

## THE POETRY OF JOHN DEWEY

Jerry L. Williams

“Poetry, art, religion are precious things.”  
—John Dewey, *Reconstruction in Philosophy*<sup>1</sup>

### ABSTRACT

This essay examines the poetry of John Dewey, 101 poems in total. Characteristic of the rhymed and metered poetry of the period, they show a very human side of Dewey. This analysis argues that many of his poems deal with existential themes—love, finitude, and God, for example. On a deeper level these poems also show connections to Dewey’s philosophy, in particular his ideas about social change and dualism.

### INTRODUCTION

The American philosopher John Dewey is an iconic figure. A prolific writer, his scholarly attention variously focused upon philosophy, education, democracy, economics, and aesthetics. It is not commonly known, however, that behind the scenes in his private office at Columbia University, Dewey also wrote poetry.<sup>2</sup> Without his knowledge or consent, ninety-eight poems were collected from his wastebasket in 1930 by a custodian. Additional “scraps” and poems were found in his office desk after his retirement, bringing the total to 101. In 1977 these poems were published and made available to the public for the first time in *The Poems of John Dewey*, edited by Jo Ann Boydston.<sup>3</sup>

For the most part, Dewey’s poetry has been ignored by scholars.<sup>4</sup> This is so for at least three reasons. First, he clearly did not intend for this work to be seen. Second, scholars may have been a little uneasy about seeing the personal side of this profound public person. After all, these poems were written during the period 1910 to 1918, a very turbulent time in Dewey’s life. It was during this period that he found himself both romantically involved with novelist Anzia Yezierska and struggling with the global crisis posed by World War I. In addition, Dewey was a middle-aged man, a time when many people are troubled with existential questions.

The final and perhaps most decisive reason these poems have received little attention by Dewey scholars may simply be *because they are poems* and not scholarly essays. Scholarly pursuits in the Western world have long been divided into disciplinary bins. Philosophers, educators, and sociologists seldom have much inclination

toward poetry. This is ironic, as we shall see, because strict disciplinary boundaries did not constrain Dewey. In addition to philosophy, he was also well versed in poetry. In *Art as Experience*, he mentions Milton, Dante, Keats, Shelley, Shakespeare, Coleridge, and others.<sup>5</sup> Further, he frequently refers to poetry in many other of his works, including *Reconstruction in Philosophy* and *Experience in Education*.<sup>6</sup>

The major contention in what follows is that Dewey's poetry represents the private efforts of a middle-aged man grappling with some very common experiences. Consistent with his stated ideas about art and aesthetics, his poems are rooted in everyday experiences and not to realities thought to transcend everyday experience. Consequently, this poetry is important not only because it shows how Dewey transformed his personal experiences into art, but also because some of the poems show glimpses of Dewey's larger philosophical writings.

In what follows, I first examine Dewey's ideas about poetry. I then consider what I see as the major existential themes of Dewey's poetry: love, finitude, and God. Finally, I address some potential connections between Dewey's poems and his larger body of philosophical writings. However, Dewey's poetry is important for yet another reason. The very existence of Dewey's poems challenges educators to rethink disciplinary and other boundaries, making Dewey's work even harder to categorize as pedagogical, philosophic, sociological, and so on. Dewey was interested in all of these things of course, but as his poetry illustrates, he too had a profound aesthetic sensibility.

## BACKGROUND AND METHOD

This analysis looks at ninety-eight poems collected in *The Poems of John Dewey*, edited by Jo Ann Boydston. As mentioned earlier, most of the poems were removed from the wastebasket located in his office at Columbia University in 1939. Other poems were discovered that same year in Dewey's desk by Herbert Schneider after Schneider took possession of his office. Dewey died in 1952, twenty-three years after the poems were first discovered. It is not believed that he knew of the poems' survival. Poetry was apparently a private endeavor for Dewey. As evidence of this, his second wife and the children from his first marriage did not know he wrote poetry.<sup>7</sup>

In style, the poems are characteristic of the popular poetry of the day, often in rhyme and meter. They also frequently deal with Whitmanesque themes—nature and the human interaction with nature. Some poems appear to be early drafts, and as a result, they do not bear titles. Many were written in his handwriting, while others were typed and show evidence of substantial revision.<sup>8</sup> This suggests that, for Dewey, poetry was more than simple self-expression, the dashing down of ideas and emotions. He knew the poetry of the day and made a rigorous effort to construct poems consistent with that aesthetic.

I should stress that the following analysis is not an objective examination of Dewey's poetry. An attempt to do so would in an important sense conflict with some significant contentions that Dewey himself made about poetry. In particular,

he draws a distinction between the “subject and substance” of the poem. Following A. C. Bradley, for Dewey, the subject of a poem is “outside the poem.” It is what the poem is about—“love, death, etc.” An objective analysis of these poems would lean strongly on such subjects (word counts, themes, etc.). On the other hand, the substance of the poem, Dewey argues, “is within it, rather it is the poem.” An objective analysis then would tend to confuse “subject” and “substance.” Concerning the irreducibility of poetry, Dewey states, “the actual substance, is the art object itself and hence cannot be expressed in any other way.”<sup>10</sup> He further writes that “the quality of a work of art is ‘sui generis.’”<sup>11</sup>

How, then, can we proceed? The answer is found in Dewey’s conception of the artistic expression in poetry. Simply put, Dewey believed that the “material” or subject of a poem is from the common or intersubjective world. However, the poet works with the skills and experiences that are in many respects unique. American poet William Stafford provides us with a useful way of thinking about this.<sup>12</sup> He suggests that writing a poem is like “swimming in the language,” the shared language of a common culture. According to Stafford, a poet who is a “certain weight” of a person has a unique biography and begins writing a poem in much the same way one begins to swim—by jumping in. What results is something new—a poem. Dewey states: “The material out of which a work of art is composed belongs to the common world rather than to the self, and yet there is self-expression in art because the self assimilates that material in a distinctive way to reissue it into the public world in a form that builds a new object.”<sup>13</sup>

At least one place to start an analysis is to look for Dewey’s “commonalities,” fully aware that we are more likely to capture the subjects of the poems than their substance. Further, these poems were crafted by someone with a unique biography, philosophy, and set of intellectual commitments. They are in other words matters of self-expression and so should also carry evidence of the author’s unique experiences, ideas, and orientations to the world. In short, I examine Dewey’s poetry poems for both the commonalities of human experience and the unique imprint of an author who was also a pragmatist philosopher and educator.

## DEWEY ON POETRY

For Dewey, art is not an expression of a reality transcending or separate from daily life (spiritual, etc.). Art is rather part of life itself. He writes, “For many persons an aura of mingled awe and unreality encompasses the ‘spiritual’ and the ‘ideal’ while matter has become by contrast a term of depreciation, something to be explained away or apologized for.”<sup>14</sup> As relates to poetry, he believed that it is a sensual and not entirely an intellectual enterprise. He warns in *Art as Experience* that poetry written for the “elevation of the ideal above and beyond immediate sense” acts to “impoverish and degrade all things of direct experience.”<sup>15</sup> For Dewey, then, aesthetic experience does not begin in “ideal” or rarefied circumstances. Rather, the heart of the aesthetic experience is to be found in “authentic experience.” He states:

“and even a crude experience, if authentically an experience, is more fit to give a clue to the intrinsic nature of the aesthetic experience and is an object already set apart from any other mode of experience.”<sup>16</sup> Key to understanding what Dewey means by authentic experience, and therefore to understanding the aesthetics of his poetry, is to see that for Dewey authentic experience is always generative, a breaking apart of prior habits and ossified modes of daily existence. Authentic experience draws the experiencer naturally to even more experiences.<sup>17</sup>

Dewey’s ideas concerning poetry are very directly stated in *Art as Experience*. As mentioned earlier, he was well versed in poetry and therefore possessed a rather important notion of what makes poetry distinct from prose. In that respect, he suggests prose and poetry are “extremes of tendencies in experience.” That is, “prose is an affair of description and narration, of details accumulated and relations elaborated. It spreads as it goes like a legal document or catalogue.” In contrast, Dewey suggests poetry “condenses and abbreviates, thus giving words an energy of expansion that is almost exclusively explosive.” This explosiveness is important for Dewey. He goes on to state that “next to music poetry is the most hypnotic of the arts.” It is in the explosiveness of poetry that the reader is shaken and therefore has an authentic experience.<sup>18</sup>

Dewey’s thinking about poetry also corresponds with his ideas about the nature of truth. Poetry does not merely inform the reader of some larger truth, nor does it form a vehicle by which the truth is simply conveyed to the reader. Rather, poetry engages the reader in collaboration. Dewey states regarding language: “Language exists only when it is listened to as well as spoken. The hearer is an indispensable partner. The work of art is complete only as it works in the experience of other than the one who created it.”<sup>19</sup>

Both scientists and educators face such collaboration. Truth is not “discovered” by scientists in the sense inferred by the ontological model handed down from ancient times.<sup>20</sup> Rather, reality is transformed by the scientist’s activities and therefore is in many respects a “moving target.” Similarity for Dewey, the educator is not merely the dispenser of truth—a truth that is to be simply accepted by the student. Education happens when a teacher and student collaborate in forming questions (problems) that are then pursued by means that bring about an “authentic experience.”<sup>21</sup> In all three cases—poetry, science, and education—we see Dewey’s rejection of a static reality and “truths” relatable only by elaboration.

## THEMES OF HUMAN EXPERIENCE

Perhaps the most striking feature of Dewey’s poetry is that often both the subject and substance of the poems deal with very common elements of human experience. As discussed earlier, art *requires* such commonalities. Dewey puts it this way: “the material expressed cannot be private; that is the state of the madhouse.”<sup>22</sup> While these poems are nearly one hundred years old, most address longings, frustrations, fears, and joys that still resonate today. Specifically, many of these poems, in part or in their totality, point toward love and passion, aging and finitude, and God.

Love/Passion<sup>23</sup>

Love, passion, desire, and longing are some of Dewey's most important themes. Love appears in two distinct contexts. First, Dewey writes about the absence of love in his daily existence and his acute longing for it. This is the major meaning of poem 27, "The Child's Garden." In the second stanza, he writes:

But the freezing years did harden  
 And shut me in this barren field  
 —Docks and thistle it's only yield—  
 And I cannot find that closed garden.

In the first stanza of untitled poem 16, he talks about this longing in a reflective way:

There stirred within me  
 The ghosts of many a love  
 Some that have passed in birth,  
 Some that I had murdered,  
 And some that had feebly spent themselves  
 In vain yearning for the light of day.

Some of the poems relating to love and passion are in juxtaposition to a sense of being "trapped." For example, in poem 28, the speaker talks about "searchings for a bright remote, paradise of joy" but concludes by stating:

. . . Then sudden walls  
 Closed in. The thorns were hands which smote  
 Him. Rocks melted. Paths were pitfalls;  
 The promised land swallowed in cloud.

Poem 43, "To Conscious," hints at how these feelings are connected to his desire for love and passion. In the second stanza the author writes:

Shall I never know pleasure?  
 Never know rest from strain?

In the last stanza Dewey continues:

Comrade conscience, cease thy talk  
 Your part but talk as mine was strife  
 While I do take this flowered walk  
 And dally with sweet soft things alluring.  
 Rested mayhap, I'll resume thy hard life  
 Of search, stern comrade, for things enduring.

Here Dewey feels constrained but "dallies" with "sweet soft things alluring." This may be a reference to Dewey's relationship with Yeziarska. Poems of this kind seem

to suggest that while Dewey longed for love and passion, he also felt that it was out of reach, that “the promised land swallowed in cloud” and that the “garden was closed.”<sup>24</sup>

The second manner in which these poems talk about love and passion is directly erotic. Given what we know of Dewey’s biography we can again assume that these poems were inspired by his relationship with (much younger) Yeziarska. For example, beginning in line 8 of poem 15, “Swinburnian,” he writes:

Were as of old my lips,  
While the foggy smoke of the smoth’ring fumes  
Were as the delicacies of thy perfumes  
Risen from flesh of thy twinned bosom bare

Untitled poem 25 also has a definite erotic tone:

Across the white of my mind’s map  
The livid equator shines like a welt  
As if the sun had drawn its belt  
Around the bulging girth  
Of my hot swollen earth

### Aging and Finitude<sup>25</sup>

The second theme of human experience in these poems is that of growing older and the realization that the future is finite. The poems often express this sense of finitude and weariness with life’s labor. The first stanza of poem 20, “Time Laid Low,” is a concise expression:

Time with its old flail  
Beat me full score;  
Till: Hold I cried,  
I’ll stand no more.

Similarly, poem 43, “To Conscience,” takes a reflective look at his career and life. He states in the first stanza:

“Arouse! Fight on! Combat and conquer;  
Evil are the forces.”  
I have struggled and am tired  
Of this road embriared:  
Let things take their courses.

In untitled poem 8, the author connects his sense of finitude with a desire for love

Great God, It’s thee I implore  
A little help to lend:—  
I do not ask for much,

A little space in which to move,  
 To reach, perchance to touch;  
 A little time in which to love;  
 A little hope that things which were  
 Again may living stir—

### God

Most problematic of his existential themes is Dewey's frequent mention of God—problematic because God is seen in two ways. First, reference to God was a poetic convention in the aesthetics of early twentieth-century poetry. One example is untitled poem 29. Here the poet watches the sunset above an ocean bay and busy urban scene:

Dusk, in waves and huge oceans,  
 Poured from some God's forgiving source  
 And blotted up each darting ray  
 With which the fierce divisive sun  
 Sought to sustain the stir and sway

The language is telling here. Dewey does not refer to a particular God, but rather "some God." It is through his/her action that dusk poured out, quieting the city. He also uses the phrase "some God" in poem 67, where he questions the notion that the universe is planned or designed. Here, God is used as a trope for the spilling of night into the city, bringing quiet and peace to the human world. The major force of the poem is not in the reference to God, but the calming influence of night upon the day.

God also is mentioned in Dewey's poems in a more direct way—as representative of an ancient way in which Western people have known the world. This should not be surprising. Dewey stood for a pragmatic conception of truth in which the activities of the human mind combined with science both discovered reality and changed it, making reality, as suggested previously, a moving target. In his philosophical writings, Dewey argues against what he calls the "ontological argument," in which the role of the knower is to reconcile himself or herself with what is undoubtedly true and passed down by authorities. Dewey's poems display a distrust of and antipathy for the old ontological argument about which Western conceptions of God were (are) at center stage. This is plainly evident in untitled poem 34:

My mind is but a gutt'ring candle dip  
 With flick'ring beams the wind doth blow around;  
 Yet the scant space thus lit is holier ground  
 Than that where prophet did his sandal slip  
 In token of the presence of his Lord.

Here we see that while the poet is modest about the power and scope of the mind, he nevertheless believes the mind and its insights are "holier" than prophets in "the

presence of the Lord.” Taken in the context of Dewey’s philosophical writings, this poem hints at a humanism with which Dewey is often associated.

Perhaps the clearest articulation and renunciation of the ontological argument can be found in poem 30, “Little Things.” Here Dewey strongly argues for his personal engagement in the world of tangible things:

For I who am a feeble thing  
 These little things do love,  
 And their faint glories feebly sing—  
 Unlike th’exalted quire above  
 Of cherubim and seraphim,  
 Who close to throne and sceptered rod  
 Majestic glories loudly hymn  
 Of highest heaven’s supremest God.

Let them keep their sonorous din. . . .

In the last stanza the author again takes aim at God with a note of sarcasm and hyperbole:

Think not, Great God, I would blaspheme  
 Thy great and holy name on high;  
 But I am wonted to this dream  
 Of earth, so made of stuff that is nigh . . .

Leave me content to have begun  
 With little foolish things I touch and see.

Again, the thrust of the poem makes an argument for earthly things that human hands can touch, see, and transform through the activities of the mind. Again, this is a position largely consistent with Dewey’s critique of the ontological argument and his position on education. True education is not a process of the learner becoming reconciled to a static truth. True education does not happen when teachers or others in authority simply proffer what is “true.” Education happens when teachers provide experiences relevant to the student’s everyday life. Education is not simply the dissemination of facts; rather, it is an ongoing negotiation between teacher and learner.

The preceding statements about Dewey’s references to God should not be taken as a comment on Dewey’s religious beliefs. Rather, what is important is his critique of the traditional means by which knowledge of the world is acquired. Dewey quite convincingly argues against revealed truth in favor of a more active process of discovery and embeddedness in the “real” world.

So it seems some of Dewey’s poems stand against the traditional understanding of revealed knowledge or truth as expressed in the theistic traditions of Western

culture. What relevance might this hold for educators today? The answer lies not so much on the level of theology, but of practice. Let us for a moment set aside what Dewey's religious beliefs were. These poems suggest that, for Dewey, the question was not so much whether God exists or not, or if God exists what role he has in human affairs. Once again, the insight is that the pursuit of knowledge is not simply a matter of presenting and learning unquestionable facts passed down to us from authoritative sources. Dewey makes clear that facts presented to students as ontological realities, no matter the prevailing conception of God, are not truly educative. They treat knowledge as an accomplished fact, as ossified and static ideas to be passed down intact and unchanged. What they miss is that education as experience is an ongoing process that can be instigated by educators but always requires on the part of students and teachers a willingness to see it as a work in progress.

I would argue that Dewey was fighting against a worldview in which God was thought to be a central, static source of knowledge, not against God in a larger sense. The ontological argument is the basis of traditional education and has been passed down for countless generations. For Dewey, progressive education was to turn this system on its head. No longer would the teacher be a simple conduit for disseminating revealed truth. In the new system, education would be about experiences that open the student to additional questions.

## PHILOSOPHICAL THEMES

In the previous discussion, we considered how some important themes of human experience are expressed in Dewey's poetry. In this section, traces of Dewey's philosophical ideas are discussed. While none of these poems are overtly philosophical, it is apparent that at least a few make statements corresponding to Dewey's ideas about social change and chance, as well as his critique of spiritual dualism in favor of idealism.

### Social Change and Chance

Consistent with other pragmatist philosophers like Charles Peirce and George Herbert Mead, Dewey saw the social world as quite resistant to change. In *Reconstruction in Philosophy* he states, "in what is distinctly human, invention rarely occurs, and then only in the stress of an emergency. In human affairs and in its relations that range extensively and penetrate deeply the mere idea of invention awakens fear and horror, being regarded as dangerous and destructive."<sup>26</sup> Similarly, in *Experience and Education* Dewey discusses the nature of habit, suggesting that habit tends to stunt or foreshorten future experience because habit is self-reinforcing. That is, what I already know becomes a template for all future experiences.<sup>27</sup>

Dewey directly deals with custom, habit, and change in poem 80, "The New World." Writing about a "soul" who "adventures" in a "world wearied with the weight of its tamed courses":

whose only chart through untracked space  
 Was faith in the miracles courage works  
 Even in the timidities of custom,

Later in the same poem he continues:

From sleep of habit to the pain,  
 Of search and thought to keep

Resistance to change is also an important part of poem 89, "Unfaith":

With you who do not now believe  
 The things you learned in childhood days,  
 And yet repining grieve  
 That truth should follow changing ways:  
 Who mourn the loss of spirit's lore.

Here, Dewey addresses those who are vested in the old ontological argument and, as a result, dismiss the dynamic nature of truth. For Dewey, change in the human world was not to be avoided, but rather embraced. The risk of doing otherwise is to continue the split between the natural world as transformed by science, and the human world that has over the centuries been governed by a revealed and static truth.

As much as Dewey believed the human world is resistant to change, he also believed that the natural world is nevertheless changing. Along these lines, poem 82, "A Peripatetics Prayer," suggests that in contrast to a God thought of as an Aristotelian "unmoved mover," things in nature change, "wane, and wax." Dewey also mentions change in poem 58, "A Moment in Time," seeing the "moving world" as it "sped its changing course of agitation."

Dewey, like other pragmatists, also believed that chance was a very real and important cause of change in both the natural and social worlds. In the traditional Western worldview, all happenings were thought to be planned and designed by a supreme being. Every event was part of a larger design. Chance occurrences had no place in such a world. Pragmatists, however, suggested the opposite. Peirce argues:

those observations which are generally adduced in favor of mechanical causation simply prove that there is an element of regularity in nature, and have no bearing whatever upon the question of whether such regularity is exact and universal or not. Nay, in regard to this exactitude, all observation is directly opposed to it. . . . Try to verify any law of nature, and you will find that the more precise your observations, the more certain they will be to show irregular departures from the law. We are accustomed to ascribe these, and I do not say wrongly, to errors of observation; yet we cannot usually account for such errors in any antecedently probable way. Trace their consequences back far enough, and you will be forced to admit they were always due to arbitrary determination, or chance.<sup>28</sup>

As expressed in Dewey's poetry, we see chance at odds with the static nature of truth proposed by the ontological argument. In the first stanza of untitled poem 67, Dewey comments on those who would lament the fact that the universe is unplanned:

Because the plan of the world is dim and blurred  
 Not some wise God's clear utterer'd word,  
 Shall I resentful stand in scorn  
 Or crushed live dumb in mood forlorn?  
 Or suppose there's no plan at all  
 But things chanced as did befall,  
 Shall I frown in offish censure  
 Because it's all a vast adventure?

In the final stanza Dewey concludes:

Wag if you wish your gloomy head  
 Because some man hath solemn said  
 "The world just happ'd by accident,  
 Whose good and beauty were never meant"-  
 But ask me not to join your wail

Poem 80, "The New Word," in addition to describing habit as resistant to change, also suggests that chance has a way of creating change in the "dusty things of earth." Beginning in line 33 he states:

From the ordered constellations  
 Of a harmony too high  
 For the dusty things of earth  
 Which meet and mingle,  
 Which are jostled by chance winds  
 Foreign to the mighty solitudes

In these instances, Dewey hints at agreement with Peirce that "arbitrary determination, or chance" is real and not simply a matter to be explained away as error.

### Spiritual Dualism

The final philosophical theme addressed in Dewey's poetry is his critique of spiritual dualism. Spiritual dualism construes human experience as consisting of two domains or spheres: the physical and the spiritual. In Western thought, spiritual dualism has a long history directly related to Judeo-Christian religion. About dualism in Western thinking, Dewey states:

the adjustment which finally moderated, without completely exorcising, the earlier split between science and received institutional customs was a truce rather than anything remotely approaching integration. It consisted, in fact, of a device that was the exact opposite of integration. It operated on

the basis of a hard and fast division of the interests, concerns, and purposes of human activity into two "realms," or, by a curious use of language, into two "spheres"—not hemispheres. One was taken to the "high" and hence to possess supreme jurisdiction over the other as inherently "low." That which is high was given the name "spiritual," ideal, and was identified with the moral. The other was the "physical" as determined by the procedures of the new science of nature.<sup>29</sup>

In large part, Dewey's project in *Reconstruction in Philosophy* was to bring about a reconciliation between these two spheres. As mentioned earlier, Dewey saw this split as a fundamental cause of the troubles of the early twentieth century and believed that this rift should be eliminated. His interest in education should in part be seen in this way, as a process to transform students and therefore society by fastening the pursuit of knowledge to the ever-changing realm of science and rationality, thus escaping from its conservative foundation in the ontological argument and its notions of revealed truth.

Perhaps the best example of Dewey's rejection of spiritual dualism comes in the first stanza of poem 9, "Body and Soul."

The meaning of these things I've read in books I do not  
know—  
Telling of one love that high is and the other that is low.  
For 'tis certain that if there be love, there is but one love,  
Love that goes all the way below and all the way above.

Beginning in line 13, the poem elaborates:

And soul without body, powerless for these things, does  
not live,  
But pretentious ghost, filled with thoughts of self, wanders  
Alone.

Poem 87, "Truth's Torch," directly rejects spiritual dualism. In the second stanza it reads:

Heed not the lies  
In idleness conceived  
Of truth's illuminated skies

Without question, spiritual dualism is one of the most common themes in Dewey's poetry.<sup>30</sup> Not only does he reject spiritual dualism, and the ontological argument with which it is associated, but he also offers an alternative. Dewey evidently saw the dualism of the human mind and the physical world as preferable to spiritual dualism. Poem 34, quoted above, makes this clear by privileging mind over spiritual revelation. There he sees his mind's "gutt'ring candle" as illuminating "holier ground" than the terrain the Lord's prophet might have trod. For Dewey, then, there is but one world, the world that goes all the way "below" and "above." It is the world best understood by the powers of the human mind unfettered by spiritual dualism and the ontological argument.

## CONCLUSION

Dewey's poetry is a little-known dimension of his intellectual life, but his poems and other writings suggest that he was well-versed in poetry and aesthetics in general. To many, the very idea that Dewey wrote poetry seems odd. We are all too comfortable thinking of him as a philosopher and educator and not as a man of passion, insecurities, and romantic intrigues. However, Dewey's poems are fully grounded in everyday life and therefore consistent with his emphasis upon the importance of human experience.

Dewey's poetry reminds us of what he saw as the central thrust of his philosophical writing—that a fixed and unchanging model of the world comprised of spiritual dualism and the ontological argument must give way to a more pragmatic conception of truth where humans creating knowledge transform both the human and natural worlds. In this system, education is not about students learning the “facts” as revealed by authorities. Rather, students should be offered educative experiences that provide a drive for even more educative experiences—experiences that are open-ended and not restricted to the natural world. The human world, its systems of organization, and its moral authority must also be subject to this inquiry.

The fact that these insights are embedded in his (private) poems as well as his (public) prose is perhaps an indication not only that Dewey was an internally consistent thinker, but also that he found passionate expression as much a part of “education” as the more traditional educational tract or university lecture. His humanism had real scope.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENT

The author would like to thank Ken and Judy Lauter for their close readings of earlier drafts.

## NOTES

1. Dewey, *Reconstruction in Philosophy*, 212.
2. This is ironic. While it is not commonly known that Dewey wrote poetry, Dewey frequently mentions poetry in his published works. It is fair to say that poetry was quite important for Dewey.
3. Dewey, *The Poems of John Dewey*, iv.
4. For an important exception see Gibboney and Christie, 21–28
5. Dewey, *Art as Experience*, 114.
6. Dewey also carried on a brief correspondence with Elizabeth Bishop, U.S. Poet Laureate. The Vassar College archives contain two letters between Bishop and Dewey written in 1945 and 1946.
7. Dewey, *The Poems of John Dewey*, ix.
8. *Ibid.*, xiv.
9. Dewey, *Art as Experience*, 115.
10. *Ibid.*, 114.
11. *Ibid.*, 112.

12. Stafford, *Writing the Australian Crawl: Views on the Writer's Vocation, Poets on Poetry*, 1–11.
13. Dewey, *Art as Experience*, 112.
14. *Ibid.*, 5.
15. *Ibid.*, 32.
16. *Ibid.*, 9.
17. Dewey, *Experience and Education*, 26–27.
18. Dewey, *Art as Experience*, 250–251.
19. *Ibid.*, 110.
20. Ontology refers to a field of philosophy that concerns itself primarily with uncovering the “true” nature of reality. As used here and by Dewey, the ontological argument suggests that “truth” does exist, that it can be conveyed by those in authority to those who “do not know,” and that the task of learning means accepting those “truths” as “true.” The ontological argument is the foundation of traditional education.
21. Dewey, *Experience and Education*, 13.
22. Dewey, *Art as Experience*, 112.
23. In addition to the poems mentioned in this section, poems 1, 6, 13, 19, 20, 22, 40, and 44 are good examples of poems that deal with love and passion.
24. In addition to the poems mentioned in this section, poems 5, 22, 27, 38, and 40 provide good examples of a sense of being trapped.
25. In addition to the poems mentioned in this section, poems 12, 13, 46, and 62 at least in some way also deal with aging and a sense of finitude.
26. Dewey, *Reconstruction in Philosophy*, 30.
27. Dewey, *Experience and Education*, 35.
28. Peirce, *The Doctrine of Necessity Examined*, 135.
29. Dewey, *Reconstruction in Philosophy*, xxxi.
30. See also poems 22, 30, 33, 34, 77, 81, 82, 85, 86, and 88.

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Dewey, John. *Reconstruction in Philosophy*. Boston: Beacon Press, 1920.
- . *Art as Experience*. New York: Penguin, 1934.
- . *Experience and Education*. New York: Touchstone, 1938.
- . *The Poems of John Dewey*, Edited by Jo Ann Boydston. Illinois: Southern Illinois University Press, 1977.
- Gibboney, Richard, and A. V. Christie. “This Mixture is the Better Art: John Dewey’s Poems.” *Education and Culture* 27, no. 2 (2011): 21–28.
- Peirce, Charles S. *The Doctrine of Necessity Examined*. In *The American Pragmatists*, edited by Milton R. Konvitz and Gail Kennedy, 127–143. Cleveland: Meridian Books, 1892.
- Stafford, William. *Writing the Australian Crawl: Views on the Writer's Vocation (Poets on Poetry)*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1978.

Jerry L. Williams is professor of sociology at Stephen F. Austin State University.  
E-mail: [jwilliams@sfasu.edu](mailto:jwilliams@sfasu.edu)