Eco on Dewey

PHILIP W. JACKSON

Department of Education, University of Chicago

ABSTRACT: This study seeks to examine Umberto Eco's views of the key ideas in John Dewey's *Art as Experience*. Eco's preferred suggestion of transactional psychology as a corrective to Dewey's views is criticized as a misreading of Dewey's position.

KEY WORDS: art, Dewey, Eco, experience, transactional psychology

In his *The Open Work* (1989) Umberto Eco takes John Dewey to task for the way he handles one of the key ideas in *Art as Experience*. He is not the first to have done so, of course. Several other critics, most notably Stephen Pepper (1939) and Benedetto Croce, (1948, 1952) had registered prior complaints about the book. Pepper accused Dewey of trying to mix organicism and pragmatism; Croce congratulated him (backhandedly) for his belated conversion to idealism and to a set of insights that he (Croce) had himself discovered long before. Others have complained about Dewey's use of figurative language (Aldrich, 1944), his apparent failure to distinguish between different types of aesthetic experience (Romanell, 1949), and his insistence upon the universality of the conclusions he had reached (Boas, 1953).

One of the things that makes Eco's criticism especially noteworthy, beyond the fact that it is fairly new to many readers on this side of the Atlantic, having only recently been translated from the Italian, is that in addition to remedying what he believes is wrong, or at least claiming to do so, Eco further suggests that Dewey might have made the repairs himself if he had been a more careful reader of his own work. That claim alone should suffice to pique the curiosity of readers of *Art as Experience*. Another thing that does so is the simple fact that Dewey is no longer around to answer his critics, as he was when Pepper and Croce wrote, which leaves us to imagine on our own what he might have said to Eco in reply.

Eco's criticism centers on Dewey's notion of "the including whole," a favorite target of a number of the book's critics and a central idea within Dewey's theory of experience where it not only serves as the glue that holds ordinary experience together by giving each situation and event its distinctive cast but also provides the key to an understanding of what makes certain experiences aesthetic. Dewey had no single name for this quality. He referred to it in a variety of ways, often with cumbersome phrases like "the total and massive quality," "the pervading qualitative unity," "the undefined pervasive quality," and "the pervading underlying qualitative whole." The two central points about this property of experience, according to Dewey, are, first, that we
usually are only dimly aware of it as we go about our daily lives and, second, that we *become* aware of it—indeed, we often are “struck” by it—when we witness works of art. Moreover, the intuiting of this sense of things belonging together and being part of a whole is a large part of what guides and controls the artist as he goes about his work. Or so Dewey would have us understand.

Eco begins by approving of Dewey’s use of this concept. He talks about Dewey being “perfectly aware” that the dim and vague aspects of every experience are part of “its global nature.” He calls Dewey’s acknowledgment of this “fact,” “one of the most interesting features of an aesthetics which, given its naturalistic foundations, could at first sight seem rigidly positivistic” (p. 26). He also points out that Croce had employed a similar set of notions in his work. Those too he speaks of approvingly. But he then proceeds to complain that neither Croce nor Dewey go far enough in their observations. Both fall short, Eco believes, in providing an adequate explanation for the phenomena they describe. Croce’s words, we are told, “effectively translate the vague emotion many of us have felt at the reading of a poem, but they don’t explain it. In other words,” Eco continues, “Croce does not accompany his observation with a theoretical framework that would account for it” (p. 25).

Eco has much the same complaint to make about Dewey. He too, we are told, dwells “on the conditions of aesthetic pleasure without trying to explain their mechanism” (p. 25). The reason for this, according to Eco, is that both Croce’s and Dewey’s philosophic positions “share the same romantic origins, which may well explain,” he continues, “why all [Dewey’s] analyses, no matter how scientific, always culminate in a moment of intense emotion before the mystery of the cosmos ...” (p. 26).

Perched “on the threshold of the cosmic mystery, Dewey seems to be afraid of taking the last step that would allow him to dissect this experience of the indefinite into its psychological coordinates,” Eco opines (p. 26). Dewey himself “declares his failure,” Eco further insists. He does so, we learn, in the following words, which appear in the section of *Art as Experience* that treats the notion of there being a pervasive unity to all we undergo. Eco calls this single sentence Dewey’s “surrender.”

I can see no psychological ground for such properties of an experience save that, somehow, the work of art operates to deepen and to raise to a great clarity that sense of an enveloping undefined whole that accompanies every normal experience (AE, p. 195).

The irony of this surrender, according to Eco, is that Dewey made it unneces-
sarily. He had already provided, “hardly a hundred pages before,” the “premises” on which “a clear psychological explanation” of the phenomenon might rest. These comprise what Eco refers to as Dewey’s “transactional conception of knowledge.” All that remains to be done, therefore, to rectify Dewey’s peculiar oversight is to spell out this explanation in some detail, which Eco proceeds to do.

Eco’s analysis is divided into two parts. He first explains what is distinctive