

Poetry Forum

"This Mixture is the Better Art:" John Dewey's Poems

Richard Gibboney
A.V. Christie

It's interesting to think about John Dewey's frame of mind as he sat at his desk at Columbia crafting, then typing up poems which, when complete, he consistently consigned to his trash can. It is clear, looking at the 101 poems in Jo Ann Boydston's volume, (fished, many of them, from that same trashcan by a janitor with a long view), that he was a student of poetry, an admirer of its methods and possibilities. He had no wish, however, that his own poems be part of his collected, known writings. But here they are to be looked at—as unfair as that may seem and as adamant as Dewey was on the matter.

So what could he have sought and gained in the act of writing poems? And what did he so keenly and fully accomplish in the process of their writing that rendered any final product unnecessary to him? Or was his discarding them just a way to hide his poetic, emotional side and thus show the intellectual side that characterized his academic prose? These poems are in many ways so purely personal and modest in their ambitions, so purely about language and ordinary life, feeling and practice, so unfettered by an eye toward worldly prominence or acclaim—and that sure is refreshing. But there's a quiet ambition at work, too, a dedication to exploring poetry's nature. At times the poems seem Dewey's *sotto voce* escape from the dungeon of academic writing—the antidote. Or are they Dewey's private tutorial to reveal and educate his emotional side? In his 101 poems you can easily sense Dewey's larger, less emotional preoccupation. He is trying to bridge some dichotomy: Can emotion and the mind be wedded into a single form, need they remain distinct? He seems very intrigued at how he can resolve into a unity his experience, his thought, his emotion and whether poetry is the vehicle for that pursuit. All very process-oriented and surely, then, it is not fair to put undue critical pressure on the final poem themselves.

Most of them, however, are pleasing and well-made. Sure, there's occasional bombast or, at times, cramped and rigid rhyme schemes, but these too mark any more famous poet's *oeuvre*. What these poems display ultimately is a wonderfully arrived at ease with the poem as a form and an honesty of expression that may have just felt too vulnerable or revealing for Dewey to share.

The poems were written between 1911 and 1928. (Each poem is more specifically dated by matching typewriter typeface to other notes/lectures typed on the same typewriting machine.) For us Dewey's free verse poems have a startling originality, are very moving. When unhampered by the conventions of rhyme, Dewey can make more provocative leaps. He seemed unsure of free verse as a structure for his own poems, even as the modernists were adopting Ezra Pound's *credo* to "make it new," to free each modern poem from the confines of "poesy," i.e. fixed meters and rhyme. Dewey seemed to trust more the scaffold of rhyme to hold the poem up and did not stray too far in free-verse experiments, even if the poems were only for his eyes and judgment. We wish he'd taken stylistically his own advice in the poem "Education." (The "thy" in the poem most consistently refers to learning as an originality or freeness hampered by the school's demand that in order to learn "X" there are a whole stultifying range of prerequisites to master):

1 I hardly think I heard you call
Since betwixt us was the wall
Of sounds within, buzzings i' the ear
Roarings i' the vein so closely near,
5 That I was captured in illusion
Of outward things said clear;
And about was the confusion
Of all the grown up persons said,
More invasive than Goths and Huns,

10 Urging to this and that
 Until my mind was but a seething vat.

 Yet, in spite of all
 Well I know I heard you call
 Like whisp'ring winds of dawn
 15 Those many years ago.
 But said they: It is forbid
 That you should hear till lid
 Lifts from the things immured
 I' the past; nor is it to be endured
 20 That you should hear direct
 Before the hull of your mind be o'erdecked
 With stiff well seasoned boards
 Brought from dry scholastic hoards.
 And others said I must not shirk
 25 My work, important work,
 And when that was done, only then
 Might I raise my head 'bove its pen
 And for a little space
 Gaze upon your shining face.

 30 And tho I knew 'twas me you called,
 I shrank afraid, appalled;
 I thought it was not proper nor polite
 For one like me to dare to claim a right
 To speak with you, and to pretend
 35 That you, strangely beautiful, would descend
 To seek me out,
 A witless lout,
 And so I did always attend
 To what was forced upon me,
 40 Listening furtive to thy call
 And desiring converse with thee
 Above aught and all.

 I knew I must speak with you then and there,
 But was taught that first I must prepare
 45 Properly to meet thee,
 Correctly to greet thee—
 And that till I was grown
 I patient must postpone
 The wild and free glory
 50 Of frank converse with thee.
 And I think they too were afraid—
 My fathers and my fathers, fathers arrayed
 In long receding generations,
 Who with their endless preparations
 55 Said, "Wait," and "Wait till you have learned,
 Lest by what you seek you may be spurned."
 For they knew, even as I now know
 They ne'er should find you thus and so.

60 Our much preparation is a thick wall
 Through which thy yet continued call
 Arrives suppressed, altered in sense
 Through medium, sound-proof, dense,
 We built laborious, learning's fence,
 Behind which we hide from thy creations
 65 Till we change by safe translations
 Wild things wondrous spoken in a tongue
 Once our own, native, personal; now hung
 Stammering and alien, language
 Of us who labor for a scant wage
 70 In lands where we are foreign born
 Living protected, safe,—and forlorn.

"Education" should be read and discussed in the first course pre-service teachers receive—and periodically by everyone through the doctor's degree—as a kind of "this-dear-educator-is-a-wakeup-call-to-the-subtle-personal-side-of-learning," the true prerequisite to any learning worth having, the personal prerequisite on the other side of the teacher's desk, the curriculum, and the tests. If the professor him/herself would be quiet (not tell the students what the poem means and so forth), form them into groups and ask them to discuss the poem from their long experience as students, we believe a situation will have been created that demands an imaginative mode of dealing with the material (as Dewey says in *Democracy and Education*, all learning requires an imaginative leap to engage the subject matter).

We love, for example, the imagery, music, and substance of the lines (65-70) that describe so well learning's dead weight: How learning turns the "wild things" of our vibrant experience, spoken easily in a language we know, into a stammering, alien tongue and places us "forlorn" in a safe but hostile foreign land; but cheer up friend because you have been dutifully "prepared" for partial citizenship in a land you do not know.

Maybe the right-wingers are correct about the waste in education. John Goodland says *In a Place Called School* that education professors rarely engage their students in intellectual discussion of significant ideas. Dewey's "Education" might be a good place to begin.

In his free-verse poems, Dewey finds his own tongue: native, personal, wild. Here is his free-verse poem from 1918-1923 entitled "Pulse in an Earthen Jar":

1 It's streaked with grime
 There where the potter's thumb
 Left an irregular groove.
 The king I suppose
 5 Sits high on his throne
 In a golden chamber up there.

 Rags and dirt, vermin too,
 This leather that was once a shoe.
 Well he was born of his mother
 10 And I of mine,
 And both of a long long line.
 And the leather came from a grazing ox
 Whose ancestors were cattle in flocks.

 I wonder does he have time to think
 15 When the one star comes out in the west?
 I think he is dead;
 They have smothered him.
 Does he dream when the soft wind sighs
 At four in the summer's morn?
 20 I think he is dead.
 They have choked and stifled him.

Disjoined, surely, compared to others of his tight and rhymed, more linear, logical type—this poem frees itself to an encounter with both surprising emotion and provocative thought. It uses the techniques of poetry: rhyme and image to underscore a startling overlap and the poem and Dewey, we think, must have been startled in the making. Its wild contrasts cannot ultimately be made into a neat, rhymed synthesis.

“Ties” is one example of Dewey’s slip back into the more intellectual confines of the “safe”/formalist poem. Notice how the rhyme scheme keeps the tender and real feelings expressed in the poem from opening up and reverberating:

1 Love’s light tether
 Holds all together;
 Tis gossamer—
 But when it’s loose
 5 Stars slip their noose
 Aimless to err.
 Love’s tender claim
 Like trembling flame
 Is never spoken;
 10 But if we deny
 Stars leave the sky
 In shamed token.
 Love’s tenuous bond
 Frail as fern’s frond
 15 Is never seen;
 But if it break
 Scat’red stars forsake
 Their heavenly queen.

It is very clear that Dewey’s strongest poems are those Boydston collects under the “Lyric Poems” heading. His greatest gifts and lyric intensities combine in the poems growing from a love affair between the 58-year-old Dewey and a “strikingly handsome 33-year-old writer Anzia Yeziarska” (Boydston, 1977, p. xxiv).

This love affair was short, confusing and intense. It developed in 1917-1918 when Yeziarska attended Dewey’s seminar at Columbia. Yeziarska, according to her daughter, was a “dazzling, stunning volcano of a person who made an overwhelming impression. She was romantic, impatient, childlike, excitable and exciting,” (Boydston, 1977, p. xxviii). She met Dewey as she sought ways to improve her writing and confidence as a writer because, while her life-experience in city sweatshops, factories, and tenements had given her material for short stories and later novels, it did not provide the formal education she thought would help her.

Dewey wrote poems to her that expressed support and assurance, while also voicing the distance that separated them (Boydston, 1977, p. xxvi):

1 Generations as yet unuttered, dumb, smothered,
 Inchoate, unutterable by me and mine,
 In you I see them coming to be.
 And I from afar shall see,
 5 And from the distance my hand shall clasp yours.

Dewey felt distinctly the pulls of his present life "Of day's unillumined duties/ A silken web in which I'm bound." His untitled Poem 6 in Boydston's book rings so true, so without artifice or design on Dewey's part, that one feels the possibilities of love's light, but understands the realities that Dewey cannot be "distracted" from "[the] ordered paces [of his path]." The core of sadness in this poem is its permeating honesty:

1
 I wake from the long, long night
 Of thoughtless dreams, fancies
 Nor pleased nor vexed. And despite
 5 The sleep of untroubled trances
 Joyless, griefless, begins the round
 Of day's unillumined duties,
 A silken web in which I'm bound.
 Earthward my eyes, lest the beauties
 10 Of a life not yet trammelled distract
 My ordered paces from the path
 And I no longer keep my pact
 With my possessions, and the wrath
 Of stern-eyed freedom break the chains
 15 Which keep me from the wilderness of tears
 And turn me loose to suffer in the lanes
 Of thorn trees unpossessed as yet by man,
 From which no harvest shall I reap
 Save stabs and flames of pain, and wan
 20 Exhaustions among th'unshepherded sheep
 Of thoughts which travel th'untracked wild
 Of untamed desire. Either this, or else I creep
 To a cooped-in grave smothered by the treasure piled.
 My friend your hand I ask along the lonely steep.

"Two Weeks" is really the accomplishment of Dewey's poetic gifts. When he was called upon by this vast and ambitious set of feelings, the poetic craft and sensibility he had honed to this point were ready to wed strong thoughts to strong feelings. Although occasionally limited by its formal rhyming structure, on the whole "Two Weeks" is a beautifully sensitive and precise poem, often strengthened by surprising rhymes and gorgeous phrasing.

1
 Riches, possessions hold me? Nay,
 Not rightly have you guessed
 The things that block the way,
 5 Nor into what ties I've slowly grown
 By which I am possest.
 For I do not own.

 Who makes, has. Such the old old law.
 Owned then am I by what I felt and saw
 10 But most by them with whom I've loved, and fought,
 Till within me has been wrought
 My power to reach, to see and understand.
 Such is the tie, such the iron band.
 What I am to any one is but a loan
 15 From those who made, and own.
 I have a garden of flowers and bees?

But others built the wall and kept the flowers
 Through the long and suffocating hours
 That I might rest myself in pleasant ease.

20 Yet would I have you know
 How utterly my thoughts go
 With you to and fro
 In a ceaseless quest,
 Half annoy
 25 And all a blessed joy.
 Does she now think or write or rest?
 What happens at this minute—it's just eight—
 Has she written or shall I wait
 In sweet trouble of expectancy
 30 For some fresh wonder yet to be?
 Whate'er, howe'er you move or rest
 I see your body's breathing
 The curving of your breast
 And hear the warm thoughts seething.
 35 I watch the lovely eyes that visions hold
 Even in the tortured tangles of the tenement
 Of a life that's free and bold.
 I feel the hand that for a brief moment
 Has been in mine, and dream that you are near
 40 To talk with, and that I can hear
 Your crystallized speech
 As we converse, each to each.

While I am within this wonder
 I am overcome as by thunder
 45 Of my blood that surges
 From my cold heart to my clear head—
 So at least she said—
 Till my body sinks and merges
 In communion with the wine and bread.

50 Then there's that matter of youth and age.
 Youth's felicitous, undaunted rage
 For living against long years age has spent
 In bare existence, till there remains
 But stored up memories in detachment
 55 From the things that might have been, and stains
 Of things that should not have been and are—
 The choked up fountain and th' uneffaced scar.

Then too there is the long drawn experience
 Of age. You say you have lived longer and most.
 60 Truly, if you measure by what is deep and tense—
 The only scale of quick youth. But if by the host
 And unnumbered diversity by which age counts
 Rather than passions few and deep, then not so. For each
 Of the many says to every other, Renounce, renounce;
 65 The horizon is too far to reach.
 All things must be given up.

Driest the lips, when most full the cup.

Damn fiction, damn romance.

70 Since I have read, I shall never know
 Whether in an ancient mirror I see prance
 Before me mimic passions in a row,
 Or if they are authentic heaven and hell.
 Moreover, no one can ever tell.
 For we are more than simple brute
 75 Only in that there have entered into us
 The thoughts of others which taking root
 Have bred the plant and seed whose surplus,
 Saved from waste, is called ourselves.
 Our own! That lie again. When one delves
 80 One finds but the tattered shred
 Of what one has seen, or heard, or read.
 An old clothes man, a pawnbroker's shop,
 A chance gathered, unwinnowed crop
 Of thistles, cockleburs—and a few grains;—
 85 Offscourings of old mountains, sweepings of new plains,
 Romantic relics of the feudal age
 Stored in today's trim realistic cage.

I told you my diet should be prose.

90 I did not know there would always float
 Before my sight the waving lily and the beckoning rose,
 Or that even on the city's hard paved streets
 My thoughts should ever shape themselves into a boat
 To bear you on every wind that blows
 The hopes and fears that measure out the beats
 Of the blood that pulses from my heart.

95 Perhaps this mixture is the better art.
 You said my logic you could never grasp,
 While my poetic words—thus you blessed them—
 Would fall like manna on a hung'ring soul.
 100 These words of mine make no poesy. They rasp
 Like the harsh divisions of my mind. But invest them
 With your own beauty and their final goal
 Shall be more than prose. The mixture uncouth
 Shall then speak to you the very truth
 Of me, the broken parts of an ineffectual whole.

105 Then take me as I am,
 Partly true and partly sham
 Not from wilful choice
 But by too ready acceptance
 110 Of the constraining work of chance,
 Here a blow to shape, there a luring voice
 To call. If I have not wholly stood
 Neither have I wholly bent.
 Just th'usual mixed up mess of bad and good

I bring to you as it was sent.

In the second stanza Dewey recognizes the bonds of his present life and says it created his power to reach and to understand. He continues in line 13 with this generous thought: "What I am to any one is but a loan/ From those who made, and own./ I have a garden of flowers and bees? / But others built the wall and kept the flowers/ Through the long and suffocating hours/ That I might rest myself in pleasant ease." In the next stanza he sounds lost in love, reliving a touch that brings Yeziarska near in "crystallized speech/ As we converse, each to each." Cole Porter made a million off a line like that. And who says Dewey is only clumsy prose?

In lines 74 to 77 Dewey restates an idea that marks many of his formal writings. He says that only as the thoughts of others take root in us is that plant bred whose surplus "Saved from waste, is called ourselves." Our individual selves come only through the social gifts of others. If Oliver Wendell Holmes had seen these poems he might have moderated his famous criticism of Dewey's prose.

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Only by comparing Dewey's poems to a passage of his somewhat opaque prose from *Art as Experience* can we see the gift that poetry was, in return, to him:

A poet has recently said that poetry seemed to him "more physical than intellectual," and he goes on to say that he recognizes poetry by physical symptoms such as bristling of the skin, shivers in the spine, constriction of the throat, and a feeling in the pit of the stomach like Keats, "spear going through me." I do not suppose that Mr. Housman means that these feelings *are* the poetical effect. To be a thing and to be a sign of its presence are different modes of being. But just such feelings, and what other writers have called organic "clicks," are the gross indication of complete organic participation, while it is the fullness and immediacy of this participation that constitutes the esthetic quality of an experience, just as it is that which transcends the intellectual. For this reason, I should question the literal truth of the saying that poetry is *more* physical than intellectual. But that it is more than intellectual, because it absorbs the intellectual into immediate qualities that are experienced through senses that belong to the vital body, seems to me so indubitable as to justify the exaggeration contained in the saying as against the idea that qualities are universals intuited through the intellect.

Poetry allowed him to think and feel in another register. The poetry and prose taken together strike up an interesting conversation; we see how each relied, expanded on, clarified the other.

And isn't it the ironic turn that Dewey himself would have appreciated that it was a worker—not necessarily a scholar or artist or teacher—it was a "life-educated" janitor who saved Dewey's poems for us.

References

- Boydston, Jo Ann. (1977). *The Poems of John Dewey*. Carbondale: Southern Illinois UP.
 Dewey, John. (1934). *Art as Experience*. New York: Capricorn Books/Putnam's Sons. (Reprint 1958).