

Review of Robert D. Richardson, *Three Roads Back: How Emerson, Thoreau, and William James Responded to the Greatest Losses of Their Lives* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2023), 108 pp. \$ 22.95.

Robert Richardson was the author of three important and wide-ranging biographies of Ralph Waldo Emerson, Henry David Thoreau, and William James. He passed away in 2020. *Three Roads Back* is his final book. It seeks to elucidate how Emerson, Thoreau, and James coped with tragic personal losses at the beginning of their respective careers. The book tells a story that centers on the idea of resilience and on how the loss of a loved one can lead to a new form of creativity and a new way of thinking. However, the author not only depicts how Emerson, Thoreau, and James responded to devastating events, he also intends to explain how their reactions were crucial for the development of American literature and philosophy. Like his previous biographies, *Three Roads Back* combines intellectual history, philosophy, and literary studies in order to illuminate the multilayered complexity of American thought from the American Renaissance to the beginning of the twentieth century. This is not the birth of American literature and philosophy, but rather the period in which it becomes obvious that the characteristics of modern American thought will profoundly differ from those typical of European thinking.

Three Roads Back is a small book. It consists of three parts. The first part focuses on Emerson and consists of five brief chapters. The second part discusses Thoreau's version of resilience and consists of eight brief chapters, whereas the third part, showing how James successfully dealt with loss and grief, consists of five chapters. The book closes with a brief postscript.

In his preface, Richardson underscores that in his opinion Emerson, Thoreau, and James's examples of resilience "count

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among their lasting contributions to modern life” (xvii). In this final book, Richardson still performs the task of the biographer. Interpreting their texts, analyzing their philosophical positions, or discussing their place in the American intellectual tradition is not sufficient for him. Richardson contends that we do not only have to read what Emerson, Thoreau, and James wrote, but we also have to “look at how they lived their lives. This is the biggest contribution of the biographical approach, which focuses our attention on how they lived their own lives as well as on the continuing value of what they wrote” (xviii). For his purpose, as Richardson maintains, it is important to regard these three intellectuals whose work he seeks to explain “as fellow human beings, facing losses and troubles much like ours” (xviii). The method he applies is, as he puts it, “documentary biography” (xix), meaning that he mostly uses journal entries and letters in order to demonstrate how Emerson, Thoreau, and James coped with tragic events and losses. According to Richardson, this documentary method is supposed “to facilitate a personal, even a sympathetic, connection – rather than a detached, critical, or judgmental connection – between the reader and the subject” (xix).

The first part of Richardson’s book discusses Emerson. In 1831, when the latter was 27, his nineteen-year-old wife Ellen died of tuberculosis. Experiencing an overwhelming grief and plunged into apathy for almost two years, Emerson eventually managed to exhibit an idiosyncratic intellectual and physical resilience. As the author argues, this process begins with Emerson developing his idiosyncratic Christian faith: “Emerson left formal, inherited, traditional Christianity in 1832 and never returned” (8). Losing his Unitarian faith and strongly reacting against formal and dogmatic Christianity, Emerson finds comfort in nature and develops his understanding of experience and truth. His final conversion, the author proposes, takes place in July 1833. Visiting the Jardin des Plantes in Paris, a famous botanical garden, Emerson connects with life in a radically new manner: “In Emerson’s moment of connection with the natural world in the Jardin des Plantes, the force of life entirely

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overpowers the feeling of loss and despair he had so recently plumbed” (14). Because of his new appreciation of the significance of nature, Emerson is capable of developing new conceptions of individuality, self-reliance, and redemption. As Richardson puts it: “Regeneration, not through Christ but through Nature, is the great theme of Emerson’s life, and it came to him as a response to the death of his young wife Ellen. Emerson uses the language of redemption, regeneration, and revelation – terms for what we now call resilience” (27).

Like his friend Emerson, Thoreau finds solace and redemption in nature. In January 1842, the latter’s brother John died at the age of 27. In his seemingly insurmountable grief, Thoreau spent many hours talking with Emerson (and no one else). Most of his time, however, he spent in nature, striving to learn its language, as it were. Finally appreciating the implications of the notion that while individuals die, nature lives on, Thoreau, Richardson argues, is capable of using the deaths of his brother and of Emerson’s son Waldo in order to emotionally connect “him more solidly than ever with nature, with the rivers, the fields, and the forest” (42). The author advances the idea that the real turning point for Thoreau was “the turn from seeing the world made up of irreplaceable individuals to seeing it as a huge whole of which everything and everyone is just a tiny piece” (43). Like Emerson, Thoreau understood that death is a necessary part of life, and that we can use our grief and utter devastation in order to change our thought and project ourselves into the future. As the author correctly points out, however, Thoreau went further by developing “an anti-anthropomorphic, nature-centered vision of how things are” (61). This combination of a radically new conception of subjectivity and an ecological worldview would, of course, culminate in *Walden, or, Life in the Woods*.

In his intellectual biography of William James, *William James: In the Maelstrom of American Modernism*, Richardson uses the first part (“Growing up ZigZag”) to describe the young James.¹

He was difficult, disoriented, fickle, as brooding as too many European intellectuals, and often sick. Richardson also uses one

chapter to tell his readers about the death of Minny Temple. The latter was James's cousin, and her death devastated him. She died of tuberculosis in March 1870, when she was 24. Her death is also central to the part that discusses James's conversion and resilience in Richardson's new book. A few weeks after Minny's death, the young James, already a truly troubled man, experienced a panic attack and had a horrific vision, a revelation that he wrote about in his journal and that he would later use in his *Varieties of Religious Experience*. One evening, "a horrible fear of [his] own existence" (85) fell upon him. He felt defenseless and painfully exposed to the insecurity of life. According to Richardson, "Minny's death set the terms in which William described the attack as an 'experience' that 'had a religious bearing'" (87). In order to understand Richardson's argument, it is crucial to note that only a few weeks after his cousin's death and his terrible vision, James, after reading Renouvier, writes in his journal about his firm decision to believe in free will. This also signifies, as the author correctly maintains, that "James already understands the immense power of action – acting – as well as the power of habit" (88). The author uses the same journal entry to direct attention to what he thinks is James's main insight: "This conclusion – that life, meaning what is real and what is good, exists in the 'self-governing resistance of the ego to the world' – is the central insight, the pivotal moment of William James's life" (89). This Emersonian, and Nietzschean, insight plays an important role for the development of pragmatism, and particularly for an appreciation of the relationship between Romanticism and pragmatism. James's central insight arrived in the wake of Minny Temple's death. However, Richardson writes that the "reason for the resilience shown here is not clear. What is clear is that William either already had or quickly acquired the resilience needed to get out of the long, depressed state of mind [...]" (92).

Richardson is in perfect command of his material, creating a montage of letters and journal entries that brings his readers closer to the lives of Emerson, Thoreau, and James. As the author intended, after having read his book one does think of these American intellectuals as "fellow human beings" (xviii). As readers, we are tempted to agree with Richardson when he

advances the argument that “the resilience we sometimes feel in ourselves is in truth a universal law or force, discernable anywhere one looks. Resilience is part of the nature of things” (97). As I have said, *Three Roads Back* is a small book, and because of the author’s chosen method of documentary biography at least half of his book consists of quotations. In his previous three biographies, Richardson showed that he was an elegant stylist. Because of his method in this book, his writing only occasionally shows former elegance. Too often he just uses a few sentences to link two quotations. One would have preferred if in his final book Richardson had given his position somewhat more contour and had accentuated his writing style and its significance for the task of composing intellectual biographies.

A decidedly more important shortcoming of this book is that the author never discusses or mentions that the narrative that he tells in his book also has to be regarded as an important part of the prehistory of pragmatism, and particularly of the endeavor to elucidate to what degree pragmatism is a form of humanism. Resilience, as the author demonstrates in his chapter on James, is intimately linked to “the immense power of action—acting” (88). In other words, Emerson, Thoreau, and James’s notions of resilience have to do with humans’ contingent actions in a historical world that is not yet postmetaphysical, but whose metaphysical foundations have begun to crumble. The story that Richardson tells in his book can be useful to one seeking to appreciate that only pragmatism as humanism can teach the full implications and consequences of the idea that humans have no duty to anything nonhuman and that the only way for them to get beyond their current practices is to creatively imagine better and more useful practices.

Three Roads Back tells a narrative about how three American intellectuals coped with devastating losses and tragedies. However, I think one should also see this narrative in a broader framework by realizing its significance for the modern antifoundationalist and humanist story of progress and emancipation. This story, from Vico, the Romantics, Nietzsche, James, and F.C.S. Schiller to Dewey and Rorty, shows that instead of trying to converge to the antecedently real and true and being adequate to the real, the human subject ought to

understand the far-reaching meaning of the development from finding to making. The idea, and the act, of finding implies that one sees the world as a conversational partner; the latter offers one candidates for belief and it eventually confirms whether those beliefs or sentences correspond to reality. In other words, the act of finding is metaphysical insofar as it forces one to differentiate between the way the world is and the way we describe it. By contrast, the modern antifoundationalist story of progress strives to show that the act of making, the creativity of action, is all we have and need. Instead of asking ourselves whether there are truths out there that we still have to find or discover, we would ask whether it would not be more stimulating to invent new ways of speaking and acting. In a de-divinized and postmetaphysical culture, as particularly Rorty showed, the act of making is intimately tied to the power of the imagination.

The pragmatist and humanist story of progress and emancipation focuses on the contingent development of humans as natural and historical creatures and as creative self-fashioners under particular enviroing conditions. In his book, Richardson does the same, but he refrains from drawing attention to the significance of the prehistory of pragmatism for an appreciation of the complexity of modern American thought. Undoubtedly, this was not his primary concern, but I wish he would have used the opportunity to discuss this important question in a conclusion. In spite of these shortcomings, however, there are passages in Richardson's book that demonstrate why one has to count him among the most important authors of intellectual biographies in the US.

PD Dr. Ulf Schulenberg
University of Bremen
schulenberg@uni-bremen.de

¹ Robert D. Richardson, *William James: In the Maelstrom of American Modernism* (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 2007).