The Gleam of Light
Naoko Saito, Stanley Cavell

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Saito, Naoko and Stanley Cavell.
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“WHERE do we find ourselves? . . . Sleep lingers all our lifetime about our eyes, as night hovers all day in the boughs of the fir-tree.” (Emerson, “Experience”)¹

But it is not easy to detect and watch the gleams of light that flash from within. Education and social surroundings are in a conspiracy to dim these flashes and to attract our watching to other things. . . . The beginning of all development of individuality with adults usually comes when one learns to throw off an outer slavery to second-hand and ready-made opinions and begins to detect, watch, and trust one’s own intuitions, that is, one’s own spontaneous, unforced reactions. (Dewey, *Construction and Criticism*)²

Dewey sheds an Emersonian light on the degenerate state of American democracy in his times—a state of darkness in which the gleam of light, the sense of being and becoming, are dimmed and even lost. This is, in his expression, the “tragedy of the 'lost' individual.” In order to reevaluate the significance of Deweyan growth after Emerson, this chapter attempts to respond to these questions centering on the theme of the tragic sense in contemporary democracy and education. Can Dewey’s progressive growth still be viable in times when flexible transaction is constantly dissipated? How can a Deweyan discourse of amelioration and progress protect us from the sense of isolation, separation, and loss that are at the heart of the contemporary crisis of democracy?

One of the criticisms consistently directed at Deweyan growth is that it lacks a sense of the tragic. In response to the criticism I shall
argue that Deweyan pragmatism, if reconsidered and reconstructed in the light of EMP, can illuminate the tragic nature of contemporary democracy and education by allowing us to remember the loss that we are suffering. This will be to move in the direction of *Emersonian antifoundationalism*—toward a third way, beyond the alternatives of relativism and absolutism.

“*Pragmatism and the Tragic Sense*”

Pragmatism, especially Dewey’s, tends to the stigma that it lacks a tragic sense of life. Criticisms have been made from diverse perspectives. It was Sidney Hook who first took up the issue with the following response:

As I understand the pragmatic perspective on life, it is an attempt, to make it possible for men to live in a world of inescapable tragedy—a tragedy that flows from the conflict of moral ideals—without lamentation, defiance or make-believe. According to this perspective, even in the best of human worlds there will be tragedy—tragedy perhaps without bloodshed, but certainly not without tears.³

In Hook’s definition, what is “tragic” in the human condition is not limited to the presence of evil, or even a matter of the necessity of death itself. Rather, the tragic, he claims, is a “moral phenomenon” where one good conflicts with another in the moment of moral choice. In other words, the tragic is a part of human life, this life we have to live in the here and now. Rather than mourning over the tragic conflict of goods, instead of yielding to despair, let us go forward in action and experiment to find a way to negotiate and resolve, or, at least, to reduce conflicts. In Hook’s view, this is the heart of what Dewey means by the power of intelligent control. Pragmatism is heroic; it is the philosophy of courage.

A shared concern continues, however, over the image of powerful and progressive growth that colors Dewey’s pragmatism and its concomitant notion of intelligent control, especially in these postmodern times. It is Cornel West who offers one of the most powerful criti-
cisms concerning Dewey’s lack of tragic sensibility. Despite his appreciation of “prophetic pragmatism,” West is especially critical of Dewey’s pragmatism for its inadequate realization of a tragic vision—a lack that West claims Dewey inherits from Emerson. Referring to Emerson’s phrase, “the only sin is limitation,” one that epitomizes his optimistic theodicy of extolling human power, West argues that a “deep sense of tragedy and irony” is alien to both Emerson and Dewey. In his later writing he reiterates the theme:

The point here is not so much that Emerson himself had no sense of the tragic, but rather that the way he formulated the relation of human powers and fate, human agency and circumstances, human will and constraints made it difficult for him and for subsequent pragmatists to maintain a delicate balance between excessive optimism and exorbitant pessimism regarding human capacities.

In contemporary democracy, the sense of possibility toward the future narrows, and there is still a need to struggle with the “death and disease, that cut-off the joys of democratic citizenship,” where the “ultimate facts of the human predicament” need to be recognized more than ever. The context of modern tragedy, in contrast to Greek tragedy, West argues, is a state in which “ordinary individuals struggle against meaninglessness and nothingness,” a feature of “a fragmented society with collapsing metaphysical meanings.” In these circumstances, Dewey’s future-oriented pragmatism and his emphasis on the primacy of human will and action lack something crucial: a failure to define the relationship between a democratic way of life and a “profound sense of evil.”

West instead supports Josiah Royce’s deeper idealism, which combines with a pessimism heavily influenced by Schopenhauer to produce his “absolute” version of pragmatism—one that is supported by the “concrete and practical notions of an absolute.” For Royce, far more than for Dewey, irrevocable deeds are the source of the tragic. West, like Royce, expresses the need for a thorough recognition of the tragic sense, a deep sense of defeat caused by brute chance. Real prog-
ress is impossible without the recognition of this sense of finitude and the appeal to this absolute reality.

More recently, Raymond D. Boisvert has presented similar criticism of Dewey’s lack of the tragic sense, but with a tighter focus on his scientific concept of intelligence than West. In Boisvert’s view, Dewey’s pragmatism equates scientific advancement with moral progress, in a manner typical of nineteenth-century modernity. Dewey’s faith in progress through scientific advancement led him to believe that in the power of intelligence, courage and effort there was the possibility of “the indefinite perfectibility of mankind on earth.” His progressive view of the universe lacks a sensitivity to the tragic—what Boisvert calls a limitation inherent in the nature of things, “the Nemesis of Necessity.” The problems afflicting human beings—murder, incest, adultery, jealousy, unfettered ambition, and the traumas of family relationships—are natural limitations put on us by necessity, limitations that will never be eliminated by the efforts of a “planned community.” Nor will a commitment to scientific progress guarantee moral progress. Dewey is mistaken when he believes that the human mind can eventually dominate necessity. In this sense, Boisvert finds Hook’s defense inadequate. Hook commits the same mistake as Dewey when he fails to recognize necessity, a failure seen in Hook’s optimism about the power of intelligence to resolve the problems of humanity once and for all. For a philosophy more adequate to the tragic in human experience, Boisvert himself appeals to the ontology of Anaximander, a philosophy of the “all-mixed-together,” and to the writings of Nathaniel Hawthorne, an author with a deep sense of the tragic—of “the constraints over which we have not control, to burdens for which we did not ask, to the inseparable mixture of good and evil in every reformist program, to the flaws in our condition and limitations in the nature of things which make our improvements temporary and fragmented.” As we become aware of the ever-increasing, global complexity of our times, with its attendant material affluence, technological development, and political sophistication, on the one hand, and the vicious cycle of retaliation through violence and the inflated rhetoric of good and evil,
on the other, the calls made by West and Boisvert for the recognition of “evil” and “necessity” confront us in terms too real to be ignored—and indeed, in their own way they are seductive. In light of their criticism, Dewey’s progressive notion of growth can seem naive, or even oppressively optimistic.

West’s and Boisvert’s criticisms are all the more persuasive in the postmodern context of tragedy. Megan Boler sees the postmodern sense of the tragic in terms of “groundlessness”—a sense that “the ground is torn from beneath one’s feet” for there is no shared value, common ground or objective norm that one can rely on. “[T]ragedies of dissensus” arise in the face of “fundamental philosophical and strategic differences.” As a philosophy that seeks equilibrium, pragmatism cannot do justice, she suggests, to the postmodern tragic sense of dissonance and disequilibrium. Boisvert’s alternative proposal of the tragic metaphysics of Necessity and West’s call for the recognition of absolute evil sound plausible responses to Boler’s postmodern sense of groundlessness. There is something in postmodern culture, however, that reinforces the mood of mourning, depriving us as a result of the energy for commitment, and lulling us into resignation: worse, it aggravates the prevalent tendency toward nihilism. Indeed, it is the concept of “hope” that those who claim the absolutism of tragedy shun. In line with Jacques Derrida’s embrace of disappointment, Boler claims: “If a ‘fundamental groundlessness’ must be accepted, perhaps giving up hope is a fruitful directive.”

Choice, in this postmodern picture, becomes either a relativistic acquiescence to the condition of groundlessness, or a reactionary appeal to the absolute ground. Like West and Boisvert, René Arcilla takes the latter position. Arcilla resists Nicholas Burbules’s apparent affirmation of Rorty’s antifoundationalist position. Arcilla opposes pragmatism on the grounds that the acknowledgment of the tragic, which he defines in terms of irrecoverable loss, leads us to act “beyond the reach of pragmatist forms of justification,” pragmatism’s optimism being invested in its faith in outcomes and some kind of “observable success.” As an alternative, he proposes tragic absolutism—the acceptance of “absolute loss and vulnerability, absolute
mortality,” and an appeal to “an absolute faith in our personal sense of integrity,” as the means of “absolute redemption.”18 Pragmatism, however, should not give in completely to such criticism. It is against the danger of this avenue of criticism, I believe, that its significance must be appreciated anew. To be more precise, it is this tragedy of the absolutism of tragedy, the fixation of the state of groundlessness, and its concomitant abrogation of hope that pragmatism resists; and it is in contradistinction to this that it demonstrates the promise of its philosophy of hope. It is precisely for the sake of enhancing its potential that the reconstruction of Dewey’s pragmatism is urgently needed. This must be reconstructed in order to show that a philosophy of hope is distinguished from oppressive optimism; that its “tragic metaphysics” is not one that is based upon “necessity” or “evil” but upon possibilities, with the acknowledgment of the transitional nature of human being, including its precarious nature.

A signpost for such a reexamination can be found in Dewey’s own writings from the late 1920s onward, especially in his aesthetic and religious works.19 It is in these that his earlier idea of progressive growth, as seen in his educational writings, came to be underscored by his resistance to the “tragedy of the ‘lost individual.’” In his criticism of an American individualism driven by capitalist economy and mass culture, Dewey laments the tragic state of American society—a state in which people drift “without sure anchorage” and suffer from the loss of any “sense of wholeness.”20 Conformity and standardization create a sense of “an inner void” and “vacuum” (ION, 83). Fear, dread, and anxiety “eat into self-respect” (68). The innovative impulses of, and independence in, the young mind are choked and stifled as they become part of the “chain-belt system of mass manufacture” (CC, 132). His concern is with the state of “moral subjection” in which a human being, in chains, loses the “mental freedom which is a condition of creation” (133, 136). The condition of imprisonment indicates the danger of an individual’s being unable to be any longer a responsible generator of “genuine time,” the moment of novelty and qualitative transformation. We are molded by the mechanical, linear, and flat repetition of time.21
Dewey’s tragic sense over the loss that individuals suffer permeates his social and cultural criticism. This can be reread as Emersonian perfectionism—his pronouncement of a battle against those forces that conspire to hinder the passage of the gleam of light. He tells us that modernity and capitalism encroach upon our hearts and minds, and consistently threaten to benumb, suppress, and extinguish our gleam of light. He is prophetic about spiritual degeneration in post-modern democracy. In *Individualism Old and New*, Dewey cites Emerson’s remark from “Self-Reliance”: “Society everywhere is in conspiracy against its members” (*ION*, 122). People cannot say authentically, without fear of pretence, “I think” and “I am.” One is no longer sure that it is this “I” that contributes to and participates in the reconstruction of “my” society. This, as Emerson says, brings forth a “tragic consequence.” The gleam of light lost does not manifest only the spiritual crisis of each individual: it is also the crisis of culture as a whole as it loses its prophetic power for regeneration.

There is a danger, however, that the reinterpretation of Dewey’s tragedy of the lost individual in connection with the loss of the gleam of light can turn into the projection of our lament over conformity, into a nostalgic sense of loss over the irrecoverable, into mourning over separation, and even into a ranting over its suppression—in other words, into a certain form of the absolutism of tragedy. As an educational consequence, it can encourage a romanticization of childhood and a desire for a return to communion, as has so often been seen in diverse forms of progressive education in and after Dewey’s times. In our times, the romanticization of tragedy can be tied up with the culture of personal narrative—a state in which the introspective self can become overly self-conscious, engaged in retrospective lamentation over irrecoverable loss or in narcissistic exercises in autobiography. Boler’s pastiche subject—one with “the relentless gaze of self-reflective paralogy”—evokes the image of the guilt-stricken self who is engaged in a “confession of ignorance.”

Dewey’s concerns here, however, are with something deeper and more subtle than a nostalgic mourning over loss. He suggests the second sense of the tragic: in our obliviousness to the gleam of light, we
cannot even remember its loss. We cannot even imagine what it might mean. We subside in apathy and indifference or in a feel-good regime of desire-satisfaction that is ultimately nihilistic in kind. As Dewey says: “We do not know what we really want and we make no great effort to find out” (CC, 133). It is a state in which our tranquilized nature is desensitized to its most insidious effects.

In Dewey’s idea of habit reconstruction, the gleam of light suggests a spiritual dimension of impulse as a cultivating ground of human intelligence. Without the prophetic vision that is constantly illuminated by our own light, progressive growth is impossible. And such progress is something we have to be constantly fighting for in a humble recognition of the imperfect state of democracy. To commit oneself to the kind of continuous growth that Dewey has in mind comes to imply the acknowledgment of the double sense of the tragic as inherent in the human condition, and an endless tension between the attainment and unattainment of democracy. Hence, Dewey says: “Since things do not attain such fulfillment but are in acutuality distracted and interfered with, democracy in this sense is not a fact and never will be.” For him, democracy is both an ideal state that is never fully “perfected” and a state that is achieved in the “actual phases of associated life as they are freed from restrictive and disturbing elements, and are contemplated as having attained their limit of development.”

It is this double nature in Dewey’s conception of democracy as both attained and unattained, his aching sense of imperfection, that warns us of our obliviousness to the lack of the tragic. And this state of obliviousness itself is the symptom of nihilism in democracy and education.

*Nihilism in Democracy and Education: The Double Sense of the Tragic*

Dewey, after Emerson and Cavell, can help us re-see and recount the tragic state of democracy and education in postindustrial democratic societies. In such countries as Japan, the United Kingdom, and the United States, there is a widespread sense of crisis in education. One of its most serious factors is the erosion of the public realm and a
consequent distortion of the relationship between the private and the public. This is not, however, an easy task, for in certain respects education is itself complicit with these problems. The practice of education is heavily dominated by neoliberal ideology and by the language of performativity; it has become dominated by procedures of standardization and quantification, in the name of efficiency and effectiveness. Facile notions of the ethical emerge in what is heralded as “values education” or in a new moralistic commitment to moral education, with a concomitant suppression of the possibility of any real engagement with the complexity of the ethical demands that run throughout education and life. In an attempt to make all aspects of practice transparent and efficient and subject to systematic accounting, there may well be lack of imaginative sensitivity to the invisible and the silent, to something in the human condition that cannot be readily expressed or presented in an articulated, either-or form; this is something to which myth has sometimes answered. The relative absence of a serious ethical language amongst adults, which has become typical of our age, means that young people do not encounter the kind of discourse that would enable them to think differently about these matters. Lives are lived out in dislocation and in a muted but surreptitious despondency.

Whether it comes as an appeal to raise standards, to increase school effectiveness, to teach right and wrong in moral education, or to increase the understanding of other cultures, education today—especially in such postindustrial countries as the United States, the United Kingdom, and Japan—is so often driven by assumptions of gaining and raising. A drive to achieve “excellence” measured by a definite set of goals never wanes. Contemporary policy and practice have generally been based on the assumption that appropriate planning means the clear identification of ends and the systematic creation of means to their realization. As Richard Rorty cynically puts this: “Unless the youth is raised to believe in moral absolutes, and in objective truth, civilization is doomed.” Concomitant to the drive toward raising, fixing, and articulating is a rhetoric of freedom that permeates the language of educational reforms in the globalized economy.
This is true even, ironically, of certain aspects of moral education or citizenship education. For example, Paul Standish discusses the idea of citizenship education proposed by the Crick Report in 1998, which led to legislation for citizenship education for all children up to the age of sixteen in England. Its focus is on: (1) the acquisition of “knowledge” about the political institutions that shape and govern society; (2) the development of “skills” appropriate to participating in the political life of their society; and (3) the development of “dispositions” appropriate to participating in modern democracy, including toleration and the inclination to listen to the other’s point of view. With good intent, no doubt, citizenship education is here characterized by the language of articulation in goals and skills to achieve it. While acknowledging the value of such endeavors, Standish criticizes the idea that “citizenship education” per se might be introduced as a separate subject, or even a separate strand running through the curriculum, and turned into a sort of accessory to the main business of education. In order to realize the “inextricably interwoven” relationship between the good of the individual and the good of the larger society—following Plato and Rousseau, and for that matter, Dewey—and especially to respond to the contemporary nihilistic tendency of “withdrawal” among young people, an attempt to join the private and the public in citizenship education requires something more than words celebratory of democracy. It also needs an approach to the moral life other than the political or quasi-contractual approach—one that addresses the “spiritual excess that is dissipated or dulled.”

Similarly in Japan a series of educational reforms has been conducted. On the one hand, there are policies of decentralization and privatization. The direction of education here demonstrates that Japanese society, as a critical case of postindustrial democratic societies, is now in search of the education of a new type of individual, fit for the age of “globalization.” The concepts emphasized here are: individuality (Kosei), internationalization (Kokusai-ka), the power to live (Ikiru chikara), and freedom for leisure and creative activities (yutori). The number of days of attendance per year has been cut down.
The minimum levels of achievement in terms of the knowledge required of learners have been reduced. Freedom in the choice of curriculum and schools has increased. In these respects, education seems to have become more liberalized. There is a danger here, however, that the concept of freedom is quantified as if it were merely a matter of either increasing or reducing. Japanese scholars such as Manabu Sato and Hidenori Fujita criticize the trend toward liberalization as one based upon the ideology of neoliberalism associated with free competition and free choice in the global—liberalism that in reality increases inequality and leads to a more stratified society.

On the other hand, a new emphasis is being put on the reinforcement of moral education in a conservative direction. In view of the alleged moral decline of young people, in 1997 the Ministry of Education initiated a program called “Education of the Heart” (Kokoro no Kyoiku). Its main features are the provision of advice and guidance for the young and the reinforcement of more rigorous disciplining of children, not only in schools but also at home. In 2002 the government started to distribute a booklet entitled Kokoro-no-Note (The Notebook for the Heart—a guidebook for moral education for teachers, students, and parents) to all elementary and secondary schools in Japan. Its basic direction, however, is conservative, looking inward into the culture with an emphasis on cultural identity and traditional values, even with a tendency toward nationalism. “Love for Japan” can be used as a mask for defensive and inward-looking exclusion of the foreign and the deviant—despite calls for internationalization. A move to change the Fundamental Law of Education—which was originally implemented after the Second World War and based on the American model of democracy—has recently gained momentum. Intellectuals on the left are wary of a return to the totalitarianism and militarism of pre-war Japan.

Seen through the eyes of Deweyan growth after Emersonian perfectionism, however, such policy and practice—notwithstanding its good intent to rebuild and join the impoverished state of the private and the public—is troubled neither by the aching sense of imperfection nor by the sharp sense of shame over the degenerate condition
of democracy—over what might be called the spiritual enfeebling of the culture. As Emerson’s radical words put this: “Public and private avarice make the air we breathe thick and fat. The scholar is decent, indolent, complaisant. See already the tragic consequence. The mind of this country, taught to aim at low objects, eats upon itself” (“AMS,” 52). And worse, in their language of transparency and efficiency, and in the constrained choice between a neoliberal concept of freedom and a conservative moral absolutism, the dominant policies and practices of education today expel from the space of education what is beyond the grasp of calculation and exchange—something in the human condition that cannot be readily expressed or presented in an articulated, fixed form, the unknowable, or what is yet to come, which can be grasped only in this moment of transition, in the process of the ongoing middle. It seems to be getting more and more difficult to enjoy the sense of what Dewey calls “the *qui vive*”—the sense of one’s whole being “fully alive” in “heightened vitality.”

In these contexts, school for many young students today is not necessarily a place to experience the joy of learning, to reconfirm their sense of existence. “WHERE do we find ourselves? . . . Sleep lingers all our lifetime about our eyes, as night hovers all day in the boughs of the fir-tree” (“Experience,” 216). The question Emerson once raised concerning the loss of the self is still relevant for young people today. What prevents people from bridging this gap is well captured by Sato in what he calls the phenomenon of children’s “escape from learning.” According to his research, many Japanese children cannot find any hope in what they learn; they feel that nothing makes a difference in their lives. The social background of this phenomenon is, in Sato’s analysis, the compressed and accelerated form of modernization East Asian style. Since its peak in Japan in the 1980s, young people cannot find meaning in learning any more. The phenomenon of nihilism, as Sato analyzes this, illustrates that neither young people nor adults can experience the joy of liberation through learning, even if the freedom increases quantitatively. Behind the language of moral absolutes and the measured criteria of achievement, the sense of the loss of orientation, the lack of confidence, and the feeling of isolation are left untouched.
The invisible but undeniable sense of loss behind the drive toward gaining, as Dewey, with Emerson, reminds us, is one of the most tragic conditions of contemporary education and democracy. In a second sense, it is tragic that educational reform today has lost its sensitivity to this duplicitous condition. In the light of the double condition of the tragic, a void or lack created in the state of oblivion is the crisis of nihilism in democracy and education. In the limited sense of freedom, the impulsive energy of the young is directed toward the immediate satisfaction of pleasures and desires; it cannot find an alternative channel through which it can be liberated and through which it might revitalize culture. As Emerson remarks: “The state of society is one in which the members have suffered amputation from the trunk, and strut about so many walking monsters—a good finger, a neck, a stomach, an elbow, but never a man” (“AMS,” 38). This image of dissemblance symbolizes the impoverished state of the private and the public in contemporary democracy. We have seen that Dewey, with Emerson, suggests the second sense of the tragic: in our obliviousness to the gleam of light, we cannot even remember its loss. In the face of the current situation in democracy and education, Dewey, after Emerson and Cavell, would argue that what is missing from contemporary democracy and education is the hope that each of us can become the creator of our own culture, as ours, and the bearer of history by producing “critical junctures” in time; and that what is missing from the dominant discourse of education—but what devoted teachers and parents in fact need—is the trust in what is yet to come, the force of prophetic impulse. This is the courage to open oneself to the potential in the evolving circles of growth, and the courage to receive the otherness of the world that endlessly transcends one’s existing knowledge.

Transcending the Tragic with Dewey after Emerson:
Emersonian Antifoundationalism

What then is the Emersonian perfectionist way of going through the double condition of the tragic? It is more than retrospective mourn-
The gleam of light lost; it is not constrained by an absolute sense of mortality. The keen recognition of a reality in which distance and proximity are forever “knotted” is internal to EMP. Suppose we see our age as impoverished in the first sense of the tragic, the sense of irrecoverable loss, our response is one of grief. Grief, however, was not Emerson’s response to his own tragic experience—the loss of his young son, Waldo. A day after Waldo’s death at the age of five, Emerson wrote a letter to his close friend, Margaret Fuller: “Shall I ever dare to love any thing again. Farewell and Farewell, O my Boy?” An entry in his journal written some two months later demonstrates Emerson’s continuing grief:

A new day, a new harvest, new duties, new men, new fields of thought, new powers call you, and an eye fastened on the past unsuns nature, bereaves me of hope, and ruins me with a squalid indigence which nothing but death can adequately symbolize.

Two years later, however, his tone changes:

In the death of my son, now more than two years ago, I seem to have lost a beautiful estate—no more . . . So is it with this calamity; it does not touch me: some thing which I fancied was a part of me, which could not be torn away without tearing me, nor enlarged without enriching me, falls off from me, and leaves no scar. It was caducous. I grieve that grief can teach me nothing, nor carry me one step into real nature. (“Experience,” 218)

His sense of the tragic has been metamorphosed, toward a quiet resolve.

Emerson’s provocative statement that “grief can teach me nothing” has generated a range of discussions on Emerson’s sense of the tragic. For example, George Santayana asserts that the Emersonian law of compensation teaches “the lesson of indifference to circumstances.” As he explains, “[Emerson] merely points out how the good and evil of our lives grow out of each other; he shows them to be inseparable. Far from making the evil disappear, he teaches that it is the foundation of the good . . . [and] . . . unless we admit that suffering and wrong are a necessary and desirable part of the scheme of
things, our optimism does not deserve the name.” More recently, in response to the conventional view that Emerson has no sense of tragedy, Buell acknowledges the sense of limits and struggles in Emerson’s thought.

In this context, Cavell’s interpretation sheds new light on Emerson’s tragic sense as a crucial component of his perfectionism—one that is related to the idea of “finding as founding.” Emerson’s response to the tragic sense of groundlessness when we lose our way is not grief, but the awareness of the futility of grieving. Cavell elaborates on this as follows. To make sense of the life of his lost son, Emerson has to declare himself as a philosopher, to be a founder. Philosophy begins in loss, with the experience of “the world falling away” (*America*, 109). Emerson’s philosophical task, however, is not the building of the unified foundation of philosophy as a kind of the ground we reach once and for all. “Foundation reaches no farther than each issue of finding” (114). Paradoxically, it is the process of the establishing of “founding without a founder” (117). Cavell claims that Emerson’s effort of finding himself again in this world symbolizes “finding a new America in the West while being, or because, lost” (90–91). This is a process of finding one’s location as a newcomer, to be “the first philosopher of this new region” (106). Philosophical writing, then, involves the task of “founding a nation” (93). In contrast to Derrida, whose task is to deconstruct the “finished edifice of philosophy,” Cavell claims that Emerson’s is “to avert foundation, in advance” in “founding, or deconfounding, American thinking.” This might be called Emerson’s antifoundationalism, his middle way of living beyond the restrictive, fixed choice between no ground and absolute ground.

In response to “cynicism and disillusion” as politically devastating passions in a democracy (*America*, 113) and the imminent sense of groundlessness in our times, Emerson and Cavell encourage us to follow the path of finding as founding—in recognition of the impoverished state of the existing self with the sense of shame. The flying Perfect always leaves the possibility of its own transcendence through imperfection: it consistently drives us to depart again. Its focus is on
an endless searching for the common with the sense of defeat and pain as much as the hope for advancement; and with the acknowledgment that unity is always beyond our full grasp. The life of Emersonian perfection is tested, and indeed, starts in the very moment when we are mired in loss and face—whether it involves the impossibility of the full understanding of different values, or the imperfectability of democratic ideals. Directive criteria to measure Deweyan growth operates in the moment of leaving the existing limitations, that of “disjunction”—when we start to make the effort of searching something different from within the state of loss and groundlessness. A hope for unity is regenerated from within the conditions of dissonance, disequilibrium, and imperfection. As Cavell says: “[Emerson’s] perception of the moment is taken in hope, as something to be proven only on the way, by the way.”

Dewey, who praises Emerson as “the Philosopher of Democracy,” would endorse Emersonian antifoundationalism, and Cavell’s interpretation of Emerson’s “finding as founding” opens a window through which Dewey’s double sense of the tragic can be descried. Being in tune with the “metaphysics” of Dewey in Experience and Nature and Art as Experience, Emersonian antifoundationalism directs Deweyan growth in a way different from Rorty’s relativist antifoundationalism. Unlike Rorty’s Dewey, whose thought is characterized by power and progress, Dewey in these writings presents the transitory view of the world. The sense of the attained and unattained perfection that Dewey shares with Emerson suggests loss, limitation, or failure as a part of the human condition.

In this regard, Odin’s discussion of the “sense of the tragedy” ingrained in both Mead’s and Whitehead’s worldviews and the Zen philosophy of Nishida helps to underscore the nature of the tragic dimension peculiar to American philosophy. Referring to Whitehead’s idea of the existential experience of “perpetual perishing,” Odin highlights the point that the sense of the tragic is a structural component of the transitory worldview of American philosophy. In contrast to Heidegger’s notion of the authentic selfhood that is realized by the anticipation of “oncoming death,” the selfhood developed
by Mead and Whitehead as well as by Nishida, Odin claims, undergoes death in the here and now in immediate experience, through “living by dying.”

This matches the Emersonian perfectionist view of finding as founding, the perpetual deconfounding of the ground.

A contribution of EMP as a means of reconstruction in Dewey’s pragmatism is to help it maintain its merit as a philosophy of hope, while defending it from the charge of Rorty’s antifoundationalism or West’s appeal to absolute pragmatism. In comparison to West’s Emerson, Cavell’s Emerson is more in tune with the tragic sense of loss and groundlessness in our times. While resisting the absolutism of tragedy like Rorty and sharing with Rorty Nietzsche’s morality beyond good and evil, Cavell’s Emerson offers a different way of transcending the tragic without falling into Rortian moral relativism. Going beyond debates between relativism and absolutism, Deweyan growth, if reconsidered as a form of Emersonian perfectionism, can open a way to finding as founding.

The Emersonian antifoundationalist way of transcending the tragic can still appeal to the voice of the “recalcitrant” child—a child whose life cannot be accommodated in the limited space of education that is defined in the neoliberal discourse of freedom or in the absolutist language of moral education. The voice of a fourteen-year-old Japanese boy reminds us of the need for such space in education:

The present society does not easily accept my existence. Therefore, I throw my poetry to the society which rejects me. Looking around me, there is no place for me to be accepted. There is no one around me with whom I can talk about the philosophical question, “Why do we live?” . . . The minds of friends at school are occupied with entrance exams into high schools and they cannot afford to talk about the concerns of the heart. In contemporary education, the emphasis is put more on clearing the goal of the entrance exam than discussing the issues of human dignity. They do not understand how important it is to think and discuss the problems of life. This is why a person like me becomes isolated.

While being a thoroughly personal and private voice, this betokens the suppressed gleam of light—the blocked entrance into the culture,
a negative manifestation of prophetic whim trapped in an icy cave. It is the voice of a young person who wants to grow, but who, in the current system of goal-oriented education, does not know how. Simultaneously, however, this is a voice of social criticism issued from within private suffering. The boy is isolated in frustration and loses his way, perhaps experiencing the sense of void, groundlessness. Still, however, he yearns for connection and therefore expresses his poetic words to unknown others. Increased freedom alone will not resolve his agony. Nor can he rely on a therapeutic healing through recounting and mourning over the past. He will resist even the language of social inclusion and the principle of equality based upon exchange in which his inarticulate sense of the unknown is flattened, fixated, and worse, assimilated. By the very act of addressing the question, “Why do we live?” he manifests a need for a philosophical dialogue with others. He tells us that generalized moral concepts alone will not save him from suffering. He knows that it is this “I” who can concretize and has even created moral language and moral ideals—no one else. Unless one utters one’s words here and now, nothing will start. The boy’s words resonate with and invigorate Dewey’s: “Perfection means perfecting, fulfillment, fulfilling, and the good is now or never.”

He lets us know that it is in a prophetic move, not by grieving or revenging, but through exercising the power of poetic creation, that he may be able to create ahead the foundation of life from within the loss of foundation, to liberate us from chains of the void. He is in need of Emerson’s middle way of living: finding as founding. He suggests to us that the criteria of the good life are not pre-given but are only directive criteria that each of us must keep finding as our own foundation. He needs other(s)—teachers, friends, or parents—who can imaginatively capture this crucial moment of leaping.

In its negative, dark tone, this boy’s words remind us of the voice of Emerson’s son, Waldo: grieving and ranting do not save us. The words also echo the hopeful voice of Emerson: “The heart refuses to be imprisoned; in its first and narrowest pulses, it already tends outward with a vast force, and to immense and innumerable expansions”; and the encouraging voice of Cavell: you can have the
courage to leave poverty only by trusting the prophetic whim. In his despair and hope, the boy reminds us that there should be a way of education that can guide him to remember the gleam of light lost—a space of Emersonian perfectionist education that can respond to the spiritual crisis of the young, and that can awaken their prophetic whim and creative force for the revitalization of culture from within. This is Emerson’s call for the education of the American Scholar—“He is one, who raises himself from private consideration, and breathes and lives on public and illustrious thoughts” (“AMS,” 46)—and Nietzsche’s Emersonian call for the education of Genius: when he writes that “the fact of our existing at all in this here-and-now must be the strongest incentive to us to live according to our own laws and standards,” and that “A new degree of culture would instantly revolutionize the entire system of human pursuits.” The boy, however, tells us that a single gleam of light cannot grow alone, but needs others—an interpersonal philosophical conversation that can inwardly empower the young to battle outwardly against forces of dulling convention.

In dialogue with the Emersonian child, Dewey’s muted voice, with its sense of the tragic, can be revived—the voice of criticism in resistance to cynicism and nihilism, the voice against the internal foe of democracy that threatens to suppress the poet in each of us, and the voice that seeks to revive it. This is a voice of hope for education.