The Gleam of Light

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The debate surrounding Rorty’s reinterpretation of Dewey has shown a limitation of defending Dewey’s naturalistic philosophy of growth solely within the framework of “Dewey between Hegel and Darwin.” A way out of this impasse is suggested by Ralph Waldo Emerson, whom Dewey calls the “Philosopher of Democracy.” Historical and textual evidence as well as recent scholarship on their connection demonstrates Dewey’s undeniable connection with Emerson. Among those who today consider Emerson to be the source of American pragmatism, however, Stanley Cavell stands out in virtue of his eloquent resistance to any easy connection between Emerson and Dewey. He is at pains to stress profound differences in their thought. The defenders of Dewey respond by arguing that Cavell misrepresents Dewey. The debate itself suggests that Emerson offers another framework of critical reconstruction in Dewey beyond Hegel and Darwin.
Though the basis of Dewey’s philosophy was formed, first under the influence of Hegel, and then Darwin, it has another facet: the influence of Ralph Waldo Emerson. The presence of Emerson in Dewey’s thought is not always perspicuous or constant, and his influence is not necessarily direct. Still, Dewey, from the early to the later period of his career, disclosed a hidden identity, or perhaps a spirit that he inherited from Emerson.

In the earliest formation of his thought, even before he read Hegel, Dewey encountered Emerson, though indirectly, via Vermont Transcendentalism. This constitutes one of the underlying streams in Dewey’s philosophy throughout his philosophical career. Dewey spent the years from 1859 to 1879 in Vermont, attending the University of Vermont from 1875 to 1879. He rebelled against the prevailing intellectual milieu of Lockean empiricism and Scottish realism, dissatisfied with their dualism and their conception of the human mind as passive. Especially concerning the intuitionism associated with Scottish realism which he studied under H. A. P. Torrey, Dewey found himself ill at ease with its metaphysical dualism of intuition and reason, where intuition gave direct spiritual insight and was the ultimate source of truth about God. George Dykhuizen points out that Dewey believed that intuition was not the final source of truth, but that it must be verified by the intellect. As Alan Ryan puts this, Dewey found that “intuitionism did little more than affirm a trust that ideas accepted with a sufficient degree of unshakability must reflect reality.” He felt that intuitionism was intellectually “timid” (“FATE,” 148). Dewey was, however, affected by and found hope in the thought of James Marsh and Samuel Taylor Coleridge, especially after reading Marsh’s edition of Coleridge’s *Aids to Reflection*, which was published in America in 1825. It was via the influence of Marsh and Coleridge, though indirectly perhaps, that Dewey came to encounter Emerson. It occurred in the following manner.

In 1826, Marsh was appointed as the fifth president of the University of Vermont and became the leader of the Vermont School of
Transcendentalism. His “Preliminary Essay” and his edition of Cole-
ridge’s *Aids to Reflection*, as well as writings of the German idealists
that he introduced to America, had a significant impact upon New
England transcendentalists, including Emerson, in the 1830s and
1840s. As a revolt against Lockean empiricism and Scottish realism,
Marsh and Coleridge, in the spirit of German idealism, emphasized
the mind’s growing process, the regenerating power of the human
will in its continual striving, and the capacity for individual self-real-
ization and affirmation. Based upon a distinction between reason and
understanding, they claimed that reason as a higher faculty based
upon intuitive judgments enables mankind to understand the world.
In the words of Marsh’s “Preliminary Essay”: “The Christian belief is
the perfection of human reason.” Furthermore, American transcen-
dentalists shared the organic metaphor of German idealism which as-
serted the ultimate unity of both mind and the world, and of the
individual and the universal in a dynamic and creative process of
growth. Marsh inherited and spread Coleridge’s liberal and radical
view of religion as that which was tested by the power of reason, an
idea, in Marjorie H. Nicholson’s description, that bought about “the
reconciliation of religion and philosophy.” Philosophy became a re-
ligious and moral affair that involved the living of life itself; and vice
versa, religion became a philosophical affair that involved the rational
power of the human mind.

These views of Marsh and Coleridge had a significant impact not
only on Emerson and other New England transcendentalists, but in
terms of the strain of German idealism that persisted in American
intellectual history. According to Steven C. Rockefeller, after the in-
fluence of New England transcendentalism subsided with the advent
of the Civil War, the idealist tradition in America was inherited by
the St. Louis Hegelians, including William T. Harris, a founder of *The
Journal of Speculative Philosophy*. It was through this journal that the
young Dewey was introduced to American neo-Hegelianism. Rocke-
feller also suggests that there was “some cooperation between the old
leaders of New England Transcendentalism and the Midwestern Heg-
elians,” especially concerning an organic view of the universe.
illustration of such common ground, Rockefeller indicates that George Sylvester Morris, Dewey’s Hegelian teacher at Johns Hopkins, shared with Coleridge and Marsh the notion of ethical self-realization, or self-determination, based upon self-conscious intelligence and free will.10

Dewey’s philosophy developed in this intellectual milieu. In 1941, reflecting upon Marsh’s influence, he tells us how Marsh and Coleridge liberated his thought and inspired his spirit—their trust in the higher faculty of Reason and the Will of man, their holistic view of the universe in the correlation of objects and mind, the spirit of “a challenge to the existing state of belief and action” in “the radicalism of Coleridge,” and the necessity of educative community for the full development of individual power.11 Rockefeller points out that Dewey was particularly sympathetic to their idea of “the art of reflection,” the art of self-knowledge by means of reason or intelligence. According to this view, spiritual intuitions are not merely passive or ultimate but are themselves “the operations of reason or intelligence,” in which heart, will, and emotion play significant roles. A faith in the rational power of mind, according to Rockefeller, was the common ground on which Dewey later came to commit himself to neo-Hegelianism. In fact, Rockefeller points to the fact that Dewey’s first book, *Psychology* (1887), offers philosophy as the “practice of reflection,” with his ideas about the “search for self-knowledge” echoing those found in Marsh’s “Preliminary Essay.”12

Thus, surprisingly at this early stage, Marsh and Coleridge could have helped Dewey to find a religious, moral, and spiritual starting point for his later philosophical vision. To illustrate their profound and lifelong impact upon the development of Dewey’s philosophy, Rockefeller cites the following remarks by Dewey himself:

All I can do on religion is to say again what I learned from Coleridge way back in my childhood, and this *A Common Faith* is, as far as I am concerned, just a restatement of my early faith that I got at the University of Vermont through Marsh and Coleridge.13

This statement, made after the publication of *A Common Faith* in 1934, suggests that, as early as the 1870s, Dewey had already acquired
something of the spiritual dimension that was to characterize his later pragmatic and naturalistic religious views. Likewise, Ryan claims that, though Marsh’s influence on Dewey’s thoughts was obscure, “the concerns he grew up with and the intellectual resources he brought to them were a plausible starting point for his later ideas.” These comments help to reveal the extent to which Dewey, before he read Hegel and Darwin, shared this background with Emerson. And he retained until the end of his career this original vision—a voice from his childhood to which he always wished to return.

In 1903, Dewey published his essay, “Emerson—The Philosopher of Democracy.” Ever after his conversion from absolutism to experimentalism, the strain of thought that had originated in Vermont transcendentalism persisted in his work. In this essay, Dewey, though now a Darwinian naturalist and pragmatist, still displays his admiration of Emerson as a spiritual naturalist and a poet philosopher set firmly in the American grain. The way that Dewey approaches Emerson’s thought throws light on his idea of growth.

The essay starts with the statement: “It is said that Emerson is not a philosopher. I find this denigration false or true according as it is said in blame or praise” (“Emerson,” 184). Dewey tries to demonstrate that Emerson is a philosopher in a rather distinctive sense. In highlighting the role of perception in Emerson’s thought, and expressing an appreciation for the poetic mode of his language, Dewey invites the reader to reconsider the meaning of thought, reason, or logic as they have dominated Western philosophy. In Dewey’s view, Emerson takes philosophical thinking to be “paths by which truth is sought” rather than “truth” itself (ibid., 186). Most importantly, on Dewey’s view, he brings philosophy back down to earth by speaking of “the facts of the most real world in which all earn their living.” Philosophy serves “the common experience of everyday man” (188), and “all nature exists for the education of the human soul” (189). In Dewey’s view, Emerson shifts the locus of truth from the “mountain high” to the “deposit that nature tolerates” at the bottom (191), where each and every individual represents the truth of mankind (189).
Dewey finds in Emerson’s thinking a direction of reconstruction in philosophy and calls him “the Philosopher of Democracy” (190).

This essay indicates that even after his shift away from Hegelian idealism, Dewey holds on to Emersonian “idealism” (187)—a faith in and an ethical drive toward the ideal vision of democracy—democracy for the everyday experience of the common man and the universal community of mankind. Dewey does not, however, base that ideal on a fixed, absolute Reality. In Emerson’s transcendentalism, Dewey finds a form of idealism that is made possible on a natural basis—ideals realized in “the Here and Now” rather than the “Beyond and Away,” or “the There and Then.” This Dewey takes to be the essence of Emersonian “spiritual democracy” for everyday experience (189–90). Although it was Darwin and James who helped Dewey reconstruct his philosophy towards naturalism and experimentalism, a close reading of this essay suggests that Emerson was perhaps a similarly, or perhaps even, more profound influence. Through Dewey’s connection with Emerson, beyond the framework of Dewey between Hegel and Darwin, we may find a rich metaphysical implication of his idea of continuous growing without fixed ends.

Is Dewey an Emersonian? Is Emerson a Pragmatist?: The Debate between Cavell and the Defenders of Dewey

There is a good reason to take this connection with Emerson as a starting point for reconstruction in Dewey’s pragmatism. In the recent resurgence of American pragmatism, a number of researchers have found the origins of classic American pragmatism in Emerson’s thought. Cornel West, in his “genealogy of pragmatism,” finds the common root of various branches of pragmatism in Emerson, and traces this influence to and beyond Dewey. West’s central claim is that American pragmatism rebels against modern Western philosophy which has been dominated by the Cartesian and Kantian models of epistemology: philosophy as a matter of knowing truth through Reason characterized by “abstract dualisms, philosophic absolutisms, autonomous discourse, professional divisions, and academic differen-
tiations.” In place of this tradition, pragmatists return philosophy to common sense, and transform it into cultural, social, and political criticism.16 West finds the roots of this project in Emerson’s thought, whose motif is “power, provocation, and personality—permeated by voluntaristic, amelioristic, and activistic themes.17 In West’s interpretation, Dewey inherits Emerson’s evasion of philosophy and takes up his idea of the moral development of individual personality and self-creation through communal participation.18 Dewey, however, situates the Emersonian motif within the historical context and social concerns of his times, and develops pragmatism, understood as a philosophy supporting critical intelligence, as the most effective means of good social practice. Ideas are not copies of the world; they are, rather, means for action. Thus West concludes: “Dewey is first and foremost an Emersonian evangelist of democracy.”19 West’s interpretation of the connection between Emerson and Dewey and his appreciation of pragmatism is based upon the assumption that the foremost task of philosophy is to work for sociocultural change. From this perspective, West claims, Dewey is more a “full-fledged democrat” than Emerson, for Dewey fights against the social miseries of the age. West is critical of Emerson’s political inactivism.20

Russell B. Goodman makes another major contribution in rediscovering the connection between Dewey and Emerson, focusing on the thread of Emersonian romanticism to be found in Dewey’s pragmatism. Following Cavell’s Emersonian theme of the “marriage of self and world,” Goodman presents the romantic tradition of American pragmatism that originated in Emerson’s thought. He claims that Emerson is at once “an empiricist,” “a transcendental idealist” and “an experimentalist,” and that Dewey takes up this Emersonian position.21 Dewey’s view of the “deeper and richer intercourse” of experience and nature is an Emersonian one in which “experience itself reveals an objective world.”22 In Goodman’s view, Dewey continues to be an Emersonian romantic idealist while being an empirical realist even after his parting with Hegelianism in the 1890s.23 Goodman calls Dewey a naturalistic spiritualist who considers the ideal and the spiritual both to be part of the natural world. Likewise, Richard Poirier
finds Emerson at the root of “the pragmatist-poetic line.” He interprets Dewey’s essay on Emerson as showing that the Emersonian pragmatist theme prevails throughout—the theme of self-creation “in movements, in transits and the abandonment of order,” and the emphasis on “the Here and Now” as the essence of Emerson’s “spiritual democracy.”

More recently, Lawrence Buell has taken the position that there is a connection between Emerson and pragmatism. Citing a phrase from Emerson, “the transformation of genius into practical power,” Buell says that “this is the proto-pragmatist Emerson,” and that “[t]he late-twentieth-century revival of interest in Pragmatism has given new prestige to the Emerson-to-Pragmatism story.” Buell claims, however, that Dewey, despite his admiration of Emerson, lacks interest in “Emerson’s thought about God.” In his view, Dewey’s connection with Emerson is limited to the aspect of “the Philosopher of Democracy,” and, in virtue of this, he implicitly separates religion from democracy.

Stanley Cavell, himself a writer in the Emersonian tradition, has been one of the few philosophers to go against the currents of this mainstream of thought. He refuses to call Emerson a pragmatist, or to call Dewey an Emersonian philosopher, first in *Conditions Handsome and Unhandsome* (1990) and subsequently in “What’s the Use of Calling Emerson a Pragmatist?” (1998). The gist of Cavell’s criticism is that Dewey’s idea of intelligence is based upon scientific method. He views Dewey’s pragmatism as a form of thinking which moves in action from a problematic situation to its solution “by the removal of an obstacle” (*Conditions*, 21), and as means of the enlightenment from “superstition, bigotry, gullibility, and incuriousness,” and as “intellectual preparation for a better future” (“Calling Emerson,” 78–79). As a result, he claims, the main emphasis of pragmatism is on social change through action with profound political implications. If these are what Dewey considers the characteristics of pragmatism and the role of intelligence, then Emerson is not, Cavell claims, a pragmatist, since for Emerson, “the success of science is as much a problem for thought as, say, the failure of religion is” (*Conditions*,
While Dewey is “an enlightened child” (16), Emerson is an antienlightenment figure who recognizes the necessity of passion and patience as ingredients of ordinary experience and sources of transformation. Emersonian thinking, as Cavell represents it, finds its incentive not in action or solving problems, but in “living”—living as being “total” and “strong” (42–43). Criticizing Dewey’s concept of scientific method, Cavell addresses the fundamental question of the meaning of intelligence, and eventually of philosophy.29 In Cavell’s view, philosophy is different from that kind of polemical or political discourse in which we “take a side in argument.” With Wittgenstein, he claims that philosophy takes place “after all scientific arguments are over.”30 Thus, Cavell maintains that calling Emerson a pragmatist is a serious “repression” of Emerson’s voice in American culture (“Calling Emerson,” 79).

Cavell is also critical of Dewey’s use of philosophical language. In his view, Dewey’s language does not, as Emerson’s does, help us understand and deepen the meaning of our experience (73). It is too general and abstract, and lacks concreteness:

In Dewey’s writing, the speech of others, whose ideas Dewey wishes to correct, or rather to replace, especially the speech of children, hardly appears—as though the world into which he is drawn to intervene suffers from a well-defined lack or benightedness. (75)

This is a serious betrayal of Emerson’s investment in ordinary words as he assiduously attempts to return philosophy to ordinary life, “from metaphysical to everyday” (Conditions, 22). Cavell sees ordinary words as inseparable from self-discovery and self-transformation in moral relationships, in those relationships where one’s position is at stake in confrontation with others.31 Thus, Cavell concludes: “Are these different responses to language not philosophically fundamental? They seem so to me” (“Calling Emerson,” 75). Cavell objects to Dewey’s essay on Emerson because it “reads like a poignant wish to find something in Emerson’s achievement that [Dewey] could put to use in his own work” (Conditions, 16).32
In a more recent book, *Emerson’s Transcendental Etudes* (2003), Cavell restates his position on the relationship between Emerson and Dewey’s pragmatism. There is a slight change in Cavell’s tone with regard to “Dewey’s textual debt to Emerson’s transcendentalism”: he finds it an “interesting and promising turn of events.” Cavell does not deny either that “Emerson was a muse of pragmatism.” His basic position, however, is unchanged. This is that, to his mind, “the assimilation of Emerson to pragmatism unfailingly blunts the particularity, the achievement, of Emerson’s language, in this sense precisely shuns the struggle for philosophy . . . that Emerson sought to bequeath.” While keeping “an old and continuing respect for John Dewey,” Cavell continues to express some frustration with Dewey’s language and with his concept of intelligence: for Emerson the essential predicate of “intellect” is “dissolves,” whereas for Dewey the function of “intelligence” is to “solve problems.” Cavell finds a lack of concreteness in Dewey’s language of the middle way between extremes, making him feel “empty-handed, abstracted from thinking.” In contrast, Cavell claims that, though Emerson’s idea of “resolving” points to a “middle way,” and in his idea of a thinking that requires “conversion or transfiguration,” there is “no middle way between, say, self-reliance and self- (or other-) conformity”; for Emerson, the question of thinking occurs “before” these are resolved into practical problems.33

Cavell’s criticism of Dewey and his opposition to comparing Dewey with Emerson has created a stir among the defenders of Dewey. Douglas R. Anderson’s article, “American Loss in Cavell’s Emerson,” raises a direct criticism of Cavell’s interpretation. He charges Cavell with missing “an Emersonian vein” in Dewey’s philosophy and its significant contribution to American culture and democracy. Cavell misrepresents both Emerson and Dewey by viewing them through his own “un-Emersonian and un-American” lens, and in his “elitist Emersonian style” deforms Dewey’s philosophy of experience for the common man which, in Anderson’s view, is a very Emersonian aspect of Dewey’s thought.34 More specifically, Anderson criticizes Cavell for misreading Dewey’s concepts of science, knowing, and intelligence. He asserts that Dewey’s idea of knowing is far richer
than suggested by Cavell’s interpretation of Dewey’s scientific method of problem-solving, since for Dewey “knowing is thoroughly environed by ‘havings’ and ‘valuings’” beyond any narrow sense of empiricism. According to Anderson, Dewey’s concept of intelligence cannot be reduced to a kind of “technologism” as Cavell attempts to do, but rather, is closer to Emerson’s “intellect”—thinking that involves human action, or a sense of “phronesis” that works for “empowerment in the world.” In this regard, Anderson sides with West who says that for both Emerson and Dewey, intellect is “a distinctive function of and inseparable from the doings, sufferings, and striving of everyday people.” Thus, Anderson maintains that Dewey’s idea of intelligence is not merely one of problem-solving in the narrow sense, but instead, “an appeal to the funded experience”; genuine science as Dewey sees it is “infused with wisdom.” As a general orientation of philosophy, Dewey’s idea of democracy as a way of life, so Anderson thinks, complements Cavell’s presentation of Emersonian moral perfectionism: it is not by differentiating but rather by connecting the two that we can redeem not only Dewey but also Emerson. By doing so, we can enrich American democracy.

Anderson criticizes not only Cavell’s misunderstanding of Dewey, but also Cavell’s own philosophical assumption, which he claims is characterized by European “intellectualism,” an elitist style, and an “impolitic” proclivity. He is particularly critical of Cavell’s “linguistic project,” which focuses on “an intellectualist realm of language: words, voice, sign, conversation, reason, sentences, and so on.” In Anderson’s view, Cavell is more a traditional professional philosopher than “an Emersonian American scholar.” The stance of Anderson seems to represent well the position of Dewey in the sense that he considers practice and action to be inseparable from thinking and intelligence. Anderson points out that “for Emerson, the intellect itself is both receptive and constructive,” and refuses “Cavell’s implicit claim that ‘receiving’ and ‘acting’ are exclusive.” Moreover, for Anderson, Dewey’s “inadequate literary means” does not mean an inadequacy of “philosophical means.” The “difference in style” between
Emerson and Dewey “should not blind us to the importance of the similarities.”

More recently, Hilary Putnam has raised the question of Cavell’s interpretation of Dewey in connection with Emerson. Despite his appreciation of Cavell’s contribution to philosophy, Putnam cannot accept Cavell’s argument in “What’s the Use of Calling Emerson a Pragmatist?” since he thinks that in this specific essay Cavell misrepresents Dewey. Putnam, like Anderson, is opposed to Cavell’s understanding of Dewey’s concept of intelligence as scientific methods of thinking in relation to experience. Concerning Cavell’s citation of the phrase from *Experience and Education*, “the significance of our everyday experiences,” Putnam argues that what Dewey has in mind here is precisely a matter of connections in experience. In opposing Cavell’s decontextualized comparison of Emerson’s “mourning” in experience and Dewey’s problem-solving concept of experience, Putnam tries to elucidate Dewey’s emphasis on everyday experience with the claim that everyday experiences mean for Dewey *everyday* experiences—not the death of one’s own child which Cavell discusses in regard to Emerson. Putnam highlights the richness entailed by Dewey’s concept of experience by saying that for Dewey human life is composed of “the dialectical relationship between consummation and inquiry.” Inquiry is not purely an intellectual matter, but involves the diverse activities of human practice.

Further, in opposition to Cavell’s attempt to differentiate Emerson’s concept of thinking from Dewey’s intelligence, Putnam instead finds common ground between the two: “[Emerson’s] route to the universal is compatible with [Dewey’s] scientific method.” Dewey’s call for the use of intelligence in moral life includes a respect for trial and error in experiment and discussion, which Putnam considers as significant fortification against “subjectivism.” Rejecting Cavell’s characterization of Dewey as a child of the Enlightenment, Putnam emphasizes the fact that Dewey does not merely accept the Enlightenment, but also criticizes the way it took place—a situation in which science and technology did not lead to the application of intelligence to our moral and political life.
Dewey’s pragmatism as too much associated with action and social change, Putnam defends Dewey in two related respects. First, Dewey does not, despite his faith in social science, propose control by scientific experts, but rather claims, in his vision of “participatory” or “deliberative” democracy, the need for social sciences for the benefit of working people. Second, his aim of social reform is not just a matter of economic, redistributive justice. Instead, Putnam says, Dewey in his ethical writings shares an Emersonian vision of democracy both when he speaks of “setting free to the fullest extent possible the powers and capacity of all individuals,” and in his use of such Emersonian expressions as “human flourishing,” “pursuit of moral happiness,” and “self-transformation.” Like Anderson, Putnam implies that Dewey has an Emersonian faith in democracy—the unity of self-realization with social intelligence. In conclusion, Putnam acknowledges Dewey’s contribution towards ethics beyond subjectivism in his call for solidarity with fellow human beings. Though not as explicitly as Anderson, Putnam suggests that Cavell has a romantic, subjective proclivity in his overemphasis on self-transformation.

Cavell and the defenders of Dewey seem to remain apart concerning how we should best understand the Dewey-Emerson connection. Their distance in the debate raises a series of questions. First, it makes us wonder if there is any one “true” Emerson or Dewey whose position either camp best represents. Second, the debate addresses not only the issue of the relationship of two American thinkers, but also puts in question the identity of pragmatism as an American philosophy. It is undeniable that both Cavell and the defenders of Dewey share a common stance in the “American evasion of philosophy,” their quest for a philosophy that serves for the ordinary experience of common men, practice being a crucial component of philosophical thinking. Cavell and the defenders of Dewey, however, show a different understanding of what they think Emerson and Dewey mean by such concepts as “practice,” “action,” “social,” “change,” or “experience.” With their respective images of Emerson and Dewey, they diverge in what they consider to be the identity of American philosophy and American philosophy. Cavell and the defenders of Dewey have
contrasting views on Dewey’s concept of scientific methods of thinking, which turn upon what they expect of “intelligence” in philosophy. They adopt different stances towards Dewey’s use of language, and the role of language in philosophy.

While Dewey’s connection with Emerson seems to offer a promising framework, beyond Rorty’s “Dewey between Hegel and Darwin,” of reconsidering his naturalistic philosophy of growth, the debate over whether Dewey is an Emersonian thinker and Emerson is a pragmatist suggests still an unresolved, or even a flexible border in their relationship. It is this very precarious border in which we might be able to find a key to enhancing a potential as well as articulating the limitation entailed in Dewey’s pragmatism and its naturalistic philosophy of growth. It is Cavell’s dissenting voice that suggests a need to further disclose this yet fully unexplored realm of Dewey’s relationship with Emerson, and by so doing to destabilize and reconstruct his philosophy from within.49