

Jesse Raber. *Progressivism's Aesthetic Education: The Bildungsroman and the American School, 1890–1920*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018. 208 pp.

It has been nearly sixty years since Lawrence Cremin published *The Transformation of the School* (1961) and over thirty since Herbert Kliebard wrote *The Struggle for the American Curriculum* (1986). The fact that the basic frameworks of these and other landmark books remain current in our field speaks to the strength of their narratives. However, intervening decades have introduced new ethnic, geographical, and theoretical perspectives on the Progressive Era, and in the coming years there will no doubt be attempts to update our understanding of the period as a whole. In the meantime, we should welcome insightful, thematic monographs like Jesse Raber's *Progressivism's Aesthetic Education*, which skillfully combines the era's intellectual currents and curricular reforms with an original argument about its cultural aspirations.

Raber builds his narrative around one of the foundational problems of America's democratic-republican politics, and hence of its educational system: How can schools submit to the authority of the very public that they are supposed to form and uplift? How are we "to reconcile democratic principles of individual spiritual autonomy and self-government with officially sanctioned institutional power over aesthetic and cultural matters, and even over aesthetic subject formation itself" (p. 3)? The answer, Raber argues, comes from variations of the German *Bildung* tradition, which argues that cultural authority remains democratic when it reflects genuine aesthetic standards, under which individual and social needs converge. As formulated by Goethe and Schiller, "The spiritual development of individuals is seen as inextricable from that of society, so that harmonious personalities depend on harmonious social arrangements." Indeed, as Hegel argued, "Within its own essence, human nature harbors a social teleology, that its highest fulfillment coincides with the highest fulfillment of social harmony" (p. 6). Raber notes the appeal of these ideas to civic republicans of the nineteenth century—including Horace Mann and other educational reformers—but also the challenge of applying them without falling into German notions of the ideal state or arbitrary standards of cultural superiority. (Tellingly, it was during the Progressive Era that Americans flirted with, but ultimately rejected, both paths.)

In outlining alternative forms of *Bildung*, Raber's book mirrors its subject, ascending through successive levels of sophistication. Early chapters discuss Herbartian notions of growth and the austere

aesthetics of Maria Montessori, which give way to more generative discussions of the social efficiency movement—which he associates with the author Charlotte Perkins Gilman—and John Dewey’s visions of embryonic communities and teacher professionalism.

The social efficiency chapter draws from the writing of David Snedden, Franklin Bobbitt, and Samuel Dutton to outline a type of aestheticism in which individuals achieve self-realization through their service to society, and in which the social sciences “extend that power of coherent willing from the individual to society as a whole” (p. 123). For Gilman, too, education required a transition from teaching “facts” to teaching “processes,” an embrace of the “unconscious growth” (p. 130) of children, and ultimately a focus on “How to Live Together ... to the best advantage, with the least waste of effort” (p. 128). In both Gilman’s educational writing and famous works of fiction, such as “The Yellow Wall-Paper” (1892), she ascribed psychic turmoil not only “to the constraints of Victorian femininity” but also to “the rigid stoicism and constant effort in character building [in] youth,” proposing instead a society that combined specialized development with common social interests (p. 133). In this, Gilman deviated somewhat from the classical *Bildung* tradition: rather than a struggle for self-formation, she envisioned “no friction in the individual’s development into her social role,” and hence no narrative of growth (p. 136). Raber acknowledges the anti-democratic aspects of sorting children into social roles, but also sees in specialization a broadening of cultural authority. Raber writes:

For Schiller, Horace Mann, Montessori, or the Herbartians, the well-ordered society is reflected in microcosm in the identically well-ordered mind of each citizen, and just as there is a single ideal of social order, there is a single ideal of mental order, which the great artist best exemplifies. For the social efficiency educators, on the other hand, social order depends on differentiation of function [so that] the artist is just one social role among others (p. 139).

The same breadth of experience typified Dewey’s aesthetics, in which *Bildung* accords with notions of growth—the deepening of experience and the preservation of plasticity—and the cultivation of “sensitivity” and “responsiveness” that enable it. For Dewey, art reproduces and propagates the best of human culture and imbues it with a critical element, “[arousing] discontent with conditions which fall below [its] measure,’ and ‘[creating] a demand for surroundings coming up to [its] own level” (pp. 154–55). Thus, art becomes the arbiter of true educative experiences, and teaching becomes an art form. “The pursuit of education has a life of its own, and those who engage in it, teachers and students alike, should expect it to change

them in fundamental ways” (p. 157). By decentering the source of this change, Dewey comes the closest to solving the riddle of democratic authority. “Neither the teacher nor the artwork is meant to be exemplary,” Raber notes. “Rather than a higher self, these educative agencies are simply larger selves,” reservoirs of greater experience and exposure; instead of a “unitary ideal, moving the student toward a fixed characterological goal,” the larger self “is always just one among many” possible selves, preserving the indeterminacy of social progress (p. 158). Ultimately, as Dewey notes in *The School and Society* (1899), the teacher’s authority over students rests on the ability to sense the direction of their development better than the students themselves, while the teacher’s autonomy from school boards and parents derives from familiarity with the pedagogical aspects of social problems (pp. 158–59). Raber concedes some criticisms of Dewey’s theories—“vagueness” (p. 154), predictably, as well as Dewey’s inability to answer existentialist quandaries, for which his definitions of “experience” often seem too mechanistic, biological rather than spiritual (pp. 189–97)—yet he clearly sees his as the purest and most defensible form of aesthetic education during the period.

Historians’ opinions of this book will, to some degree, depend on their taste for the field of American studies. Early chapters intertwine educational thought with literary analysis in ways that may be more useful to the latter than the former, and many points of overlap are merely thematic: discussions of “growth” and “senses” were certainly in the air, but the lines of intellectual influence between Abraham Cahan and the Herbartians or Maria Montessori and Willa Cather remain indistinct. Conversely, the impact of German idealist philosophy has a far more traceable lineage than Raber’s sporadic references suggest, not least through immigrants’ cultural institutions, the growth of educational journals, and the exportation of the research university model, and could have featured more prominently throughout the text. Evidentiary concerns aside, Raber provides an erudite and philosophically provocative look at the cultural, political, and pedagogical aspirations of the Progressive Era and makes a significant contribution to our understanding of what the arts can and cannot accomplish in the democratic classroom.

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