The Rekindling of the Gleam of Light: Toward Perfectionist Education

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The account with democratic ideals is still far from being settled. But if it turns out in the end a failure, it will not be because it is too low a doctrine but because it is too high morality for human nature, at least as that human nature is now educated. It is a strenuous doctrine that demands courage of thought and belief for realization. (Dewey, *Construction and Criticism*)

The soul’s advances are not made by gradation, such as can be represented by motion in a straight line; but rather by ascension of state, such as can be represented by metamorphosis—from the egg to the worm, from worm to the fly. The growths of genius are of a certain total character. (Emerson, “The Over-Soul”)

Dewey says: “MANKIND likes to think in terms of extreme opposites. It is given to formulating its beliefs in terms of Eithers-Ors, between which it recognizes no intermediate possibilities.” We are, are we not, still bound by this fatal drive toward dichotomous choice. Yet there are times today when it seems that there is only one alternative—when other possibilities are made to seem beyond the pale or absurd or just unrealistic. The clamor of urgency about the raising of standards and levels of achievement has expressed itself in part in a new obsession with assessment. Whatever cannot be measured (and that is to say, quantified) does not exist. This has arisen in a context where the purpose of education is largely taken for granted in the vocabulary of the new competitive “knowledge economy.” The concept of liberty has become confined in the too-narrow space of neoliberalism. The busy, apparently forward-looking tone of this way of thinking couples ironically with a conservative call for a return to
moral discipline. Moreover, behind the enlightened call for social inclusion, there may then be a lack of imaginative sensitivity to the invisible and the silent, to what cannot be readily expressed or presented. Signs of unrest and disturbance among the young are viewed with fear, and even covered over, and in various quarters the solution is seen in a reactionary turn to clear—perhaps absolute—standards of right and wrong; or even to the fervor of religious fundamentalism. There is a fear of the amorphous, the uncertain, and the unknown, that lurks behind this absolutism in education. On the global scene, conflicts and tensions among different values and beliefs aggravate our sense of living in a state of groundlessness, where the hope of finding common ground becomes more and more dim. Talk of globalization simply exacerbates this trend, while “multiculturalism” either is resisted because of its apparent endorsement of relativism (a relativism that is, it is assumed, the road to moral confusion), or is accepted in terms of a toleration reduced to the token recognition of difference, or—worse—is exploited by advertisers who, in effect, assimilate difference into sameness. Such solutions impoverish private and public lives and widen the gap between them, alienating us from the sense of the whole.

Under these circumstances Dewey’s pragmatism and conception of growth, along with the related tradition of progressive education (typically characterized as “child-centered education”), become the target of conservative attack—allegedly the very cause of the decline in standards of knowledge and morality among young people. Pragmatism and progressive education continue to be stigmatized as naively optimistic. It is true that we cannot live today with a simple faith in progress. Deweyan growth, however, reconstructed in the light of EMP—the idea of perfection without final perfectibility, and of democracy never finally to be achieved—reminds us today that the solutions these limited choices seem to offer simply cover up the sense of loss and groundlessness from which we suffer: the potential of the inarticulate yet prophetic impulse for the assiduous reconstruction of culture is numbed and obliterated. Dewey, after Emerson and Cavell, would argue today that the prophetic light, which can never be
grasped through fixation, is to be watched in its transition, in the “intermediate possibilities,” that it offers. It requires another space, another language, and another vision of education—a turning of our ways of seeing education. Dewey follows Emerson in naming this the space for the “education of the human soul.” This is no return to any rosy picture of child-centeredness; it is rather a strenuous call, in these nihilistic times, for endless human perfection and for the revitalization of the culture from within. This necessitates the practical and ethical task, as Dewey says in *Democracy and Education*, of philosophy as education. Now reconsidered in dialogue with Emerson, the notion of philosophy as education can be reinterpreted as the critical reexamination and transformation of the spiritual, aesthetic and moral basis of our living. It can be captured only as a matter of ongoing process, as the process of becoming; and as the process of searching for the common, the universal, or the whole—for what is beyond the existing boundary of the self. Dewey, with Emerson, reminds us that the regaining of this spiritual aspiration is the task of creative democracy—democracy as a personal way of living.

In this concluding chapter, I would like to discuss how Deweyan growth, after Emersonian perfectionism, can point us to a form of education sufficient to rebuild a route from the private to the public. Dewey can guide us to another possibility of social or political education, one that permeates and integrates diverse areas of education. It is the aesthetic turn in Dewey’s pragmatism that makes this possible.

*The Intensity of the Gleam of Light: Dewey’s Aesthetic Turn*

For both Dewey and Emerson, as well as for Cavell, the task of creative democracy is the rebuilding of the public, starting from within the private. Dewey says that “democracy must begin at home.” With the metaphor of “home” Dewey means not only the local community and neighborhood; he means also one’s being oneself. Later in “Creative Democracy: The Task Before Us,” he continues this theme in a sharper tone:
To denounce Naziism for intolerance, cruelty and stimulation of hatred amounts to fostering insincerity if, on our personal relations to other persons, if, in our daily walk and conversation we are moved by racial, color or other class prejudice. (‘‘CD,’’ 226)

The task of connecting the private and the public, he suggests, must start at this level by somehow transforming one’s personal way of being in the world. This is why in his later period Dewey renews his faith in the idea that “individuals who are democratic in thought and action are the sole final warrant for the existence and endurance of democratic institutions.”

This passage from the private to the public, indeed, is none other than what is urged in Emerson’s (and Cavell’s) call for the education of “Man Thinking”:

[T]he deeper he dives into his privatist, secretest presentiment, to his wonder he finds, this is the most acceptable, most public, and universally true. The people delight in it; the better part of every man feels, This is my music; this is myself. (“AMS,” 49)

Education of such an individual, Emerson suggests, is the sole way of shedding a new light again on the world—the world in darkness in which man “has almost lost the light” (48)—to bring forth the moment of its “conversion” (52). This is neither selfish individualism nor the hubris of the chosen elite. This is Emerson’s expression of “hope” for the genius in each of us, for the part of us that does not yet see (48, 52). It is a hope that “the inmost in due time becomes the outmost.” Following such a path, he says, requires “patience” (“AMS,” 52): education is the patient process of the conversion of the human spirit.

Similarly, Dewey, especially in his later writings, presents the Emersonian route from the inmost to the outmost. He argues that “self-criticism” functions as social criticism as the condition of construction and revitalization in democracy. By citing Emerson’s idea of the gleam of light as a symbol of self-reliance, Dewey tells us to “detect, watch, and trust [our] own intuitions” and “speak with authority” (CC, 136). He suggests that trusting one’s own light and expressing it
is the “moral” condition of criticism; it is prior to intellectual criticism. To be moral here means to exercise the “courage first to think and then to think out loud” (135–36). Dewey reminds us that this is not the province of an aggressive, argumentative self; rather, it is a kind of self-reliance that is made possible by finding one’s own language. To borrow Cavell’s phrase in EMP, it is “authorship” of “my constitution.”

To further this line of thinking, Dewey in *Art as Experience* says that the “reeducation” of aesthetic perception and imagination is a key to recovering drained energy and the creative drive to live forward, to experience again the “wonder and splendor of this world.” Education that serves human perfection is re-envisioned now as an endeavour to release our impulses through expression and action. It is found in a critical rhythm whose receptive, passive phases give way not to aggressive self-assertion but to a recovery of voice; this enables us to transcend the current boundaries of our experience.

Something of what is at stake in aesthetic experience—one that creates the moment of conversion in the ordinary—is suggested for Dewey by comments of the artist W. H. Hudson, whose remarks he links with Emerson:

> As to absorption of the esthetic in nature, I cite a case duplicated in some measure in thousands of persons, but notable because expressed by an artist of the first order, W. H. Hudson. “I feel when I am out of sight of living, growing grass, and out of the sound of birds’ voices and all rural sounds, that I am not properly alive.” He goes on to say, “... when I hear people say that they have never been properly alive, nor seen with clear vision the world they think so meanly of or anything in it—not even a blade of grass.” The mystic aspect of acute esthetic, that renders it so akin as an experience to what religionists term ecstatic communion, is recalled by Hudson from his boyhood life. He is speaking of the effect the sight of acacia trees had upon him. “The loose feathery foliage on moonlight nights had a peculiar hoary aspect that made this tree seem more in-
tensely alive than others, more conscious of me and of my presence . . . Similar to a feeling a person would have if visited by a supernatural being if he was perfectly convinced that it was there in his presence, albeit silent and unseen, intently regarding him and divining every thought in his mind.” Emerson as an adult said, quite in the spirit of the passage quoted from Hudson: “Crossing a bare common, in snow puddles, at twilight, under a clouded sky, without having in my thought any occurrence of special good fortune, I have enjoyed a perfect exhilaration. I am glad to the brink of fear.” (AE, 35)

If there is some intimation of a Wordsworthian pantheism here, not least in the adjacency of exhilaration and fear, at times there is also in this text the suggestion of “emotion recollected in tranquillity”(75). Dewey makes clear that the immediacy of experience initially suggested by Hudson’s words is something recalled from “boyhood life.” Art is the province not of an exuberant, animal absorption in the world but of its recollection, and that recollection is necessary—perhaps is made possible—because of an intermediate loss. We lose our early vitality when we live in the mode of abandoning the present to the past and future in apprehensions (24–25). We subside in apathy, torpor, and indifference, and then the shell is built around us and within us: we have mouths, but cannot express; we have eyes, but cannot see; we have ears, but cannot hear (109–110). It is blindness to or forgetfulness of these unhandsome conditions that we must keep resisting. The enemies of a union of form and matter spring from our own limitations, which acquiesce too easily in the extinguishing of the gleam of light: “They spring from apathy, conceit, self-pity, tepidity, fear, convention, routine, from the factors that obstruct, deflect and prevent vital interaction of the live creature with the environment in which he exists” (138). This learned apathy, the blindness in which we persist, then (wrongly) seeks from art either transient excitement or “medicinal solace.” In contrast, the clarification and concentration effected through art is an intensification that constitutes new experience. As Dewey puts this, “Art celebrates with particular intensity the moments in which the past reinforces the present and in which the future is a quickening of what now is” (24).
This is an intensification that involves sometimes a newfound sense of the ordinary and sometimes rare adventure. But whatever direction the art work pursues, its intensification revivifies the sense of being fully alive in the here and now, “the power to experience the common world in its fullness” (138). The burden that the past can inflict on us in regret, and the weight of the future felt in apprehension, can then be transformed into a “storehouse of resources by which to move confidently forward.” Thus, “[e]very living experience owes its richness to what Santayana called ‘hushed reverberations’” (23). In a footnote to these words, Dewey cites a passage from George Eliot’s *The Mill on the Floss*:

> These familiar flowers, these well-remembered bird-notes, this sky with its fitful brightness, these furrowed and grassy fields, each with a sort of personality given to it by the capricious hedge, such things as these are the mother-tongue of our imagination, the language that is laden with all the subtle inextricable associations the fleeting hours of our childhood left behind them. Our delight in the sunshine on the deep-bladed grass to-day might be no more than the faint perception of wearied souls, if it were not for the sunshine and grass of far-off years, which still live in us and transform our perception into love. (23–24)

The hushed reverberations that sound through this passage justify the emphasised prefix that has marked the language of this essay: Dewey calls for a continuing re-education in the name of a re-awakening of the intensity of impulse that we have lost, a remembering of the light that is always under threat of being extinguished. Growth as perfection and democracy to be attained require the cultivation of this poignant sense of imperfection. Furthermore, this is the re-education not only—perhaps not primarily—of the young but of adults in order that they should transcend their existing circles, in order that they should, as McDermott says with Dewey, “experience the world in all of its potential intensity.” Experience and perception have always, on Dewey’s account, been characterised by their temporal structure, but here this acquires a deeper and somewhat darker, indeed tragic, resonance: they are transformed in an intensity attained and still to
be attained. Dewey says that peace and courage are obtained only “in the midst of effort,” only “in action not after.”

In the project of reconstructing Dewey’s pragmatism in the light of EMP, his aesthetic turn points to reconsidering the meaning of intelligence—the allegedly narrow concept of intelligence associated with its scientific method of problem-solving—in the broader terms of “creative intelligence” (AE, 351). It is a kind of intelligence that integrates the spiritual and aesthetic dimensions of human nature, symbolized by the gleam of light, as prophetic energy for continual perfecting. In other words, creative intelligence is the “arts of living” (339): intelligence through which we live in affirmative energy despite the tragic human condition. This resonates with Emerson’s “onward thinking,” as Cavell calls it. From another perspective, the notion of creative intelligence is the culmination of Dewey’s project of joining art and science that he presents in Experience and Nature.

The aesthetic experience that Dewey describes here might be called the process of internal transformation—what Emerson calls the “total character” of the “metamorphosis” involved in the “growths of genius” (“OS,” 155–56). This represents Emerson’s notion of self-transcendence. It is not mysticism, otherworldly spiritualism, or selfish individualism but rather a strong ethic of self-reliance as a social morality, a morality that resists the tragic loss of the gleam of light. The foremost task of Emersonian education is to awaken the lost gleam of light, to become a “hero who is immovably centered.”

Yet this centeredness is not a form of hedonism; instead, it aims for a thorough confrontation with one’s self in order to reclaim one’s natural proclivity, symbolized by the gleam of light. As Cavell says, in EMP individuation and socialization are inseparable: before “the process of individuation,” he writes, “there are no individuals, hence no humanity, hence, no society” (Conditions, 11). Individuation requires the concrete other in the here and now—the other, as Emerson says, who returns to us “our own rejected thoughts” and the other who reminds us of our lost light (“SR,” 131). This revisits Emerson’s idea of friendship. As Cavell says, “we need not, we should not, take
[Emerson] to imagine himself as achieving a further state of humanity in himself alone” (*Conditions*, 11).

In a process of thorough individuation, the self, in encountering its own limitations with the other, learns to transcend the existing boundary, and acquires, so to speak, the standpoint of otherness within and without the self. Emerson’s transcendental perspective of the gleam of light enables us envision our “I” from the “third” standpoint, the “Over-Soul, within which every man’s particular being is contained and made one with all other.” In “the soul of the whole, we transcend private interests (“OS,” 153). This is the condition of human perfection and fullest happiness. In its quest for “impersonality” (157)—what is beyond the self—Emerson’s transcendentalism is universalist in its ethical standpoint; at the same time it does not diffuse personality. As Cavell interprets this, unlike Kant’s notion of a noumenal self in connection with the idea of “selflessness,” in EMP “partiality” never disappears (*Conditions*, xxxiv). In this dual structure, one central aim of education for the gleam of light is to overcome the apparently contradictory elements of human nature—an inclination toward strong self-centeredness and the aspiration toward the whole, beyond a narrow egocentrism. Emerson fully acknowledges this dilemma as “fate”—the natural law that “[w]e can only obey our own polarity.” His “Over-Soul” is anything but a pre-existing metaphysical or immortal realm that guarantees peaceful harmony from the beginning; rather, it is the common, universal state that humans continuously struggle to build from within their fated partiality. In Emerson’s and Dewey’s process-oriented perfectionism, conversion takes place not once and for all, but here and now, again and again.

Self-transcendence, Emerson suggests, is made possible with the art of detachment. This implies a manner of living in which: “I desire and look up and put myself in the attitude of reception, but from some alien energy the visions come” (“OS,” 210). In *The Senses of Walden*, Cavell finds, as implied by the imagery of circles, a key to converting the loss of one’s way to “onward thinking” in “abandonment” and “leaving,” power is derived from “crossing, or rather leap-
The gleam of light—this is both fate and freedom—a hope that is found in our possibility and capacity to leave the state of loss and poverty (Senses, 136–37). Referring to Thoreau’s celebrated expression of this in Walden, Cavell says that leaving is “the transfiguration of mourning as grief into morning as dawn.” In Emerson and Thoreau, this experience of ecstasy does not resolve mourning all at once but continues to be “part of the work of mourning.” It is through this work of mourning that one’s prophetic voice is cultivated. The possibility that we can always depart again from within loss, by “bearing pain,” is the ground of Emerson’s hope. In EMP freedom is found in this critical moment of leaving, leaving made possible by the power of prophesy and creation. Dewey also suggests that such a manner of living is learned from aesthetic experience: “‘Detachment’ is a negative name for something extremely positive. There is no severance of self, no holding of it aloof, but fullness of participation” (AE, 262). Art enables us to transcend our habitual framework of thinking and ways of seeing, to “forget ourselves by finding ourselves in the delight of experiencing the world about us in its varied qualities and forms” (11).

The courage to detach oneself from one’s previous state and existing framework of thinking—oftentimes in the sorrowful state of the gleam of light being lost—is a key to creating a new path in expanding circles without negating the past trajectories of life. Dewey suggests the image in the expression “recurrence with difference” (173). The way of living in detachment also implies the courage to open oneself to the potential in the evolving universe, the courage to receive the otherness of the world that endlessly transcends one’s existing knowledge. Then, as Nietzsche says with Emerson, the moment visits us with “bright sparks of the fire of love in whose light we cease to understand the word, ‘I,’ as something beyond our being.” Emerson’s transcendentalism offers a standpoint that encourages us to overcome the fatal entanglement of individualization and socialization that is ever present on the path of human perfection. From the detached standpoint of life, care for one’s self and others will become inseparable. Emersonian perfectionist education may sound like a political approach, but it presents a way toward political life through, as
it were, the internal route—a route through which the personal and the public are progressively joined. The ethical, the aesthetic, and the spiritual are preconditions of the political.

_Toward Emersonian Perfectionist Education_

But how can Deweyan growth after Emerson and Cavell offer the language and theory of perfectionist education in service to the gleam of light? How can educators incorporate this other invisible, but essential route of spiritual and aesthetic education into the existing practice and discourse of democracy and education? How can we defend it from the expected charge of selfish individualism, from an apolitical, amoral, or narcissistic theory of self-creation, or from the romantization of childhood? And most challengingly, how can Emersonian perfectionist education show, in sensible language, that the life of perfection without final perfectibility is needed today precisely because we live in the age without any grand telos?

Deweyan and Emersonian perfectionist education can contribute to the reconsideration and recreation of the language of education, hence, our ways of seeing the world. The language of education is at present dominated by a debased jargon of economics (“the bottom line” and “competitiveness”) and technology (“teaching as a technology”), with the emphasis on performance targets, efficiency, and effectiveness. Such discourse is most typically found in the language of excellence and standards in connection with academic performance and achievement. Contemporary attempts to raise standards tend to take reductive, positivistic forms based upon a firm belief in definite criteria. Such a belief is illustrated by language used in educational policy—framed, as these are, by behavioristic objectives and clearly itemized achievement goals, conjoined incongruously with the language of higher moral ideals. Such a language of education is a thin and misleading abstraction from the real experience of teachers and students.

Dewey’s aesthetic idea of directive criteria can point us away from such a fixed conceptualization of criteria, and by so doing realize an
alternative understanding of excellence and standards. In his pragmatist concept of the good as the better, Dewey shows us that a search for excellence and standards is at the heart of human perfection. Criteria for excellence are not merely handed down from the past or uncritically derived from the prevailing culture; neither can they be imparted from above. Instead, measurement in itself must be grounded in an endeavor of raising excellence and standards in the ongoing interaction among teachers, students, parents, and policy makers, involving their live voices in engagement with their daily struggles. It is a cooperative project of mutual perfection, involving the creation and revision of criteria. Since growth as perfection is an endless, ongoing process, a careful attention to the visible and invisible processes of this particular growth, especially to the crucial moment of the rebirth of prophetic light, is required for a teacher in interacting with her students. Such teaching requires an eye to spiritual transformation, to a “movement of the soul” impossible to measure by “impartial” or “objective” test scores. Growth can be “measured” only by the step that the student now takes, by her voice that now speaks, and by the power of her words. The intensity of the light is not metered. It is the total weight and quality of the life as a whole; we can perceive and communicate it only in approximation.

The classroom must then become a place to cultivate the art of patient listening and imaginative seeing in resistance to the incessant threat of blindness to, and suppression of, internal light. It is only then that students and teachers come to acquire the sense of responsibility to their own words and to learn what it means to join the “city of words” (Conditions, 8). Dewey, with Emerson, would argue that hope for education is justifiable not by any fixed, absolute ground, but by the way—on the way—of living. Here the “ground” of justification is achieved through the creation of words in dialogue. Following Emersonian perfectionist education, the classroom must in some sense become the forum for a mutual finding of inner light, through awakening and remembrance. The classroom is a place, to borrow Cavell’s phrase, for “autobiographical exercises.”

But finding one’s light is something more than a merely verbal formula, or than the
assertion of one’s position in the name of social justice. Unlike the
typical orientation of narrative education, inclined toward nostalgia
and sometimes a kind of resentment, and often ending up with a
romanticizing of one’s tragic sense, the focus of Emerson’s and Dew-
ey’s perfectionist education is on the drawing out of creative energy
by transcending the tragic. As a patient acquiring of the sense of trust
in one’s own voice, it ranges over and permeates such diverse aspects
of the curriculum as history or literature, multicultural education, edu-
cation for global understanding, and citizenship education, as well
as the daily interactions of teachers and students.

Dewey’s idea of the art of communication is a good starting point
in considering how to create an environment for mutual perfection.
In Democracy and Education he presents the view that communica-
tion is the condition of growth. He says that “communication insures
participation in a common understanding” (DE, 7) and that “[c]on-
sensus demands communication” (8). In his later writing during the
1920s and 1930s he develops the idea that communication is not sim-
ply a matter of skill or means, but rather an art for creating a demo-
cratic community (PP, 350). Along these lines, in “Creative
Democracy: The Task Before Us” (1938), he introduces the idea of
“friendship” as a condition of creative democracy:

[D]emocracy as a way of life is controlled by personal faith in per-
sonal day-by-day working together with others. Democracy is the
belief that even when needs and ends or consequences are differ-
ent for each individual, the habit of amicable cooperation—which
may include, as in sport, rivalry and competition—is itself a price-
less addition to life. To take as far as possible every conflict which
arises—and they are bound to arise—out of the atmosphere and
medium of force, of violence as a means of settlement into that of
discussion and of intelligence is to treat those who disagree—even
profoundly—with us as those from whom we may learn, and in
so far, as friends . . . To cooperate by giving differences a chance
to show themselves because of the belief that the expression of
difference is not only a right of the other persons but is a means of
enriching one’s own life-experience, is inherent in the democratic
personal way of life. (“CD,” 228)
Here he makes it clear that the notion of “friends” touches upon a dimension of our moral life that precedes the political concept of “right.” It is also tied to the process of mutual education. In Art as Experience (1934), he makes it clearer that friendship and conversation are “arts of living”:

Friendship and intimate affection are not the result of information about another person even though knowledge may further their formation. But it does so only as it becomes an integral part of sympathy through the imagination. It is when the desires and aims, the interests and modes of response of another become an expansion of our own being that we understand him. We learn to see with his eyes, hear with his ears, and their results give true instruction, for they are built into our own structure. (AE, 339)

Conversation among friends involves more than the understanding of the other as the object of knowledge, or framing the other in one’s own perspective. Rather it is the matter of mutual learning by being attentive to the different other. Openness to the difference of others means the reception of the other’s life as a part of one’s own structure of thought. It provides a momentum to release oneself toward what is beyond the self.

While the Deweyan art of communication and conversation among friends can provide teachers and students with a key to achieving education for global understanding from within the classroom, a challenge still remains. Garrison cites a passage from Democracy and Education, in which Dewey identifies the need for “breaking down barriers of class, race, and national territory which kept men from perceiving the full import of their activity.” A challenge to education in these nihilistic times is how to make possible the transformative experience of breaking down the rigidities of one’s framework of thinking through the opening of one’s eyes and ears to the faces and voices of different others. In response to this challenge, I would like to make an Emersonian move and extend the Deweyan notion of the art of communication into the art of translation—translation as a specific mode of communication that at once high-
lights the gap between languages and is driven by the hope of creating a common ground of conversation.

The art of translation is crucially related to the idea of poiesis. In his aesthetic turn Dewey suggests that the education of the poet is a condition of democracy—where poetry is not the activity of an exclusive group of talented individuals, but is the possibility in each of us of our finding our own language as founders of democracy. This is a return to a vision he presented as early as in 1903 when he praised Emerson as the poet-philosopher of democracy. Dewey says, with Matthew Arnold, that “poetry is criticism of life.” Poets are “moral prophets” who, in their prophetic lights, and in their imaginative power, let us envision the world anew (AE, 350). With Keats, he claims that, not by disputing or asserting but by “whispering,” poetry exercises its power of transformation through disclosure (349). Poetry is critical and moral because its function is to “remove prejudice, do away with the scales that keep the eye from seeing, tear away the veils due to want and custom, perfect the power to perceive” (328). The prophetic and projective power exercised by the poet initiates a break. Dewey suggests that the education of the poet in each of us is a condition for perfecting democracy from within. Dewey places Emersonian perfectionist education at the intersection of the political, the aesthetic, and the moral, even the “religious.”

Emerson elaborates on poiesis as the art of word- and world-making (and re-making), an initiation of the transformation of the self and its relationship to the world. In his words, it is a “metre-making”: “it is not metres, but a metre-making argument that makes a poem—a thought so passionate and alive that like the spirit of a plant or an animal it has an architecture of its own, and adorns nature with a new thing.” The poet, he says, witnesses a “metamorphosis” (“Poet,” 205). Taking one step further, Emerson shows us that the prophetic and transforming power of the poet is related to the art of translation: “The experience of poetic creativeness [is] not found in staying at home, nor yet in traveling, but in transitions from one to the other.” This communicates to us the sense of transition and traveling involved in the activity of metre-making. In this patient act,
poetry exercises its power of resistance—to conformity and to comfortable complacency. He describes poets as “liberating gods” who help men find “within their world, another world, or nest of worlds” (“Poet,” 209). They are translators of nature into thought (211) who “re-attach things to nature and the Whole” (204). By doing so, they help us transcend our habitual ways of seeing the world, emancipate us from the “prison” of our thoughts, and make possible a “metamorphosis” (209). Serving as a translator and interpreter between men and the world, the poet produces “the best success in conversation, the magic of liberty” (210). The poet starts at home, but does not stay there. He perseveres in the in-between, in transition from one place to another. Unlike Dewey, Emerson brings us deeper into the nature of poetic language in his own poetic voice. The key to poetry’s liberation and metamorphosis lies in its power of transition, translation, and transcendence, what Emerson describes as the transitory nature of language. The boundaries of the poet’s language are always being reformulated and expanded—breaking the ground for founding. In Emerson’s discursive circles, Poirier says, “at every moment there is movement with no place to rest.”

Harold Bloom calls Emerson the “American Gnosis,” the writer who discontinuously breaks into the aboriginal absence, the Abyss, and thus, who continuously creates a new voice. Bloom asserts that for Emerson “[p]ower is an affair of crossings, of thresholds or transitional moments” and that “[p]ower is in the traversing of the black holes of rhetoric.” In each act of breaking and throwing oneself “forward” into the realm of the absence, one finds his voice in the “Newness.” Emerson tells us that the poet cannot stay within the existing categories of language and states of mind, but constantly has to move outward (“Poet,” 205).

Emersonian perfectionist education requires translation in a broader sense than the experience of self-transcendence. As a mediator between two parties whose worlds are mutually alien at the outset, the translator needs to travel from one place to another and then travel back again. In search of the shared areas of language and culture, she struggles to redefine the still indefinite boundary of one language in the light of another. Like the Emersonian poet, a translator
must have the courage to persevere in the face of uncertainty, searching gradually for a common focus through which both parties to the dialogue can perceive the world again and, with luck, can transform their mutual identities. This often involves the poet’s suffering from a sense of her own anonymity. But she knows that it is not by disputes, aggressive persuasion, problem-solving, or moral impeachment, but through the mode of mutual learning that the common may be found within diversity. In this process she must accept the impossibility of a perfect translation in order to find some common focus and to narrow the initial difference. Different voices invite us to start again from the lack of common ground by reminding us of the impossibility of full articulation, understanding, and translation. Those who have the experience of studying and living abroad undergo this sense of imperfect translation between two cultures—of crossing distances and sometimes of falling into an abyss. Dewey states that “democracy must begin at home” (PP, 368). The experience of a translator points us beyond this remark: we must unsettle ourselves and leave home to find home again.

Thus, if Dewey’s idea of the art of communication is developed into translation, diverse educational implications can be seen. For example, something of the experience of leaving home can be created in the foreign language classroom, without going abroad. Cultivating the awareness of difference and distance is a precondition for the teaching of foreign language as the art of translation. If students are encouraged to study a foreign language with a sense of the impossibility both of full translation and of perfect understanding, the very experience of difficulty may cultivate in them a drive for further perfection in their understanding of unknowable others, at the same time as a recognition of its impossibility. This approach unsettles the naive assumption that a foreign language is simply a different code for saying the same thing, realizing at the same time a kind of humility in relation to others.

Similarly, education for global understanding can benefit from the wisdom of Emersonian perfectionist education. When we face a gap as we encounter the other, we encounter Dewey’s words anew; there
is no occasion for mutual learning if we leave the gap untouched and stay safely within our separate homes or appeal to our “genuine” ideal in an attitude of self-righteousness and complacency. We cannot simply resort to a utopian vision of a global community as if the distance created by difference were merely a temporal source of insecurity, uncertainty, or even an evil to be got rid of. Both modes of life entail the danger of obliviousness, and even violence, to the lives of different others. Instead, if we follow the path of Deweyan democracy, we will start in the midst of ambiguity and groundlessness (which can become the source of further inquiry); we will gain distance in our thinking and gradually narrow the existing gap to work toward common ground. For Deweyan democracy reconstructed in the light of EMP, what is common is not pre-given but something to be realized in the process of searching; it is always on the way, in the process of becoming, but never finally perfected.

In a world into which the tragic continually and inevitably enters, perfectionist education offers another way of living with the tragic beyond the absolute distinction between good and evil, or right and wrong. Emerson, Dewey, and Cavell together suggest a way of education that can enable us to overcome the tragic that is not mired in the negativity of revenge or retaliation. The lesson of perfectionist education is indeed the art of transcendence, the pragmatic search for the better through patient dialogue as the most practical, intelligent means to live with suffering and to convert it to hope. By preparing a ground for dialogue among conflicting values and religions, the transcendental standpoint of mutual perfection serves the conversation of mankind.

Citizenship education also can be reconsidered in terms of the art of translation. In resistance to our fated drive toward totality—assimilation of the unfamiliar into the familiar and toward disclosure, and articulation of the unknown in the name of public participation and social inclusion—Deweyan democracy, combined with Emersonian perfectionist education, offers an alternative understanding of citizenship education: education with a tragic sense. Here the experience of translation is crucial to creating a breathing space for the ineffable and anonymous part of a human being. The presence of the anony-
The rekindling of the gleam of light can be a disturbing factor within a culture, and the acknowledgment of the unknown calls for the courage to reach out and welcome it. This is an education that encourages the gleam of light of the dissident and that starts with the sense of homelessness. The resuscitation of culture awaits the prophetic light of the alien. Here the art of translation is a precondition for the epistemological and cognitive understanding of different others, and an integral element of our moral life. It prepares a form of citizenship where an ethical obligation precedes equality and the politics of mutual recognition. The perspective of the gleam of light has shown that “understanding” of the other and “mutual recognition” require as their precondition the aesthetic perception into the quality of the human life as a whole: they require seeing the unseen and the unknown.

Furthermore, education for the gleam of light in Emersonian moral perfectionism reconceptualizes morality itself. It presents an alternative, far-reaching ethic of education beyond existing limitations, especially those limitations that are posed by teleological conceptions of moral or religious education. The standpoint of mutual perfection extends the reach of Dewey’s theory of the social self not only toward the ethic of care and otherness but also toward the ethics of self-reliance and self-transcendence. This is an ethics that is built not on the perspective of the “I” of the self isolated from the world, or on that of the “I” of the autonomous, rational self, but on the “I” of what Dewey envisions in “I Believe” as the individual self that is a center in the field (“IB,” 91). This is light that illuminates the whole.

With its emphasis on an encounter with one’s singularity through the “pain of individuation” as much as with the joy of communion, Emersonian perfectionist education encourages the cultivation of self-knowledge among teachers and students, but only in the way of acquiring the standpoint of otherness within and without one’s self—in order to undergo the “incessant want of knowledge” (Tears, 22). This requires an openness to unforeseen possibilities and the aspiration toward further perfections of the self, but this is not to be understood, still less to be realized, in any self-conscious self-aggrandizement, still
less in any narcissism. Rather it is realized in self-transcendence through an immersion in those challenges that confrontation with the other presents—confrontations with the demands of other people but also with those difficulties in (the otherness of) what is taught. In the encounter with one’s limitations, the energy for the affirmation of life is released through mutual illumination and intensification.

The perspective of mutual perfection transcends conventional boundaries in the moral concepts of egoism and altruism, of autonomy and heteronomy, and in debates between virtue ethics of care and universalistic moral reasoning. The mediation of these divisions through perfectionist education is not achieved without courage, to be sure: “the courage to be what you are” is an idea that Cavell finds running through Emerson to Nietzsche (Pitch, 35), and that Dewey appropriates from Emerson in Construction and Criticism. Such courage, from the perspective of mutual perfection, implies the self’s courage to receive and respond to the unknowability of the other, and the courage to open oneself to the potential of the evolving universe, the courage to receive the otherness of the world endlessly transcending one’s existing knowledge. In education for mutual perfection, such courage cannot be taught as a moral imperative, an isolated item of virtue, or a trait of character, as the telos on which moral education is grounded and toward which it should be directed. There are many occasions when moral imperatives, such as the call for courage, open-mindedness, or sympathy, lose their purchase on our lives, as if the grounds of morality that those concepts have seemed to secure are shaken, as if they falter and abandon us. It is then that we face the limitation of moral concepts as the object of knowledge, and that we become aware of the need to come face to face with ourselves and with the other in the here and now.

The Rekindling of the Gleam of Light

Starting, in “Experience,” with the sceptical question, “WHERE do we find ourselves?” Emerson concludes his essay with a scene of awakening:

...
The rekindling of the gleam of light

I am at first apprised of my vicinity to a new and excellent region of life. By persisting to read or to think, this region gives further sign of itself, as it were in flashes of light, in sudden discoveries of its profound beauty and repose.33

This is the moment of the rebirth. This internal transformation is crucially related, Emerson claims, to the consummatory and ecstatic moment of aesthetic experience—the moment of conversion when, in the flash of light, one re-encounters the intensity and depth of life. It is the moment of turning away from the darkness to the light, of seeing oneself and the world in a new light.

The imagery that has been elaborated in this book has served to evoke the vision of a Deweyan-Emersonian perfectionist education. We have seen that the gleam of light is the symbol of aesthetic and spiritual impulses, of being and becoming; it implies the inventive combination of the spiritual and the natural, the transcendental and the pragmatic; and it is crucially related to the experience of internal transformation. It enables a new appreciation of the role of impulse (its prophetic and imaginative power now evident) as the spur and driving force of creative intelligence. Yet this light is plainly not the forceful, unremitting illumination of the sun: it defies any easy optimism. We have been moved beyond the conventional framework of “Dewey between Hegel and Darwin.” At the same time, in the three-sided dialogue between Emerson, Dewey, and Cavell, Emerson’s thought has been reclaimed as social and democratic philosophy.

To assert the spiritual and aesthetic turn in Deweyan growth is in no way to deny its social philosophy. As Dewey later restates, it is a shifting of attention in order to shed a new light on the role of an individual, say, a private, dimension of democracy; rebuilding the public by beginning at home. The individual redeemed by the gleam of light is a manifestation of the new individualism Dewey envisions. Yet the spiritual and aesthetic turn in no way points us to the secluded or isolated individual: this is not the self in contemplation. In Deweyan-Emersonian perfectionist education, the rekindling of the gleam of light requires an encounter with the other(s). The experience of morning suggested by Emerson in the above passage is our re-turn to
the otherness of the world, turning away from our captivity in the
cave, whether or not we are alone there. Aesthetic and spiritual expe-
rience also lays the way for the criticism of the self and society as a
precondition of the political. As Dewey says, “criticism, self-criticism,
is the road to [the] release of [creative activity]” (CC, 143). Self-
transcendence through self-criticism takes place in the common
world, in the ordinary, and it does this not once, but again and again.
This is the philosophy of continuous departure—a philosophy that
acknowledges a space for the infinite and the unknown, and that re-
sists our fated drive toward assimilation into totality.

At the heart of Deweyan-Emersonian perfectionist education must
be the rekindling of the gleam of light, but it must do this starting
from a state of loss. The specific loss we suffer today is the state of
nihilism in democracy and education, the state in which the sense of
what is beyond, the sense of otherness, and the sense of the whole,
have been obliterated. Dewey and Emerson, however, give us hope
that we shall be able to experience the moment of conversion in self-
transcendence. Conscientious and devoted educators, as well as many
young people who have lost their way, await such flashes of illumina-
tion—irradiating from a source that they have perhaps not yet seen
but that they wish, or can be led to wish, or in any case need to see.

At the start of the twenty-first century we cannot merely rely on
progress. We cannot simply start with the presumption of light. As
Dewey once said, “Progress [is] not necessarily an advance and, prac-
tically never an advance in all respects” (AE, 216). Neither should we
think of progress as in simple contrast to the reactionary turn to the
past. Such dichotomous thinking will obscure the subtle light that
dawns on the horizon. Hence we need to transcend any conventional
boundary between, for example, “Traditional vs. Progressive Educa-
tion” (EE, 17), as Dewey put this in 1938, or between moral absolutism
and relativism, say, or for that matter between political liberalism and
communitarianism. Instead we will do better to reconsider liberal
learning: learning as a patient process of liberating human impulse
from within, through our engagement with culture, tradition, and
texts. In other words, EMP works as an intermediary and interdisci-
plinary force that permeates all dimensions of education—whether it involves human relationships between teachers and students in the classroom, or diverse realms of the curriculum.

With these implications for contemporary democracy and education, Deweyan growth can reemerge as holistic growth—growth toward a whole, with the irruption of departure and loss. Growth is the infinite process of self-overcoming in expanding circles. It is precisely because we cannot simply rely on progress any more that we need Dewey’s Emersonian prophetic pragmatism, the philosophy of endless growth in our attained and unattained perfection. This alerts us to the prevailing instrumentalism with its emphasis on skills and its reduction of knowledge to information—a form of assimilation into totality that incessantly deprives us of the intensity of the gleam of light. Moreover, Deweyan progressivism, reconstructed as Emersonian perfectionist education, is not for childhood alone: it is a lifelong process of perfection. Perfectionist education for the liberation of human potential makes possible a democracy attained yet unattained, our best hope. This involves transcendence from within: only by pursuing a passage from the innermost to the outmost can the light one lives by be hoped eventually to illuminate the public world.