

PRAGMATIST AESTHETICS: LITERARY AND ANALYTIC ROOTS

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Readers might not be surprised to find me in this special issue on pragmatism and literature not only because my philosophical reputation now rests primarily on the work I have done in pragmatist aesthetics but also because the issue's guest editor Dr. Małecki recently devoted a very intelligent monograph to my contributions to pragmatism and literary studies, his book entitled *Embodying Pragmatism: Richard Shusterman's Philosophy and Literary Theory* (2010).¹ There is no reason to contest Małecki's portrayal of me as an American pragmatist philosopher who also engages important insights and arguments from contemporary French and German theorists (though often polemically) and who has a penchant for unconventional philosophical topics such as popular art and somaesthetics. But it is useful to recall (both to myself and to other readers) that I enjoyed an active career in philosophy and literary theory long before I began considering myself as a pragmatist and invoking the theories of pragmatist philosophers in my work.² So in this brief essay I wish to revisit some of my central views on literary theory that precede my conversion to pragmatism and to consider the ways they anticipated (and perhaps led to) my later explicitly pragmatist theories.

It was only in mid-career (in the late 1980s) that I began to appreciate the rich value of pragmatist philosophy and tried to formulate an aesthetics founded on pragmatist principles. My guide, of course, was John Dewey, whose *Art as*

*Experience*³ seemed to define the field because it was the only systematic pragmatist treatise in aesthetics. My *Pragmatist Aesthetics*⁴ sought both to defend the Deweyan pragmatist project against the arguments of analytic philosophy, whose rise to dominance since the 1950s marginalized pragmatist thinking in aesthetics and other philosophical fields. But it also tried to redeem the experiential, embodied nature of pragmatist aesthetics that was disregarded or often explicitly rejected by neopragmatists like Richard Rorty for whom experience was a philosophically useless and indeed pernicious notion, committing us to the fallacious, foundationalist "myth of the given."

Trained as analytic philosopher in Jerusalem and Oxford, I had initially dismissed Dewey as a vague, fuzzy thinker unable to formulate crisp and concise arguments. Moreover, his prose struck me as flat, flaccid, and prolix. Such matters of literary style were important to me because my initial research focus was literary theory and the philosophy of literary criticism. Moreover, it was solidly nested in analytic philosophy, indeed exclusively so. My first two articles, published during my Oxford student days, were devoted to literature and the logic of its criticism and appeared in highly-ranked analytic journals: "The Anomalous Nature of Literature"⁵ and "The Logic of Interpretation."⁶ Other early papers were devoted to topics involving the convergence of literature and analytic philosophy: Bertrand Russell's literary fiction, the different logics of literary evaluation and critical reasoning, the analytic philosophical influences on T.S. Eliot's literary theory and practice.

My first book, *The Object of Literary Criticism*,⁷ was a conventional work of analytic philosophy and far from the provocative topics (like rap, popular culture, and somaesthetics) with which my pragmatism is often

¹ Wojciech Małecki, *Embodying Pragmatism: Richard Shusterman's Philosophy and Literary Theory* (Frankfurt am Main-New York: Peter Lang, 2010).

² Dr. Małecki is certainly aware of this earlier career, since he has published interviews with me that touch on it. For readers interested in this material, see Richard Shusterman, "Od literatury do somatoestetyki: Z Richardem Shustermanem rozmawia Wojciech Małecki" ["From Literature to Somaesthetics: An Interview with Richard Shusterman, by Wojciech Małecki], *Teksty Drugie*, No. 6 (2009), pp. 198-221. His choice to give his book a sharper focus by limiting it to the pragmatist material is surely reasonable.

³ See John Dewey, *Art as Experience* (New York: Capricorn, 1934).

⁴ See Richard Shusterman, *Pragmatist Aesthetics: Living Beauty, Rethinking Art* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1992).

⁵ See Richard Shusterman, "The Anomalous Nature of Literature," *British Journal of Aesthetics*, vol. 18, no. 4 (1978), pp. 317-329

⁶ See Richard Shusterman, "The Logic of Interpretation," *Philosophical Quarterly*, 28 (1978), pp. 310-324

⁷ See Richard Shusterman, *The Object of Literary Criticism* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1984).

identified. It was instead devoted to mainstream analytic questions in philosophy of literature (i.e., the identity and ontological status of works and the logic of methods used in interpreting and evaluating them). Its analytic style was that of ordinary language philosophy made most famous by Wittgenstein's later work at Cambridge and by J.L. Austin (in Oxford). My thesis supervisor at Oxford, J. L. Urmson, was Austin's student and literary executor, and *The Object of Literary Criticism* was based on my dissertation of that title, submitted for the Oxford D. Phil. in 1979. I was, indeed, so completely (and complacently) absorbed in the Anglo-American analytic context that this book on literary theory pays no attention at all to European poststructuralist theory and deconstructionist criticism, though they were already the dominant fashion in American literary and critical theory. Nor did it pay any attention to German critical theory, nor to pragmatism. C.S. Peirce was the only pragmatist philosopher mentioned in the book, and his appearance had nothing to do with his pragmatist ideas but rather with his logical notion of types and tokens, which was sometimes applied in analytic theories of work identity and individuation.

In Hebrew there is a proverb to the effect that doctrines deeply learned in one's youth (imbibed, as it were, with one's mother's milk) are not forgotten. My early analytic training in Jerusalem and Oxford was so thorough that my philosophical style of argument remains greatly marked by it, and in many contexts I still reach for my analytic toolbox of distinctions and strategies. Nonetheless, five years after the publishing my book on analytic literary theory, I was already beginning to worry about the limitations of the analytic approach in aesthetics and feel the attractions of pragmatism. Though my next book *T.S. Eliot and the Philosophy of Criticism*⁸ remained essentially an analytic study, its last chapter showed the pragmatist dimensions of Eliot's theory and practice and was entitled "Pragmatism and Practical Wisdom." Moreover, in the "Introduction" to an important collection of essays on *Analytic Aesthetics* that I edited for Blackwell,⁹ I argued that the most promising

⁸ Richard Shusterman, *T.S. Eliot and the Philosophy of Criticism* (London and New York: Duckworth and Columbia University Press, 1988).

⁹ See Richard Shusterman (ed.), *Analytic Aesthetics* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1989).

directions in analytic aesthetics had a distinctly pragmatic dimension.

My conversion to the general pragmatist perspective was already complete by 1992, when my book *Pragmatist Aesthetics* appeared – along with its abridged French version *L'art à l'état vif*.¹⁰ A close seminar reading of Dewey's *Art as Experience* (done with a cadre of doctoral students, many of them in dance and oozing with experiential embodied enthusiasm) was what converted me to pragmatism, and I used that book's pragmatist perspectives to criticize the narrower, scholastic confines of analytic aesthetics. Though Dewey has remained the most lasting inspiration for my pragmatist thinking, I have increasingly recognized how many of his aesthetic theories were anticipated by other American pragmatists: Ralph Waldo Emerson, Alain Locke, C.S. Peirce, and, perhaps most significantly, William James. Having demonstrated their contributions to pragmatist aesthetics in other publications,¹¹ I turn here instead to how certain key themes I advocated as pragmatist aesthetics were already present in the Wittgenstein- and Austin-inspired analytic theories formulated in *The Object of Literary Criticism* and more generally in my published work through the mid-1980s.

Though initially convinced that my pragmatist conversion took me very far from the thoroughly analytic approach of *The Object of Literary Criticism*, when I reread that text for its publication in French translation, I realized that this book was largely shaped by key themes that likewise centrally structure my pragmatist approach, themes that I now believe helped lead me toward pragmatism but also to certain French thinkers, such as Pierre Bourdieu and Michel Foucault, who became increasingly important in my work.

One of these central themes is pluralism. Rather than assuming, as theory too often does, that there is only one

¹⁰ See Richard Shusterman, *L'art à l'état vif: la pensée pragmatiste et l'esthétique populaire* (Paris: Minuit, 1992).

¹¹ For Emerson, see my "Emerson's Pragmatist Aesthetics," *Revue Internationale de Philosophie*, no. 207 (1999), p. 87-99; for Locke, see chapter 7 of my *Surface and Depth* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2002); for James, see my "Dewey's Art as Experience: The Psychological Background," *Journal of Aesthetic Education*, vol. 44, no. 1 (2010), pp. 26-43; and "The Pragmatist Aesthetics of William James," *British Journal of Aesthetics*, vol. 51, no. 4 (2011), pp. 347-361.

right answer, logic, purpose, or method in the critical enterprise, my first book and early articles argue for a plurality of aims and frameworks in literary criticism, a plurality of legitimate logics and purposes in interpretation and evaluation, and a plurality of ways and contexts for defining the identity of literary works, whose ontological complexity also displays a plurality of aspects or dimensions. Literature and criticism are essentially valued, essentially complex, and essentially historical concepts, and therefore also essentially contested concepts. In these fields of competing methods, attitudes, purposes, styles and concepts, an open-minded pluralism of letting rival approaches have a chance to prove their different values in different contexts seemed the most reasonable approach.

This spirit of pluralism still inspires my pragmatist insistence on the value of both high art and popular art, the variety of useful modes of appropriating and understanding them, the legitimacy of different ways of living a philosophical life, the useful multiplicity of levels of body consciousness, and the variety of helpful somaesthetic disciplines, etc. Recognizing the plurality of useful practices and values (even when they sometimes compete for our attention or adherence) seems to be the best way to maximize our benefits in pursuing the multiple values of life. If I already recognized this in my analytic writings, it was not until my pragmatist phase that I was able to formulate this principle in terms of what I call the “inclusively disjunctive stance” in either/or situations: that when faced with different promising options, we should not presume that we must only accept one but should rather try to reconcile and realize as many as we can profitably combine together. Thus when asked whether we want to drink water or wine with our meal, there is no reason why we cannot drink both. In literature, there is no reason to limit one’s reading to poetry rather than prose, fiction rather than nonfiction, or vice versa.¹²

Likewise in criticism, there is no reason to affirm that only intentional or historical interpretation is legitimate while more creative, performative interpretation must be outlawed. The plurality of literary and critical forms is not an

anything goes relativism. There are better and worse interpretations, for example, but judgments of better and worse depend on the specific contexts in which one is interpreting (a newspaper review versus a scholarly article) and the purposes for which one seeks an interpretation (to discover the author’s intention or to make the work more relevant and meaningful to today’s readers). The analytic pluralism I developed with respect to interpretation was distinguished from a more limited pluralism which recognizes merely a plurality of valid objects and methods of interpretation. This limited pluralism allows for different approaches to or aspects of a work of literature with respect to which true or plausible interpretive assertions can be made.

My analytic pluralism went farther in arguing that not all interpretations are assertions that could be true or plausible; some have the logical status of recommendations while others are more like performatives rather than constative assertions. Literary interpretation, I argued, has no single, essential logic but is a family of games that often compete for our attention and for priority of value. Their validity and value (and the same goes for rival games of literary evaluation) depend not on antecedent philosophical or logical grounding but on the quality of their fruits in actual critical practice. “It is not the job of the philosopher of criticism, as analyst, to award the birthright” or provide an absolute ranking of these different practices, I wrote in *The Object of Literary Criticism*. “Having identified and analyzed these different and often competing critical practices, the analytic philosopher,” I continued “must let them justify themselves, as they have justified and must justify themselves, in actual critical practice.”¹³

Here we see how the primacy of practice for critical theory is another central pragmatist theme that pervades my early analytic work. As practice generates and shapes theory, so methodologies or logics of interpretation and evaluation are assessed in terms of the aims and fruits of their practice. The validity and value of different logics is not an abstract pluralist notion of tolerance but a recognition that criticism’s multiple methods are pragmatically justified by the different aims and values these practices realize. Although *The Object*

¹² For more discussion of this stance, see the “Introduction” to the second edition of *Pragmatist Aesthetics* (New York: Rowman and Littlefield, 2000).

¹³ Shusterman, *The Object of Literary Criticism*, pp. 168-169.

of *Literary Criticism* is clearly a philosophical text of critical theory (that even occasionally employs abstract logical formulae), it tries to express the crucial importance of practice not only by general assertions but by specifically deriving its views on the logics of interpretation and evaluation from the actual practice of critics – by introducing and analyzing the specific arguments that especially influential critics have made.¹⁴ The idea of integrating practical literary criticism into my analytic philosophical theory naturally continued into my work in pragmatism where it evolved into full scale analyses of literary works, elite and popular. *Pragmatist Aesthetics* thus contains a chapter built on a close critical reading of Eliot’s “Portrait of a Lady” and the lyrics of “Talkin’ All that Jazz” by the Brooklyn rap crew Stetsasonic. Here, however, rather than relying primarily on analyzing the interpretations of other critics, I practiced my own interpretive analyses.

Working with real rather than hypothetical critical discourse exemplifies a fundamentally empirical orientation that I later found repeatedly emphasized by the classical pragmatist tradition. James and Dewey highlight experience not only as a crucial cognitive ground, instrument, and mode of assessment for theorizing, but also as the essential locus for realizing aesthetic values. Because my analytical study of literary criticism draws its examples from different periods of literary history, its empiricism has a diachronic dimension that shows how changing historical contexts can alter the aims and methods of literary critical practices. This empirical sense of historical change likewise reveals that literary critical practices rely on a background of cultural institutions and conventions that are always embedded in larger social and ideological contexts that are more than merely aesthetic or purely literary. It was from Wittgenstein and Austin that I first learned to appreciate the crucial role of historical and institutional contexts and conventions in determining meaning, practice, and theory. These historicist,

¹⁴ If the critical work of T.S. Eliot and F.R. Leavis figures most prominently in my early analytic work in philosophy of criticism, that is not only because they were the most influential critics for Oxford literary culture at that time, but also because their major texts were largely available in inexpensive paperbacks. For a penurious graduate student who felt uncomfortable in stuffy Oxford libraries and liked to own and annotate his readings, this factor of cost-efficiency was significant – revealing an altogether different manner in which pragmatic thinking shaped my doctoral work.

contextualist, and institutional perspectives prepared me to embrace the genealogical, contextual, sociopolitical dimensions of Dewey’s pragmatist thought, along with those of Michel Foucault and Pierre Bourdieu.¹⁵

These three authors, who helped push me beyond the limits of analytic philosophy taught me something that my doctoral thesis essentially ignored: the theorist’s interventionist role in the cultural transformation of practices. *The Object of Literary Criticism* and my other work in analytic aesthetics emphasizes that the field of criticism is essentially contested – containing many practices or critical “games” (with fundamentally different logics) that compete with each other for dominance, power, and esteem. This pluralism came with a “hands-off” theoretical attitude in which the philosopher is supposed to analyze and compare those established practices but never to intervene by suggesting alternative methods or by championing some disparaged or neglected artistic genre. My later work in pragmatism, while still emphasizing the values of pluralism and the need to begin by recognizing and analyzing established cultural forms, is more engaged in the transformation of cultural (including critical) practices. The role of theory, as I now see it through pragmatist eyes, is not just to mirror cultural truths and their related practices but to improve them. That melioristic impulse is highlighted in my detailed pragmatist advocacy of certain kinds of popular art and of the art of living, and in affirming the cultivation of certain somatic disciplines for heightened awareness and attention. The meliorist impulse is also present in my case for the importance of writing in efforts of self-improvement in pursuing an ethical art of living as a form of philosophical

¹⁵ The contextualist perspective can also be reflexively brought to bear on the analytic/pragmatist contrast that is widely used and that I deploy here. The contrast of these philosophical styles (which themselves are quite diverse in style) gets its effective meaning only within a particular context or background. The fact that many central themes remain continuous in my move from analytic to pragmatist aesthetics should warn us not to treat analytic and pragmatist philosophy as a neat dichotomy of incompatible orientations. There is indeed a significant strain of important twentieth-century philosophers who combine analytic methods and pragmatist insights: Nelson Goodman, Richard Rorty, Hilary Putnam, W.V.O. Quine, Donald Davidson, and also Wittgenstein and Austin. I see my work as inspired by that illustrious tradition.

life.¹⁶ If meliorism implies advocacy, does advocacy not preclude pluralism? Not at all. For pluralism is not an “anything goes anywhere” indifference.

¹⁶ See Richard Shusterman, “Philosophy as Literature and More than Literature,” in: *The Blackwell Companion to Philosophy of Literature*, ed. Garry Hagberg and Walter Jost (Oxford: Blackwell, 2010), pp. 7-21.