

Notes for *American Philosophy: A Love Story*. By
John Kaag. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2016.
272pp. \$26

There is a strange daylight magic in this book. It is part memoir and part flyover of American philosophy, which, says Kaag, “from Jonathan Edwards in the eighteenth century . . . to Cornel West in this one, is about the possibilities of rebirth and renewal” (66). The book is also clearly and beautifully written. I picked it up for a quick look and couldn’t put it down. Not since Pirsig’s *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance* have I read such a mesmerizing confluence of personal experience and formal thought.

A young philosophy professor dangling at the end of a failed marriage, depressed and not at all sure life is worth living, stumbles upon a magnificent abandoned stone library deep in the New Hampshire woods. The lost library is crammed with old rare incredibly valuable books — all the classics of American philosophy and its German, English, and French antecedents. As the narrator struggles with his life (and with the problem of what to do about this hidden treasure) so he struggles with the main lines of American thought from Transcendentalism to Pragmatism and beyond. A female colleague, a Kantian, joins him in his strange mission and in the string of personal experiences that follow, the narrator takes us back and forth from learning to love until he can answer the question is life worth living with a sly “it depends on the liver” (8) and a modestly rapturous “maybe” (235).

Kaag’s notion of philosophy is not technical or academic in the usual ways. Heidegger once started a class on Aristotle with a disdainful dismissal of the biographical. Of Aristotle’s life he said “He was born. He thought. He died.”¹ Heidegger had more reason

than most to avoid biographical illumination, but his low view of the subject is fairly common in some quarters. Not, however, with John Kaag, who writes “Royce’s lectures on German Idealism began where all philosophy does, in biography” (166). That is to say, in life. And if philosophy couldn’t help us lead better lives, most of us wouldn’t care two pins for it.

American Philosophy: A Love Story is saturated with William James’s thought and life. Even so, Kaag is, I think it fair to say, a Roycean; he is drawn more to a life with others — to community — than to individualism, however splendid. But he gives equal time to Emerson, Thoreau, James, Hocking, and so many others (Descartes, Hobbes, T.H Huxley, etc., etc.) that I would advise a beginning student to read this book rather than those of Father Copleston or Will[iam James] Durant for an overview of American thought.

And beyond overview, Kaag has many new things for us, the relationship between Emerson and Henry Lee, that between William James and Pauline Goldmark, and that between Ernest Hocking and Pearl Buck. There is a fresh bit on Royce’s last words, another on the origins of Shady Hill School, a reappraisal of Jane Addams and much, much more.

American Philosophy: a Love Story is then a brightly written, thoroughly accessible, sometimes moving account of a young life in philosophy. (It is also an adventure story about the discovery of the lost library of Ernest Hocking.) Kaag teaches courage, risk-taking and above all reading. He would, I think, agree with the comment attributed to Borges that “you are not what you write, but what you have read.” And his book goes on my shelf with other books in which philosophy *lives*, with Jacques Barzun’s *A Stroll with William James*, Margaret Yourcenar’s *Memoirs of Hadrian*, Louis Menand’s *Metaphysical Club*, Stephen Greenblatt’s *The Swerve*, Richard Rubenstein’s *Aristotle’s Children*, Mary Renault’s *The Last of the Wine* and Simone de Beavoir’s *Memoirs of a Dutiful Daughter*.

Kaag leaves us with what Goethe, Emerson, and William James all agreed on. In the beginning was not the word, but the deed, the act. The way forward is not twelve steps, or ten or three. It's just one. Don't sleep on it, sit on it, stand on it, or take it for a trial spin. *Take* the step, You have to do what you can, and you have to do it right now.

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NOTES

¹ Herman Philipse, *Heidegger's Philosophy of Being: A Critical Interpretation* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press 1999), xiii.