education review // reseñas educativas
editors: gene v glass gustavo e. fischman melissa cast-brede
a multi-lingual journal of book reviews

October 28, 2011 Volume 14 Number 11 ISSN 1094-5296
Education Review/Reseñas Educativas is a project of the National Education Policy Center http://nepc.colorado.edu
Follow *Education Review* on Facebook

Culture and Pragmatism in Education Theory: An Essay Review of Dietz's *An Awkward Echo: Matthew Arnold and John Dewey*

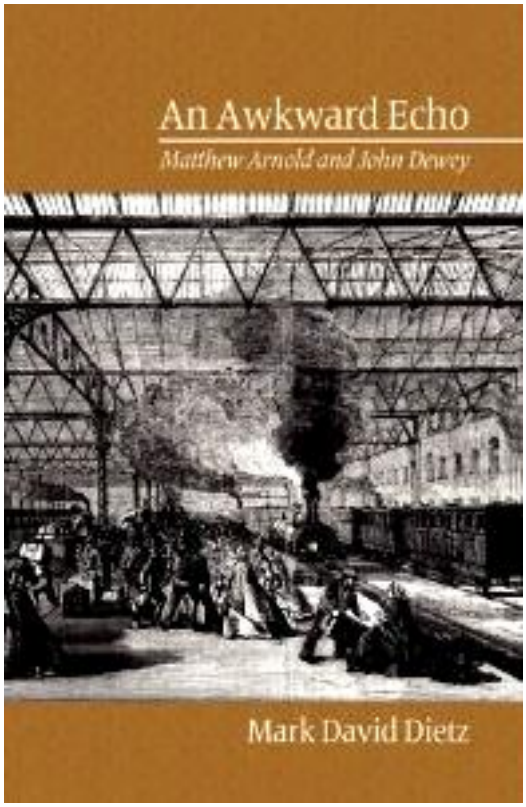
Nicholas Preus
Luther College

Dietz, Mark David. (2010) *An Awkward Echo: Matthew Arnold and John Dewey*. Charlotte, NC: Information Age Publishing.

Pp. 282 ISBN 978-1607523994

Citation: Preus, Nicholas. (2010 October 28) Culture and Pragmatism in Education Theory: An Essay Review of Dietz's *An Awkward Echo: Matthew Arnold and John Dewey*. *Education Review*, *14*(11). Retrieved [Date] from http://www.edrev.info/essays/v14n11.pdf

In a passing reference, Mark David Dietz suggests that his approach in this book is somewhat "Shandyan" (p. 38), an allusion to Laurence Sterne's eighteenth-century novel, *Tristram Shandy*. Stern's novel has puzzled, provoked, and entertained readers since its publication, and it continues to pose a challenge to literary classification. The text is fragmented, achronological, and wildly digressive. Yet through it all, a generous view of a recognizable world emerges. The



social scene that is satirized appears as the unavoidably human one in which we all live.

Dietz's book is Shandean in this sense: it is digressive and often shifts focus without warning or prior explanation. He has included some of his own drawings periodically, and although the title promises an academic study of the relationships between the critical theories of Matthew Arnold and John Dewey–an interesting and complex endeavor–the object of the book is to present Dietz's theory of education, which starts in Arnold and Dewey, but which is very much his own construction.

As with Sterne, however, something emerges from the proliferations of the text that is worth hearing. This volume makes an intriguing case about the philosophy of education: an appeal for a middle way, a practical–or pragmatic–approach to critical theories of reading, learning, and educating.

The book is divided into seven chapters that fall into three major sections: the first two chapters are introductory, setting the table for the argument to follow; the next four chapters are structured around Dietz's interpretation of Dewey's theory of the mind and its functions; and the final chapter and postscript contain Dietz's summation of the argument and his retrospective judgment of it.

In an academic study, one might expect that the early material would be primarily aimed at orienting the reader to the substance of the argument and some sense of the writer's approach, both in terms of structure and critical positioning. Dietz's study promises to begin this way with "Sketches of Matthew Arnold and John Dewey." The idea of "sketches" is apropos as Dietz takes up bits of Arnold's biography and touches on the most familiar of his critical statements: Culture is the "best which has been thought and said in the world" (p. 6), and it implies the ability "to see the object as in itself it really is" by means of a "free play of mind." "Sweetness and light," "Hebraism and Hellenism," "Barbarians and Philistines" also get brief mention, but Dietz is most interested in Arnold's central concept of "culture," and the links it has with Dewey's idea of "experience."

The chapter turns to Dewey, and after a page of biography, looks at his poetry, certainly a little known and somewhat curious subject to pursue here. But Dietz is linking Arnold and Dewey in terms of their understandings

of the poetic enterprise as a "criticism of life," as Arnold puts it. Dietz indulges in a bit of literary criticism, and then discusses the words that are central to Dewey's thought: "experience," "habit," and notably "thing" which Dietz argues is consonant with Arnold's understand of what "really is" (p. 25). Both Arnold and Dewey, we are told, see criticism as a way of clearing away the useless, or mechanical, accretions of the past in order to arrive at the best mode of human conduct (p. 28). "One almost feels that Dewey and Arnold were approaching the same thought from different directions … Dewey, distrustful of tradition …While Arnold fears …the monstrous and overgrown clutter of uncritical superstition, and the careless, awkward philistinism of the practical managements of modern life" (p. 28).

The chapter has its liabilities as an introduction, jumping, as it does, from poetry analysis, to political commentary, to biography, to criticism, to personal opinions and generalizations. There is little or no introduction to the central argument of the book, and it would certainly be helpful to have an overview of exactly how and why the discussion will connect Arnold and Dewey. We come away with the assertion that Arnold and Dewey both employ practical criticism to analyze modernity and to sort out the useful from the surrounding noise. Exactly what this practical criticism consists of is the next question for the study.

"Educational Pluralism" introduces Dietz's "rhetorical-hermeneutic" model, which is at the heart of his argument for a new form of criticism, for a functional theory of interpretation that moves beyond the impasses of postmodernism. He opens by apologizing that he had not provided an introduction in the previous chapter, and explains, "my ultimate intention is to understand how the educative process can be made more adequate to the age in which we live" (p. 38). He calls his proposal, "educational pluralism" (p. 42). At this point, it becomes clear that in spite of its title, the book will not be a study of the links between Arnold and Dewey. Rather, Dietz is advancing his own theoretical interests, seeking a "middle ground" between what he claims are the extremes of modern education theory. Arnold and Dewey for him represent "middle ground thinkers," whose theories of mind and criticism enable Dietz to construct his middle way model. In short, Arnold and Dewey are to be used as foundational, pragmatist thinkers whose connection is the rationale they provide for this book's philosophical agenda.

Proceeding to his model, Dietz frames his middle way in terms of two poles of critical theory that were once traditionally integrated, but that now have been inappropriately separated: rhetoric and hermeneutics, or persuasion and interpretation. Taken separately and in isolation, each term seems to suggest to him a dysfunctional extremism that needs to be overcome by re-integration via his model. Dietz's concern here seems to be on the one hand that postmodern analysis of language has fragmented signification into meaninglessness, and on the other that the postmodern critique of interpretation and

understanding has resulted in an isolation and solipsism of the mind. The middle way, with its reliance on Deweyan pragmatism and Arnoldian critical culture, is Dietz's solution, a "philosophy that finds the hard-won middle ground" (p. 42).

Dietz's model requires, he tells us, certain "corollaries," which are rooted in the thoughts of Arnold and Dewey. These are the four aspects of mind: the "tentacled mind," the "critical mind," the "intentional mind," and the "reflective responsive mind" (pp. 43-44).

After introducing these terms, Dietz shifts back to Arnold and Dewey, apparently aware that his text might not be what was anticipated. "I should like to provide a little more by way of evidence of the influence that Arnold had on Dewey, if only in that those who may have expected such an exposition should, at least, be partially satisfied in their expectations" (p. 46). This takes the form of a summary of some findings from Donald Stone's *Communications with the Future: Matthew Arnold in Dialogue* (1997)–essentially an argument that Arnold is Dewey's forebear (p. 49). We continue with a section on the differences in Arnold's and Dewey's voices, which while interesting, does not seem to bear significantly on the major thesis of the study. And finally, we return to Dietz's model and an introduction to the way it stands as a corrective to Reader-Response Theory, which Dietz seems to take as the central postmodern theory needing critique.

The main section of the book, or the next four chapters contain, among a number of other things, discussions of the four aspects of mind, their relationship to the rhetorical-hermeneutic model, and the ways in which Arnold and Dewey inform Dietz's project. Although he does not say as much, the schematic of the mind that Dietz provides appears to be built on Dewey's (1910) discussion of thought in *How We Think* (pp. 68-78). The world presents a problem causing perplexity; the mind engages critically to find a solution; deliberate reasoning produces hypotheses and possible solutions; and reflection leads to more observation, testing, and knowledge applicable to future problems.

The "Tentacled" Mind

For the discussion of his first aspect of mind, Dietz borrows the image of a "tentacled" mind from Dewey, a symbol of Dewey's answer to the skepticism of David Hume. Far from doubting the ability of the mind to apprehend the real, Dewey insisted that no thought was "'independent of experience'" (p. 72). The mind reaches out to the world and grasps onto what it needs. Dietz's discussion of this point drifts into a vague passage on Dewey's view of the experience of art and aesthetics, but what he eventually, and properly, arrives at is Dewey's rejection of mind/body dualism and insistence that experience is the foundation of our organism's ability to learn. After an excursus on the Gnostics, Dietz explains that Dewey was at the same time well aware of the dangers of materiality, such as reifying language, letting things dominate thought, becoming

solipsistic (p. 79). Coming back to Arnold, Dietz suggests that "to see the thing as in itself it really is," and to "try to know the best that is known and thought in the world" – what Arnold meant by "culture" – is essentially connected to Dewey's idea of "experience." One wishes that Dietz had been more thoroughgoing in this discussion, with significantly more textual analysis of the terms "culture" and "experience." As it is we are indeed only partially satisfied, and the connection between the terms becomes more a matter of assertion than demonstration. For example, Dietz asserts that Arnold's notion of the "free play of mind," the disinterested activity of a mind free of self-interest, is "clearly moving toward Dewey's 'active manipulation of things'"(p. 84). But the discussion here is too brief and not well supported. Nonetheless, Dietz's position is clear: both Arnold and Dewey insist on a mind that is engaged with a real world, upon which it reflects and acts and by which it is informed.

The Critical Mind

The next stage, "The Critical Mind," is a main focus of the book's argument. The tentacled mind may function in the real world, but "reality [also] forms a contiguity with what is … within the mind" (p. 91). Dietz proposes to trace the movement of critical thought from the mind's engagement with the world, through several historical stages of critical theory, finally to an educational pluralism (p. 92). To accomplish this purpose, he chooses the history of literary criticism as the domain in which one can best observe the developing stages of critical awareness. Dietz's source text is George Watson's 1962 volume, *The Literary Critics*, whose arguments and historical trajectory Dietz recapitulates over some 35 pages. This summary takes us from Dryden, Pope and Johnson; to the Romantics, Wordsworth and Coleridge, (Shelley and Keats noticeably missing), Hazlitt, Lamb, and de Quincy; to Arnold and aesthetes Pater and Wilde; to T.S. Eliot, I.A. Richards (Dietz argues with Watson here), and Cleanth Brooks (based on an essay in *The New Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry*); and finally Dietz turns to Stanley Fish, with whose theories he takes exception. The point of all this, besides recounting the "progressive permutations of 'theory,'" is to note that literary criticism seems at last to be turning toward what Dietz is arguing for: a "practical criticism" (p. 128).

The historical survey traces developments leading up to this practical criticism–a history of disjunctions among theory, text, and reader–and it demonstrates the shifting views of the role of the critic: as reader or author. Dietz's practical criticism, in contrast to previous theories, is a "bridge" linking the author, text, and reader. Neo-classical criticism takes into account the rules (classicism) but is accountable to the text and, in Johnson's case, to the common reader (p. 98). Romantic criticism turns to the creative process of authoring (Coleridge), the waking reflection on subjective vision (Lamb), and the reader's response to text (Hazlitt and de Quincey; pp. 100-106). Pater and Wilde focus on artifice and subjectivism with no pragmatic interests

(pp. 116-119), and Eliot rejects "utility" and pragmatism (pp. 120,121). Henry James is pragmatic to the extent that in his *Prefaces* he affirms the importance and knowability of authorial intention (p. 118). These theoretical sketches have some general validity, but their brevity can be misleading, especially when writers are only seen through a pragmatist lens.

Arnold's and Dewey's practical bent in criticism is discussed in terms of their views of history. And here the argument confronts directly the differences between them: Arnold, the elitist apostle of culture, wishing to preserve the "best," particularly as it is found in books, and Dewey, the progressive, for whom "life was lived through active experience," not books (p. 113). Dietz acknowledges that "no apologetics on my part will liberate Arnold from this charge [of snobbery]" (p. 115), but he defends him on the rather fallacious ground that many academics are elitists too. Dietz's point is that in spite of their differences, Dewey and Arnold both share a concern with things as they are in the present, with the need to move beyond the personal, and with moral action–all dimensions, in one form or another, of practical criticism.

Finally, in his history of criticism, Dietz takes up the New Critics and postmodernism, I.A. Richards/ Cleanth Brooks and Stanley Fish, respectively. Without rehearsing his analysis of these critics, suffice it to say that Dietz uses them as primary players in creating the impasse he wishes to correct. While 18th-century critics may have privileged the author, The New Critics entirely privilege the text, and rule out both authorial intention and the reader. Reader Response rules out the author and the text, and entirely privileges the reader and her construction of meaning. Dietz's practical criticism, via the rhetorical-hermeneutical model seeks a new, middle way that will enable an integration of author-text-reader in the act of meaning making. As he puts it

> Whether we are able to distinguish among the dully echoed intention of the author, the physicality of the text, the swirling associations of our own many-voiced culture– ALL of these are, nonetheless, absolutely present in every act of reading. (p. 134)

The Intentional Mind

That brings Dietz to his third quality of mind: the "intentional mind." In this chapter, he is concerned with issues of authority, authorial intention, and postmodern subjective isolation. He has set up an oppositional model to his own middle way, or practical criticism, in the polarity between the New Critics and postmodernists (i.e. reader response theory): the former rejecting authorial intention and the latter shifting meaning to the authority of a reader's isolated subjectivity. But this is problematic, even though he is at some pains to defend this part of his argument. For one thing, Dietz nowhere takes into account the last 30 years of cultural analyses, those critical approaches stemming from the work of Foucault, such as many feminisms, new historicism, and postcolonialism. It is

almost axiomatic at this point in discussions of subjectivity that one must engage with the idea of the culturally constructed subject, who is both a product of an historical moment and shaper of it. This kind of postmodernism does not cede authority to the individual, because the notion of individual is replaced by the cultural and political situatedness of the subject. Nor does authority reside in the text, since as Foucault and his followers repeatedly show, the text is a pastiche of historical lineaments of power, which may be revealed by an archeology of knowledge. So the binary that Dietz establishes is at least dated and perhaps also has limited relevance in the current critiques of postmodernism. His notion of postmodernism is reductive in the end.

With the binary of text vs. reader in the background informing his next elaboration of the rhetorical-hermeneutic model, he attempts to clarify his project. A graphic with three boxes depicts WRITER (or X^1), TEXT (or X^2), and READER (or X^3). Each of these is privileged by one or another earlier schools of criticism, as we have seen. Dietz's practical criticism, however, maintains that the process of making meaning involves the authority–or agency–of all three domains. Furthermore he suggests that as the reader reads, she takes on, in some sense, the authority of a writer; similarly as a writer writes with the reader in mind, authority shifts in a readerly direction. And the text, far from being simply a rhetorical device, is also a hermeneutic phenomenon. As he puts it: " the real whole journey is that which moves from reader to author and back, by way of the object (or text)" (p. 160). He calls this the "ping-pong effect" (p. 159), a description of the interaction among authorial intention, text, and interpreting reader.

This is all in the spirit of Dewey's anti-dualism: Dietz too wants to show the inadequacies of "either-or" propositions. Here the authority of reader and writer positions is interactive with and through the text; rhetoric and hermeneutics are co-present and mutually dependent; the world of things and the world of thought (body/mind) are not separable; and the communication between two minds–the essence of education–is not only possible, but because "understanding is socially constructed" (p. 163), unavoidable. Most importantly Dietz argues that in integrating these polarities, it is not necessary to create a perfect fit: authorial intention and reader interpretation may not, and need not be identical. Arnold says that it is sufficient simply to come "near" (pp. 162-163, 172-173). In other words, approximations and congruences are sufficient for meaning in a world of change and uncertainty.

This point is critical to Dietz's project of practical criticism. Dewey and Arnold, at least as Deitz reads them, both turn to the world of experience and things as a grounding for thought and criticism. This pragmatic turn demands a simultaneous recognition of both uncertainty and of the real, without recourse to authoritarianism on the one hand or subjective isolationism on the other. As a core argument this point is very much in the vein of Dewey's

pragmatism, and although Dietz might have produced a more linear and tightly constructed analysis of Arnold on this matter, he is persuasive that Arnold on some level shares this view.

The Reflective-Response Mind

"For Arnold, culture was a thing that revealed its virtues only to those who read critically and reflectively; for Dewey reflection was the essence of educated thought … an active part of life" (p. 211). For Dietz, reflection is the capstone of his theory of mind. In order to indicate its active component–as opposed to an exclusively contemplative function–he refers to the "reflective-response mind." This mind is recursive: the tentacled mind "has moved out beyond itself … and now it returns" (p. 214), but in a condition of uncertainty and uneasiness as it seeks resolution to what it has discovered. For Dewey, this mental disturbance is a positive impetus for active reflection; for Arnold, it requires as much doing as thinking (p. 216). In a somewhat puzzling choice, Dietz discusses "Dipsychus," a poem by Arnold's friend, Arthur Hugh Clough, as a way of demonstrating how reflective thinking requires a sort of "overhearing" of ourselves, a looking back at prior intentions and experience. This overhearing cannot become lost in nostalgia or self-involved memory; it must be active (p. 219). That is, reflective thinking must not wholly become "passive contemplative thought" (p. 222).

To demonstrate this process, Dietz returns to his model, and explains the recursive ping-pong effect as the reader, encountering the text, becomes writer, becomes responder, such that meaning approaches a "nearness to that intentionality which lay behind the initial urge to write" (p. 225). Dewey's "reflection" involves "pushing those thoughts back out into the world, by responding and continuing the process of interacting" (p. 226). Dietz's proposal is thus Deweyan: seeing reflective thought as a springboard to action in the world, upon which further action initiates more reflection. To Dewey this is how progress occurs, and for Dietz it is the substance of the educational model he advances.

> What we really have, in the hermeneutic-rhetorical model, is a reader-writer, engaged with the objects of the world, listening or reading critically, conscious of the intentionalities that have authored the world of objects, balancing the valences of thought and response reflectively, and, consciously, moving in and out of the authority of writing. (p. 227)

Pluralistic education, in other words, must be a joint project of outwardness and inwardness, of "taking" and "making," and above all, it must employ all four aspects of mind that he has detailed. "The reader-writer," he concludes, "is, in rhetorical-hermeneutic terms, the very model of the Arnoldian-Deweyan learner" (p. 228).

With his four-part discussion of the mind complete, all that remains is for Dietz to wrap up and reflect on his argument. He reiterates his purpose:

> I am arguing rather with my own age, an age that has surprisingly chosen the certainty of non-communication over the uncertainty of Arnoldian *nearness*. I feel that, when faced with a subject like education we have no choice–we must encounter the awkward uncertainty of the world and not hide in the skeptical doubts of postmodernism, with its suggestion that the only alternative is a kind of caricatured positivism, while ignoring the hard-won middle ground of pragmatism." (p. 234)

His solution–pluralistic education through the rhetorical-hermeneutic process–is his version of Arnold's seeing "'things as in themselves they really are'" and Dewey's "interaction between mind and body" (p. 235). He claims that the true virtue of his system is its dynamic nature, refusing to fix a center that in any case would not hold (p. 239). "The center must be forever moving, for it if fails to move, we will find ourselves trapped in the authoritarianism of the teacher-rhetor, or the mindless idolatry of the text, or the cavalier incompetence and isolation of the willful self" (p. 248). This, to Dietz, is the project in which both Arnold and Dewey were engaged: the "search for the reasoned and reasonable middle ground" (p. 250).

For his final word, Dietz adds a "Postscript" written after reading the proofs of his manuscript, and here acknowledges many of the challenges of his text. He notes that he may have fallen into the "thinking-aloud mode" that "could often make Dewey terribly difficult to read" (p. 257); he imagines being unable to explain to someone what the book is about; and he admits that in places he finds his work "hollow, vague, and sophomoric" (p. 256). Maybe so, but at the same time Dietz is very well and widely read, and clearly wants to share his enthusiasm for critical discourse and education theory with his readers. The copious footnotes alone constitute an ongoing discussion with his sources about the ideas in the text. His purposes, as they emerge from his text, are also worthy. Clearly there have been a variety of disjunctions between both educational, critical theories, and the facts-on-the-ground of the world. A turn toward Dewey and elements of American pragmatism may indeed be warranted at this point. In the end, as well, Dietz's argument has its compelling moments, as he tries to bridge the gaps, polarities, binaries, and dualisms, of our age. It is a daunting task, and perhaps too ambitious for one project of this sort, but the effort is admirable and he has set out lines of inquiry that are useful as grounds for this discussion.

As for the challenges, it is unfortunate that the volume does not really engage with the postmodernism of cultural analysis and postcolonial theory. Targeting Reader-Response Theory as the primary bogeyman of postmodernism is reductive and

insufficient for the critique that Dietz wishes to pursue. The book is also full of somewhat puzzling and extraneous discussions. Many are not uninteresting, to be sure, but they detract from the focus of the argument. A good and thorough editing would clarify and strengthen the work considerably. And among the more difficult of these challenges–for some readers anyway–are the sections that engage in literary criticism and history. These give the impression that they are the work of an "amateur," in the older, positive sense, as Dietz himself understands it: the scholar who is a dedicated lover of a particular field of study, but who has not become professionalized in that discipline. For example, he seems to be insufficiently aware of the characteristic concerns of European modernism when he criticizes Eliot's work for its lack of utility, promulgation of escapism and extinction of personality (p. 121). In his discussion of Romantic criticism (pp. 100-106), he leaves out Shelley's defense of the "poet as legislator" and Keats's theory of "negative capability," both of which would have contributed to the argument. This omission may be because he is committed to a recapitulation of Watson's text. He criticizes Derrida for "so particularizing the individual case as to allow for no opportunity to generalize" (p. 184), although it is not clear to what this refers or if it is true. (Derrida is named here, but earlier he mysteriously appears as "D-" (p. 66, note). And he seems to misread literary texts on occasion. Responding to Wilde's epigram, '"All bad poetry springs from genuine feeling," Dietz supplies the unstated inference that therefore "good poetry is founded upon false or non-genuine emotions," a proposition to which he takes exception in a lengthy endnote. But his objections miss Wilde's advocacy of artifice as the highest expression of aesthetics–the more artificial, the better the art.

Some of these difficulties might be quibbles, but Dietz's text does have some propensity to drift into areas where his expertise is questionable. And the digressive nature of the discourse adds to the sense that this is something other than a tightly argued scholarly treatise. It is, as its author suggests, Shandean: a seeming gallimaufry of argument, analysis, narrative, opinion, personal anecdote, and visual art. But also like *Tristram Shandy* it is a provocation that calls readers to recognize the world we all inhabit, and especially to reflect upon the ways we think about education. This text provides us a sometimes challenging yet intriguing journey into the messy, uncertain world of the mind and the interplay of ideas and things among which we live.

References

Dewey, John. (1910). *How we think.* Boston: D.C. Heath.

Dietz, Mark David. (2010). *An awkward echo: Matthew Arnold and John Dewey.* Charlotte NC: Information Age Publishing.

Sterne, Laurence. (1983). *Tristram Shandy*. Ian Campbell Ross (Ed.). Oxford: Clarendon.

About the Reviewer

Nicholas Preus is an Associate Professor of English and Education at Luther College in Decorah, Iowa. He draws on his former life as a high school teacher in courses on pedagogical methods and ethical issues in education, but he also teaches Victorian literature, novels, and poetry. Nick has a BA from Luther and a PhD from the U of Wisconsin-Madison. His latest literary interest is studying how insights from evolutionary psychology help us re-see literary texts, particularly Jane Austen and F. Scott Fitzgerald. A highly skilled woodworker, he builds beautiful furniture and makes a great artisanal beer.

Copyright is retained by the first or sole author,
who grants right of first publication to the *Education Review*.
http://www.edrev.info

Editors
Gene V Glass
glass@edrev.info
Gustavo Fischman
fischman@edrev.info
Melissa Cast-Brede
cast-brede@edrev.info