In the past several decades in the United States there has been a remarkable revival of interest in two (perhaps the two) of the most famous, or influential, American claimants to the title of philosopher: John Dewey and Ralph Waldo Emerson. From the point of view of a philosopher and teacher such as myself, this revival of interest is a valuable, heartening turn of events. But I find that it has come at a high price, namely one in which Emerson’s so-called transcendentalism is largely subordinated to Dewey’s pragmatism. I mean that the tendency on the part of most participants in these matters has been to think of Emerson as essentially a forerunner of pragmatism, whose writings, so far as philosophically useful, are taken up, and taken forward, in Dewey’s massive corpus of works. The resulting inattention to the details of Emerson’s texts contributes, to my mind, to a thinning of American intellectual and cultural life, which is not unequivocally expressed by pragmatism but rather, it seems to me, by an irreducible tension between pragmatic and transcendentalist instincts and expressions. This is not something that manifests itself with particular clarity within the field of professional philosophy, where both of these instincts are themselves heavily, not of course wholly, subordinated to styles of analytical philosophy that go back to inheritances from England and from Vienna during the first half of the twentieth century. The tension is manifest most clearly, perhaps, in the history of American literature and in America’s contribution to the development of the worldwide art of cinema. But these are not matters to which professional philosophy on this continent has for the most part felt that it must be responsive.
Whether and how the issue between pragmatism and transcendentalism will come to matter to philosophy generally (as I hope it will) will depend upon whether the tension proves to be an expression not merely of a parochial conflict confined within the arena of a few American professors of philosophy, but finds resonance within the experience of thinkers formed also by intellectual and cultural ferment beyond these borders. Naoko Saito is well placed to contribute to the determination of this question, in two respects. First, she takes up the interaction of Dewey and Emerson at perhaps its most sensitive and revelatory point, namely in their respective views of education. Dewey wrote in virtually all the fields into which philosophy is broken, but in none is his influence, intellectual and practical, more deeply and currently active than in the philosophy of education. Emerson, strikingly, does not divide philosophy into fields, but all of his writing can be seen as directed to what he calls the youth or the student, so that the totality of it embodies a pedagogical ambition, implicitly declaring that his culture as a whole stands in need of education. Second, the knowledge Naoko Saito deploys of the educational environments, intellectual and institutional, of both Japan and of the United States, gives her that double perspective which must enter into the philosophical assessment I find called for.

Her response to the strains shared in Dewey and Emerson brings to attention the details of their texts in a way that has so often been missing from these late debates arranged between them. Something I am particularly grateful for in her work is that, while she brings out the intimacy between the writings of these thinkers, she never loses sight of the differences between them. It is, it seems to me, precisely because of this awareness of differences that she is able, somewhat paradoxically, to reach back to the details of Emerson’s decisive intervention in American culture in order to find the philosophical strength and sympathy with which to defend and enrich the reception of Dewey’s work in the face of the periodic waves of criticism it has attracted, along with periods of rediscovery, throughout the twentieth century. It is a notable achievement.

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July 19, 2004