

Pragmatic Modernism. By Lisi Schoenbach. Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2012. ix + 197 pp. Hardcover. \$45.00

Lisi Schoenbach's *Pragmatic Modernism* will disabuse any reader of the notion that a book's brevity indicates intellectual slightness. Synthesizing strands of pragmatist philosophical and cultural history from Ross Posnock and Stanley Clavell to Richard Rorty, *Pragmatic Modernism* takes the intellectual history of pragmatism in fresh directions by redefining its relationship to modernist "shock" aesthetics. Schoenbach writes against the grain of scholarship that has characterized modernist aesthetics as antithetical to habit by representing modernism's dialectical engagement with a pragmatist understanding of habit as a force for change through time and as a necessary basis for social cohesion. Such "pragmatic modernists" from William and Henry James and John Dewey to Walter Benjamin, Andre Breton, Gertrude Stein, and Marcel Proust, Schoenbach argues, highlight how the conservative and socially-cohering forces of habit are necessary to sustain meaningful political transformation. Schoenbach entirely reconceptualizes long-standing narratives of the relationship between modernist revolutionary aesthetics—its seeming desire to overturn tradition and habit—and pragmatist politics steeped in a progressivist reform agenda. The result is a transformational work of literary and cultural history that will undoubtedly set the terms for future debate on modernist aesthetics and politics for decades to come.

The book's elegant two-part structure neatly embodies Schoenbach's dialectical understanding of pragmatist "habit" and modernist aesthetic "shock" in which "two opposing positions" are co-constitutive, remaining in dynamic "tension and mutual interdependence" (7). Part I, on "Habit," traces the deep history of a pragmatist understanding of habit from Aristotle, Edmund Burke, and Walter Pater to Victor Shklovsky and the Frankfurt School, delving into John Dewey's and William James's writings on habit as an aesthetic and a social force. Chapter two goes on to explore Stein's process of making habit visible. More provocatively, Schoenbach suggests, Stein's recontextualization of habit as a sustaining force for new ideas "points the way toward a new possibility within contemporary academic discourse: that of the recontextualizing mode of criticism" (64). Part II, on "Institutions," represents habit's codification within both unofficial and official institutions, developed in two chapters on Henry James and a concluding epilogue on Proust. In these chapters, Schoenbach identifies habit as a key concept mobilizing

individual freedom and risk against insurance and probability; habit balances uncertainty and contingency against institutions that codify and organize experience in ways that sustain ongoing revolutionarily creative efforts.

Of particular interest to William James scholars is the book's first chapter on "Modernist Habit," in which Schoenbach turns to James's concept of "plasticity," from his chapter on "Habit" in *Principles of Psychology*, to theorize a "pragmatic modernist" understanding of the psychological and social processes of change through time. Following C.S. Peirce's understanding of beliefs as "habits of mind," Dewey and James offer "a post-Darwinian conception of the dialectic of habit, in which continuity and adaptation to the environment are continually balanced with positive actions and constantly changing reactions" (24). In this sense, James's and Dewey's pragmatism represents not so much a stodgy understanding of habit as static tradition, but as a dynamic process by which individuals and groups can both adapt to and transform modernity's systems and mechanized routines. A refrain throughout this chapter and the book's subsequent chapters is that habit is neither "good" nor "bad," but "inevitable," and looked upon by pragmatic modernists from vacillating optimistic and pessimistic points of view—an "intellectual balancing act" (24) that necessitates ongoing engagement with, and transformation of, personal and cultural habits, rather than a settling into static tradition.

In Part II, chapter five, "A Jamesean State," teases out fundamental differences between William James and his novelist brother, Henry James when it comes to their attitudes toward national civic institutions. William reviled them. Schoenbach calls attention to William's correspondence with Sarah Wyman Whitman and others, in which he claims that individuals, and only *the* individual, could transform society for the good. Close readings of Henry James's novels *The Wings of the Dove*, *The Ambassadors*, and *The Princess Casamassima* in the context of his meditations on American civic institutions in *The American Scene*, conversely, demonstrate Henry's understanding of the potency of institutions for safeguarding "sociability" as a means for cultivating genuine intellectual commerce between individuals in order to sustain a sense of collective civic responsibility.

Schoenbach's narrative dialectic sustains this intellectual balancing act between various modernist dualisms, deftly tracing the internal contradictions within pragmatist understandings of habit and modernist aesthetics, thereby preserving the complexity of this dialectic, but also enacting the very "recontextualizing" mode of "pragmatic modernism" and creative scholarship

she hopes to inspire with her work. *Pragmatic Modernism* internationalizes pragmatism by highlighting the numerous exchanges between American, British, German and French intellectuals and their philosophical traditions. This, to my mind, is what makes this book groundbreaking and suggestive for future scholarship on William James and his modernist legacy. Where the book may fall somewhat short, from a historical perspective, is in its somewhat cursory treatment of the First World War, and its ensuing psychological uncertainty and trauma, as instrumental for the period's negotiation of habit and shock. This is a minor quibble, for Schoenbach makes no grandiose claim to have said all that can be said about modernism's pragmatic aesthetics. Thankfully, her work generously opens up suggestive ways for scholars to continue this important conversation about modernist aesthetics and politics.

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