

AFTERWORD

Because the play of world is dim and blurred
Not some wise God's clear utter'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?¹

This is the opening stanza of an untitled poem by John Dewey, one of 98 poems discovered in 1939 in a desk drawer by Herbert Schneider, who was taking over Dewey's office at Columbia University upon Dewey's retirement. Schneider glanced at them, deemed them personal, and dumped them into the office wastebasket. Later that day, he mentioned the poems to a colleague, M. Halsey Thomas, who, from 1926-28, had been librarian of the Butler Library of Philosophy, where Dewey's office was situated. Thomas rescued the poems from the wastebasket and added them to an assortment of other materials, including poems, that he had previously salvaged (or stolen?) from Dewey's trash. Writing many years later to Jo Ann Boydston, as she prepared *The Poems of John Dewey* for publication (the volume came out in 1977), Thomas termed himself "addicted to Boswellizing" and confessed that he "usually looked in Dewey's wastebasket at the end of the day, particularly when it was full." Many years earlier, in an entry in his diary dated 7 March 1928, Thomas had written, "Lately Professor Dewey has been going through some cases of books and papers packed up before he left for China in 1920 or 1921,

¹ John Dewey, *The Poems of John Dewey*, ed. Jo Ann Boydston (Carbondale and Edwardsville: Southern Illinois University Press, 1977), 49.

and I have been gathering up the crumbs, as it were, some things given to me and others saved from his wastebasket.”²

It was not to China but to Japan that Dewey had gone after sorting through and packing up those “books and papers,” and it was in 1919. In February and March of that year, at the Imperial University in Tokyo, he delivered the series of eight public lectures that, as published in 1920, constitute his *Reconstruction in Philosophy*. For its republication in 1948, he wrote a lengthy introduction, in which he summarizes “the basic postulate of the text: namely that the distinctive office, problems and subjectmatter of philosophy grow out of stresses and strains in the community life in which a given form of philosophy arises, and that, accordingly, its specific problems vary with the changes in human life that are always going on and that at times constitute a crisis and a turning point in human history. [...] The First World War was a decided shock,” and, he continues, “Today the shock is almost incredibly greater. Insecurity and strife are so general that the prevailing attitude is one of anxious and pessimistic uncertainty. [...] The problems with which a philosophy relevant to the present must deal are those growing out of changes going on with ever-increasing rapidity, over an ever-increasing human-geographical range, and with ever-deepening intensity of penetration; this fact is one striking indication of the need for a very different kind of reconstruction [...].(v-vi, vii)”

In *Cloud, the, 3*, Helen Mirra has taken up such a “very different kind” of reconstruction, one that directs us back to John Dewey’s seminal 1920 book (being an index to it) while at the same time giving it a new conceptual form. The form is, in essence, sculptural, an embodiment of “stresses and strains.” In this sense it epitomizes the radical empiricism that Dewey advocated; it stands at hand, open to observation, and it can be verified. The philosophy that Dewey found in need of

² Quoted in the Jo Ann Boydston’s “Introduction” *The Poems of John Dewey*, xi.

reconstruction is that which purports to establish eternal truths; the philosophy he devoted his life to propagating is one that could sculpt from the experiences of lived, considered life concepts (rather than principles) of practical application in a world of radical change.

To begin my own (successful) attempts to verify *Cloud, the, 5* I turned to page 3 of the 1948 edition of Dewey's book. It is a right hand page, and five lines from the bottom I spotted Mirra's source, the raw material from which she drew: "The cloud suggests a camel or a man's face." If Mirra's work (as distinct from Dewey's) has affinities with sculpture and is therefore *formed*, and if, as I have proposed, its sources are derived empirically, the title (*Cloud, the, 5*) and the sentence to which it refers seriously complicate matters. The empiricism in question is a matter of praxis, not of theory, and it is carried on without suppressing subjective impressions; it is practical and associative (as, of course, is an index). It also recognizes that ambiguity is a pervasive presence, and that things change.

Thinking along these lines, I turned to "Hunting for trouble, 142." The phrase is at the top of the page, coming toward the end of one of Dewey's characteristically long sentences; it begins on page 141: "When the scientific man appears to observe aimlessly, it is merely that he is so in love with problems as sources and guides of inquiry, that he is striving to turn up a problem where none appears on the surface: he is, as we say, hunting for trouble because of the satisfaction to be had in coping with it." It is easy to imagine (and it may be true) that Helen Mirra was hunting for trouble when she set about to compose her *Cloud, the, 5*. What is more interesting is that it is, in many ways, a cloud that she has composed, and it is the trouble beneath its surfaces that she, in the guise of an indexer, discloses. There are numerous terms for this trouble—*beauty* might be one, *love* another. Or *happiness*. Western philosophical traditions tend to view these as properties, and hence as possessions, objects of desire, but might they not each

be regarded rather as the compelling problem, the fascinating difficulty, the demanding predicament that holds our attention?

Dewey in the *Reconstruction* argues vehemently in favor of thinking as an empirical praxis, and observation as a course of material engagement. "Nothing has done greater harm to the successful conduct of the enterprise of thinking ... than the habit of treating observation as something outside of and prior to thinking, and thinking as something which can go on in the head without *including* observation of new facts as part of itself" (See "Intellectual, somnambulism, 140").

Helen Mirra's engagements as an artist are with the ontological flow of things as they exist. Each thing as it appears is new, and each remains new and key to what Dewey would remind us is "an open world, a world varying indefinitely without the possibility of assignable limit in its internal make-up, a world stretching beyond any assignable bounds externally" (see "Moving and altering, 54"). An index, by definition, points, and it is to that world that Helen Mirra's book of indexical poems directs us. And I do read these entries as poems, elemental and practical, like songs.

"Short this song," Dewey wrote at the end of one of his own poems:

Short this song,
But its practice long.³

³ "Paradise Lost and Regained," *The Poems of John Dewey*, 59-60.