Book reviews.


There are few philosophical studies of literary works that are at once a pleasure to read and profound. As much as one admires Derrida’s *Glas* for its originality, crossing between Jean Genet and Hegel on the same page, each with his own column of text, makes the reader a bit deranged. For the writer the demands of doing this sort of thing with rigor are staggering: one has to know the literary works very well and the philosophy too. It can be argued that at the level of style, the more tacit the interplay of sources (and the smaller the “hammer” in Nietzsche’s sense), the smoother the reading experience. In this regard the works of Georges Poulet remain unsurpassed as exemplars of philosophical criticism—*The Interior Distance, Studies in Human Time*, and *The Metamorphosis of the Circle*. But these are phenomenological. In pragmatism, which is the viewpoint of the study under review, the standard has been set by Richard Poirier at Rutgers, author of the magisterial *Poetry and Pragmatism* and *The Renewal of Literature*.

Arthur Efron’s *Experiencing Tess of the D’Urbervilles* is an obscurely inspired book of criticism that persistently employs Dewey’s aesthetics to interpret Thomas Hardy’s novel, *Tess of the D’Urbervilles*, published in 1891. The reason Dewey is used as the guiding critical master, we are told, is that the author has been infatuated with his *Art as Experience* since time immemorial. This is not a critical motive for using Dewey; nevertheless, it seems to be the author’s most compelling reason to invoke Dewey, along with the banal observation that both Dewey and Hardy share an interest in “experience.” Although Efron thoroughly knows his Dewey and his Tess, for the reader the two ships keep passing a couple of miles from each other in the dead of night, and one suspects that Efron’s union of Dewey and Tess has become so privatized over the years that it is no longer communicable. One keeps flipping pages, trying to find a convincing relation between pragmatism and Hardy’s tragic, complexly deterministic vision of life in which archaism and modernity obscurely conflict within individuals estranged from their native communities.

There is an attempt to justify the author’s reliance on Dewey in the beginning of the book, when he talks about
sex. Things go from bad to worse. First, the author says that although "sex is extremely important" in *Tess*, many professional readers of *Tess* have avoided this issue. It never occurs to Arthur Efron that most critics prefer not to belabor the obvious. Then Efron says that Dewey himself doesn't have much to say about sex in his own writings. He anticipates his "Deweyan readers" concerns with his sexual approach by asking, "What has a Deweyan approach have to do with sex?" and answers his own question: "Sex figures very little. There is nothing surprising about this; few philosophers even in our own time write about sex" (20). Now, what time is "our own time"? I can think of a dozen philosophers from Foucault to Alphonso Lingis and Judith Butler who have written extensively about sex. More importantly, if Dewey doesn't have a lot to say about sex, and Efron's book is about sexual experience in *Tess* (and it is), than why keep dragging poor Dewey into it?

Let's jump ahead and take a look at a passage in Efron's book that is not entirely focused on sex, to see if he makes up for other lapses in rigor. It is about a famous scene in Hardy's novel in which Tess carries out a mercy killing of some wounded pheasants. In this scene she takes some consolation from the fact that she is at least better off than the miserable birds. Efron says, "As a convincing portrait of and comment upon Tess at this point, the passage on killing the pheasants seems dumb. To use Dewey's term, Tess's Mind-, her intelligence, is working against her -Body, when she produces this discounting of her misery. Hardy's purpose of showing how arbitrary social law is, when it produces false guilt over sexuality, is put to the unlikely use of supporting Tess in not crediting the reality of her own suffering...If I de-emphasize the cognitive value of Hardy's statement, however, and respond to him as a person who is the author, then it feels all right; it is palpable, as his care and concern for the woman and her emotional state...This emotion-laden passage, nonetheless, is difficult to experience. Even though in Dewey's aesthetics, emotion is crucial for the formation of experience, its presence cannot produce coherence where there is some integral failure of imagination. The passage about the pheasants tends to distract from, rather than augment, Tess's interesting critical thinking" (112).

Forgive this reviewer for inserting such a long passage as a sample of Efron's writing, but I wanted to display its idiosyncratic texture. One notices that even...
here sex gets a word in edgewise. It is surely original of Arthur Efron to call Tess (a farm girl) an interesting critical thinker. But do professors who write for a professional audience really say about a master novelist that his work "seems dumb"? Do we really have to invoke Dewey to describe a mind/body duality problem in Tess? Isn't that overkill? Surely Dewey didn't coin the terms Mind and Body. What does Efron intend when he responds to Hardy "as a person who is the author" such that it "feels all right"? Is Hardy not the author? Why belabor the obvious--so that things feel all right? And do philosophical critics really speak that way, about "feeling all right" in the context of their critical work?

To look past all this forced use of Dewey and unsubtle informality one has to simply assume that much of Efron's material comes directly from classroom lectures. In the give-and-take of the undergraduate lecture, much of his language is excusable, even appropriate. Yes, it is best in this case to be forgiving and call in the protection of pedagogy, by which the end justifies the means.

C. S. Schreiner

University of Guam


Philip Cafaro presents an integrated picture of Henry David Thoreau's moral thought in *Thoreau's Living Ethics: Walden and the Pursuit of Nature*. The first substantive chapter documents Thoreau's engagement with the question of "how to live," while the second argues that his answer was framed within a rich matrix of aspirational virtues. The next chapter is an extended analysis of Thoreau's account of economy in which Cafaro argues that Thoreau's concern is neither asceticism nor autarky so much as achieving the discipline needed for contemplation. Unlike Aristotle, Thoreau argues that realization of human potential is possible in the absence of wealth. Cafaro follows this with a discussion of specific virtues associated respectively with solitude and society, including an extended meditation on Thoreau's relationship with Emerson under the aegis of "friendship." The chapter titled "Nature" probes Thoreau for an ethic on the use of nature, finding a strong