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The Gleam of Light

Reconstruction toward Holistic Growth

A man should learn to detect and watch that gleam of light which flashes across his mind from within, more than the lustre of the firmament of bards and sages. Yet he dismisses without notice his thought, because it is his. In every work of genius we recognize our own rejected thoughts. (Emerson, “Self-Reliance”)

Dewey’s naturalistic philosophy of growth has been found as one bordering on EMP, but with another internal force resisting to its full development. Dewey’s voice is dissonant from Emerson’s and Cavell’s, most significantly in their divergent responses to the recalcitrant child. In order to elaborate more fully the potential of his idea of growth as perfection and to reclaim his muted Emersonian voice, we must rescue Dewey from a totalizing tendency that he reveals in his commitments to social intelligence. It requires that task of reconstruction in philosophy.

A promising clue to reconstruction is latent within the structure of Dewey’s naturalistic philosophy of growth: his concept of impulse in habit reconstruction. If we read Dewey’s text carefully, we hear most acutely his Emersonian voice when he discusses the significance of impulse. In Democracy and Education, he praises Emerson’s respect for the immaturity of a child for his “naturel.” In Human Nature and Conduct, when he proposes the liberation of the novel impulse of
the young in aid of the reconstruction of culture, Dewey’s Emersonian perfectionist spirit of anticonformity stands out. Most strikingly, in *Construction and Criticism*, Dewey presents the Emersonian claim of the self-reliant individual who would be courageously engaged in criticism for the reconstruction of democracy. There he discusses the significance of the child’s impulse that brings “something fresh into the world” as “one’s own true nature” or “some deeper and more primitive reaction of emotion.” He then tries to associate it with Emerson’s idea of the “gleam of light”—the aesthetic and spiritual dimension of EMP. A link between Dewey’s idea of impulse and Emerson’s idea of the gleam of light seems to offer a promising clue to reconstructing his idea of growth in the light of EMP. Let us first examine Emerson’s original idea of the gleam of light.

*Emerson’s Idea of the Gleam of Light*

Emerson’s essay, “Self-Reliance,” begins with a poem by Beaumont and Fletcher:

> Man is his own star and the soul that can
> Render an honest and a perfect man,
> Commands all light, all influence, all fate;
> Nothing to him falls early or too late. . . .

*(Epilogue to Beaumont and Fletcher’s Honest Man’s Fortune)*

(“SR,” 131)

As the poem presages, “Self-Reliance” is an essay on the perfection of human life, symbolized by the gleam of light. The following is a quotation from Emerson that Dewey cites in *Construction and Criticism*:

> A man should learn to detect and watch that gleam of light which flashes across his mind from within. . . . Great works of art have no more affecting lesson for us than this. They teach us to abide by our spontaneous impression with good-humored inflexibility then most when the whole cry of voices is on the other side. Else to-morrow a stranger will say with masterly good sense precisely what we have thought and felt all the time, and we shall be forced
Emerson calls the gleam of light “Intuition,” or “Instinct.” It symbolizes one’s inner soul, the sense of one’s being, of who “I am” (“SR,” 141), or “the integrity of mind” (133). The gleam of light originates in an undivided, holistic condition of life as the “fountain of action and of thought” (140). It is the mark of one’s particular inclination, and serves as the origin of thinking or “tuitions” (139).

The gleam of light represents Emerson’s transcendentalism and his perfectionism as a hybrid of the spiritual and natural, or what he calls “the transcendentalism of common life.” Light is of archetypal significance in human experience. In the course of Western philosophy, the metaphor of light connects especially with the spiritual perfection of the human soul but also with broader senses of enlightenment. Most famously, in Plato it is the light entering the mouth of the Cave, toward which benighted souls must turn. This is the image of the perfection of soul in its journey upward. Plato’s mysticism of light was expanded by Plotinus and neo-Platonism. In America, Emerson’s gleam of light might be called a secular restatement of Jonathan Edwards’s “divine and supernatural light.” It is the basis of spiritual conversion. In certain respects, Emerson’s gleam of light inherits this spiritual tradition. But that is not all. He creates anew his own meaning of the spiritual and the transcendent in the American grain.

Emerson’s transcendentalism is creative, but elusive in its many facets. Russell B. Goodman claims that Emerson is at once an “empiricist,” a “transcendental idealist,” and an “experimenter.” Being the inheritor of the romantic tradition of Kant’s transcendental idealism, Emerson validates empirical observations by “invoking some structure in us,” that is, a transcendental scheme for the categorization of experience. Emerson’s transcendentalism also embraces the influence of Eastern thought. Arthur Versluis points out that Emerson’s self-transcendence is based upon the concept of “the primordial One” in the traditions of Hinduism and Platonism. Versluis interprets Emerson’s thought as an “assimilationism” of “a German mys-
tical, a Vedantic, or even a Platonic origin.” Emerson creates a unique “literary religion” that is “neither Eastern or Western.” Indeed the significant role that “light” plays in Indian philosophy needs to be noted. Versluis discusses the relationship of light and soul that Emerson describes in connection with the ideas of the *karma yoga* (or the “path of works”) and *jnana yoga* (or “direct illumination”) in the *Bhagavad Gita.* Buell also discusses at length Asian influence on American transcendentalism, and says: “Transcendentalism became the first intellectual movement in the United States to take Asian religious thought seriously.” He claims that the “antidualistic spirituality” of Asian religion attracted Emerson and helped him “fortify his theory of spiritual impersonality.” Buell also highlights Emerson’s interests in the *Bhagavad Gita* in connection with the idea of acting with “integrity” in a “spirit of nonattachment to the fruits of one’s action.” Buell, like Versluis, however, claims that Emerson’s interest was “eclectic and synthetic” and that he had “no intention of converting to Hinduism.”

In this characteristic brand of transcendentalism, Emerson’s gleam of light is both spiritual and pragmatic. On the one hand, he claims that a transcendentalist is an idealist in the sense that he not only relies on the sensuous fact, but also sees it as “a spiritual fact.” He says: “Time and space are but physiological colors which the eye makes, but the soul is light; where it is, is day; where it was, is night” (“SR,” 141). On the other hand, the gleam of light is pragmatic and earthbound. Dewey says that the transcendental and spiritual value claimed by Emerson does not exist in some remote “Reality” but in the “common experience of the everyday man,” in the “pressing and so the passing Now.” Emerson emphasizes the changeable and unpredictable nature of the gleam of light. In Emerson’s view, the original meaning of one’s gleam of light needs to be continually (re)discovered in action:

Your genuine action will explain itself, and will explain your other genuine actions. Your conformity explains nothing. Act singly, and what you have already done singly will justify you now. Greatness appeals to the future. If I can be firm enough to-day to
do right, and scorn eyes, I must have done so much right before
as to defend me now. Be it how it will, do right now. (“SR,” 137)

In this regard, Emerson is a proto-pragmatist who says: “I simply ex-
periment as an endless seeker” (“Circles,” 173). To be true to nature’s
laws for the “motions of the soul” and to treasure the unexpected
power to reveal the gleam of light, a “foolish consistency” needs to
be shunned as “the hobgoblin of little minds” (“SR,” 136–37).

In association with the gleam of light, Emerson also evokes the
scandalous notion of “Whim.” This he associates with “Spontaneity
or Instinct.”

I shun father and mother and wife and brother, when my genius
calls me. I would write on the lintels of the door-post, Whim. I
hope it is somewhat better than whim at last, but we cannot spend
the day in explanation. Expect me not to show cause why I seek
or why I exclude company. (134)

This is the moment when Genius calls us from within, when “our
spontaneous impression” visits us (131). With the sense of greatness,
we transcend existing relationships with others as well as our old
selves. The word on the lintels, however, is not “Independence,” “Au-
thority,” “Nonconformity,” or “Disobedience.” It is—surprisingly,
provocatively, discouragingly—“Whim,” a word whose ordinary and
light simplicity promises nothing grand. In a conventional usage, the
word “whim,” or “whimsical” has a slightly negative connotation of
triviality of impulse. Emerson throws the reader with this word, espe-
cially with its rather bizarre inscription. Yet Emerson places his faith
in whim as leading to something more.

As Cavell reminds us, whim is natural—so is the sense of
shame—as it is an impulse from below.12 It is anything but spiritual
in the sense of something that comes “from above” (ibid.). Paradoxi-
cally, we transcend ourselves from below. We experience transcen-
dence within nature, in our common lives.13 In this regard, Emerson’s
spiritual light as whim is radically different from Plato’s or August-
ine’s who considers the spiritual light as belonging to the higher
realm beyond nature. Whim is naturalistic as it is experienced in a
dimension that extends into, or derives from, the physiological, to borrow Cavell’s words, something “wrestling us for our blessing” (*Senses*, 137). Approaching Emerson’s transcendentalism from the viewpoint of whim creates an image of Emerson that distances him both from the oneness of Asian thought and from the American philosophy and theology of Jonathan Edwards. Cavell’s interpretation of Emersonian light as whim is also different from the one presented by Buell. Referring to Emerson’s idea that the light must be better than whim at last, Buell suggests that what is “merely ‘personal’” is not truly inspired, and that the “‘I’ of the passage [quoted above] is not the mundanely autobiographical ‘I’ who would gladly unfold a natural history of the intellect.” As “[t]he inner light or authority was not idiosyncratic,” he concludes, “[d]epersonalization was indispensable to a truly privatized spirituality.”

In contrast, Cavellian-Emersonian whim is thoroughly personal and partial and is more process-oriented. There is no guarantee that authenticates the universality of the gleam of light until it is tested on the way. Despite Cavell’s resistance to Emerson’s being labeled a pragmatist, his Emerson is more pragmatic than Buell’s.

In this fashion, Emerson’s gleam of light is an inventive combination of the spiritual and the natural, the transcendental and the pragmatic. Although the gleam of light symbolizes the inner soul and being, Emerson’s gleam of light as Instinct is not a static, causal determinant; rather, it is growing as “the soul becomes” (“SR,” 142). In this respect, Emerson’s gleam of light is remote from the Scottish intuitionism of which the young Dewey was critical. Not unlike William James’s “stream of consciousness,” the gleam of light is a stream moved by its consequences as well as by its origin. As Steve Odin points out, in James’s idea of pure experience, the self is always “in-the-making” and the stream of consciousness is related by “felt transitions.” Sharing the same structure as James’s, the Emersonian gleam of light is a stream of light. It can be considered to serve as an intermediary in the cycle of experience between being and becoming, soul and action, “[c]ause and effect” (“Circles,” 172). It symbolizes Emerson’s holistic view of perfection.
It is this perspective of Emerson’s gleam of light that can revitalize Dewey’s idea of impulse, and by so doing can open a new passage for reconstructing his naturalistic philosophy of growth in the light of EMP. In Human Nature and Conduct, Dewey calls the association between impulse and intelligence a “twin” relationship. Together they create the reconstructive growth of an organism in interaction with the environment, and the renewal of social habits and culture as a whole. Though Dewey claims an inseparable, as well as equal, function for the two, his description of habit reconstruction is weighted relatively in favor of intelligence. As the scientific procedure of observation, hypothesis, and experimentation, the function of intelligence is to control and direct impulse. In The Quest of Certainty Dewey calls intelligence “an art of control,” the method of regulating natural change through experimentation. He also associates intelligence with active behavior (HNC, 45, 52, 133), with the emphasis on the consequences of action (143–45). In this context, where intelligence seems to be given the central role, we are left with the impression that impulse is secondary (though it is primary in terms of temporal order).

In such works as Experience and Nature and Art as Experience, however, impulse is given greater emphasis. As a temporal event, an experience consists of a rhythm between the perceptual and reflective phases. In this regard, Dewey is influenced by William James’s idea of “double-barreled” experience. Experience contains “in its primary integrity no division between act and material, subject and object, but is constituted by them both in an unanalyzed totality.” This is the perceptual, “precognitive” phase. Out of this primary experience, a discriminative phase of reflection is cultivated. Impulse plays the leading role in this original, perceptual phase. It initiates the rhythm and cycles of experience:

Every experience, of slight or tremendous import, begins with an impulsion, rather as an impulsion. . . . ‘Impulsion’ designates a movement outward and forward of the whole organism to which special impulses are auxiliary.
The movement is “an adventure in a world” initiated by a living creature in its interaction with the world (AE, 65). Discussing the “biosocial concept of personhood” developed by G. H. Mead in American pragmatism and his notion of the social self as “I-Me” interaction, Odin claims that the “biological” aspect of the “I” pole, in contrast to the “social” aspect of the “Me” pole, is the “source of creativity, novelty, and freedom in the evolutionary process.”23 The “I” here corresponds to the original, spontaneous impulse symbolized by the gleam of light.

The beginning of an experience initiated by impulse is crucial. Through impulse we are immediately connected with life. An organism experiences a thoroughgoing “participation” or immediate inhabitation in the world in a state of “surrender in perception” (AE, 25), and in complete “saturation” with objects (280). Dewey describes this state with the metaphor of home: “Through habits formed in intercourse with the world, we also in-habit the world. It becomes a home and the home is part of our every experience” (109). This original sense of being at home, a memory of inner harmony “persists as the substratum” and “haunts life like the sense of being founded on a rock” (23), or remains in “the depths of the subconsciousness” (155), even after we have begun the process of making distinctions and having reflections (196). There is a sense in these words of the inner that modifies and deepens his former behavioral description of impulse.

Indeed, Dewey’s naturalistic idea of impulse is not merely a biological or reductionist concept. In Construction and Criticism, Dewey associates impulse with something that is “stirring within us” (CC, 139) or “the power that comes from command of ourselves” (136). It shares some common ground with the spiritual aspect of Emerson’s gleam of light—something like what Dewey calls “a mind and soul, an integrated personality.”24 Dewey’s impulse is also congruent with Emerson’s gleam of light as whim. In acknowledging the significance of the original impression, Dewey says:

There is about such occasions something of the quality of the wind that bloweth where it listeth. Sometimes it comes and some-
times it does not, even in the presence of the same object. It cannot be forced, and when it does not arrive, it is not wise to seek to recover by direct action the first fine rapture. (AE, 150)

The image of the original impression here is similar to Emerson’s whim with respect to its unexpected, capricious arrival. Like Emerson’s whim, Dewey’s impulse originates from below, from the human body, and can be associated with “a commotion demanding utterance” (81). Yet, whim is only the beginning. Its meaning is gradually found only through experiments and action.

Although Dewey does not abrogate his allegiance to the scientific method of intelligence, the way he describes the relationship between impulse and intelligence in his later writings becomes progressively more rhythmic. He provides himself with a key to broaden the narrow definition of intelligence. Intelligence is the process of “nourishing” this original impression to be transformed into the capacity of critical discrimination. Dewey reminds us not to forget that the “direct and unreasoned impression comes first” (150).

It is a common misreading of Dewey to suppose that he subscribes to the Lockean empirical sense of impulse. This is not supported by a close reading of his text. Dewey shares with Emerson an idea that impulsive force is the primary source of self-reliant thinking. Cavell, who claims that Emerson is not only a philosopher of Intuition, but also of Tuition, interprets Emerson as saying that Tuition is the process of articulating Intuition, that “Tuition is to find its Intuition,” and therefore, that thinking must realize and transfigure “indestructible instinct” as “something else.” Similarly, in Dewey’s view, Emerson is a thinker who redefines philosophy as logic as the “procession or proportionate unfolding of the intuition” (Emerson,” 184). Dewey here refers to the following passage of Emerson in “Intellect”:

All our progress is an unfolding, like the vegetable bud. You have first the instinct, then an opinion, then knowledge, as the plant has root, bud, and fruit. . . . By trusting the [instinct] to the end, it shall ripen into truth, and you shall know why you believe.

This is a horticultural metaphor. If Emerson’s language of growth sometimes takes this botanical turn, this is not to be construed as in
any way reductive. Any sense of reductive naturalism is totally dispelled by the spiritual force of the imagery of light. And Dewey shares with Emerson this direction. As an indestructible, original sense of one’s individuality and as a source of perfection, the gleam of light is ever present in the course of experience. It is, however, only a beginning impulse; it must be watched, nurtured, and guided along the path of its growth.

In the concluding passage of *The Public and Its Problems*, Dewey writes: “We lie, as Emerson said, in the lap of an immense intelligence.” From the perspective of the gleam of light, the scientific concept of intelligence, which Dewey typically describes as the function of controlling impulse, can be reconstructed in broader terms. To be true to the original nature of the gleam of light, intelligence must be receptive as much as active. Thinking makes us receive the sense of our being, as Emerson says: “Our thinking is a pious reception. . . . We do not determine what we will think. We only open our senses, clear away, as we can, all obstruction from the fact, and suffer the intellect to see” (“Intellect,” 177). Intellect connects us with the wholeness of nature: “The circle of the green earth he must measure with his shoes” (182–183).

Cavell interprets the receptive nature of Emerson’s thinking by saying: “Emerson’s most explicit reversal of Kant lies in his picturing the intellectual hemisphere of knowledge as passive or receptive and the intuitive or instinctual hemisphere as active or spontaneous” (*Senses*, 129). Emerson presents the concept of “intellectual intuition” (ibid.) or receptive thinking (*Conditions*, 39). Cavell connects this with Heidegger’s concept of “thinking as thanking”—giving thanks for “the gift of thinking” (*Senses*, 132). Emerson’s thinking is composed of the rhythm between “stopping to think” (*Conditions*, 21), suffering, thanking for the sense of being, and leaving and moving onward in “ever-widening circles” (*Senses*, 128). Cavell can be interpreted as saying that receptivity sows the seed for an ongoing growth. Based upon his interpretation of Emerson’s thinking, Cavell criticizes Dewey’s scientific concept of intelligence as active problem-solving
for its inability to receive and give thanks for life. Instead, it severs us, Cavell claims, from a holistic condition of life (Conditions, 21, 42–43).

Dewey, however, in recognizing the significance of Emerson’s gleam of light, would support Emerson’s comprehensive notion of intelligence. Particularly in his writings in the late 1920s and thereafter, Dewey emphasizes the idea of reception as a crucial aspect of human experience. For example, in Construction and Criticism where he discusses Emerson’s gleam of light, Dewey says: “Receptivity and assimilation are as much forms of vital action as are the overt actions that are visible.” Here he recognizes the significance of the mode of “permit[ting] selected impressions to sink in until they have become truly our own capital to work with” in order to acquire “the courage to give out with assertive energy” (CC, 140). Also in the 1933 version of How We Think, Dewey says:

Meditation, withdrawal or abstraction from clamorous assailants of the senses and from demands for overt action, is as necessary at the reasoning stage as are observation and experiment at other periods. The metaphors of digestion and assimilation, which so readily occur to mind in connection with rational elaboration are highly instructive.28

Dewey here implies that thinking necessitates a receptive phase. What he means by receptivity, however, is not merely “passivity” (AE, 58). He describes the difference as follows:

The esthetic or undergoing phase of experience is receptive. It involves surrender. But adequate yielding of the self is possible only through a controlled activity that may well be intense. . . . Perception is an act of the going-out of energy in order to receive, not a withholding of energy. (59–60)

We need a certain type of energy to absorb, receive, and thereby, go out and act. An experience is made up of a cyclic rhythm involving a receptive mode of perception (in which impulse or the gleam of light plays a central role) and an active mode of inquiry (the narrow sense of intelligence that Dewey defines as a function of habit reconstruction)—“the alternative flights and perchings of a bird” (Dewey here using James’s phrase [62]).
Thus, the gleam of light makes possible a broad sense of intelligence in which Dewey’s concept of growth becomes all the more holistic. The later Dewey expresses metaphorically the sense of the whole we experience in a pre-reflective phase: “At twilight, dusk is a delightful quality of the whole world” (AE, 198). With the gleam of light being added to this picture of the whole, we are able to reconfigure Dewey’s view of the universe as expanding circles propelled by a central force of the light.

Every movement of experience in completing itself recurs to its beginning, since it is a satisfaction of the prompting initial need. But the recurrence is with a difference; it is charged with all the differences the journey out and away from the beginning has made. (AE, 173)

Dewey’s idea of “recurrence” in experience is not one of repetitive circulation, but of expansion originating from the initial need or impulse. Further, when conjuring up an image of the qualitative whole of experience in the form of an arc penetrated by the light, Dewey cites the following poem of Tennyson:

Experience is an arch wherethro’
Gleams that untravell’d world, whose margin fades
Forever and forever when I move.

(Tennyson, quoted in AE, 197)

Dewey offers this interpretation of these lines:

Whether the scope of vision be vast or minute, we experience it as a part of a larger whole and inclusive whole, a part that now focuses our experience. . . . But however broad the field, it is still felt as not the whole; the margins shade into the indefinite expanse beyond which imagination calls the universe. (AE, 198)

This passage conveys the image of an ever-expanding whole whose meaning is experienced only now in the ongoing movement of light—in “an actual focusing of the world at one point in a focus of immediate shining apparency”—and whose margin is yet beyond
our grasp. With the metaphor of light, Dewey here suggests a certain sense of infinity, that of the unknowable.

Perfecting the Gleam of Light in the Here and Now

Dewey states: “Perfection means perfecting, fulfillment, fulfilling, and the good is now or never” (HNC, 200). The perspective of the gleam of light also shows why the meaning of perfection lies in the moment of perfecting in the here and now.

Emerson says, “We do not guess to-day the mood, the pleasure, the power of to-morrow, when we are building up our being” (“Circles,” 174). His metaphor of the rose conveys to us the depth and intensity of such a moment:

Those roses under my window make no reference to former roses or to better ones; they are for what they are; they exist with God to-day. There is no time to them. There is simply the rose; it is perfect in every moment of its existence. . . . but man postpones or remembers; he does not live in the present, but with reverted eye laments the past, or, heedless of the riches that surround him, stands on tiptoe to foresee the future. He cannot be happy and strong until he too lives with nature in the present, above time. (“SR,” 141)

Cavell characterizes this Emersonian sense of the perfectibility of each moment by saying that “each state of the self is final” (Conditions, 12).

Dewey shares the Emersonian sense of the crucial moment of perfecting, a kind of time that is being fully lived and experienced only in the here and now. Dewey’s expression of the consummatory moment sounds like the Emersonian transcendental moment:

[Happiness and delight] come to be through a fulfillment that reaches to the depths of our being—one that is an adjustment of our whole being with the conditions of existence. . . . The time of consummation is also one of beginning anew. (AE, 23)

In such a moment, Dewey says, man is in “active and alert commerce with the world” with all senses being “on the qui vive” in “heightened
vitality.” Impulse plays a central role here as “sentinels of immediate thought and outposts of action” (24–25).

In EMP, the moment of perfecting is one in which the self has attained itself and, therefore, starts to unfound and unravel itself to the next state of unattainable self. This Cavell calls the time when the attained but attainable self is “knotted” (Conditions, 10). He further suggests that this is the moment of “discontinuity,” as Emerson’s expanding circles are characterized by “an ambiguity between the picturing of new circles as forming continuously or discontinuously” (Senses, 135). He raises the question of what it is that brings the very moment of the “leap” “from one circumference to another” when a new circle is drawn. He answers that “power seems to be the result of rising” (136). The gleam of light plays a crucial role in producing a critical juncture in the expanding passage of growth.33 The radical moment of transcendence in perfection is the time when we leap from one sphere to another by trusting our whim. It is, as Emerson says, when one separates himself from his old state, leaving his father, mother, wife, and brother in response to the invitation of whim:

The new position of the advancing man has all the powers of the old, yet has them all new. It carries in its bosom all the energies of the past, yet is itself an exhalation of the morning. I cast away in this new moment all my once hoarded knowledge, as vacant and vain. Now, for the first time, seem I to know any thing rightly. (”Circles,” 174–175)

In this new moment, the trajectories created in the past find possible openings in the future; a new circle is drawn, but without negating the past trajectory. Emersonian gleam of light or whim is prophetic in producing such critical juncture in time (Senses, 156). In unpacking Emerson’s statement that “I hope that it is somewhat better than whim at last” (“SR,” 134), Cavell emphasizes that Emerson’s whim is the indispensable beginning, but merely the beginning in the sense that its significance needs to be “proven only on the way” (Senses, 137), and seen “by its fruits” (154). It does not rely on any absolute ground of the good, but on its trust in the better that is yet to come;
it is projective. Whether it is good or bad, we cannot tell in advance. All we can do now is to trust “the instinct of the animal to find his road,” hoping that new passages are opened. The arrival of whim marks such moment of venturing into the unknown, the moment of a radical departure. Emerson’s gleam of light has a pragmatic facet:

Lest I should mislead any when I have my own head and obey my whims, let me remind the reader that I am only an experimenter. Do not see the least value on what I do, or the least discredit on what I do not, as if I pretended to settle any thing as true or false. I unsettle all things. (“Circles,” 173)

It is whim that initiates and leads this onward moving. This forward movement in Emerson’s whim, however, is anything but an expression of a rosy optimism toward the future. Rather, it is accompanied by a certain rigor and stern willingness to commit oneself to the unknown out of a trodden path. Cavell reminds us that whim is only the manifestation of a hope that is born out of despair:

[Emerson’s] perception of the moment is taken in hope, as something to be proven only on the way, by the way. This departure, such setting out, is, in our poverty, what hope consists in, all there is to hope for; it is the abandoning of despair, which is otherwise our condition . . . Our fatality, the determination of our fate, of whether we may hope, goes by our making the path of whim. (Senses, 137)

Emerson’s expression of whim manifests the courage to leave, to abandon, “power and courage to make a new road to new and better goals” (“Circles,” 175).

While being under the influence of a Darwinian progressive and evolutionary concept of time, Dewey, in his appropriation of the Emersonian gleam of light, suggests its vital role in producing the new moment in the here and now. He insinuates Emersonian and Cavellian themes of the proximity of attainability and unattainability in perfecting. His pragmatic view of the universe in chance reinforces this trait. Scheffler discusses Peirce’s notion of tychism, the idea that “[a]n element of absolute chance must rather be acknowledged in
nature, along with the element of regularity.” Dewey, qua pragmatist, is opposed to the fixed view of universe, “the kingdom of the unchanging, of the complete, the perfect,” and presents the idea of a temporal, changeable view of the universe with “genuine indeterminacy”—the universe of chance, contingency, and unpredictability in “temporal seriality.”

Dewey’s idea of development in temporal continuity, however, is not merely a linear progression, repetitions, or “redistributions, rearrangements” of what existed before. Rather, like Emersonian and Cavellian concepts of time in EMP, it entails the moment of discontinuity. He introduces the idea of “genuine qualitative changes,” or “genuine transformations,” when “unpredictable novelties” break into a stream of time. This he calls “genuine time” as “breaches” or “breaks” in continuity, or the moments of “critical junctures.” Based upon this concept of time, Dewey introduces the notion of genuine individuality—“individuality pregnant with new developments.” The quality of change to produce genuine time hinges on unpredictable novelties that “individuals as individuals” can produce (“TI,” 108–09, 111–12). This is the moment of individuation. Dewey acknowledges James’s idea of the indispensable role played by the individual factor in the creation of an open universe as a fortress against determinism (101). Here it is impulse that creates “the forward thrust of life” (ibid.). Impulse is “the living source of a new and better future” (114). Dewey shares Emerson’s idea of the prophetic whim that produces the new moment. This certainly requires the self to exercise the courage to leave its established path.

In the temporal structure of selfhood of both the Japanese philosophy of Nishida and the American pragmatism of Mead and Whitehead, Odin identifies a “culminative nature of temporal becoming.” The temporal flux in that structure, Odin says, is asymmetrical, and there is always an emergent “creative advance” in the “arrow of time.” This he calls, with Nishida, Mead, and Whitehead, the temporal structure of “discontinuous continuity.” As a result, the “sum total of events increases with each passing moment.” In Mead’s idea, it is the “flexible and open concept of impulses” that makes possible
the moment of this leap.38 Dewey’s discussion of the discontinuous moment as the production of novel individuality and the role of impulse fits into this temporal structure running through Mead and Whitehead.

The perspective of the gleam of light would better satisfy Dewey’s wish in later years, a wish to have done more justice to the individual perspective in his social and situational theory. In his account of aesthetic experience, he stresses the indispensable role of “a bias, a predestination,” or “the instinctive preference,” which he says is “bound up with the very existence of individuality” (AE, 327). Elsewhere he says, “we touch the world through some particular tentacle” (199). Later in “I Believe,” faced with the need to defend democracy from the threat of totalitarianism in the late 1930s, Dewey acknowledges that “individuals will always be the centre and the consummation of experience,” and continues: “I should now wish to emphasize more than I formerly did that individuals are the finally decisive factors of the nature and movement of associated life.” Dewey expresses his sense of the indispensable role of an individual not as “a center without a field,” but as one within a field, as one defined by the marking, or inscription, of that field.39 This is a slight revision, but a significant deepening of his theory of situation and interaction, the concepts whose vagueness had tended to blur the account in his earlier work of the central life of the individual.

Directive Criteria: The Imaginative Role of Prophetic Light in EMP

From the standpoint of the prophetic light, the notion of criteria in Deweyan growth can be redefined. Like Emerson’s gleam of light, Dewey’s idea of impulse plays the role of projecting ahead a vision of the better. He tells us that the beginning of the course of forming aims is with “a wish, an emotional reaction against the present state of things and a hope for something different” (HNC, 161). The initial emotional wish projects a vague sense of the better—what Dewey calls “prophetic vision” (“TI,” 113). By this, Dewey means the revelation of “potentialities hitherto unrealized” (114), or goods that are
“relatively embryonic.” The good is anything but guaranteed in advance; it is to be created ahead, as “consequences” in the future, or as Cavell says, proven only on the way. Potentiality is not “a category of existence” that is being unfolded. Instead, “potentialities cannot be known till after the interactions have occurred” in terms of “consequences” (109).

In projecting a better vision ahead, the prophetic light is closely related to its aesthetic function of imagination. Emerson calls imagination “a higher sort of seeing, which does not come by study, but by intellect being where and what it sees.” The imagination of a poet has an “intoxicating” power that brings force a “sublime vision” (“Poet,” 207–09). Similarly, Dewey refers to the aesthetic role of imagination.

The new vision does not arise out of nothing, but emerges through seeing, in terms of possibilities, that is, of imagination, old things in new relations serving a new end which the new end aids in creating. (CF, 34)

Imaginative projection is “the chief instrument of the good” (AE, 350). It functions as “the precursor of changes” (348). In imagination, we re-see the world in a new light. This is the moral function and implication of aesthetic imagination.

Dewey suggests that the emotional nature of impulse here plays a crucial role:

An emotion is more effective than any deliberate challenging sentinel could be. It reaches out tentacles for that which is cognate, for things which feed it and carry it to completion. (73)

What Jim Garrison, along with Thomas Alexander, calls “the human eros”—a passionate desire to “become good”—thrusts us toward the better, or in Dewey’s words, “stirs human endeavor to its depths” (“TI,” 114). We experience “emotional stir by possibilities as yet unrealized” and then, we aim to realize them in action (CF, 39). Citing Santayana’s idea of imagination, Dewey claims that the forces of impulse constitute “the starting-point for a creative movement of the
imagination” (13). The function of imagination is typically manifested in aesthetic experience: “The first stirrings of dissatisfaction and the first intimations of a better future are always found in works of art” (AE, 348). Dewey describes such an original impression as “a peculiar musical mood” (195) that grasps a total vision—“some end dimly and imprecisely prefigured” as “an aura” (80).

The articulation and realization of this initial vision requires ongoing action in the here and now. We have to “enhance and steady” our original vision till it is “wrought into the texture of our lives” (HNC, 180). Like Emerson and Cavell, Dewey implies that the vision is embodied only in our ways of life. Alexander helps us understand this sense: “The imaginative appropriation of the world—which is also the imaginative appropriation of the self—demands a progressive (and critical) articulation of the ideal.”

Alexander here communicates to us Dewey’s Emersonian sense that the realization of a better vision is anything but guaranteed in advance. It needs to be articulated progressively. Emphasizing the unguaranteed nature of Emerson’s idea of an ideal, Cavell says:

Kant found an essential place for perfection in his view of it at the end, as it were, of his theory, as an unreachable ideal relation to be striven for to the moral law; in Emerson this place of the ideal occurs at the beginning of moral thinking, as a condition, let us say, of moral imagination, as preparation or sign of moral life. (Conditions, 62)

The creation of the future hinges on ongoing efforts, action, and thinking in the here and now, and its meaning signifies the unknowable. It is tested by the act of leaving rather than by arriving at a destination. These are the moral implications of Emersonian moral perfectionism.

It is in connection with the imaginative power of a prophetic light that Dewey’s idea of “criteria” can be given a positive redefinition. In the following, he presents the idea of “directive criteria”:

The community of causes and consequences in which we, together with those not born, are enmeshed is the widest and deep-
est symbol of the mysterious totality of being the imagination calls the universe. It is the embodiment for sense and thought of that encompassing scope of existence the intellect cannot grasp. It is the matrix within which our ideal aspirations are born and bred. It is the source of the values that the moral imagination projects as directive criteria and as shaping purposes. (CF, 56)

Dewey here says that the source of the values is the totality of our existence, our holistic condition of life. Being enmeshed there, our imaginative power is exercised to project the sense of the good. Criteria are not fixed measures that identify the definite good. Dewey says that goods originated in nature are too “evanescent and unique” to be molded into principles and rules. “Standardizations, formulae, generalizations, principles, universals, have their place, but the place is that of being instrumental to better approximation to what is unique and unrepeatable” (EN, 97). Criteria are rather like purposes that are being progressively shaped with the sense of “coherency” (AE, 57). Criteria function to direct humans toward the better. Thus, to the question, “How do we know the moment of perfection?” Dewey, along with Emerson and Cavell, would answer: in the perfecting of our lives, we only approximate, neither knowing nor identifying.

Directive criteria maintain the evolving nature of good that is the essence of Dewey’s pragmatism, but now with a sharper focus on the aesthetic and spiritual nature of the gleam of light, being more sensitive to the senses of myth and the infinite, and the wonder of life. In comparison to Dewey’s typically pragmatic concept of criteria, which is heavily weighted with social intelligence, action, and situations, directive criteria, in so far as they incorporate the contribution of the imaginative power of impulse, do more justice to the inner soul of one who is struggling to articulate its invisible but undeniable urge toward the better. Dewey characterizes such a mode of living as the “religious”—a spirituality that originates in “natural goods” on earth (CF, 47).

Directive criteria embody the moment of perfecting, “critical junctures” of discontinuity in the continuity of time. They represent the
nexus of the attained and unattained self—what Dewey calls the closure of “awakening” (AE, 174), what Emerson calls the “metamorphosis.” The production of directive criteria is the act of perfecting with the proximate sense of finitude and infinitude when the individual “raise[s] himself above himself, to work a pitch above his last height” (“Circles,” 168). Criteria mark the moment of the leap when a new horizon expands beyond an existing circle and when the self seems to leave, to move on.

Though we have to admit that Dewey is not as explicit as Emerson and Cavell about the sense of shame and despair in the path of perfection (which I shall discuss in the next chapter), his concept of directive criteria has the potential to reconstruct Deweyan growth in the light of EMP. With the standpoint of the gleam of light, Dewey’s idea of the social reconstruction of criteria can be now reconsidered as a more holistic process, involving interaction between the impulsive force of the young and the social intelligence of the adult, and as the process in which our inner sense of the better is thrown into the outer world to be tested. The gleam of light would allow Dewey to do more justice to the inner light of the recalcitrant child, whom he inadvertently sought to suppress. Directive criteria have a capacity, like Cavell’s concept of criteria, to be a matter of mutual attunement.