

Foreword to *The Poems of John Dewey*

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The Poems of John Dewey? I would forgive you for being a little surprised by this volume, if you are learning about it up for the first time. Dewey is known as many things—philosopher, pragmatist, education theorist, political thinker, activist, polemicist—but poet is not typically among them. For those familiar with his prose writings, “poetic” is perhaps not the first descriptor that comes to mind, to understate the case. While there have been a few who appreciate Dewey’s writing style,¹ most have found it awkward, obscure, or otherwise quite unpoetic. Among the critics, we learn from Jo Ann Boydston, is the author Anzia Yezierska:

Unfortunately, Professor Dewey’s style lacks flesh and blood. It lacks that warm personal touch that would enable his readers to get close to him. He thinks so high up in the head that only the intellectual few can follow the spiraling point of his vision. (qtd. on xliii)²

Still, for the avid reader of Dewey’s prose works, one catches glimpses of the poetic imagination of the philosopher, where, as Boydston says, “his prose is imbued with an emotional tone and quality” (xix). For me, this is easiest to see in *Art as Experience*. One thing that reading Dewey’s poetic works, uneven as they may be, brings out is precisely the emotional complexity of Dewey as a person and a thinker. The philosophical ideas one finds in these

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¹E.g., Virgil C. Aldrich, “John Dewey’s Use of Language,” *The Journal of Philosophy* 41, no. 10 (1944): 261–71, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2019375>.

²Parenthetical references are to this book, in the earlier hardback edition. The numbers should be replaced by the numbers in the current edition.

poems remains consistent with his prose work, but the form of expression adds something to our appreciation of what those ideas meant to the man.

In my view, of even greater interest than the poems themselves is Boydston's detailed Introduction and editorial appendices. The Introduction reads as part detective story, part literary criticism. On the one hand, Boydston tells the engaging story of how these poems came to be, how they were discovered despite the fact that their author had no intention of their publication; we learn about the few souls who Dewey showed some of the poems to during his lifetime and how the poems made it from Dewey's wastebasket and the back of desk drawers to the Special Collections at Southern Illinois University and thus this book. On the other hand, Boydston makes a compelling case for the significance of Dewey's poetry within the larger story of his life and work.

One compelling aspect of the detective story is the meticulous work Boydston did, with the assistance of Barbara Levine and Lynn Ziegler, to authenticate the poems as indeed Dewey's. This included handwriting analysis and the careful examination of typefaces and paper stock, comparing the poetry to contemporaneous letters, manuscripts, and other documents by Dewey. For those eager for further details of this analysis, the section entitled "Description of the Texts" (81ff) goes into greater depth.

But by far the most exciting part of the introduction concerns the multiple love stories embedded in and intertwined with the poems and their publication.

The first of these stories concerns John Dewey's first and greatest love, his first wife, Harriett Alice Chipman. As Dewey supposedly said, "no two people were ever more in love."³ Early in their relationship, he referred to Alice as "the centre of everything."⁴ Alice herself was an interesting character with an enormous influence on Dewey: a feminist, a religious freethinker, and an activist.⁵ Boydston only provides confirmation that Alice read a single one of these poems: handwriting analysis on the critical comments written on one typescript of the poem *Creation* (no. 47, pp. 35-36). It is notable, however, that this poem is perhaps one of the best constructed and most

³Jay Martin, *The Education of John Dewey: A Biography* (Columbia Univ Pr, 2002), 92.

⁴Larry Hickman, ed., *The Correspondence of John Dewey, 1858-2011*, Comprehensive Edition (Charlottesville: InteLex Corporation, 2023), vols. 1, 1885.12.24,25 (00005): John Dewey to Alice Chipman Dewey; cf. Martin, *The Education of John Dewey*, 91.

⁵Martin, *The Education of John Dewey*, 92-95; Sarah J. Robbins, "Out of the Shadows," *Collections: A Publication of the Bentley Historical Library*, 2019, 18-23, <https://bentley.umich.edu/news-events/magazine/out-of-the-shadows/>.

philosophically interesting in the whole collection (see liv-lv).

The second love story concerns Dewey's second wife, Roberta Lowitz Grant. She seems not to have known about Dewey's poetic experiments during his lifetime, but rather discovered them in 1957 when she collected them, along with a number of other materials, from the Columbiana Collection at Columbia University. Still, Roberta seemed to have been quite taken by the poems, considering having them published before being dissuaded by a friend, showing them to visitors, and having some retyped and mounted for display (x).

The third and by far the most exciting, in that detective story way, is the love story between Dewey and Anzia Yezierska, with whom he carried on some sort of romantic relationship during 1917-18. This part of Boydston's story is the most striking, involving the piecing together of information from the historical record, interviews and correspondence with Yezierska's daughter, and careful literary analysis of both Dewey's poems and Yezierska's fictional and autobiographical writings (between which the line is always fuzzy). Though ultimately, some of the details Boydston relays are based on the indirect testimony of the notoriously unreliable Yezierska, she presents a compelling case for the existence and broad outlines of their emotional love affair.⁶

If you will excuse a brief, gratuitous excursion into autobiography, there is a fourth love story for me, entangled with this last. Some 15 years ago, or so, I was a graduate student in Philosophy, in love with a fellow graduate student in Literature, with whom I taught freshmen writing. I was working on a dissertation heavily involving Dewey, and she was working on comprehensive exams and then a dissertation prospectus involving urban and ethnic American literature and the social settlement movement, with Anzia Yezierska as one important figure. We talked often of our work, as graduate students typically do. One day, she turns to me, and reads a passage from a book by Yezierska. "Does this sound like Dewey?" It did, indeed; and from there, we discovered the Dewey-Yezierska connection, as relayed in Jay Martin's biography of Dewey and in Boydston's essay Introduction to this volume. And, to our delight and horror, we discovered Norma Rosen's fictionalized account of

⁶Those interested in further background on this story may wish to consult the *Correspondence of John Dewey* vol. 4, particularly the exchanges between Jo Ann Boydson and Louise Levitas Henriksen, but also much of the rest of the correspondence in 1974-75 discusses other aspects of the *Poems*, including the work required to get the John Dewey Foundation's permission to publish them.

their romance, *John and Anzia: An American Romance*,⁷ a source of much laughter and blushing as we would read passages aloud in the evening.

Personally, reading through the poems, I find moments of poignant beauty, humor, and also cringeworthiness. My favorite lines are probably the first stanza of one of the poems to Yeziarska:

Generations of stifled worlds reaching out
Through you,
Aching for utt'rance, dying on lips
That have died of hunger,
Hunger not to have, but to be. (no. 4, p. 4)

“Hunger not to have, but to be” is a line that really resonates for me. Otherwise, I will not try to improve or add to Boydston’s helpful discussion of the themes and significance of the poems themselves. I simply recommend you devote your attention to this part of her Introduction.

One might be concerned, ethically, with the propriety of publishing these private, personal writings that were never meant for public attention. Boydston is brief on this point: “Dewey obviously did not intend to publish this poetry. Now, however, some twenty-five years after the death of an important figure like Dewey, it is appropriate that such a significant segment of his writing and life experience should become part of the published record” (x). In a letter to Boydston, Sidney Hook bolsters the case:

After all there is nothing objectionable in these poems that would offend good taste. They are not obscene. . . Any truthful account of Dewey’s life must take note of them even though they may be considered jejeune or very amateurish. . . Karl Marx’s early poems have been published as well as the poems of other great men famous for achievements in other fields, for the light they cast on their development. . . In Dewey’s case the publication of these poems in my judgment is especially desirable because it helps counteract the impression of some critics that Dewey was a dull, prosaic, literal minded professor—expert in epistemological chess and other technical philosophical disciplines but without passion or vision,—a sobersides for whom intelligence was the be all and

⁷Norma Rosen, *John and Anzia: An American Romance* (New York: E.P. Dutton, 1989).

end all of human experience. . . . Further, the publication of the poems will show that Dewey had a reach and depth of emotional experience which opened up perspectives that he explored in some pages of his *Art As Experience*.⁸

No doubt, the work of the historian sometimes shades into the voyeuristic. Still, in this case, a touch of voyeurism is required for a fuller understanding of the life and works of John Dewey. In the process, we benefit much from his often charming, occasionally beautiful poetry and Jo Ann Boydston's fascinating investigation of it.

References

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⁸Hickman, *The Correspondence of John Dewey, 1858-2011*, vols. 4, 1975.08.09 (22074): Sidney Hook to Jo Ann Boydston.