

**A Profound Experience of Democracy: Reconsidering  
the Democratic Potential of John Dewey's Theory of Art  
while Reading Ben Lerner's *Leaving the Atocha Station***

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# **A Profound Experience of Democracy: Reconsidering the Democratic Potential of John Dewey's Theory of Art while Reading Ben Lerner's *Leaving the Atocha Station***

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*Abstract: Adam, the main character in Ben Lerner's novel Leaving the Atocha Station, spends a few months on a fellowship in Spain to write poetry about the Spanish Civil War. Reflecting upon the difficulties he experiences with this project, he thinks about what it means to have "a profound experience of art" (Lerner 9). In this paper, I argue that Adam's considerations pose a specific problem to the democratic potential of John Dewey's influential art theory as formulated in Art as Experience (1934), and that it is Jacques Derrida's conception of literature in relation to democracy that may eliminate this problem.*

*Keywords: Experience of art, democracy, Ben Lerner, Jacques Derrida, John Dewey*

For a long minute he was quiet and then he again released a sob. This startled the guard into alertness and our eyes met, mine saying that this had happened in the other gallery, the guard's communicating his struggle to determine whether the man was crazy – perhaps the kind of man who would damage a painting, spit on it or tear it from the wall or scratch it with a key – or if the man was having a profound experience of art. (Lerner 9)

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In his 1934 book on thinking about art, leading proponent of American pragmatism John Dewey strikes a blow for “recovering the continuity of esthetic experience with normal processes of living” to regain “[t]he understanding of art and of its rôle in civilization” (Dewey 9). Two major statements Dewey defends in this book are reflected by these two quotations from its opening pages. In *Art as Experience*, Dewey holds that esthetic experience must be theoretically “democratized”; he aims at a way of thinking that draws “the esthetic” back from its isolated “highbrow” position that he believed it had gained at the time of writing, and places it back into any person’s everyday experience. The second claim is that art is no less than a *condition* for civilization. Although he does not say so in these exact words in *Art as Experience*, taking into account Dewey’s other philosophical preoccupations, we may anticipate that *civilized* societies in Dewey’s opinion are necessarily *democratic* communities (cf. articles like “Christianity and Democracy” from 1893 and his 1916 book *Democracy and Education*). But although Dewey’s view on esthetic experience, art, and civilization seems like an inclusive one with plenty of democratic potential, I foresee a problem regarding the implications of Dewey’s theory for the conditions for democracy.

In this essay, I want to address the problem I detect by first giving an interpretation of the way in which Dewey connects the concepts of “esthetic experience,” “art,” “imagination,” and “civilization” to one another in specifically the last chapter of *Art as Experience*. Next, I discuss how a piece of literary art poses a challenge to Dewey’s line of argument; I provide a short reading of *Leaving the Atocha Station*, a novel published in 2011 by US-based novelist Ben Lerner. This text not only facilitates its reader with an esthetic experience, it thematizes the issue as well, since the main character, who experiences trouble with belonging to a community, frequently reflects upon (his own) esthetic experiences in a way that is not directly compatible with the Deweyan conception of esthetic experience. Moreover, an argument for discussing a *novel* in the context of the Deweyan view on art and democracy is formulated by Dewey himself, who thought the genre of the novel constituted a great increase of literature’s democratic potential: “The novel has been the great instrument of effecting change in prose literature. It shifted the center of attention from the court to the bourgeoisie, then to the ‘poor’ and the laborer, and then to the common person irrespective of station” (196). Subsequently, I describe a possible relation between my reading of *Leaving the Atocha Station* and the

conception of literature as a form of art formulated by Jacques Derrida, by addressing the slightly different way in which Derrida connects the same four concepts discussed by Dewey, i.e., esthetic experience, art, imagination, and civilization or democratic community. In a concluding paragraph, I highlight the nuance I believe Derrida's way of relating art such as literature to democracy can add to Dewey's project, insofar as it aims at democratizing art and designing a way of thinking that allows democratic communities to develop.

### **Dewey's way of relating art and civilization**

The fourteenth chapter of *Art as Experience* explicates the exact relation between art and civilization that Dewey has in mind. For him, a piece of art expresses an instance of *imagination*, something that exceeds all actualities (Dewey 360). As we learn from earlier chapters in *Art as Experience*, an artwork facilitates its spectator with an esthetic experience of *unification* (Dewey 44): the spectator is invited to experience a continuity not only between all the fragments that make up the art piece, but also between the object and herself (Dewey 53, 57). She therefore experiences a continuity between her actual circumstances and an imaginative alternative expressed in/by/through the art piece:

Neither the savage nor the civilized man is what he is by native constitution but by the culture in which he participates. The final measure of the quality of that culture is the arts which flourish. Compared with their influence things directly taught by word and percept are pale and ineffectual. Shelley did not exaggerate when he said that moral science only "arranges the elements that poetry has created," if we extend "poetry" to include all products of imaginative experience. [...] Only imaginative vision elicits the possibilities that are interwoven within the texture of the actual. (Dewey 359)

This does not only mean that the spectator experiences something radically *new* or *other*, and that something that was at first impossible to her suddenly becomes possible, but it also means that art can make all kinds of people feel connected to one another, within and between societies, by asking from its spectator an unprejudiced mode of perceiving: "[t]he moral function of art itself is to remove prejudice, do away with the scales that keep the eye from seeing, tear away the

veils due to wont and custom, perfect the power to perceive" (Dewey 338). This removal of prejudice is necessary for communality to come into existence, because the prevailing world is always a walled one: "In the end, works of art are the only media of complete and unhindered communication between man and man that can occur in a world full of gulfs and walls that limit community of experience" (Dewey 109). By breaking walls, esthetic experience can make people feel like they all are inseparable and constitutive parts of society's whole: "when the art of another culture enters into attitudes that determine our experience genuine continuity is effected. Our own experience does not thereby lose its individuality but it takes unto itself and weds elements that expand its significance. A community and continuity that do not exist physically are created" (Dewey 350).

Thus, art as an expression of imagination and the unifying esthetic experience that it facilitates, form a condition for the development of communities in which people relate to one another as equals, in other words: for democratic civilization. I say democratic *civilization*, because Dewey's conception of the term "democracy" is not confined to a way of organizing political practice, but rather covers a way of people relating to one another as members of a civilized, free culture, as free and equal beings: "Democracy for Dewey is not a name for a special political institution so much as one for a creative-critical culture. Political freedom is more a result of a free culture than the other way" (Alexander 272).

### **"A profound experience of art" and its risk of exclusion**

Let us now turn to an imaginative civilian whose experiences pose a problem to this conception of art, esthetic experience, imagination, and civilization. Main character Adam Gordon, whose thoughts and feelings are expressed in Ben Lerner's novel *Leaving the Atocha Station*, receives a fellowship to stay in Madrid for a few months and write poetry about the Spanish Civil War. Adam looks back on his time in Spain; the novel expresses his ongoing reconsideration of what he has experienced there. In the first weeks of his stay, reflected upon in the first pages of the novel, Adam wakes up early every morning, performs a ritual with coffee, marijuana, and tranquilizers, and heads for the Prado museum to stand in front of Rogier Van der Weyden's *The Descent from the Cross* for a while, waiting to have what he calls "a profound experience of art" (Lerner 9). Adam regards having such an experience as a fundamental step in the first phase of his project,

since a real artist, capable of writing real poetry on a serious topic such as the Spanish Civil War, should at least be able to have a real esthetic experience of a real painting in a real Spanish museum like real Spaniards. Unfortunately, he finds himself unable to have such an experience. What he *does* experience is a *distance* from other people that he meets in front of the painting, who *do* seem to be having a profound experience of art, and from the people whose theories on the artwork he has read: "the closest I'd come to having a profound experience of art was probably the experience of this distance [between my experience of actual artworks and the claims made on their behalf], a profound experience of the absence of profundity" (Lerner 9). The reader learns that Adam, due to his incapability of having an esthetic experience, feels that he cannot be a real poet, not a real artist, that instead he is a *fraud*, not suited for accomplishing an important project like poetically addressing an historical event that is so significant to the Spanish community.

Adam's considerations about not being able to have an esthetic experience and the fear that this incapability makes him a fraud, pose the following problem to Dewey's theory of art as experience: if art really is the expression of an imaginative account, and esthetic experience really is what produces continuity between the actual and the imaginative, making people feel like they are integral parts of a unity, then what should we think of people who do not seem to be able to experience this continuity, this wholeness? Can we claim that these people are no part of the community of those who have esthetic experiences? Could we even claim that these people are "less civilized" than the people who are capable of having profound experiences of art? I fear that, referring to John Dewey's theory of art in *Art as Experience*, we can, no matter how democratized the concepts of art and esthetic experience turn out to be in his text.

Allow me to switch back to Adam in *Leaving the Atocha Station*: later in the novel, the reader learns that Adam at a certain point *has* experienced *something* while enjoying an artwork. It happened when he was on a train reading John Ashbery's *Selected Poems*. In the novel, Adam reconsiders this experience:

The best Ashbery poems, I thought, although not in these words, describe what it's like to read an Ashbery poem; his poems refer to how their reference evanesces. And when you read about your reading in the time of your reading, mediacy is experienced

immediately. It is as though the actual Ashbery poems were concealed from you, written on the other side of a mirrored surface, and you saw only the reflection of your reading. But by reflecting your reading, Ashbery's poems allow you to attend to your attention, to experience your experience, thereby enabling a strange kind of presence. But it is a presence that keeps the virtual possibilities of poetry intact because the true poem remains beyond you, inscribed on the far side of the mirror: "You have it but you don't have it. / You miss it, it misses you. / You miss each other." (Lerner 91)

As a reader, we thus learn what Adam thinks is happening when he is having an esthetic experience while reading poetry, something that he could not define at first, but that he, after some thinking, does find himself able to make sense of. But Adams "making sense" of John Ashbery's poems does not exactly reflect the Deweyan way of "making sense" of an artwork. Adam does not experience a continuity between all separate poetical lines and the totality of the poem, does not experience a unity or a continuity between his own actual state of being and that "other" possibility, the imaginative "actuality" in the poem. Rather, he experiences *not experiencing unity*, he experiences the lack of continuity between his perceptive capacities and the content of the poem, he experiences the absence of a whole in which both he and the poem could play a part. Incompatible to Dewey's theory of art and esthetic experience, Adam does qualify his experience of the Ashbery poem as an esthetic experience – and he does so, based on a reading of the poem itself; it is not his capacity of experiencing continuity and unity that is lacking, but the poem that invites Adam to experience distance between himself and the poem. Therefore, having an experience of art in Adam's case means having an experience of distance, rather than an experience on the basis of which we can build up a continuity between all elements of an experienced artwork. In other words: the secret of the Ashbery poem does not reveal itself to its reader while reading, rather, the reader experiences the contours of its secret, and at the same time experiences that she will never be able to know the content of its secret. To Adam, this lack of experiencing continuity is not a negation of, but a condition for, esthetic experience.

### **Derrida: Literature and democracy**

In the previous paragraph, I used the term “secret” not only to refer to the Lerner passage cited above, but also to link the interpretation of *Leaving the Atocha Station* referring to the writings of Jacques Derrida. In response to the problem that Adam poses to Dewey’s theory of art, I want to take up Derrida’s ideas about the relation between literature and democracy. For Derrida, literature, as an art-genre, has a responsibility towards the “démocratie à venir” (Derrida, “This Strange Institution” 38). This does not mean that Derrida thinks that literature necessarily causes existing societies to change their course in such a way that they would become increasingly democratic. It rather means that literature invites its readers to be receptive to a way of thinking or talking that does not blindly follow the logic of the prevailing discourse. According to Derrida, literary texts are capable of stimulating an openness towards non-prevailing ways of thinking (Sijde 317).

The precise relation between literature and democracy that Derrida has in mind may be expressed more clearly when brought into relation with similar ideas about this relation formulated in a slightly different way by fellow philosophers. In *The Inoperative Community*, Jean-Luc Nancy claims that literary texts, because of their capability of presenting polyphonies of voices and ideas not stripped of their ambiguity, can give communities indications about how to do justice to what, according to the prevailing discourse, counts as “other.” In *The Unavowable Community*, Maurice Blanchot formulates the statement that literature is capable of dramatizing an engagement with openness towards what cannot be calculated beforehand (Sijde 312). Both philosophers argue that, for a civilization to develop in which people really relate to one another as equals, people have to be stimulated ceaselessly to reconsider the possibly excluding implications of their own ways of thinking and talking, to consider alternative ways of thinking and talking, ways that are not possible in actuality, but may turn out to be possible by seriously taking imaginative possibilities into account.

Derrida’s conception of the “democracy to come” is similar to the ideas about the possibility of community expressed by Blanchot and Nancy: “real democracy” is an everlasting promise that may never be actualized, since human discourse will always implicitly exclude at least some ways of thinking and will thus disadvantage at least some people. Yet, this everlasting promise of democracy impinges upon us a responsibility to reconsider the implications of the prevailing way of thinking over and over. Literature turns out to be an



effective art-genre for this sort of reconsideration, since literary texts can express all sorts of ways of thinking, both actual and imaginative, without expressing preference for either one of them: "Literature, which narrates or cites, is the name for a neutrality before decision, conceptuality prior to the oppositions between actual and virtual, serious and nonserious, real and fictional, but a priority we can think of as the permanent possibility of the suspension of reference" (Derrida, "Passions" 9).

These considerations make Derrida state that democracy would not be a possibility without the absolute freedom of speech that characterizes literature (Derrida, "Passions" 28) and without literature's special feature, i.e., the "oblique" way of addressing what is fundamentally "secret": "There is in literature, in the *exemplary* secret of literature, a chance of saying everything without touching upon the secret" (Derrida, "Passions" 29). In *Paper Machine: Cultural Memory in the Present* (2005), Derrida formulates this idea in slightly different terms:

Literature keeps a secret that doesn't exist, in a sense. Behind a novel, or a poem, behind what is in effect the richness of a sense to be interpreted, there is no secret meaning to be interpreted. A character's secret, for instance, does not exist; it has no thickness outside the literary phenomenon. Everything is secret in literature and there is no secret hidden *behind* it – there you have the secret of this strange institution. (Derrida, *Paper Machine* 163)

In other words, literature can give expression to what is other, not-actual, non-prevailing, imaginative, because it does not pretend to "reveal" the "content" of this fundamentally secret otherness. It rather presents the secret *as secret*. The experience it facilitates is thus not one of continuity between itself and the content of the secret, but that of a *necessary distance*.

The way that this instance of literature relates to communality, is by inviting its readers to experience the fact that there will always be something secret within themselves as much as there is in others that they will not be able to understand, and that it is exactly this otherness that they share with and that connects them to one another (Sijde 312). This conception of communality is one that allows otherness as such, difference as such, to exist *within* it – and I would say the allowance of diversity and difference to exist within a community counts as a condition for democracy. Interestingly, while one may argue that Derrida

would be a representative of what Dewey calls "[t]he theory that art is play" (Dewey 289) as opposed to theories that say art causes "real" changes, since his "theory" of language is based on a notion of play (Derrida, "Sign, Structure and Play"), his conception of literature says otherwise. For Derrida, "[l]iterature does not exist as an entity separate from societal engagement" (Sijde 316, my translation).

### **Distance as a ground for community**

At the end of *Leaving the Atocha Station*, Adam reconsiders his participation in a panel discussion on Spanish poetry, where he sat worrying about not being able to express himself as a worthy member of the Spanish-speaking community, feeling like he was still "outside the language [he] was speaking, building simple sentences with the blocks [he]'d memorized, not communicating through a fluent medium" (Lerner 168). Yet on the same page, Adam draws the conclusion that it might be exactly his effort of trying to think and talk in ways other than his "own," without ever being able to really do so much, and his experiencing of an unbridgeable distance instead of a unity, that makes him a worthy member of the community he was placed into because of his fellowship. He then even considers: "Maybe only my fraudulence was fraudulent" (Lerner 168). Nevertheless, the fact that Adam says "maybe" should be stressed: the reader who experiences *Leaving the Atocha Station* never knows for sure what Adam thinks and feels. This distance between the reader and the main character is the result of, among other things, the fact that Adam does not communicate his thoughts and feelings to the reader at the moment he has them; he reflects upon them afterwards. In many ways, as Daniel Katz has argued, reading the novel itself is like reading an Ashbery poem – having the experience that it is written on the other side of a mirrored surface (Katz 321).

As I have argued in the above, the problem I foresee for the democratic potential of Dewey's thinking about art and esthetic experience is expressed by Ben Lerner's main character Adam, who experiences a distance instead of unity while looking at art, and therefore experiences a distance between himself and the community he wishes to be part of. The problem: when describing esthetic experience as the experience of continuity and unity, one risks holding on to a way of thinking that may allow exclusion, that may allow exiling anyone who does not share this experience of wholeness. Adam gives expression to the idea that for a community of equals to come into existence, people should not have to be

able to share in one and the same experience of unity, but should be able to experience the fact that there is something inescapably *other* within every person, including within themselves. Esthetic experience should be conceptualized as an experience of otherness as otherness, thus of distance, not as something that forms a unity with the "self." It is only then that a democratic community of a diversity of people potentially exists.

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