

*Pragmatic Modernism*. LISI SCHOENBACH. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

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In this thought-provoking volume from the 'Modernist Literature and Culture' series, Lisi Schoenbach makes an admirable attempt to recalibrate academic responses to the period. Arguing that we have been too long in thrall to the shocks, breaks and ruptures of manifesto discourse, Schoenbach suggests that we pull on the thread of philosophical pragmatism running through modernist fiction and non-fiction writing, an effort which turns up some surprising connections. Focusing on pragmatism's interest in the concept and practice of habit, Schoenbach establishes a philosophical trinity – William James, John Dewey and Oliver Wendell Holmes Jr. (p.3) – and identifies the influence of their thinking in a more eclectic range of literary writers including Andre Breton, Gertrude Stein, Henry James and Marcel Proust. Schoenbach is, however, careful not to throw out the baby of shock-related grandstanding with the bathwater of the avant-garde, arguing instead that 'the many contradictions of habit surface unexpectedly in the midst of modernism's most powerful manifestoes' (p.36).

Schoenbach is faced with two problems perilous for the writer of a monograph, and she is gracious in acknowledging them both. First, the term 'habit' itself is slippery and amorphous, shearing off into unthought gesture, social expectation, and much else in between. The 'capaciousness' of the term, as Schoenbach has it (p.47), prevents its pinning down in this volume and, given that the author is committed to tracing pragmatism in her writers' published work rather than their biographies (p.5), the connections between theory and practice here can seem strained. Schoenbach is deft when tackling the former, skipping through the philosophical history of

pragmatism in a way that is both convincing and informative. Attempting to trace that history in the literary work of modernist writers, Schoenbach remains close to her central interest in habit, resulting in literary readings that are considerably less engaging than the philosophical theorising which precedes them. The second problem connects to this issue of engagement. Schoenbach tentatively suggests that ‘pragmatist treatments of habit have simply failed to fulfill the affective and imaginative needs of scholars of modernism’ (p.48). While this statement works as a caution, and opens a space for a corrective analysis of habit, it also makes clear that a fascinating account of pragmatist incrementalism may be a paradox.

Nevertheless, there is much to admire here, particularly the analyses of Henry James in relation to questions of risk, prediction and the institutional. In fact, this study is so dominated by James that one wonders whether it began life as a single author thesis. Poor Breton is given two pages, Stein fifteen, and Proust confined to an epilogue. The latter seems a particular shame, since Schoenbach perceptively notes that habit is the ‘engine thrumming in the [. . .] background’ of Proust’s writing (p.137). We can cross our fingers for a book-length study of James, and an expanded discussion of Proust, from Schoenbach in due course. In the meantime, it will be left to other studies to put the case for a pragmatist modernism in a more comprehensive manner, and to convince us that this is not only a plausible, but a truly interesting, approach to the literature of the period. Yet Schoenbach is to be congratulated for a bold, if imperfect, attempt to expand our notion of who might ‘count’ as a modernist, and for suggesting that in re-focusing upon the habitual, we are no longer looking for a canon which blasts.

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