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HABITS OF MODERNISM

Kate Stanley

Pragmatic Modernism by Lisi Schoenbach. New York: Oxford University Press, 2011. Pp. 224. \$45.00 cloth.

What does it mean to practice pragmatic literary criticism?¹ For the majority of the twentieth century, there appeared to be little overlap between pragmatic and literary lines of inquiry. In the 1950s, at a moment when pragmatism was being heralded as “almost the official philosophy of America,” New Criticism’s open hostility towards pragmatist thinking restricted its influence on literary studies.² With the rise of deconstruction and post-structuralism, pragmatism remained relegated to the sidelines of literary study. By the 1980s, however, pragmatist thought began to gain traction in literature departments in America. An important catalyst for a literary turn towards pragmatism was Richard Rorty’s influential challenge to representationalist theories of language and perception in *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* (1979). Rather than a mirror that reflects and clarifies reality, language is for Rorty the radically contingent core of all experience. His contention that linguistic *redescription* can remake the world has resonated strongly with critics invested in the idea that literary language not only illuminates, but also potentially transforms, conditions of living.

Rorty has been called “the foremost proponent of American pragmatist thought,” though his own professed preference is to be characterized “as someone who tried to retrieve some stuff in Dewey

that . . . was in danger of being forgotten.” And yet, in Rorty’s estimation, this project of retrieval has little to offer people studying literature.³ His contention would seem to be confirmed by the dearth of literary critics who have looked to John Dewey as a guiding figure, even as pragmatism’s significance for the study of literature has been established over the past thirty years.⁴ Lisi Schoenbach’s declaration that Dewey is “the unassuming philosophical hero” of her book *Pragmatic Modernism* (2012) serves as a welcome corrective to Rorty’s dismissal and to Dewey’s wider neglect in literary studies (10).

Like Rorty, Schoenbach credits John Dewey with pioneering a “recontextualizing mode” of investigation into sudden or novel encounters (13). In Rorty’s interpretation, the term *recontextualization* describes the way we accommodate small and large-scale paradigm shifts by reweaving our “webs of beliefs and desires” in response to change. On one end of the spectrum are the “routine calculations” that allow us to assimilate minor alterations into the social fabric of daily life. At the other end of the continuum are dramatic transformations like those spurred by “revolutionary science or politics.”⁵ While Rorty’s discussion of recontextualization focuses on the history of Western philosophy, Schoenbach unexpectedly finds Dewey’s recontextualizing logic powerfully at work in

literary modernism. Her suggestion that figures like Henry James and Gertrude Stein took a recontextualizing approach to modern change counters a long tradition of modernist literary criticism that relies on what she calls “the ideology of the break.” “To this day,” Schoenbach argues, “modernism continues to be defined by its celebration of heroic opposition, its clean break from the past, its anti-institutional stand, and its emphasis on shock and radical discontinuity” (4). As she shows, the dominant narrative of “modernism-as-break” frequently occludes an equally strong modernist investment in more gradual and continuous processes of incorporating change into the framework of experience (3). For the pragmatic modernist, a moment of radical rupture cannot be understood in isolation from its animating and resulting conditions. As each of the writers and thinkers of Schoenbach’s study recognizes, violent upheaval catalyzes sustainable social change and meaningful aesthetic innovation only to the extent that those transformations are integrated into an ongoing praxis of life.

The critical term at the center of Schoenbach’s study—*habit*—may seem like an unlikely source of common ground between modernism and pragmatism. Habit’s embattled status in avant-garde aesthetics is exemplified by modernist manifestoes that call for the demolition of

all routines, conventions, and traditions that stultify the mind. Viktor Shklovsky's famous polemic in favor of an art of defamiliarization underwrites a widespread commitment to countering the deadening force of "habitualization" (6). From this vantage, William James and John Dewey's dedication to cultivating sustainable life habits may be construed as a final brick on the wall dividing pragmatism's staid practicality from modernism's revolutionary radicalism. Schoenbach deftly reconstrues habit as the very crack that fissures the integrity of this false partition. As she demonstrates, pragmatist habit is irreducible to the numbing repetition that Shklovsky and others hold up as the chief enemy of art. James and Dewey teach us that habit is an ever-evolving organism, subject to Darwin's evolutionary information like all other forms of life.⁶ In fact, as Joan Richardson has demonstrated, the founders of pragmatism set out to cultivate "habits of mind" that would provide the supportive scaffolding necessary for facing the Darwinian insight that we are "accidental creatures inhabiting a universe of chance."⁷ Recognizing the potential for habits to harden into rote reflexes, James and Dewey emphasize the vital importance of exercising habits into flexible responsiveness. Those writers whom Schoenbach claims as pragmatic modernists approach the task of writing and reading as

their primary means of fostering receptively supple habits of perception and expression.

Pragmatist and modernist aesthetics converge where we might least expect. As Schoenbach uncovers, the most vehement avant-garde rejections of "pragmatic considerations" in the name of "total revolt" hinge in each case on equally robust accounts of the habitual rhythms that shape everyday life.⁸ For example, André Breton populates *Nadja's* (1928) dreamscapes with strange, defamiliarized objects. In Schoenbach's reading, the novel reanimates these relics of past habits by weaving them through the novel's imaginative loom. Surrealist strategies like automatic writing and dream analysis discover the phantasmagoric potential of quotidian objects through techniques of "total integration," as Walter Benjamin describes them.⁹ Benjamin's term underlines for Schoenbach that even avant-garde ideals of revolutionary rupture depend on ongoing, integrative aesthetic practices and life habits. Though they focus on the proliferating shocks of modernity, both Breton and Benjamin share a core goal with pragmatists like Dewey and James: to supplant repetitive, mindless forms of automatism with fresh forms of consciousness. In Schoenbach's persuasive account, surrealist shock—and a wider avant-garde allegiance to rupture—is deeply rooted in the ground of habit.

While *Pragmatic Modernism* theorizes habit by way of Dewey and William James, the chapters on Stein and Henry James demonstrate the term's critical breadth and aesthetic richness. Stein's conception of habit in particular has served as a linchpin for recent studies that connect cultural theories of *everyday life* with modernism. For example, Bryony Randall argues that an overwhelming critical emphasis on the exceptional, epiphanic modernist moment occludes alternate models of time exemplified by the domestic "dailiness" of Stein's accretive repetitions.¹⁰ By contrast, Liesl Olson sharply critiques Stein's "dangerously escapist" withdrawal into the routines of bourgeois domesticity during Germany's occupation of France.¹¹ Schoenbach reframes the relationship between domestic culture and national culture in Stein's work by establishing how her writerly experimentation indexes the individual and institutional habits that structure personal as well as collective registers of experience. Far from representing a retreat from matters of war and statehood, Stein's efforts to render habit visible at the level of grammar and syntax expose the intimate implication of daily minutiae, national consciousness, and international politics.

Stein's attention to the public implications of private habits introduces *Pragmatic Modernism's* second

key term: *institutions*. For Schoenbach, institutions are broadly construed as the psychic and social structures "that govern and codify collective behavior" (68). Part 2 focuses on a range of works by Henry James that explore the civic and legal, local and national dimensions of institutional structures that mediate the individual's relationship to the law and to the state. Often misread as an apolitical aesthete, James at first appears an unlikely subject for an extended examination of the institutional bases of juridical and state power. However, in recasting James's protagonists as "a pragmatist ideal of mindfulness with regard to habit," Schoenbach also reframes the Jamesian stream of experience as an osmotic flow between individual and collective forms of consciousness (69). James's vessels of consciousness—the exquisitely attuned Milly Theale, Isabel Archer, and Lambert Strether—navigate the strange tributaries where apparently personal proclivities, dispositions, and desires intermingle with impersonal institutional forms. According to Schoenbach, James's keen attention to the "bristling" points of contact between private relations and faceless social systems begins to fill what Dewey describes as a theoretical vacuum created by discourses of individualism that emerged in the eighteenth century (71). Dewey's central claim in *The*

Public and its Problems (1927) is that “the documents of the French Revolution . . . at one stroke did away with all forms of association, leaving, in theory, the bare individual face to face with that state.”¹² In Schoenbach’s analysis, novels like *The Portrait of a Lady* (1881) and *The Princess Casamassima* (1886) offer crucial insights into the various ways that individual freedoms are constrained but also produced by institutions like boarding schools, prisons, political factions, bureaucratic bodies, and the codified social customs they promote.

With equal sensitivity to the texture of daily minutiae and a wider social grain, the Jamesian perceiver confronts a question at the heart of modernism and at the center of Schoenbach’s study: How does one continually reinvigorate processes of thinking, feeling, and perceiving when every facet of experience is conditioned by habits and institutions? Recognizing the impossibility of living free from habit, Isabel, Milly, Strether, and others develop what Schoenbach terms “the habit of freedom”—a posture of responsive openness towards life’s uncertainties (71). Freedom in this context entails exposure to the risks intrinsic to an unknown future. Schoenbach identifies the central drama of James’s novels of consciousness as a confrontation between those characters who embrace unsettlement and incalculability and those who

are driven by predictive calculation and control. Characters like Gilbert Osmond and Madame Merle, Kate Croy, and Merton Densher exhibit the “habits of anticipation” that Schoenbach aligns with the “prediction theory” Oliver Wendell Holmes develops in his 1897 essay “The Path of Law” (112). A modern “culture of prediction,” as Schoenbach defines it, represents a risk-averse response to the indeterminacies of the modern world (101). Even as James dramatizes the ethical limits of manipulating outcomes, the impulse to manage risk can no more be condemned than the institutional infrastructure of the modern world can be dismantled. James’s novels acknowledge the challenge of facing a future without guarantees at the same time that they expand the horizons of the unknown.

In the chapter on prediction and throughout her study, Schoenbach resists drawing stark critical antitheses; a hard and fast dichotomy between the predictive principles of administrative control and the ideals of human freedom would only reinforce the oppositional logic of modernism-as-break that she works to undo. Instead of opposing prediction and autonomy, shock and habit, Schoenbach declares the oscillation between those registers of experience to be “the signal experience of modernity” (38). While

Schoenbach's integrative approach may appear solely applicable to the American tradition that is her primary focus, the final chapter of *Pragmatic Modernism* extends the transatlantic reach of the project. These last pages develop the provocative claim that Marcel Proust's modernism is also distinctly pragmatist. Schoenbach marshals biographical evidence for Proust's engagement with pragmatic philosophy, but she finds the most compelling evidence of Proust's pragmatist inquiry in several set-piece scenes of *À la recherche du temps perdu* (*In Search of Lost Time*, 1871–1922). The novel's famous opening sequence, for example, introduces habit as both enabler and enemy of fresh perception. As *Recherche* proceeds, individual habits accumulate to form collective habits, prompting Proust's reflections on social institutions as dual sources of stultification and creative inspiration. Schoenbach observes important affinities between American and European literary responses to modernity by aligning Proustian habit with the work of Stein, the Jameses, and Dewey. Schoenbach's transatlantic expansion of the "recontextualizing vision" they share allies her study with the ongoing efforts of Ross Posnock, David Kadlec, Giles Gunn, George Hutchinson, and others to establish pragmatism's international significance (146).¹³

Pragmatic Modernism develops an alternate literary and intellectual genealogy of modernism, but in allowing her subject to dictate her method, Schoenbach also models a new set of critical habits. Just as the pragmatic modernist asks what difference writing makes to the way we live, the pragmatic critic attends to the literary work's effects on experience. Schoenbach's recontextualizing vision offers fresh insight into modernist conceptions of psychic and social change, but this study's most important contribution is not limited to any one field. Schoenbach closes by widening the geographic boundaries of her study, but she also might have expanded its temporal scope beyond the modernist period by claiming the methodological importance of pragmatist habit. As William James defines it, *pragmatism* is a "method" that provides an "attitude of orientation" for inhabiting a pluralistic universe of chance—a project that remains as pressing and challenging at the beginning of the twenty-first century as it did one hundred years ago.¹⁴ The work of the pragmatist critic, which Schoenbach performs without overtly announcing, is to demonstrate the difference that habits of mind and styles of experience make in maintaining an "original relation to the universe."¹⁵ In the dexterous hands of such a critic, the literature of pragmatic modernism yields instruments for

living that speak to our present moment as forcefully as they spoke their own.

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NOTES

1. Recent efforts to bring what William James called the "pragmatic method" to bear on literary criticism have underlined the difficulty of definitively defining the American philosophical tradition known as *pragmatism*. In the foundational 1907 lecture series by that name, James eschewed a systematic model of pragmatic interpretation in favor of a dynamic process of questioning that "unstiffens all our theories, limbers them up and sets each one at work" (*Writings, 1902–1910*, Library of America, vol. 38 [New York: Library of America, 1987], 510).
2. Henry Steele Commager, *The American Mind: An Interpretation of American Thought and Character since the 1880's* (1950; repr., New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1959), 974.
3. Richard Rorty, with E. P. Ragg, "Worlds or Words Apart? The Consequences of Pragmatism for Literary Studies: An Interview with Richard Rorty," *Philosophy and Literature* 26, no. 2 (2002): 369–96, quotations on 392, 373.
4. For exceptions, see Nicholas Gaskill, "Experience and Signs: Towards a Pragmatist Literary Criticism," *New Literary History* 39, no. 1 (2008): 165–83; and Timothy O'Leary, "Foucault, Dewey, and the Experience of Literature," *New Literary History* 36, no. 4 (2005): 543–57.
5. Richard Rorty, *Objectivity, Relativism, and Truth: Philosophical Papers*, Philosophical Papers, vol. 1 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 93–94; and Rorty, quoted in Schoenbach, 13.
6. Here Schoenbach extends Joan Richardson's argument that pragmatism registered Darwin's insights in its conception of language and thinking as life forms that are "constantly undergoing adaptation and mutation" (Richardson, quoted in Schoenbach, 153n14).
7. Joan Richardson, *A Natural History of Pragmatism: The Fact of Feeling from Jonathan Edwards to Gertrude Stein*, Cambridge Studies in American Literature and Culture, vol. 152 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 131; and *Pragmatism and American Experience: An Introduction* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 4.
8. André Breton, *Nadja* (New York: Grove Press, 1960), 142; and *Manifestoes of Surrealism*, trans. Richard Seaver and Helen R. Lane (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1972), 125; and Breton, quoted in Schoenbach 46, 42.
9. Benjamin, quoted in Schoenbach, 42.
10. Bryony Randall, *Modernism, Daily Time and Everyday Life* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007).
11. Liesl Olson, *Modernism and the Ordinary* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 9.
12. Dewey, quoted in Schoenbach, 130.
13. Giles Gunn, *Beyond Solidarity: Pragmatism and Difference in a Globalized World* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2001); George Hutchinson, "Pragmatism and Americanization," in *The Harlem Renaissance in Black and White* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1995), 33–61; David Kadlec, *Mosaic Modernism: Anarchism, Pragmatism, Culture*, New Studies in American Intellectual and Cultural History (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2000); and Ross Posnock, *The Trial of Curiosity: Henry James, William James, and the Challenge*

of Modernity (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991).

14. William James, "What Pragmatism Means," Lecture 2 in *Pragmatism: A New Name for Some Old Ways of Thinking*, in *Writings 1902–1910*, ed. Bruce Kuklick (New York: Library of America, 1987), 505–22, quotation on 510.
15. The question that opens Ralph Waldo Emerson's *Nature*—"Why should

we not enjoy an original relation to the universe?"—becomes a guiding question for James, who declares himself Emerson's "spiritual heir" (see Emerson, *Essays and Lectures*, ed. Joel Porte [New York: Library of America, 1983], 7). Though Emerson's "method of nature" is foundational for James's and Dewey's pragmatic method, he is noticeably absent from Schoenbach's book.