Experiences or Vocabularies?

Pragmatism and the Teaching of Literature

Recently, there has been a revival of interest in pragmatism throughout the humanities, including literary theory. But a number of competing “neopragmatisms” have emerged, and the competition has largely become polarized into two rival camps, which I will designate as “experientialist” and “textualist.” In a book called Pragmatist Aesthetics: Living Beauty, Rethinking Art (1992), Richard Shusterman makes a truly heroic attempt to rehabilitate the aesthetic theory John Dewey based on his notion of “experience.” This latter notion was Dewey’s attempt to dismantle what he called the “epistemology industry” by bridging the supposed gap between subject and object, mind and world, but it quickly became eclipsed by the language-centered philosophy of logical positivism and the analytic tradition. In his preface, Shusterman declares his intention to recuperate Dewey’s experientialist philosophy in opposition to the “textualism” he finds dominant in contemporary pragmatist thought. He has in mind particularly the work of Richard Rorty, who has advocated renewed attention to Dewey’s pragmatism but has suggested substituting a post-Wittgensteinian conception of language for Dewey’s notion of experience as a more effective means of putting the epistemology industry out of business. Rorty’s textualism offers its own account of the value of literature and other kinds of art, and Shusterman’s work has made it clear how opposed this textualist aesthetic is to Dewey’s experientialism. So if pragmatism is to furnish the post-Darwinian aesthetic that accounts for the particular mode of survival of literary texts in our culture, then which pragmatist aesthetic will it be?

Most pragmatists would agree that the best test of a theory is the difference it makes to practice. One practice that should serve as an ideal test for literary theory is the teaching of literature, yet oddly enough, the enormous wave of literary theory produced in the last century has almost entirely ignored pedagogical issues. Not surprisingly, one early, notable exception is an attempt to derive a literary theory from pragmatism in Louise M. Rosenblatt’s Literature as Exploration (1938). Rosenblatt follows Dewey, whose philosophies of education and art are clearly the inspiration for her book, in arguing that the study of literature must not impose
purposes upon students from without but rather must connect literary texts and their meanings with purposes and values drawn from the students’ own lives. She also follows Dewey in maintaining that this way of teaching literature can provide a valuable service to democracy by “allowing the student to develop the habit of reflective thinking within the context of an emotionally colored situation”—indeed, she concludes, “literary experiences might be made the very core of the kind of educational process needed in a democracy” (274). While Rosenblatt’s book is a bit vague about how these ideals are best realized in the classroom, any pragmatist could surely agree that they are worthy goals for the study of literature, and they provide an excellent means of adjudicating between the experientialist and textualist versions of pragmatism. On these pedagogical grounds, the textualist version, based on vocabularies rather than experiences, proves superior because its implications for the teaching of literature are more consistent with democratic goals of education than are those of the experientialist version offered by Dewey and Shusterman. Furthermore, what prevents Dewey’s experiential aesthetic from meeting the requirements of a democratic classroom is its attachment to its own brand of formalism. For these reasons, I will argue, only Rorty’s textualist aesthetic can provide the basis for the pragmatist reconstruction of literary studies I am calling informalism.

I. Dewey’s Experiential Formalism

As his book’s title suggests, Dewey’s aesthetic theory in *Art as Experience* (1934) defines the aesthetic not in terms of objects but in terms of experience. But Dewey means something very specific by the term “experience.” The book contains one of his best statements about his sense of the term: “Because every experience is constituted by interaction between ‘subject’ and ‘object,’ between a self and its world, it is not itself either merely physical nor merely mental, no matter how much one factor or the other predominates” (251). For Dewey, ordinary experiences are motivated by instrumental purposes—they are interactions with the world that try to achieve particular ends by particular means. Experiences can be “consummatory,” however, when “the material experienced runs its course to fulfillment . . . Such an experience is a whole and carries with it its own individualizing quality and self-sufficiency. It is an experience” (42). The particular kind of value called “aesthetic value” resides in these experiences according to Dewey. The value in many experiences is “instrumental” because the experience is merely a means of satisfying a particular end. But consummatory experiences have “aesthetic” value because, in addition to any value they receive by satisfying particular ends, they are valued as ends-in-themselves—the process of undergoing the experience provides its own kind of satisfaction and is valued in its own right. As Dewey says, aesthetic value is “immediate enjoyment” because it arises from experience “freed . . . from factors that subordinate an experience as it is directly had to something beyond itself” (278). But contrary to traditional theories that maintain art’s practical uselessness, it does not follow from this idea that art is noninstrumental, in part