The New Scholarship On Dewey

Jim Garrison, ed., *The New Scholarship on Dewey* (Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1995).

On Reading the New Scholarship on John Dewey
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In an essay on the subject of his new book, *John Wayne's America: The Politics of Celebrity*, Garry Wills analyzes the distinguishing features of America's mythic history. Where

other cultures begin with a fixed and social hearth, a temple, a holy city, American life begins when that enclosure is escaped. One becomes American by going out. We are a people of departures, not arrivals....Our basic myth is that of the frontier. Our hero is the frontiersman. To become urban is to break the spirit of man."

This familiar Turnerian thesis is central to the project of American philosophy as well. In Michael A. Weinstein's account of the "classical" period of American philosophy at the turn of the twentieth century, the period of Peirce, Royce, James, Santayana, and Dewey, the organizing images are "wilderness" and "city." Drawing on Royce, Weinstein writes that the wilderness "was the mental space into which the philosopher withdrew in an act of separation from the moral conventions, the cognitive assumptions, and the practical certitudes of the "city,"...in contrast, "straightforward and readily definable as the everyday social life of human beings in their actual communities." For the classical American philosopher, "the journey into the wilderness was an attempt to doubt the certitudes of the city, not in order to break them down, but to discover and to think through a more rational basis for them and, therefore, to strengthen the bonds of community by giving them self-conscious justification." Classical American philosophy was essentially a moral quest, to show that the "God of the wilderness," the God of doubting, individual, separated self was at one with the "God of the city," the God of the connected, communal member.

Reading Dewey, we understand how torturous this quest was. In his only directly autobiographical account of his journey into philosophy, the essay "From Absolutism to Experimentalism," Dewey tells a story of movement within painful conflicts. For example, the conflicts between what he calls his native inclination toward the formal and the "accidents of personal experience that compelled me to take account of actual material." Dewey writes of how his choice of problems and a method of presentation in philosophy were consequences of the marks, what he calls stigmata, of this inner struggle. He writes further of how the divisions of the New England culture in which he was raised, of self from the world, soul from body, nature from God, were experienced as an "inward laceration" in response to which an "intense emotional craving," a "hunger," for unification arose. Dewey envies those who can tell their story straight-away in a unified pattern, but because of the "road I have been forced to travel," he remains entangled, unstable, chameleon-like, never settled. And finally, he connects his quest directly to the central categories of

classical American philosophy. Hoping for unification, but not expecting it, Dewey writes that the chief task of philosophy is to "help get rid of the useless lumber that blocks our highways of thought, and strive to make straight and open the paths that lead to the future. Forty years spent wandering in the wilderness like that of the present is not a sad fate — unless one attempts to make himself believe that the wilderness is after all itself the promised land."

These are the struggles out of which Dewey's philosophy and educational theory emerge. The frontiersman encountering the city; the metropolitan encountering the wilderness. The public school movement arises from these same encounters. In Cremin's terms, the public school movement takes its shape in that transition from an agrarian to a metropolitan civilization, a complex shift marked notably by a transformation of knowledge itself from something that is learned in the doing to something that is stored and learned through symbols. Thus, while the school, the specialized domain of symbolic literacy, arises as the dominant institution in the metropolitan configuration of education, the sources of our public education, our common sense taken literally as the sense it takes to live in a commons, remain multiple and experiential. The Deweyan problem, "Can schools educate?" was met with an effort to theorize the common school as a "rustic city," a place where the formal could be learned through the occupations of living and where the curricular structures of doubt could become the resources of community, solidarity, and renewal.

Dewey's project was to understand how to become human — not by an appeal to an essence, not by an appeal to some correspondence or relation with something non-human, but by developing the reflective intelligences that enable us to tell masterful and moving stories of our participation in community. For Dewey, this is the only meaningful sense of literacy. When Dewey writes of reflection or reflective intelligence, he uses metaphors of creation, construction, or reconstruction of new identities and meanings as a consequence of symbolic interaction, rather than mirror metaphors of re-presentation, image-formation, or copying of that which exists antecedently. That is, for Dewey, the root meaning of reflection is not in *lux*, or light, but instead in *lection*, from *legein* or *legere*-to read. Reflective intelligence for Dewey is expressed in metaphors of reading and re-reading and more generally in metaphors of literacy. As such, the successor to philosophy, after epistemology, is educational inquiry.

One hundred years later we are entangled in another configurational shift. We are part of another round of leavings, of departures, of migrations and journeys from the level of the international marketplace to the level of the family and identity itself. Much of the talk about public school reform, understandably, focuses on institutions and thus misses the point. Home-schooling, common curricula, world-class standards, cultural literacy, all talk within the metropolitan configuration and the public school movement, but the basic categories are no longer there.

Where I live there are no cities, no wilderness, only longing expressed in the abstract signifiers of enclaves of nomads named Steward's Hamlet, Foxmoor Village, and so on. The idea of a public education here is vacuous. Indeed, the very

idea of an education at all is deeply problematic. What is a symbol, a text, an author? The questions of educational theory are no longer where, or what, or how we learn, but when, and even that is stretched beyond the borders of practical response. Cyberculture, while part of the rhetorical superhighway of learning, is itself bound in metaphors of location, sites, and architecture. We "chat" in a "lobby," maybe move into a "public room" or "auditorium." We "visit" each other's "sites" and "home pages," a name that neatly combines and evokes familiar images of buildings and books, that is, schools. These *are* places, but only in the extreme abstraction of electronic impulses and silicon bubbles. Creations of a will and a click, they are, in the old terms, literally u-topias, no places at all.

This is why I think there is a new scholarship on Dewey and other thinkers, such as Nietzsche, whose thought emerged in the midst of another painful transformation, on the cusp of a wilderness journey. It seems to be our best, maybe only, option. Ordinary language analysis will not help us in this fix. Postmodernism is the intellectual's accommodation *to* the problem. Marxist politics is moribund. Some find solace and hope in religion. I heard a news story of a church day-care center which was closed because church officials thought that day-care centers promoted the kinds of life-styles which were breaking up marriages, families, and communities. Four single mothers who were members of the congregation were left with no one to care for their children while they tried to earn a living.

What will it mean to become a distinct member of a literate community in the new city and in the new wilderness? How can we organize such journeys, if at all? What do things mean? It is so easy to think within the conventional vocabulary of the city — more homework, canonical texts, computer literacy — so easy to enter the wilderness of doubt and succumb to its hermetic ecstasy.

But Dewey, lacerations, stigmata, and all, fighting his own predilection for premature system and the allure of the literary culture of the lost, insists upon life. No, better, upon living, the impulse of movement, of being underway to Being in Heidegger's terms, of the back and forth of doubt and communication. And he insists that they are of one piece and serve the same god. On the cusp, on the verge, on the borders, Dewey thinks not *for* us, but *with* us. His lifelong quest to dwell, write, think, and act within a systematic philosophy of incompleteness makes the problem of learning to become human the most urgent and beautiful call for our reflection and rereading.

^{1.} Garry Wills, "American Adam," New York Review of Books 44, no. 4 (6 March 1997): 30.

^{2.} Michael A. Weinstein, *The Wilderness and the City: American Classical Philosophy as a Moral Quest* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1982), 5.

^{3.} Ibid.

^{4.} John Dewey, "From Absolutism to Experimentalism," in *The Philosophy of John Dewey*, ed. J.J. McDermott (New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1973), 5.

^{5.} Ibid., 13.

CERTAINTY, HARMONY, AND THE CENTERING OF DEWEY'S AESTHETICS Michael Simmons SUNY at Buffalo

Two theses control this paper: (1) Dewey is both better and worse than he is and must be read this way to avoid falsifying him, and (2) Dewey is partially responsible for some of the shortcomings of his supporters. In the Deweyan *oeuvre*, the quest for certainty is subjected to devastating attack. But in defeat, certainty is transformed into a contradictory hybrid, a hard-headed quest for harmony with strong logical and subtextual tendencies toward "happy praxis" and "feel good" criticism.¹

This peculiar hybrid takes support from many sources. Social, political, and educational problematics are softened by the way Dewey joins the ontological language of the defining ideal to his social criticism and its recommended goals. The language of the ideal functions to instill hope. When it is merged with the language of social criticism the ideal and the actual are made one. This "guarantees" success and makes the travail necessary to achieve success appear much easier than it can possibly be.

Dewey's constant use of an atheoretical description and criticism of capitalism in which the necessities born of its logic and nature are not identified as such adds support to a successful quest for harmony. The quest for harmony is also underwritten by the way Dewey presents the generic traits of existence as pairs of opposites. So organized, these metaphysical traits tend to become an even keeled, long term, balanced imbalance which transcends intense, abstract metaphysical conflict. Conflict as a pervasive quality of concrete social reality as a whole is now diminished by its metaphysical substrate, balanced imbalance. As Dewey tells us, the quality of the whole, or, of a concrete situation, directs and informs specific inquiry about and within the events, objects, and transactions that comprise it. The sense of this situation and the events which constitute it has now been eased by balanced imbalance.

Harmony, as sociohistorical development and end-in-view, is grounded ideologically in the logic and promise of Dewey's historical perspective and also in Dewey's successful philosophical and textual defeat of metaphysical dualisms and idealisms. However, as Dewey well knew, these historically necessary, metaphysical forms of hierarchical rationality resist and reject philosophical criticism as they continue to take sustenance from and give order to alienating socioeconomic structures and institutions constituted by conflicts of class, race, and gender.

And, finally, harmony, as ideological and ontological longing hovers over text and self as that "sense of something that lies beyond...[and] from which we are never free." The sense of the "including whole implicit in ordinary experience is rendered intense within the frame of a painting or a poem," Dewey tells us. 2 No less important in ordinary experience, the quality of the "including whole" gives direction to our purposive activity in the present. This "including whole" of ordinary experience is our everyday point of origin, departure, and recovery. When our recovery is an aesthetically enhanced reconstruction of experience our essential nature is made

actual and we are/become an inextricable, necessary condition of the "complete culmination of nature." Such is the relation of harmony and nature in the protecting ground from which we are never free. These philosophical-subtextual formulations conceal, soften, and undercut the bite of Dewey's critical method which is at the heart of his critical-adversarial stance toward the self understanding of his society as it rationalizes those institutionalized practices which can not meet the demands of Dewey's method of intelligence. The quest for harmony now has a double existence. Harmony is both a sound and worthy end-in-view and, also, it is a limiting, distorting, and comforting ideological perspective.

The contributors to this volume, with few exceptions, fall under the control of Dewey's quest for harmony rather than his adversarial stance toward society. Their contributions advance our understanding of concepts and method in aesthetics, democracy, religion, theory of communication, and pedagogy. But there is a cost. We gain a technically and philosophically sound understanding of some basic Deweyan concepts and method at work in an abstract (benign?) social reality. But with no reinvention of a Deweyan adversarial perspective, our new understanding does not inquire about the function and fate of these reconstructed concepts in the real world.

Jim Garrison's introduction tells us there is a tendency in the new scholarship "to place Dewey's aesthetics at the center of his thinking" (p. 1). The possibility of real danger is now present. The centering of the aesthetics can signify an attempt, in or out of awareness, to save the failed politics of his grand narrative. Dewey remains center stage. Attention is now shifted from the depressing state of the narrative's practical politics to a celebration of the quality of hope as it informs Dewey's highly aesthetic concept of human nature. The narrative's appearance has been changed but not its substance, the real object of needed criticism. The need for reconstruction of Dewey's social and political theory and practice has been finessed, has been bypassed by criticism which resolves a serious problem through avoidance of its essence.

Centering aesthetics as the attempt to save the grand narrative is a move toward a privatized interpretation of the problems of men [sic!], a focus and concern for the quality of individual aesthetic consummatory experience. However, this need not be. Aesthetic possibility, like beauty, is the promise of happiness. The aesthetic and the beautiful are critical concepts. They pose a primary question of social critique: What are the origins and nature of the social conditions that limit and deform beauty, happiness, and the aesthetic in all aspects of community life? Which way the center will lean remains to be seen.

A handful of the chapters in this volume address issues in the theory and practice of democracy. Rather than touch upon each of them briefly, I will present in some detail a criticism of Thomas Alexander's insightful and appealing "Educating the Democratic Heart: Pluralisms, Traditions, and the Humanities."

Strengthening and improving democracy requires a sound understanding of democracy's nature and logic. Alexander identifies and explicates concepts, attitudes, and knowledge central to the democratic project. He augments the familiar

Deweyan notion that democracy is more than a political system, that it is "primarily a mode of associated living, of conjoint communicated experience" with a creative treatment of human nature. According to Alexander,

All human existence is founded upon a need to experience meaning and value in an aesthetic, concrete manner, a need (Alexander calls) the 'Human Eros'....Democracy is the collective project to create a civilization that fulfills the Human Eros. (It entails) the most fundamental commitment....to the ideal of realizing as much as possible every individual's capacities to live a fully human life, a life that is experienced as funded with a sense of meaning and value (p. 75).

Human nature, so conceived, gives foundational support to Alexander's Deweyan democratic project. Alexander builds into human nature at the outset that content which is needed to serve as a major condition for the possibility of achieving democracy. I think of this move which is made by Dewey, by Marx, and now by Alexander, as the "philosophical guarantee." Ontological support in the form of a concept of human nature has been given to the argument and the hope for actual democracy. There is, of course, no absolute, historical, guarantee, but in our heart and mind pure chance has been "bested." Alexander continues,

The aim of democratic education must be to provide an intelligent and aesthetic vision of the ways human beings create meaning; this allows the ultimate project of civilization to be more fully discerned — the need to create the most meaningful experience possible for the fulfillment of human life. The arts and humanities, rather than the sciences, address this most directly (p. 76).

The arts will give students the sense and the feel, from the inside, as it were, of the relations and qualities of life that comprise democratic existence. This is the gift the arts offer. History and the social sciences offer the necessary view from the outside. Included here, Alexander tells us, are an understanding of the historical development of democracy and knowledge of "the tragic failures of democracy" (p. 85). A sense of a fully fleshed, completed, democracy now hovers over the events in Alexander's analysis even though he says that democracy is a cultural and political movement which has developed in many historical contexts. The tragic failures he refers to are Thomas Jefferson writing that "all men are created equal" while recognizing that slavery would persist in the new political order." His other example of tragedy is the treatment given the suffragettes "at the hands of democratic governments" (p. 85). Alexander's commitment to democracy and his desire that it succeed take him out of a Deweyan historical perspective and into a form of historical idealism. To see these two events as tragic flaws is to fail to see the painful, paradoxical, ironic, and contradictory nature of the historical events that are the development and current stuff of democracy. Alexander may surprise some when he claims "perhaps the most important discussion of what lies at the heart of (Dewey's) social and political theory is found in *Art As Experience*. The aesthetic experience as analyzed in that work describes the fullest realization of the human quest for embodied meaning" (p. 78). True, Art As Experience is such a source, but Alexander overlooks in this work a vital aspect of Dewey's radical analysis of the relation of this quest and democratic society.

Alexander, like Dewey, sees in aesthetic experience a demand for further democratization of American society. Dewey understood that actually existing

American democracy is inseparable from capitalism, and that capitalism is destructive to its health. Alexander's concern in "Educating the Democratic Heart" is not the relation of democracy, actual and ideal, and its economic formation. Nevertheless, the nature and logic of capitalism, as expressed in the causal relation between social class and school success, the commodification of cultural artifacts, or the television sound bite, informs the actually existing democratic heart and mind. Mapping democracy while denying voice to the antagonistic and shaping force of American capitalism vitiates the Deweyan quality of Alexander's project. I wish that Alexander and his colleagues had struggled to incorporate in their work, the critical and adversarial Dewey. For a start, the new scholarship on Dewey might ponder his depiction of the relation of democracy, aesthetics, and capitalism in the passage I shall give you from *Art As Experience*. It is essential, I believe, to evaluate, sharpen, extend, and apply this material to the theory and practice of education.

The human organism's natural hunger for satisfaction in the material of experience, Dewey asserts, is frustrated by the influence of modern industry. A major problem remains unsolved. The problem is located in the forces that affect the mechanical means of production. These forces, however, are extraneous to the operation of the machinery itself.

These forces are found, of course, in the economic system of production for private profit....No permanent solution is possible save in a radical social alteration, which affects the degree and kind of participation the worker has in the production and social disposition of the wares he produces. Only such a change will seriously modify the content of experience into which creation of objects made for use enters. And this modification of the nature of experience is the finally determining element in the aesthetic quality of the experience of things produced.⁶

And, I would add, of the lives we live.

Democracy and Education: Some Deweyan Issues Edward Sankowski University of Oklahoma

I wish to discuss (and to develop further) some issues alluded to or illuminatingly studied by certain authors in Jim Garrison's edited volume. I make some

^{1.} *Happy Praxis:* History as the dynamic process in which all major social conflict can and will be solved to the mutual satisfaction of all parties involved. *Feel Good Criticism:* The social criticism which produces self satisfaction through the identification of the origins, nature, and resolution of social problems in a social reality which is, in the last instance, harmonious.

^{2.} John Dewey, Art As Experience (New York: Capricorn Books, 1958), 193-94.

^{3.} John Dewey, Experience and Nature, 2d. ed. (New York: Dover Publications, 1958), 358.

^{4.} Herbert Marcuse, *One-Dimensional Man* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1964), 210. Marcuse attributes beauty as a "promesse de bonheur" to Stendhal.

^{5.} John Dewey, Democracy and Education (New York: Macmillan, 1916), 101.

^{6.} Dewey, Art As Experience, 343.

claims that would ideally need more detailed argument than can be provided here. I aim to show that Dewey's work very much deserves further extension in order to cope with some central problems in contemporary ethics and social or political philosophy as well as aesthetics. The Deweyan texts most important in this paper are *Democracy and Education* and *Art As Experience*.¹

Some contributors to Garrison's book indicate that moral education is central in Dewey. Now one finds in contemporary Anglo-American moral philosophy the following situation. Utilitarianism is still studied, even defended by some, but has tended to decline. Kantian ethics has made gains. Rawls is the most prominent example. Yet in recent debates about ethics and political thought, Kantians have to some extent been both disturbed and sometimes influenced in surprising ways by communitarian ethics and politics. Rawls, for example, seems to have shifted his position in response to communitarian criticisms.

The features of some communitarianism on which I wish to focus lend themselves to Deweyan treatment, and creative elaboration on Dewey. Let me mention some elements. Garrison notes that Dewey's aesthetics is basic in the new scholarship on Dewey: "One theme of the new scholarship especially well represented in this volume is the tendency to place Dewey's aesthetics at the center of his thinking" (p. 1). I myself would remark that some recent communitarians, such as Charles Taylor, are very interested in the role of the arts in modernity.² Some communitarians are especially interested in the role of narrative (including fictional narrative) in ethics, culture, and politics.3 According to Taylor, we should give up the utilitarian and Kantian craving for one basic type of reason at the bottom of ethics, and substitute certain ideas about discussion. We might compare J.E. Tiles, "Education for Democracy," on discussion and democracy, in Garrison's book. I agree very much with Tiles that educating persons in disciplined conversational skills of a relevant sort is important for democracy. Taylor is concerned with mature discussion in which, among other things, the partners in conversation must attend to one another's salient ethical intuitions and significant narratives.

Dewey is obviously a communitarian. Like some of the most influential recent communitarian writers, Dewey is at once a self-professed liberal and a community-centered thinker. I concede that narrative and story-telling has not been emphasized as much as one might expect in Deweyan ethics, not so much, for example, as science. But it might have been otherwise.

Dewey is well aware of the potential of the arts in social and political criticism. Some of Dewey's ideas about aesthetics readily lend themselves to extensions in which the continuities would be stressed between fictional and non-fictional artistic narrative and everyday non-fictional life narratives important to persons' interpretations of themselves, others, and communities. Dewey's examples of continuity between aesthetic and everyday experience (discussed insightfully by Philip Jackson in Garrison's book) do not seem chosen to make a case about narratives. Yet Dewey's ideas readily invite interpretation, "(re)searching," to use a term from Mary Leach's essay repeated by Jim Garrison (p. 1) to make a point about continuity between narratives in art and in real life stories about individuals and communities.

Dewey is especially interested in democratic community, as some contributors to Garrison's anthology note. For Dewey, democracy can only be understood by reference to community (and communication), and only understanding democracy will allow us to understand the type of community in which moral education can be fully realized. See especially the chapter on "The Democratic Conception in Education" in *Democracy and Education*, to which we now turn.

Dewey observes that people associate for all sorts of purposes. He also declares an interest in two traits. For any given association, he asks, "How numerous and varied are the interests which are consciously shared? How full and free is the interplay with other forms of association?" He attacks sharp divisions between classes, and sharp divisions at work between those who furnish purposes and those who carry out the purposes. He also attacks associations that isolate themselves from full and free interplay with other modes of association, as one would expect. Dewey claims that "The two elements in our criterion both point to democracy."

Art and its uses can fit in with, but can also conflict with democratic community. In the latter sense, consider, for example, the use of the arts to sharpen class divisions within a society, or in domineering by some societies over other societies. Dewey is cognizant of some of the main problems here, to which we now turn for our own highly selective purposes. I shall stress certain issues about democratic community and the arts.

I wish also to stress that universities and colleges play an important part in criticizing and defending claims to legitimate authority in many different areas of a community, including the arts. It is so obvious that we might not notice it, but the contributors to the Garrison anthology are all university or college faculty. In many cases, their projects can be construed as so many attempts by higher education's representatives to assert or examine the legitimacy (or not) of claims to authority in various areas of a would be democratic community. The arts are one such area in which there are explicit or implicit claims to authority about how we should live.

Without being entirely didactic about it, I would emphasize that fictional narratives of many sorts in circulation make a society and its moral education what they are. The general point is that narratives and stories (in the arts and in "real life") are pervasive, and give a community (and its members) some of its (and their) most distinctive characteristics, characteristics which must be understood and talked through in order to resolve ethical and political problems.

Richard Shusterman perceptively writes:

One of cultural theory's most pressing tasks is the aesthetic legitimation and analysis of popular art, a task whose significance is powerfully social and political as well as aesthetic. Since so much of so many lives is affected by popular art, refusal to accept or understand its aesthetic import intensifies powerful divisions in society, and even in ourselves" (p. 9).

I believe that Shusterman is carrying out one important part of a democratic critique of art and culture, and I think that my own approach is driven by very similar concerns. Shusterman also explicitly emphasizes questions about democratic legitimation, in particular.

Arts and the aesthetic sphere, Dewey pointed out, both enable us to appreciate

what value is ascribable to things as they are, but also arouse discontent with existing conditions and a demand for something better. The Deweyan pragmatist, however, will also recognize and critically examine attempts to monopolize and co-opt arts and the aesthetic in education. Such monopolization and co-optation are attempts to assert authority over a community where no such legitimate authority exists. Dewey, for example, equally questions judicial (judge-like) critics, who claim to invoke or provide a measure for evaluating and appreciating the arts, and "impressionistic" critics, who in violent counter-reaction to judicial critics, are extreme subjectivists. Dewey famously questions the tendency of some institutions, such as museums, or, by implication, schools (no doubt including colleges and universities) to claim a lion's share of legitimate authority to define and exalt what is of genuine artistic and aesthetic value. By refusing to make the aesthetic a province of any narrow realm of community, Dewey seeks to liberate us from the tyranny of illegitimate authority of this type. In pursuing these goals, Dewey is simultaneously pursuing democratic community.

When one considers the deep seriousness and continuing relevance of Dewey's critical ideas about democracy and the economic system, democracy and work, the numerous forms of cruel social schism and subordination by some of others, an emphasis on democracy and aesthetics may seem comparatively frivolous. But I think not, and partly because of the "holistic" quality of Dewey's philosophy, of which Garrison writes (p. 1). Reconstruct Dewey's aesthetics, and Dewey's democratic community will soon come up for reexamination. Moreover, if some of the communitarians are right about the ethical and political importance of narrative, an appropriate contemporary philosophy will have to pay careful attention to artistic and nonartistic narratives.

^{1.} John Dewey, *Art As Experience* (New York: Capricorn Books, 1934) and John Dewey, *Democracy and Education* (New York: Macmillan, 1916).

^{2.} See Charles Taylor's Sources of the Self (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1989), esp. 3.

^{3.} See Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue* (Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press, 1981), esp. 201.

^{4.} John Dewey, Democracy and Education (New York: Macmillan, 1916), 101.

^{5.} Dewey, Art As Experience, 13.

^{6.} Ibid., I.