad memories this'd be a great place to start off-loading them.' But what I mean is obvious" (350).

Cooperstown as the Mecca of American nostalgia—a place dedicated to memories of the most cheerful, sentimental kind—seems to Frank the perfect place for inculcating this new, brighter version of the past. The fact that such memories, like Cooperstown itself, may lack a certain authenticity does not trouble him; it actually strikes him in some ways as a potential advantage:

Some suspicion lurks . . . that the town is just a replica (of a legitimate place), a period backdrop to the Hall of Fame or to something even less specific, with nothing authentic (crime, despair, litter, the rapture) really going on no matter what civic illusion the city fathers maintain. (In this way, of course, it's no less than what I imagined, and still a potentially perfect setting in which to woo one's son away from his problems and bestow good counsel—if, that is, one's son weren't an asshole). (293)

This description clearly links Cooperstown to the postmodern, hyper-real American landscapes most famously described in the work of Fredric Jameson and Jean Baudrillard. Frank's embrace of Cooperstown seems to suggest an alliance between Emersonianism and postmodernism on the basis of a shared rejection of "authenticity" and a shared faith in the virtues of self-creation. Such a linkage, however, as the novel soon makes plain, is clearly a mistake. Frank has taken a wrong turn

(philosophically) since the urge to impress good memories over bad ones, however apparently attractive, assumes that memory and the past rather than the future remain the crucial component of individual identity—and for an Emersonian pragmatist to concede this is (in effect) to concede almost everything.¹⁶

Not surprisingly, then, the new tactics do not work—the past, however spruced up or reconceptualized, cannot be a good guide to the future. Ford signals both the theoretical weakness and the practical collapse of Frank's modified method when, whilst they are watching a fantasy baseball camp at Doubleday Field, Paul calmly asks Frank whether he was ever abused as a child: the “good” false memories of Cooperstown are, in other words, decisively trumped by other, equally false, but much worse ones. Since neither version of the past is truer or more convincing than the other, Frank is left in a helpless and hopeless position: “A dead spot seems to be where these two days have delivered us . . . before I've said enough, before I've achieved a desired effect. . . . Before I've made of this day a memory worth preserving” (352-53).

Frank's failure at this point in the novel (with both Paul and the Markhams¹⁷) raises the important question of how improvements *can* be implemented or understood using a pragmatic method without appealing, as philosophers and moralists traditionally do, to a set of fixed truths or an idea of the way things “really are.” Frank's efforts thus far have been based on a faith in the power of words to reimagine and in some sense remake experience. His ex-wife Ann's criticisms of him in this regard are especially illuminating in that they emphasize the Romantic and writerly quality of these tendencies: “Everything's in quotes with you, Frank. Nothing's really solid. Every time I talk to you

¹⁶My reading of this section of the novel raises the complex question of the relationship between pragmatism and postmodernism. It is certainly beyond the scope of this essay to resolve or even adequately address that issue, but it will be clear from what I have argued, I hope, that I believe Ford's version of pragmatism, in *Independence Day* and elsewhere (*A Multitude of Sins* [2002] is especially relevant), ultimately sets itself against an hedonic postmodernism characterized by pastiche and eclecticism. To anticipate my own argument a little, we might say that for Ford true self-reliance finally involves a complex double-movement whereby the past is both recognized and moved away from, rather than the playful or therapeutic reshufflings of the past characteristic of the more celebratory forms of postmodernism.

¹⁷Although the Markhams do eventually instruct Frank to make an offer on a house, they delay too long and the house is sold to someone else.

I feel everything's being written by you. Even my lines" (184). Although Frank is no longer a writer,¹⁸ he remains, albeit in a much diluted and ironized way, a version, or would-be version, of Bloom's "strong poet"—the man or woman who is able to remake the world and the self through an act of will or imagination. Another remark by Ann in the same conversation makes the pedigree of these notions even clearer: "You just want everything to seem perfect and everybody to seem pleased. And you're willing to let *seem* equal *be*." The allusion (presumably unconscious on Ann's part) is to Wallace Stevens's¹⁹ famous line in "The Emperor of Ice Cream": "Let be be finale of seem." Ann, as a Michigan literalist committed to a common-sensical notion of reality, has no time for such ideas, but Frank sticks with them (through the bulk of the novel), arguing against Ann that the grand abstractions which she considers crucial are much less important and real than the small-scale acts of goodwill and creativity in which he places his own faith: "You're one of those people who thinks God's *only* in the details . . . You invent things that don't exist, then you worry about being denied whatever they are. And then you miss the things that *do* exist" (254).

Although Frank's ideas are persuasive—and the novel certainly suggests that they are preferable to Ann's²⁰—the imaginative edifice that he seeks to create, the truth he attempts to make, is clearly at best a fragile and paradoxical thing, as the title of Stevens's poem emphasizes. His efforts with Paul and the Markhams fail and, in the end, the kind of change which Frank has been striving to encourage or provoke through language finally occurs on its own, non-linguistically, without his contrivance and without warning or explanation. The trip to Cooperstown ends when Paul is seriously injured in a batting cage: "the

¹⁸Although Frank gave up fiction writing in 1970 after publishing one volume of short stories, in *The Lay of the Land* he notes suggestively that the realtor and the novelist have some important characteristics in common: "Realtors share a basic industry with novelists, who make up importance from life-run-rampant just by choosing, changing and telling. Realtors make importance by selling, which is better-paying than the novelist's deal and probably not as hard to do well" (84).

¹⁹Wallace Stevens has been connected to the pragmatist tradition by Richard Poirier in *The Renewal of Literature* and elsewhere.

²⁰Frank insists on Ann's status as a crude metaphysician: "This is the perpetual theme of her life: the search for truth, and truth's defeat by the forces of contingency, most frequently represented by yours truly" (253).

machine . . . squeezes another ball through its dark warp, out through the sprightly air, and hits my son full in the face and knocks him flat down on his back with a terrible, loud *thwock*. After which everything changes” (361).

At this crucial moment the novel touches the limits of the American pragmatist tradition. In “Experience,” Emerson suggests in a loosely Kantian fashion that we are so enmeshed in our own subjective selves that even extreme suffering and loss (he cites the example of the death of his son Waldo) leave us fundamentally untouched. “There are moods,” he says, “in which we court suffering, in the hope that here, at least, we shall find reality, sharp peaks and edges of truth. But it turns out to be scene-painting and counterfeit. The only thing grief has taught me is to know how shallow it is” (3: 29). Such apparent numbness or indifference in the face of profound loss gives fuel to the long-standing criticism that American pragmatism lacks a proper sense of the tragic and, furthermore, that its optimism is, in that sense, naive and partial.²¹ It is precisely at moments of peril and suffering, when human beings experience their own limitations, that pragmatism, it seems, loses its purchase. As Rorty admits, the world

can blindly and inarticulately crush us; mute despair, intense mental pain, can cause us to blot ourselves out. But that sort of power is not the sort we can appropriate by adopting and then transforming its language, thereby becoming identical with the threatening power and subsuming it under our own more powerful selves. (*Contingency* 40)

For Rorty, these limitations are not cause for embarrassment. Instead they are a reminder that philosophy is always a human activity rather than an uncovering of the deeper structure of reality. The desire to control, understand, or overcome what he calls “the nonhuman, the non-linguistic,” and what we might call, more broadly, suffering or loss,

²¹This kind of criticism goes back as far as Hawthorne and Melville. Sidney Hook attempted to refute it in 1974 in *Pragmatism and the Tragic Sense of Life*, but it persists and can be seen more recently (albeit in quite different forms) in the work of Raymond Boisvert, Terry Eagleton, and Stanley Cavell. Cavell, for example, in his attempt to reclaim Emerson for Continental philosophy, claims that from an Emersonian perspective “the Deweyan is apt to seem an enlightened child, toying with the means of destruction, stinting the means of instruction” (16). For Cavell, philosophy, or thinking, begins with a profound and inescapable sense of loss, which pragmatism as a practical problem-solving approach is either unaware of or uninterested in.

is for Rorty a part of the metaphysical attempt to deny our own contingency. For Frank Bascombe, however, suffering cannot be so easily diminished or put aside. The novel flatly contradicts Emerson's assertion in "Experience" that "grief can teach me nothing, nor carry me one step into real nature" (3: 29). In Cooperstown the problem for Frank is not, as it is for Emerson, the "evanescence" or "lubricity" of reality but rather its sudden, brutal, and unignorable presence. "There is no *seeming* now," Frank notes as Paul is being taken to the hospital, "all is *is*" (369). And then a little later, when they arrive: "Here is the voice of the *outer* world become primary. . . . While mine—the silenced voice of worry, love, patience, impatience, comradeship, thoughtlessness, understanding and genial acquiescence—is the small voice of the old small life losing ground" (382).

Paul's baseball injury, like Ralph's death which it painfully echoes, reminds us that, for all his Emersonian optimism, loss and suffering are the defining features of Frank's life. The Bascombe trilogy begins on the anniversary of his son's death, and in the opening pages of *The Sportswriter*, Frank observes ominously that "for your life to be worth anything you must sooner or later face the possibility of terrible, searing regret. Though you must also manage to avoid it or your life will be ruined" (4). While American pragmatism, broadly speaking, emerges and explains itself as a response (whether romantic, scientific, or ironic) to the accumulated failures of a received philosophical and cultural tradition, Frank's pragmatism emerges primarily as a response to personal loss. It is a crucial difference. The conflict between optimism and gloom—between a forward-looking, New World meliorism and a much darker, more tragic and backward-looking vision which we might associate with Europe and the past²²—is a familiar element of an American narrative tradition which owes as much or more to

²²In terms of the development of the American novel, we might symbolically associate this darker vision with Europe (after James) and with the South (after Faulkner). Frank Bascombe, like Richard Ford, was raised in Mississippi and has lived for a time in France. By the time the novel opens he has settled in New Jersey, but the novel suggests that symbolically at least the influence of these earlier locations persists. For useful discussion of Ford's relationship to Faulkner and the South, see Fred Hobson and also Martyn Bone. Ford's connections to James have been not much commented on but they are clear enough in the first and third stories of *Women with Men*, both of which are set in Paris and both of which suggest that Europe is the home to a kind of dark seriousness which America and Americans cannot hope to match.

Hawthorne as it does to Emerson, but the Bascombe trilogy replays this long-running conflict in a new and distinctive way. Frank's pragmatism, despite its indefatigable and occasionally desperate energy, never completely escapes its own traumatic origins. The action of all three of the Bascombe novels thus involves Frank in a repeated movement away from, then back towards, the experience of grief or mourning. It involves him, in other words, in a continual effort of pragmatic forgetting that continually fails, yet to which he returns repeatedly (albeit in modified form) as the best or only available option.²³

The final section of *Independence Day*—itself titled “Independence Day” as if after the events of Cooperstown everything, including the novel itself, is forced to somehow begin again—involves a symbolically complex effort to rethink Frank's pragmatic project (and to rethink the key term “independence”) so as make it once again usable. A primary element of this effort involves a reconsideration of the relationship between the private and the public, the individual and the communal. As Frank notes regarding the July Fourth holiday,

It is an odd holiday, to be sure—one a man or woman could easily grow abstracted about, its practical importance to the task of holding back wild and dark misrule never altogether clear or proveable; as though independence were *only* private and too crucial to celebrate with others; as though we should all just get on with being independent, given that it is after all the normal, commonsensical human condition, to be taken for granted unless opposed or thwarted, in which case unreserved, even absurd measures should be taken to restore or reimagine it (as I have tried to do with my son but he has accomplished alone). Best maybe just to pass the day as the original signers did and as I prefer to do, in a country-like setting near to home, alone with your thoughts, your fears, your hopes, your “moments of reason” for what new world lies fearsomely ahead. (425)

His emphasis here on the private nature of independence may well signal a desire to escape from the recent intrusions of the outer world—to rediscover a space where he may safely return to the pragmatic project as previously imagined. However, this desire (with its

²³This broadly dialectical pattern—hope, followed by disillusionment, followed by another kind of hope—defines the narrative arc of all three novels in the Bascombe trilogy. Each one works up to a dramatic climax (on the lawn of the Arcenault house in *The Sportswriter*, in the batting cage at Cooperstown in *Independence Day*, and at the Manasquan Bar in *The Lay of the Land*) in which Frank's hopeful efforts to escape the loss of Ralph and all that loss symbolizes fail, and after which he is required to begin again—not to abandon optimism and hope entirely, but to reimagine them in some way.

nostalgic and pastoral overtones) is explicitly undercut by the dramatic context in which it occurs—Frank, as he ponders, is watching and taking an interest in the preparations for the Haddam Independence Day parade, a very *public* expression of self-reliance. At this point, he is clearly caught in a classic, perhaps *the* classic, American dilemma of how to detach oneself from convention (to become free) without in the process becoming merely alienated or self-absorbed—the paradox of how, in the broadest terms, to create an independent *nation*.²⁴ To jettison the past and be truly free of all conventions means moving away from, even abandoning, shared ideas and a shared language, and the project of forgetting in that sense is deeply, and perhaps disturbingly, individualistic. When Frank's stepbrother Irv shows him an old family photograph, for example, Frank fails to recognize either himself or his mother—an involuntary failure of memory which provokes something like a panic attack: "for an instant I lose my breath entirely and almost gasp, which makes me panic that I'm choking and need a quick Heimlich" (392).

This is a deep-seated dilemma which pragmatist thinkers have reacted to in a variety of ways, ranging from the individualistic emphases of Emerson and James to the more communitarian ideas of Pierce and Dewey. In his influential essay "Private Irony and Liberal Hope," Rorty offers a compromise based on a Rawlsian acceptance of an ineradicable public-private division. Although Ford's solution in *Independence Day* is not exactly the same, Rorty's ideas offer the most helpful way of describing and illuminating the philosophical dimensions of the compromise Frank Bascombe finally does (provisionally) achieve. Rorty accepts that pragmatist ideas are generally most useful in the private realm of self-creation "but pretty much useless when it comes to politics" (*Contingency* 83). In the public realm, he suggests, the thoroughgoing private scepticism of the pragmatist must be tempered by awareness of the needs of others—most specifically their need not to be hurt or humiliated. This balancing act is potentially tricky, he argues, because thoroughgoing scepticism (what he calls ironism in this essay) has a great

²⁴The tension between individualism and social cohesion has been a central concern of American thinkers (liberal thinkers especially) since Tocqueville. Quentin Anderson's *The Imperial Self* is still perhaps the best known communitarian critique of the individualist tradition. For a recent, non-literary reiteration of these long-running concerns, see Robert D. Putnam's *Bowling Alone*.

potential to hurt others. Although pragmatism “results from awareness of the power of redescription,” most people, Rorty notes, “do not want to be redescribed.” And careless redescription is thus “potentially very cruel” (*Contingency* 89). His point is, therefore, that while private acts of redescription can be entirely free, public acts must take careful account of “all the various ways in which other human beings whom I might act on can be humiliated” (*Contingency* 92).

Ford has described *Independence Day* as a novel explicitly concerned with isolation and the difficulty of combining private independence with a larger kind of emotional engagement.²⁵ For Frank, this dilemma (effectively Rorty’s public-private dilemma writ small) takes its most forceful form in the question of his relationship with his girlfriend Sally. In a conversation prior to the Cooperstown incident, Frank answers Sally’s question about what it means “to tell somebody you love them” in the following way: “it’s provisional. I guess I’d mean I see enough in someone I liked that I’d want to make a whole person out of that part, and want to keep that person around” (168). While this answer is true to Frank’s principles—his belief that everything is mutable and nothing permanent—it also demonstrates little awareness of what Rorty would call Sally’s own “final vocabulary” or what we might call, rather more simply, her feelings. On the evening in question, it provokes what appears to be the break-up of their relationship, and later on she revisits the remarks, telling Frank that

making her up (which she referred to then as “reassembling”) just to make love appealing was actually intolerable . . . and that I couldn’t just keep switching words around indefinitely to suit myself but needed instead to accept the unmanageable in others. (435)

²⁵In an interview with *Salon* shortly after the publication of *Independence Day*, he noted:

But when I started writing about Frank at the beginning of the book, I kept thinking to myself, what the hell is at issue here? . . . so I thought to myself, well, he has an equilibrium in his life which he has paid the price of isolation to maintain. . . . what price have you paid to attain equilibrium? And what I figured out was that the price Frank had paid—and it was a high price—was that he was isolated and had achieved independence only in a conditional sense. And what was at issue in his life was how in the process of maintaining that equilibrium he could ever touch somebody. How could he run the risk of complicating his life by engaging people he cared about? So that is what the book is about. (Majeski)

Sally insists (and Frank accepts) that he must move away from the severity of private irony and towards what Rorty calls "liberal hope," i.e., a form of speech and action which recognizes there are no permanent truths or human rights but also seeks to minimize cruelty and harm. "Switching words around indefinitely to suit [one]self" is a reasonable (if dismissive) description of the pragmatic method of making truth rather than finding it, and "accepting the unmanageable in others" is another way of phrasing Rorty's suggestion that "The liberal ironist needs as much imaginative acquaintance with alternative final vocabularies as possible, not just for her own edification, but in order to understand the actual and possible humiliation of the people who use these alternative final vocabularies" (*Contingency* 92).

While Rorty argues for a continuing dialectic between private and public—irony and hope—with neither having final priority,²⁶ Ford's novel (and the Bascombe trilogy in general) suggests a progressive movement, as Frank gets older, away from one and towards the other. This movement is certainly not steady or unequivocal across the three novels, and it involves a good deal of wobbling and falling back on Frank's part, but at the same time it is a clear and recognizable trend. *The Sportswriter* conceives of freedom predominantly as a form of escape connected to physical movement.²⁷ *The Lay of the Land*, whose plot is tellingly built around Thanksgiving as a family gathering, is dominated by questions of inclusion and acceptance—what they might mean and how they might be achieved.²⁸ *Independence Day* as the middle novel of the trilogy offers the Cooperstown incident as the fulcrum or triggering incident of this longer-term shift of emphasis. The awareness of the external world which is first forced on Frank by Paul's

²⁶He suggests that even in an ideal liberal society the public-private distinction would still operate: "I cannot . . . claim that there could or ought to be a culture whose public rhetoric is *ironist*. I cannot imagine a culture which socialised its youth in such a way as to make them continually dubious about their own process of socialisation. Irony seems inherently a private matter" (*Contingency* 87).

²⁷In a crucial moment towards the end of *The Sportswriter*, after Walter Lockett's suicide, Frank symbolically leaves home, abandoning Walter's flat and jumping on a train to New York where new opportunities present themselves.

²⁸The essential question in *The Lay of the Land* is, as Frank puts it, "how to keep afloat in the populous hazardous mainstream (the yakkedy-yak and worse) without drowning" (95).

injury softens and mutates but never entirely leaves him. Moreover, it encourages him, once the first shock has passed, subtly but significantly to modify his previous sense of independence. In the final section of the novel the project of forgetting is combined, suggestively if paradoxically, with a form of commemoration. Frank goes to visit the site of *Homo haddamus pithecarius*—an old skeleton of unknown origin that has been unearthed during recent construction work—and he is also tellingly reminded, by his old friend Carter Knott, that July Fourth is the anniversary of the deaths of Thomas Jefferson and John Adams. We might say that in this concluding section the private urge towards self-creation is modified or restrained by an awareness of death as a universal and therefore, in an important sense, shared and public experience.

This change of emphasis is most broadly characterized in the novel as a shift from the “Existence Period” into a new phase which Frank calls “the Permanent Period.” The Permanent Period, which is most fully explored in *The Lay of the Land*, emphasizes the present rather than the future or the past, and is a logical consequence of Frank’s discovery that the project of forgetting is circular and self-defeating, i.e., that the attempt to jettison loss only leads back to it. It is also a logical consequence of Frank’s getting older and realizing that non-existence is where we go to as well as where we come from. “It is another facet in the shining gem of the Permanent Period of life that we try to be what we are in the present—good or not so good—this, so that accepting final credit for ourselves won’t be such a shock later on” (*Lay* 31). The later novel explores and makes clear the limitations of even the Permanent Period, but at the end of *Independence Day* it is offered as a new solution, a new way of facing death. Frank tells us that it is

also possible that I will soon be married, following years supposing I never could again, and so will no longer view myself as the suspicious bachelor, as I admit I sometimes still do. The Permanent Period, this would be, that long, stretching-out time when my dreams would have mystery like any ordinary person’s; when whatever I do or say, who I marry, how my kids turn out, becomes what the world—if it makes note at all—knows of me, how I’m seen, understood, even how I think of myself before whatever there is that’s wild and unassuageable rises and cheerlessly hauls me off to oblivion. (450)

On the basis of such a passage, one may be tempted to wonder whether Frank has abandoned pragmatism completely in favor of a less

bold, more complacently bourgeois, compromise, but this would be to ignore Ford's clear and persistent efforts to keep his protagonist connected to an Emersonian tradition while at the same time mitigating the more isolating and self-defeating elements of that strategy. The shock of Cooperstown and the bigger, less redeemable, losses which these events recalled have not been forgotten—indeed the novel has made quite clear that they *cannot* be forgotten—but neither, the novel stresses, can they easily form the basis of a happily lived life. The novel's carefully considered relationship to loss is formulated one last time in its final pages when Frank drives past the town cemetery and ponders his own eventual resting place:

On down Pleasant Valley Road along the west boundary fence of the cemetery, wherein tiny American flags bristle from many graves and my first son, Ralph Bascombe, lies near three of the "original signers," but where I will not rest, since early this very morning in a mood of transition and progress and to take command of final things, I decided (in bed with an atlas) on a burial plot as far from here as is not totally ridiculous. Cut Off, Louisiana, is my first choice; Esperance, New York was too close. (439)

Here space, as so often in American writing, is offered as a solution to the problems of time, but it is a solution which is, in this case at least, surely more subtle (and witty) than it is naive. To remember and recognize loss, Ford seems to suggest here, does not mean one has to dwell with it, or even particularly close to it. This idea stands in contradiction to the darker implications of a European philosophical tradition exemplified by Heidegger's "being towards death" and other forms of existentialist "authenticity." To think like that is to give in to morbidity and stasis, to deny the vividness and particularity of life itself. To know that he would one day be buried "at home" near Ralph, Frank says, would "paralyze me good and proper," and would prevent him from fully living out his remaining years. It would indeed be even worse, he goes so far as to suggest in a final clinching metaphor, "than having tenure at Princeton" (439).

To suggest, as I have, that Richard Ford tests the limits of a pragmatic tradition does not mean that he wishes, at least in the Bascombe trilogy, to push beyond those limits into another kind of thinking altogether. There is no sense in these novels (despite their occasional references to

the existentialist tradition²⁹) of angst leading to insight, and indeed Frank is openly dismissive of the highfalutin literariness of such a suggestion: “I do not credit the epiphanic, the seeing-through that reveals all, triggered by a mastering detail. These are lies of the liberal arts to distract us from the more precious here and now” (*Lay* 343). This attachment to the here and now may seem simple enough, even simple-minded, yet reading the Bascombe trilogy reminds us how hard it is to maintain this perspective, this balance, the “high-wire act of normalcy” (94) as Frank calls it on one occasion, poised between the equally unappealing options of idealism and despair, metaphysics and nihilism. In terms of literary history, the name for this continuing effort is probably realism, but in broader human terms Ford suggests it might be called, after Emerson, self-reliance, or independence, and in that sense the Bascombe novels themselves, in their surprising and subtle variations on their literary and philosophical heritage, are to be read as exemplifications as well as explorations of this continually American theme.

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²⁹See, for example, *The Lay of the Land* 210 and 326.

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