Engaging with Philosophy’s “Limit-Defying Provocateur”: A Review of *Shusterman’s Pragmatism: Between Literature and Somaesthetics*

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This article reviews a volume edited by Dorota Koczanowicz and Wojciech Malecki titled *Shusterman’s Pragmatism: Between Literature and Somaesthetics.*

As the first edited collection to engage with the broad scope of Richard Shusterman’s philosophical preoccupations, this book seeks to “shed light on why Shusterman is so widely read not only in different cultural contexts ... but also within different disciplines” (1). The editors pursue this aim by partitioning its twelve chapters into three sections, by providing an introductory overview of what they christen the “in between” nature of Shusterman’s body of work, by opening the collection proper with an essay from Shusterman, and by closing it with his detailed responses to the preceding essays. As I hope to make clear in the body of this review, this is an exceptionally well organized and coherent collection, one which thereby provides insight into “the work of this interesting philosopher” (1).

In their “Introduction,” Koczanowicz and Malecki take pains to demonstrate the connections between Shusterman’s turn to Dewey and his development of somaesthetics, defined by Shusterman as “the critical, ameliorative study of one’s experience and use of one’s body as a locus of sensory-aesthetic appreciation (aesthesis) and creative self-fashioning” (quoted, 4). In particular, they emphasize how Dewey’s exhortation to address “the problems of men” (rather than the professional puzzles of analytic epistemology or continental hermeneutics) directly informs Shusterman’s recent efforts to apply somaesthetics to issues of gender and racial justice, efforts that, in turn, require ever greater interdisciplinarity.

These connections are more deeply explored, of course, in the opening essay by Shusterman himself, entitled “A Pragmatist Path Through the Play of Limits: From Literature to Somaesthetics.” Indeed, he introduces his reflections by stating that “I decided that this essay could usefully trace how I came to
pragmatist philosophy and how I was led from my initial focus on literary theory to a much broader philosophical project that eventually generated the interdisciplinary field of somaesthetics” (11). He takes this approach because of his suspicion that his own philosophical trajectory reflects “a deeper current in the history of aesthetics” (14). This is the need to overcome (or “transgress”) limits, whether this need has its roots in his own impatience with the merely descriptive aims of much contemporary theorizing about art or in the larger historical failure of philosophers to provide a definition of art that is invulnerable to counterexample. This is thus why he turns to pragmatism and emphasizes its melioristic mission: “If art and aesthetic experience are crucial forms of human flourishing, then philosophy betrays its role if it merely looks on with neutrality without joining the struggle to extend their breadth and power” (22). More specifically, this is why he insists both that the value of conceptual analysis resides in its ability to make a concept “more meaningful and useful in improving our aesthetic understanding of experience” (22) and that we need to recover “the ancient ideal of philosophy as a way of life” (24). Given these convictions, his efforts to establish and promote the field of somaesthetics can therefore be seen as the culmination of his philosophical development: “Somaesthetics was thus conceived to complement the basic project of pragmatist aesthetics by elaborating the ways that a disciplined, ramified, and interdisciplinary attention to bodily experiences, methods, discourses, and performances could enrich our aesthetic experience and practice, not only in the fine arts but in the diverse arts of living” (23).

Just as the themes introduced in the editors’ “Introduction” receive elaboration in the opening essay, the essays included in the first section of this collection, “Literary Theory and Philosophy of Art,” further advance and illustrate the points that I have just summarized. So, for example, the Eliot scholar, Anna Budziak, in her contribution, “The Idea of Emotion in T.S. Eliot and in Richard Shusterman,” explores “the affinities” (33) between Eliot’s attempts to both express and understand emotion and Shusterman’s identification of the judgmental, transformative, aesthetic, and somatic aspects of emotion as revealed in somaesthetic investigation. In so doing, and as happily noted by Shusterman himself (cf. 216), she not only bridges his earliest work in literary theory with his current research in somaesthetics but shows how both Eliot, the high modern poet, and Shusterman, the “postmodern” philosopher (37), are indebted to American pragmatism’s emphasis upon “the physiological element of affectivity” (33).

In similar vein, the literature professor and poet, Kacper Bartczak, in his contribution, “Neo-Pragmatist Models of Self-Development and the Poetic Subjectivity in John Ashbery’s Poetry,” exploits Shusterman’s criticisms of Richard Rorty’s account of self-creation in order to investigate “the evolution of Ashbury’s poetic voice” (50). In particular, Bartczak praises Shusterman for declaring that the relationship between “the conscious effort at self-stylization and the gesture of self-abandon” (63), essential to the emergence of genius, is a