Chapter 1: In Search of Light in Democracy and Education: Deweyan Growth in an Age of Nihilism

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... when the intervals of darkness come, as come they must,—when the sun is hid, and the stars withdraw their shining,—we repair to the lamps which were kindled by their ray, to guide our steps to the East again, where the dawn is. (Emerson, “The American Scholar”)

Indifference is the evidence of current apathy, and apathy is testimony to the fact that the public is so bewildered that it cannot find itself. . . . What is the public? If there is a public, what are the obstacles in the way of its recognizing and articulating itself? (Dewey, *The Public and Its Problems*)

In *The Public and Its Problems* John Dewey criticized the democracy of American society in the 1920s. The “eclipse of the public” that he warns against is not only a matter of political participation but also a moral issue that has a bearing on one’s way of living. Dewey captured the ethos of his times in terms of a sense of “hollowness.” This is the sense that one cannot articulate one’s feelings or even that, in the loss of one’s own taste, one does not know “what one really wants.” In Dewey’s view, the weakening of the personal sense of being is tied up with the loss of a sense of the common good in the public realm. When one’s voice is released simply as a matter of superficial self-presentation, it cannot genuinely contribute to the common good. In *Individualism Old and New*, published in 1930, Dewey describes this state in terms of the “tragedy of the ‘lost individual.’”

In the crisis of an American society afflicted with the rugged individualism of capitalism and the mass culture of standardization and uniformity, conformity is a debased condition of democracy, a condition
that robs human beings of their capacity to be “captains of their own souls” (ION, 67). Dewey speaks of the loss of one’s integrity—in effect, of the light one lives by, with its power to illuminate the darkness of the political. His call for democratic participation and the rebuilding of the Great Community is driven by the sense of crisis over the spiritual void of democracy, a void created in the rift between the private and the public.

In his idea of the “tragedy of the ‘lost individual’” Dewey is prophetic about the fate of democracy and education in late modernity, where material affluence and political freedom do not assuage a burgeoning spiritual degeneration. With the loss of what Dewey called the dimension of the personal way of life, democracy itself is threatened. With the tendency toward selfish individualism has come the loss of a sense of responsibility toward others and toward the future, and a general thinning of the ethical life. We would like to reach out our hands to others beyond the narrow confines of our private lives, but we do not know how. The denial of others is a tragic phenomenon in our ordinary lives. Apathy among young people displaces the inclination to learn and grow. In these contexts, for many young students school is not necessarily a place for experiencing the joy of learning, for reconfirming their sense of existence, or for that matter for finding their own voices. Education, which is so often driven by assumptions of gaining and raising (whether this takes the form of the appeal to raise standards, or to achieve excellence, or to teach right and wrong, or to increase the understanding of other cultures), often aggravates, ironically, the ubiquitous sense of loss or irrelevance that afflicts teachers and students. As if to combat this, however, or to cover over the pervasive sense of loss with something else, the quest for absolute goals gains momentum in recent educational reforms. Such limitations are symptoms of nihilism and cynicism in democracy and education. The loss of intensity of life among young people simultaneously darkens the culture as a whole.

Dewey calls philosophy a “general theory of education.” He claims that our task of reconstructing democracy involves the endeavor of *philosophy as education*, the critical reexamination and
transformation of the moral and spiritual basis of our living. The challenge to Dewey’s philosophy today is how to sustain his hope for democracy and education, while resisting its familiar reduction to a naive optimism of progressive growth; how to make best use of his pragmatism as a wisdom for living with and beyond the incipient nihilism of our times, to address the spiritual crisis of the “tragedy of the lost individual”; and how to summon it to the task of revitalizing and bridging the disjoined private and public realms. To do so we require another mode of education—a kind of education that cannot be fully grasped in the language of standardization, quantification, and moralization, but one whose significance may well be recognized by many educators in their daily struggles. We need to reclaim a lost dimension in education, one in which we can inspire the invisible, patient transformation of the spirit—education as the constant process of conversion, turning away from loss toward the rekindling of light.

As an attempt to respond to such a call, this book tries to revive and critically to reconstruct the contemporary significance of the Deweyan task of democracy and education, in dialogue with Emersonian moral perfectionism—a perfectionism without final perfectibility through which the spiritual and aesthetic dimension, and the tragic nature, of Deweyan growth can be reclaimed. To be engaged in critical dialogue with Dewey in the light of the changing situation of our times, this book attempts to show that Cavell’s Emersonian moral perfectionism is a standpoint in light of which the recessive, Emersonian dimension in Dewey’s pragmatism can be illuminated. As a philosopher of growth, Dewey never gave up his faith in democracy. His struggle to reorient American society toward liberal-communitarian democracy—the reconstruction of a public space in which individual freedom is realized within community—can be understood as an expression of his hope for democracy. That democracy can always fall into a state of conformity means that it must never be allowed to settle down in some fixed telos; it is a state forever to be worked toward, never finally to be achieved. In our age when a simple faith in growth cannot suffice, we need to reclaim this spirit of perfec-
tion, which is, so I shall argue in this book, no less than the amelioration, liberation, and reconstruction that Dewey shares with Emerson and Cavell; but we must do this in such a way as to be in touch with, to start from within, a sense of loss and powerlessness.

It is in response to the nihilistic crisis of democracy and education in our times that this book develops, and it does this around a figure that is sustained in Emerson and developed by Dewey. Emerson writes: “A man should learn to detect and watch that gleam of light which flashes across his mind from within.” This is an image that symbolizes the sense of being and becoming in the path of perfection. It is an idea that Emerson explicitly discusses in his “Self-Reliance,” and that Dewey appropriates in Construction and Criticism. The gleam of light is a guiding metaphor for the themes, in Emersonian moral perfectionism and Deweyan growth, of the tragedy of the lost individual and the rebirth of the new. It illuminates also other Emersonian connections with Dewey—growth as the unending expansion of circles, self-transcendence in the here and now, impulse as the crucial beginning and directional force in intelligence. It indicates also perhaps a way to the critical reconstruction of that intelligence. The orientation it suggests points also to the possibility of “reconstruction in philosophy”—Emerson’s and Dewey’s common project in reconfiguring philosophy as involving our ways of living and as inseparable from our aesthetic and religious experience of the ordinary. It points also, therefore, to the process of education as conversion. Crucially related to Emerson’s ideas of self-reliance and self-transcendence, the gleam of light is recaptured as a symbol not of isolated individualism but of receptivity to otherness. Furthermore, in a way characteristic of American philosophy, Emerson and Dewey together show that the gleam of light represents nothing substantive, but an ongoing process (or, say, stream) with its power of prophesy in discontinuity. Cavell rehearses Thoreau’s words that morning comes after mourning: we come to rejoice in the arrival of the light only through undergoing and leaving the darkness. It is in relation to this imagery that the later chapters in the book follow the thematic development from loss
toward rebirth, concluding by offering a vision and theory of perfectionist education.

The Need for Reconstructing Deweyan Growth

The reconstructing of Deweyan growth in the light of Emersonian moral perfectionism is needed, especially in view of the criticism that has been directed toward it. The idea of growth underlies Dewey’s philosophy of democracy and education. He proclaims: “Education is all one with growing; it has no end beyond itself” (DE, 54). The aim of education, for Dewey, is to produce more growth in a child, to foster a continuous reorganization of a child’s experience in his or her interaction with the adult world. To the question, “What is the criterion of growth?” his answer is the “principle of the continuity of experience.” This we might call growth without fixed ends.

Dewey developed this notion of growth in the wake of his conversion from Hegelian absolutism to Darwinian naturalism. Unlike his former concept of self-realization directed toward a final end-point, Hegel’s Absolute, growth came to be seen later as a contingent and endlessly evolving natural process. It is a form of development that takes place in the interaction of an organism and its environment without the positing of a single, eternal resting point outside that process.

Dewey’s moral vision for a democratic community is based upon this naturalistic philosophy of growth. Growth is an ongoing interaction between the innovation of the younger generation, on the one hand, and the wisdom and cultural heritage of the older, on the other. To liberate the full potential of a child, the mechanism of naturalistic growth necessitates constraints given by culture and through other human beings. At the same time, the immaturity of a child is not, and should never be considered to be, a mere preparatory step to the mature state of an adult. Each stage of growth has its own intrinsic value as part of the ongoing process of growing (DE, 56). This interactive process of growing is an essential condition for the healthy and flexible reconstruction of any democratic society.
Dewey’s idea of growth without fixed ends has been controversial from his time to ours. It raises the perennial question, “Growth towards what?” The question has been raised mainly by those who firmly believe that there must be definite ends for education. In Dewey’s time, Boyd H. Bode phrased the question as “Growth whither?” and pointed out that Dewey’s progressive view of growth could not provide a democratic principle in “a topsy-turvy world.” I. L. Kandel also criticized Dewey’s child-centered view of education for its lack of clear values and, hence, for promoting the development of children without a sense of direction, responsibility, or ideals. He condemned Dewey for fostering nihilism and anti-intellectualism in America. Randolph Bourne, who opposed Dewey’s support of America’s entry into World War I, criticized his pragmatism for lacking definite ends beyond the principle of adjustment. A concern over the relativism possibly entailed by Dewey’s idea of growth has resurfaced again in our times. Allan Bloom, worried by the nihilism and cultural relativism of contemporary American youth, criticizes the lack of moral virtues and fundamental principles in Dewey’s pragmatism. And John Patrick Diggins sees him as refusing to define any specific ends toward which education should aspire. Still today those who claim a need for “moral” education attack Deweyan “child-centered” education as a cause of the degeneration of education.

These criticisms might well encourage skepticism about Dewey’s Darwinian naturalistic philosophy of growth. They present him as not having any fixed ends, or more particularly, moral values, principles, or ideals that can guide children in the right direction. They worry, therefore, that Dewey’s philosophy of education and its principle of growth will lead children to moral relativism, uncertainty, and chaos—all insidious forms of democratic freedom. “Growth towards what?” expresses the kind of worry that many educators still feel. It is this worry that points education in the direction of more stable, conservative solutions, either by reinforcing moral discipline and inculcating moral restraints on unbridled freedom, or by fixing measurable standards for student achievement.
It is against this background that another related sense of anxiety is expressed, now more than ever: that Dewey’s pragmatism is overly optimistic, that it lacks perhaps a sense of tragedy. In Dewey’s times, Bourne attacked Dewey’s progressive good will, raising doubts over whether the method of intelligent control and its instrumentalist attitude toward life could deal adequately with the crises of human life. Richard Hofstadter argued that Dewey’s assumptions regarding the pre-established harmony between individual growth and the interests of a democratic society were optimistic, if not utopian. Even contemporary Deweyan scholars who are basically sympathetic to Dewey share similar concerns. Steven C. Rockefeller, though a staunch defender of Dewey’s spiritual vision of democracy, thinks that he fails to develop a convincing account of human evil. Cornel West asserts that Dewey does not fully escape an “Emersonian theodicy” of optimism, robust individualism and the enshrinement of power. Raymond D. Boisvert argues that Dewey’s pragmatism, in so far as it equates scientific advancement with moral progress, is typical of naive nineteenth-century modernity. As a result, his empiricism lacks a tragic sensibility, a sensitivity to a limitation inherent in the nature of things, what Boisvert calls “the Nemesis of Necessity.” Such criticism demands that the implications of Deweyan progressive growth be reconsidered, especially in the light of the nihilistic tendencies of our times delineated above.

From Rorty to Cavell and Emerson: Another Way toward the Antifoundationalism of Deweyan Pragmatism

Reconstructing Deweyan growth in the light of Emersonian moral perfectionism can also make a new contribution to other ways of interpreting Deweyan pragmatism, in particular one that is offered by Rorty. In response to the question, “Growth towards what?” Richard Rorty’s reconstruction of Deweyan pragmatism is a significant contribution. From his Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature (1980) to his most recent writings, Rorty sheds light on the cogency of Dewey’s pragmatism. In Truth and Progress (1998) his “hypothetical” reading
of Dewey’s position as situated between Hegel and Darwin elaborately and explicitly demonstrates the potential of Dewey’s Darwinian concept of growth.23

This book, however, takes the stance not only that Rorty’s approach to reconstruction in philosophy omits an internal tension hidden between the Hegelian and Darwinian components in Dewey’s concept of growth, but also that Rorty’s proclivity toward demystifying Dewey’s pragmatism as a philosophy of power and progress discloses his blindness to the sense of the tragic implied therein—Dewey’s keen sense of the “tragedy of the lost individual.” It is claimed that Rorty is subject to a limitation common in Hegelian and Darwinian philosophies, and therefore common to any thinker positioned on a continuum drawn between them: these are philosophies of totality; that is, philosophies characterized by the view that reality is in principle understandable in terms of a coherent whole, the price of which is a tendency toward the reductionism of difference to the same.24 I shall argue that, behind Rorty’s relativist approach and anti-foundationalism, Rorty’s Dewey, in its concentration on power and progress, masks a tragic and spiritual dimension latent in Dewey’s idea of an unending process of growth: the metaphysics of ongoing growth that can be captured only by paying close attention to its process; and the sense of attained and unattained perfection, a process symbolized by the flickering of the gleam of light. Rorty’s anti-foundationalism makes it harder for Deweyan pragmatism to be appreciated among those who persistently raise the question, “Growth towards what?”

Besides Rorty, there are a number of other scholars who have contributed to the revival of Dewey’s pragmatism whose thoughts I shall discuss in the book. Their interpretations, however, which are again based mainly upon the framework of Dewey between Hegel and Darwin, similarly fail to elucidate the suppressed dimension of Deweyan growth. Ironically, the tendency to sanctify Dewey casts his philosophical outlook in more optimistic terms, despite claims to the contrary, and in so doing exposes a kind of naivete in the face of the real challenge posed by the contemporary democracy and the continuing
criticism that Dewey lacks the tragic sense. Consequently, Deweyan progressive education, tainted as it has become with the aura of naive optimism, has been enthusiastically taken up by conservatives as the scapegoat for the decline of academic achievement and morality. As educational policy and practice around the world illustrate, however, absolutist tendencies in education muffle and dispel the sense of loss and the invisible in their drive toward fixation and articulation.

A part of the aim of this book, therefore, is to search for an alternative way to reclaim Dewey’s ateleological notion of growth through a recognition of its perfectionist spirit—without falling either into Rortian antifoundationalism or a reactionary turn to absolutism and the quest for certainty in democracy and education; it is to show that, if the meanings of these terms are salvaged from their typical misunderstanding, the “ateleological” concept of growth and the “antifoundationalism” of Deweyan pragmatism can enable us to transcend the tragic toward hope.

To bring this about, however, Dewey’s pragmatism must be reconstructed. By giving a serious ear to the conservative’s worry, “Growth towards what?” it is necessary to redefine carefully the meaning of progressive growth. The reading of Dewey needs to recount why growth without fixed ends is still important today and to demonstrate the significance of his naturalistic view of moral life. In so doing there is a need to overcome a limitation in interpreting Dewey’s idea of growth solely from the perspective of “Dewey between Hegel and Darwin,” and to reconstruct Dewey’s concept of progressive growth in such a way as to make it a viable philosophy of democracy and education in response to nihilism. To this end, this book explores Emerson’s perfectionism and the idea of the gleam of light as a third standpoint, beyond Hegel and Darwin—as a recessive dimension in Deweyan growth.

Dewey has called Emerson “the Philosopher of Democracy,” and a careful examination of his writings reveals an undeniable presence of Emerson throughout Dewey’s career. With the recent resurgence of American pragmatism, the connection between these thinkers has become one of the focal points of philosophical discourse. While a
majority of the defenders of Dewey not only find a connection between Dewey and Emerson but claim that Emerson is the fountainhead of American pragmatism, Cavell remains firmly opposed to this placing of Emerson. He takes a powerful minority position by claiming that Dewey is not Emersonian and that Emerson is not a pragmatist. The defenders of Dewey respond by charging that Cavell misunderstands Dewey. The issue remains unresolved.

Within the context of this debate, I shall highlight Cavell’s idea of Emersonian moral perfectionism—a philosophy that I shall argue taps a latent dimension in Dewey’s concept of growth, the idea of the attained and unattained perfection. It is in Dewey’s emphasis on this, I shall argue, that some connection can be explored between his view on growth and Emerson’s sense of human perfection. The Emerson represented by Cavell is a social (as opposed to an individualistic) and a democratic (as opposed to an elitist) figure. Further, as Hilary Putnam points out, it is Dewey who “anticipated Cavell’s identification of philosophy with education.”

At the heart of Cavell’s Emersonian moral perfectionism lies the idea of philosophy as education, philosophy as “education of grown-ups.” Rereading Dewey through Emersonian perfectionism, and connecting impulse with the gleam of light, elucidates the spiritual and aesthetic dimension of Deweyan growth. This helps us envision a conception of growth that is altogether richer than the one evident in his characteristically scientific discourse with its associated notion of intelligence. But it is important to resist too quick a reading of the imagery here. The lambent illumination that is implied must be understood in terms of the necessary, faltering discontinuities of growth—the leap that is the very dynamic of expanding circles, of which Emerson speaks. It is with this in mind that Dewey’s language, in dialogue with Emerson and Cavell, is critically reexamined and reclaimed as the language of education, a language sensitive to the experience of the child, to the child’s necessary interaction with the adult, and to the child within any adult who continues to grow.

I shall try to show that Dewey’s pragmatism can provide an anti-foundationalism different from Rorty’s in what might be called the
Emersonian middle ground – going beyond the dichotomy of no
ground and the absolute ground, and enabling a searching for and
cultivating of the ground through which private and public lives
come to be related. Emerson’s idea of perfection, because of its simi-
larity to and difference from Dewey’s growth, and because of and de-
spite Cavell’s criticism of Dewey, has the capacity to reconstruct
Dewey’s pragmatism from within. In this sense, I shall side with Cavell
but draw a conclusion different from his. Namely, I shall agree to the
effect that the internal tensions, ambiguousness and precariousness
of Dewey’s thought can, when elucidated in the Emersonian gleam of
light, offer that thought the momentum to transcend with its pro-
phetic force the common limitation in his Hegelian and Darwinian
horizons—the limitation that, in its proclivity toward totalities of
power and progress, tends to expel the tragic from the understanding
of the human condition. In a three-sided conversation among Emer-
son, Cavell, and Dewey, I shall attempt to draw out possibilities to
which we are sometimes deafened by the sonorous proclamation of
Deweyan pragmatism and progressive growth. Lending our ears to
this quieter, muted Emersonian voice—in Dewey and in us—can, I
believe, guide the lost individual in this age of nihilism out of tragedy
and toward hope.

Inevitably, Deweyan growth reconstructed in the light of Emerson-
ian moral perfectionism will turn our eyes into philosophy as educa-
tion—education as the continuous process of conversion,
metamorphosis, and internal transformation, toward the rebirth of
one’s lost light. It guides us to the Emersonian passage from the in-
most to the outmost as a way of bridging the private and the public.
Among all there are three distinctive contributions of Emerson’s and
Dewey’s perfectionist education. First, it presents us with a secular-
ized or naturalized notion of conversion in place of the Christian no-
tion of conversion. In Emerson’s and Dewey’s process-oriented idea
of perfectionism, conversion does not take place once and for all, but
is taking place in the here and now, and again and again. Second,
Emerson and Dewey show us that the process of cultivating the gleam
of light requires the encounter with the other—one that helps us re-
member and recover our gleam of light. The gleam of light in their American thinking is released from the isolated inner soul back to life as a whole including social relationship with others. Third, Emerson and Dewey in their idea of the cultivation of the gleam of light point us to the significance of aesthetic education, one in which poeisis is at the heart of political democracy.

The Structure of the Book

In subsequent chapters, the project takes the following steps. Chapter 2 initiates the reexamination of Rorty’s revival of Dewey’s pragmatism within the framework of “Dewey between Hegel and Darwin.” In response to the perennial question, “Growth towards what?” and the concomitant criticism directed at Dewey’s claim of the continuity of the moral and the natural that is made possible through the application of intelligence, Rorty presents a way of rereading Dewey’s pragmatism in a relativist and antifoundationalist direction. While Rorty’s position is criticized by other inheritors of Dewey’s pragmatism, including Hilary Putnam, both Rorty and its critics stand within the framework of Dewey between Hegel and Darwin. In this common framework, their defense as well as their criticisms, and their debate itself, disclose a totalizing tendency latent in Dewey’s philosophy of growth, especially his concept of the scientific method—a tendency that frustrates the kind of reading of Dewey’s pragmatism that might best meet the anxiety of our times.

To find a way out of this impasse, chapter 3 takes a radical turn and sheds new light on a latent dimension in Dewey’s naturalistic philosophy of growth. This is done by putting Emerson in dialogue with Dewey. Scholarship on the connection between Dewey and Emerson within the recent revival of American pragmatism confirms again the plausibility of this direction of thought. At the same time, however, the opposing interpretations of the relationship between contemporary pragmatists and Cavell cautions against making any easy connections. Yet the paradoxical relationships between Dewey and Emerson, and between the defenders of Dewey and Cavell, are
themselves a rich source for reconstructing Dewey’s philosophy in its Emersonian direction, beyond Hegel and Darwin. Cavell’s dissenting voice must be more attentively listened to in order that the strongest possible reconstruction in Dewey’s philosophy of growth might be achieved.

Chapter 4 introduces Cavell’s idea of Emersonian moral perfectionism (hereafter abbreviated as EMP) and offers it as a critical base from which to reexamine Dewey’s naturalistic philosophy of growth. Despite Cavell’s refusal to call Dewey an Emersonian perfectionist, his celebration of Emerson’s idea of perfection bears similarities, in certain respects, to the way Dewey celebrates Emerson as a philosopher of democracy and of education. An overview of some of Dewey’s writings in the light of EMP provides further evidence for this claim. On the strength of this, I shall tentatively hold Cavell’s criticism in suspension, taking the view that Cavell’s refusal to call Dewey Emersonian does not do full justice to Dewey.

Chapter 5 presents a reading of Dewey’s metaphysics of growth reinterpreted in the light of EMP as a middle way beyond relativist abrogation of foundations and their maintenance in absolutism. I shall represent his concept of habit reconstruction in the naturalistic process of growth as transactional holism: the notion of a never-complete unity that is composed of ongoing processes of interaction between ever-changing factors. Dewey’s idea of the ends-means relationship, along with Emerson’s ends, takes the perfection of life to be understood solely as perfecting in the present participial form. Dewey and Emerson do not deny the concept of telos per se, but their philosophy of the attained and unattained self rethinks teleology. Challenging the very foundation for the question, “Growth towards what?” Dewey and Emerson shift the focus of the question to how: How shall we continue to create and recreate better ends on the path of further growth?

Turning away from the proximity of these writers, chapter 6 emphasizes the distance that Dewey creates in his paradoxical relationship with Emerson. Dewey’s writings, challenged further, still want to seek a response to the question concerning the criteria for growth:
how can a good end be determined at each moment of perfecting? Dewey’s answer is his pragmatic and evolutionary concept of socially revised criteria. At this point, Deweyan growth starts to deviate from EMP. The way Dewey describes a recalcitrant child in the classroom illustrates this. In contrast, Cavell’s description of the Emersonian child represents the unconventional voice that unsettles convention. In comparison with the literary brilliance of both Emerson and Cavell, and the simultaneous energizing and destabilizing of thought that this enables, Dewey’s writing is famously prosaic, lacking the capacity itself to illustrate the processes through which criteria are socially revised. This is not merely a stylistic difference, but one that affects and is affected by the contents of their philosophies. Cavell’s criticism of Dewey’s inadequate use of language is now heard anew as a voice of warning against a totalizing tendency in Dewey’s philosophy of growth, a tendency at odds with the Emersonian direction toward infinity.

Chapter 7 endeavors to redirect Dewey’s idea of growth to EMP, and to rescue it from this totalizing tendency. It attempts to draw his idea of naturalistic impulse into a nexus with Emerson’s notion of the gleam of light. As a symbol of our aesthetic and spiritual impulses, the gleam of light originates in the undivided condition of nature, embodying our aspiration for fulfilling life. A link between Dewey’s idea of impulse and Emerson’s gleam of light offers a promising clue to reconstructing Deweyan growth in the light of EMP. It also brings Dewey’s transactional holism closer to Emerson’s idea of growth in expanding circles. Dewey’s aesthetic and quasi-religious concept of directive criteria represents this holistic growth. Closely related to the prophetic impulse and imagination, this shows the way to a better vision of life, by initiation, projection, and discontinuity. Directive criteria embody the moment of perfecting, the nexus point of the attained and the unattained self.

In response to the question of whether his progressive notion of growth can still be viable in times marked by uncertainty and the sense of loss, chapter 8 reexamines the sense of the tragic that is implied in Dewey’s reconstructed view of growth as EMP. This is shown
in his resistance to the “tragedy of the lost individual” in the spiritual crisis of democracy and education. This side of Dewey is given a further depth by Emerson’s second sense of the tragic as beyond mere mourning over loss: this is the tragic understood in terms of the proximity of evanescence and luminosity in the gleam of light, and of the double condition of democracy attained and unattained. In response to the standard criticism that Dewey lacks a sense of the tragic, I shall argue that Deweyan growth is peculiarly attuned to the sense of the tragic that we must face today: it can be reread as a warning against our obliviousness to the double condition of human beings, that is, the threatening force of nihilism, the obliviousness that flattens our ethical lives. Resisting the abrogation of hope in our times, Dewey, after Emerson and Cavell, helps us re-see and re-assess the tragic sense of democracy and education in postindustrial society. Here Emerson’s “antifoundationalism,” which is to be distinguished from Rorty’s, guides us to a way of transcending the tragic—a middle way of living beyond the restricted, fixed choice between no ground and absolute ground.

In chapter 9, as conclusion, I adumbrate a vision and theory of Deweyan-Emersonian perfectionist education: education as the constant process of conversion, epitomized by the rekindling of the gleam of light. The chapter will try to show how perfectionist education can engender the aspiration for creative democracy, reconstituting the private and the public. Such a rereading of Dewey is important today, not only because of his huge influence on education in the last hundred years, but also in the light of the recurrent misreading of his views, both by progressive educators and in conservative reactions to them.

In the aesthetic turn of his later years, Dewey tells us that reawakening the intensity of living by cultivating the prophetic impulse—in effect, the gleam of light—is a crucial step to creative democracy. I shall show how this connects with Emersonian self-transcendence, which calls not only on the art of communication, but also that of translation. It is in this context that the poiesis that Dewey calls creative intelligence plays a significant role. A broader concept of intelli-
gence than the scientific method of thinking, this is the art of remaking the self and the world, and a condition for the criticism and (re)construction of democracy.

Inevitably, perfectionist education puts an emphasis on friendship. In the education of the gleam of light, we are not engaged in isolated or secluded meditation, or in a kind of aesthetic self-indulgence. It is in the patient process of the conjoint metamorphosis of the self and the culture that the human soul is reborn: this requires receptivity, detachment, and the orientation toward the other. Such a line of thought will contribute to a pervasive reconstruction of the ethics of education, beyond the existing teleological concepts of moral education and in favor of an ethics before moral imperatives and moral reasoning. Such an approach has implications also, it should be clear, for citizenship education and education for global understanding. The spiritual and aesthetic dimensions of Deweyan-Emersonian perfectionist education are preconditions of political education. Perfectionist education can, thus, provide a third way, beyond progressivism and traditionalism: it is liberal learning in dialogue between the innovation of impulse and initiation into culture.