In the debate that we have been examining, Cavell represents a dissenting voice. The majority of pragmatists think that Cavell misunderstands Dewey, which is, in Anderson’s words, an “American loss.” I believe, however, that leaving this gap within American philosophy unexamined will be a greater loss. We might be able to learn something from Cavell’s sense of resistance for the sake of further enhancing the contributions made by Dewey’s pragmatism in connection with Emerson’s thought. Instead of keeping the two camps apart, therefore, I will try to engage his voice more fully in dialogue with neo-pragmatists and Deweyan scholars.

A crucial factor that splits Cavell from Deweyan pragmatists in the debate is his interpretation of *Emersonian moral perfectionism* (EMP). Deweyan scholars who find a connection between Dewey and Emerson suggest that Dewey can be an Emersonian moral perfectionist; whereas Cavell, though acknowledging that Dewey is “some sort of perfectionist,” maintains that he is not an *Emersonian* perfectionist.
Cavell asks us to “see how close and far they are to and from one another” (Conditions, 15). In order to find a source of Cavell’s dissenting voice in the debate, and lead toward a more penetrating analysis of Dewey’s relation to Emerson, a closer examination of EMP is essential.

To this aim, this chapter first examines Cavell’s interpretation of EMP. In the light of its key features I shall then go over some of Dewey’s text in which he echoes Emersonian voice. It shows that the preoccupations that run through Cavell’s discussion of EMP are, in fact, very close to Dewey’s central concerns with democracy, education, and growth. The chapter concludes that EMP can constitute an alternative framework to reevaluate Dewey beyond Hegel and Darwin.

* Cavell’s Emersonian Moral Perfectionism

Cavell introduces the concept of perfectionism as “a dimension or the tradition of the moral life” in Western thought—a stream of philosophy as a quest for the good life that originated with Plato and Aristotle (2). It puts weight on the question, “How do we live?” as a matter of the state of one’s soul rather than of theoretical argument in such moral theories as utilitarianism or Kantianism (6). Perfectionism is concerned with “the plane on which the issue arises before questions of the good and the right come to occupy moral reasoning.” As examples of perfectionist thinkers, Cavell includes a broad range of writers such as Plato, Aristotle, Emerson, Nietzsche, Kant, Mill, Kleist, Ibsen, Matthew Arnold, Oscar Wilde, Bernard Shaw, Heidegger, Wittgenstein—and even the Dewey of *Experience and Nature* (5). By naming them, however, Cavell does not offer us a “closed list of features that constitute perfectionism,” since perfectionism, as “an outlook or dimension of thought embodied and developed in a set of texts,” refuses to be defined for some “theoretical purpose” (4, 6).

The perfection of the self is a process of transformation, or perhaps, more conventionally, self-realization. Aristotle’s words capture the gist of this:
We must not follow those who advise us . . . but must strain every nerve to live in accordance with the best thing in us . . . . This would seem, too, to be each man himself, since it is the authoritative and better part of him. It would be strange, then, if he were to choose not the life of himself but that of something else.

Cavell’s idea of perfectionism has a similarly strong ethical and moral drive in the pursuit of a better state of the self: “Perfectionism is the dimension of moral thought directed less to restraining the bad than to releasing the good” (Conditions, 18). Cavell here uses a thematic metaphor of “the soul’s journey” (32)—or “the myth of the self as on a journey (a path in Plato’s image, a stairway in Emerson’s, a ladder in others’), a journey to, let us say, the truth of itself (not exhausted by its goods and its rights)” (Pitch, 142). Cavell implies that although perfectionism is concerned with the self, it does not treat it as the object of knowledge in an epistemology or of the subject of moral judgment in ethical theories. It alters the perspective on the self by centering on the question of how “I” should live. Here, some sense of a “dialogue” between the “I” and the voice of the text to which “I am invited” is crucial in Cavell’s idea of perfectionism. In other words, the state of one’s soul has a stake in how readers participate in the “city of words” built in a text (Conditions, 8)—how their “I” confronts and responds to the perfectionist author that they read. As Cavell tells us: “The moral force of perfectionism does not collect in judgments but is at stake in every word” (32); and more recently: “Writing from self-reliance is thus simultaneously an emblem or instance of the self-reliant in word and in deed, in words that are deeds.”

The transformation of the self, however, is not merely a matter of self-interest. It is inseparable from the betterment of society with the spirit of amelioration seen through the state of one’s soul. In this regard, Cavell echoes the sentiments and the expression of Matthew Arnold:

Culture, which is the study of perfection, leads us . . . to conceive of true human perfection as a harmonious perfection, developing
all sides of our humanity; and as a general perfection, developing all parts of our society. The “inward operation” and the total development of society are inseparable in perfectionism.

In this broad framework Cavell presents his view of Emersonian moral perfectionism. It has three main characteristics: (1) perfection as perfecting with no fixed ends; (2) as a distinctively American democratic ideal; and (3) with significant implications for education emphasizing conversation and friendship. First, it presents a distinguishably American version of perfectionism—a view of human perfection that is located in the ordinary and that sharply contrasts with the teleological form of Plato’s and Aristotle’s perfectionism. The essence of Emersonian moral perfectionism, as Cavell presents it, is the endless journey of self-overcoming and self-realization whose central focus is on the here and now in the process of attaining a further, next self, not the highest self. Drawing on Emerson’s idea of the “unattained but attainable self” in “History,” Cavell states: “The self is always attained, as well as to be attained” (12) and “each state of the self is, so to speak, final” (3). The self that is attained now is immediately connected to the next state that is as yet the unattained, and therefore, the attainable. There is no one unattained/attainable self, but rather, Cavell says, “‘having a self is a process of moving to, and from, nexts” (12). The direction of Emersonian perfection is “not up but on . . . in which the goal is decided not by anything picturable as the sun, by nothing beyond the way of the journey itself” (10). Emersonian perfectionism is characterized by “goallessness” (xxxiv); it refuses final perfectibility.

If Cavell retains the name of perfection for self-realization, it might be asked how that self-realization is to be characterized, what self-realization consists in. Cavell’s suggested response is secular, which is to say naturalistic. A direction for perfection is not given by theology or moral lessons. Rather perfection is firmly rooted in our natural sense of shame as a driving force and the quest for happiness. Cavell calls Emerson’s “Self-Reliance” “a study of shame” (Conditions, 47).
He states: “One way or the other a side of the self is in negation—either the attainable negates the attained or vice versa” (12). Indeed Emerson, in his call for cultivating the self-reliant American Scholar, expresses his sense of shame over the “degenerated state” of the American society: “Public and private avarice make the air we breathe thick and fat.” This contrasts with Thomas Hurka’s omission of natural pleasure or desire from his concept of perfectionism. Or in comparison to Russell B. Goodman’s and George Kateb’s writings on Emerson, Cavell’s language most intensely echoes Emerson’s sense of shame or “disdain” (Conditions, 49). In this regard, Cavell is more Freudian than Aristotelian. This sense of shame is specifically directed against the fallen state of democracy, what Emerson calls “conformity”—the state in which we subject ourselves to “our given opinions, learning nothing new” (Conditions, 12), being “subject to an oppressive helplessness” with “a sense of compromise and of cynicism.”

Second, EMP represents an ideal of American democracy. At the very beginning of the introduction to Conditions Handsome and Unhandsome, Cavell raises the question: “Is Moral Perfectionism inherently elitist?” (Conditions, 1). Since perfectionism involves the matter of excellence, this is an inevitable question. Hurka points out that some perfectionisms are antiegalitarian, including that of Nietzsche, which limits the idea of perfection to the few best individuals. Contrary to Anderson’s criticism of Cavell’s Emerson as an “un-American,” intellectual elitist, Cavell presents Emerson as a democratic philosopher. Responding to John Rawls’ opposition to an elitist version of perfectionism, Cavell says:

My direct quarrel with A Theory of Justice concerns its implied dismissal of what I am calling Emersonian Perfectionism as inherently undemocratic, or elitist, whereas I find Emerson’s version of perfectionism to be essential to the criticism of democracy from within. (Conditions, 3)

Cavell’s project resists the charge of elitism. Emersonian perfection is a call to the potential nobility of the self, what might be called an aristocracy of the self, rather than the endorsement of political in-
equality. He represents EMP as not only “compatible with democracy, but its prize.”

The democratic way of life, as Cavell sees it in Emerson, involves the continuous illumination of the state of “my” compromise with society in which I find myself and “my” response to society in “my” own voice of criticism; self-criticism and social-criticism are conjoined. On this Cavell says: “The necessity of our (a citizen’s, one whose consent is invested) participation in a democracy is not expressed by saying, as Kateb insists, that we ‘must’ act.” The “political” implication of EMP is our participation in the “democratic city of words.” It is the matter of our “thinking and acting aversively” (ETE, 190). Cavell’s thought here can be traced back to The Claim of Reason where he writes:

[I]n the political, the impotence of your voice shows up quickest; it is of importance to others to stifle it; and it is easiest to hope there, since others are in any case included in it, that it will not be missed if it is stifled, i.e., that you will not miss it. But once you recognize a community as yours, then it does speak for you until you say it doesn’t, i.e., until you show that you do.

Although Emerson does not make an appearance here, what Cavell says presages his later Emersonian idea of the “criticism of democracy from within” (Conditions, 3). Siding with Emerson, who claims that “genius” is not the privilege of a few individuals, but the “sound estate of every man” (“AMS,” 41), Cavell takes a position that Emersonian perfectionism is not elitist. Responsibility of criticism is “universally distributed” among each of us as a “capacity” and “an opportunity” as well as “a threat” (Conditions, 9, 26).

Cavell revives Emerson’s spirit of nonconformity not for the cause of isolationism, but for the sake of the betterment of self and society, as a form of social participation. In resonance with Emerson’s voice, “I do not see how any man can afford, for the sake of his nerves and his nap, to spare any action in which he can partake” (“AMS,” 43), Cavell resists a “shrinking participation in democracy” (Conditions, 51). EMP calls for a response without cynicism in conjunction with a
reaffirmation of consent to the society in the light of one’s “constitution.” The social contract is realized in a “responsiveness to society.” The pursuit of happiness not only satisfies the self; it involves the “public” quest as that for which the self searches and to which it necessarily attests. Liberty is “my liberty as a matter of my voice.” Justice, whose adequacy is the mark of goodness, is sought not only in one’s soul, but constantly tested in “the conversation of justice” in which the fate of all is shared (27–28). Cavell finds in Emerson “the democratic aspiration” (1). Against the dominant, conventional image of Emerson as a representative of American individualism, Cavell shows us the social Emerson.19

Third, EMP offers a view on the education of the self in dialogue with others based upon friendship. While emphasizing Emerson’s praise of “the infinitude of the private man,” with its stress on the process of individuation, Cavell reminds us that “we need not, we should not, take [Emerson] to imagine himself as achieving a further state of humanity in himself alone” (Conditions, 10–11). Recognition of “my attained perfection (or conformity)” requires “the recognition of an other—the acknowledgment of a relationship” (31). Cavell shows us that the relationship of acknowledgment is at the heart of Emerson’s idea of friendship, and that it involves Emerson’s idea of representativeness: the “friend (discovered or constructed) represents the standpoint of perfection” (58–59). As Emerson says: “the private life of one man” can represent and animate all men (“AMS,” 49)20 Cavell elaborates on the idea of representativeness as follows:

[T]his another of myself—returning my rejected, say repressed, thought—reminds me of something, as of where I am, as if I had become lost in thought, and stopped thinking.21

The presence of another is Emerson’s transfiguration of Kant’s idea of “the reception of the moral law, the constraint as Kant names the relation, by the moral imperative, expressed by an ‘ought’” (Passages, 26). Cavell highlights the fact that for Emerson, this constraint is not a matter of “ought,” but that of “recognition and negation.” A friend
reminds us of the sense of shame, that of “aversion to our selves in our conformity.” By so doing, a friend invites us “beyond ourselves” (or not) (Conditions, 58–59). It is illustrated by Cavell’s Emersonian idea of the conversational act of reading. Emerson the writer is “this other for his reader” who confronts the reader with her attained state with a sense of shame, and by doing so guides her on the soul’s journey (32).

As Emerson himself suggests from time to time, friendship is the relationship that is featured by inspiration and awakening. “[T]he friend permits one to advance toward oneself” (Passages, 26). The perfection of one’s self requires the process of education as Cavell sums up: “As representative we are educations for one another” (Conditions, 31). In Kateb’s words, it is a matter of “achievement.”

Thus with an emphasis on friendship in EMP, Cavell again projects the image of the social Emerson, not Emerson as an individualist, or the proponent of a solipsistic, subjective, or autonomous self.

In sum, EMP has shown diverse dimensions of Cavell’s interpretation of Emerson that have not been fully recognized in the debate. He presents Emerson as a democratic figure, not an “elitist,” who is fully participatory and responsive. Although Cavell distances himself from political and polemical issues, a stance for which he is sometimes criticized as being apolitical, he is not simply insensitive to these matters; rather he takes a different approach to the democratic concepts of justice, liberty, and equality as those that concern the noble condition of each state. Although it is true that Cavell treasures language, this is not merely a matter of linguistic play, as Anderson criticizes. Instead EMP has shown that language is a necessary route to his Emersonian democratic vision. Furthermore Cavell’s strong concern for education is a factor that marks his account off from many other interpretations of Dewey’s connection with Emerson. The standpoint of EMP can now be used to bring into focus Dewey’s relationship with Emerson and reexamine his philosophy of growth in a new light.
Reviving Dewey’s Muted Voice: Gaining from the Closeness between Dewey and Emerson

The one thing in the world, of value, is the active soul. This every man is entitled to; this every man contains within him, although, in almost all men, obstructed, and as yet unborn. The active soul sees absolute truth; and utters truth, or creates. In this action, it is genius; not the privilege of here and there a favorite, but the sound estate of every man. (Emerson, “The American Scholar”)

That every individual is at once the focus and the channel of mankind’s long and wide endeavor, that all nature exists for the education of the human soul—such things, as we read Emerson, cease to be statements of a separated philosophy and become natural transcripts of the course of events and of the rights of man. (Dewey, “Emerson—The Philosopher of Democracy”)

Dewey is in tune with Emerson’s vision of “spiritual democracy” (“Emerson,” 190). He responds to the voice of Emerson who calls for the “upbuilding” of the American Scholar, the private individual whose central fire “animates all men” (“AMS,” 49). For Dewey, spiritual democracy involves the “education of the human soul” for the sake of rebuilding the public in America. It is the responsibility and the right of each individual. And like Emerson, Dewey is aware that democracy is never a perfected state, but that it needs to be attained; it requires the patient process of education in “the Here and the Now” (“Emerson,” 189).

Despite the apparently common ground that Dewey’s essay on Emerson suggests, Cavell claims that this represents merely Dewey’s “poignant wish” to sound like Emerson. Are these words of Dewey above merely his passing remark, as Cavell implies? Or is there something here that reveals Dewey’s authentic voice and that might help us tap the potential of his idea, of democracy, education, and growth? To find a valid answer to these questions, and as an initial step in untangling the implications of Cavell’s request to “see how close and far [Dewey and Emerson] are to and from one another” (Conditions,
It is worth reexamining Dewey’s text—his words, tone, and spirit—this time in the light of distinctive features of EMP.

Dewey’s writing style typically lacks a personal or emotional tone and it often creates a barrier between him and his readers. Steven C. Rockefeller claims: “Dewey’s writing style tended to be dry, and his books and essays left many readers feeling that something to do with the emotions, the heart, and values was missing.” Although Dewey was a man of strong feeling, “his passions to a large extent had been channeled into a rarefied form of philosophical discourse and social idealism.” Likewise, in connection with his “self-effacing” personality and abhorrence of “psychobiography,” Alan Ryan characterizes Dewey’s writing as “impersonal” and “reticent.”

His characteristic writing style, however, has a positive side. Ryan cites the remark by Justice Holmes that Dewey wrote the way God would have “if he had been terribly anxious to tell us something of great importance but had found himself temporarily at a loss for words.” When he read Dewey’s *Experience and Nature*, Holmes felt that “he had for the first time seen the universe ‘from inside.’” Raymond D. Boisvert claims that, in trying to present new metaphysical theories, Dewey is “a pioneer breaking new ground” with “philosophical courage” and “honesty,” a philosopher who breaks away from old dualistic assumptions. Similarly, Rockefeller finds Dewey’s way of addressing philosophical problems difficult to comprehend “in part because it runs counter to traditional ways of thinking.” Once it is understood, however, “it emerges as a convincing and profound expression of one of the major alternative ways of being religious open to modern men and women.”

These scholars agree that Dewey’s apparently muddy language is a sign of his innovative philosophical thinking, a language that requires a reader to be actively and imaginatively engaged in the interpretation of his text.

In fact, Dewey does not necessarily sound dry or unemotional, particularly when his writing touches upon some common themes with EMP. His autobiographical essay, “From Absolutism to Experimentalism” (1930), which was written late in his career, illustrates this. The essay presents Dewey’s philosophical conviction that a phi-
The undeniable spirit of EMP expressed here is not merely a matter of language; it suggests a possibility that Dewey’s naturalistic philosophy of growth may be reread as one that is related to the distinctive features of EMP. There are two of Dewey’s writings that distinctively suggest this direction: *Democracy and Education* (1916) and *Human Nature and Conduct* (1922). These are the books that were written after Dewey drifted from Hegelian into naturalist, but that still maintain his Emersonian idealist language and vision. In *Democracy and Education* Dewey makes it explicit that his naturalistic concept of growth differs from the idea of “perfection” as an unfolding of latent powers toward “a final unchanging goal,” as “completion.” In place of the idea of the telic perfected state, Dewey is close to Cavell in claiming that “the perfect or complete ideal is operative here and now” (*DE*, 62). Dewey thus criticizes Hegel’s view of perfection as the concept of development that aims at “the Whole, or per-
fection” (63), “an absolute goal” on “a stepladder of ascending approximations” (64). In its absolute institutionalism and historicism, “the Hegelian theory swallowed up concrete individualities,” allowing “conformity” to become a principle of education (65). The naturalist Dewey’s rejection of this Hegelian concept of perfection can be reread as his solidarity with Emersonian perfectionism—the American voice of democracy.

*Human Nature and Conduct* is also filled with opportunities for rereading Dewey within the framework of EMP. As a book on human nature based upon the theory and vocabulary of Darwinian naturalism, it discusses the “ethical import of the doctrine of evolution,” presenting the naturalistic theory of habit reconstruction as a basis of growth. Among biological, scientific, and naturalistic, as well as pragmatist discourse, however, we can find throughout the text the Emersonian message. It is permeated by the nonconformity and antimoralism of EMP. Thoroughly rejecting the fixed end point of growth, “a static perfection” (*HNC*, 122), Dewey proclaims: “Perfection means perfecting, fulfilment, fulfilling” (200). Growth as perfection is an ideal to be attained at each moment. And it is a process in which we are not allowed to “rest upon attained goods” for “[n]ew struggles and failures are inevitable” (199).

Thus, *Democracy and Education* and *Human Nature and Conduct* offer promising signs that show a striking similarity between Dewey’s concept of growth and Emerson’s view of perfection. Against the common foe of teleological perfectionism, Dewey and Emerson create solidarity for what might be called an American version of perfectionism—a philosophy that puts weight on the here and now, and therefore questions sincerely how we can live a better life in this moment, rather than focusing on goals that we strive to achieve. In this minimum sense, Cavell unintentionally offers a hopeful bridge between Dewey and Emerson.

Based upon this original intuition, let us explore further other texts of Dewey. *Reconstruction in Philosophy* (1920) presents a philosophical vision in tune with the central theme of EMP. Responding to the chaos and uncertainty of American society in the postwar period,
Dewey calls for a reconstruction of philosophy in order to throw light upon the issues troubling mankind in the here and now. Reconstruction is neither a complete rejection of the heritage from the past, nor the mere application of ready-made intelligence (RP, ix, xxxvi). Rather, it is a sustained criticism of the crises and tensions arising from new human situations. The means of this reconstruction he calls “intelligence” or “scientific knowing,” as distinct from “reason” or “pure intellect” (viii). Philosophy can no longer be conducted under the old doctrine of immutable, ultimate truth. Dewey’s idea of reconstruction in philosophy echoes the idea of EMP in its resistance to fixity, insofar as fixed standards, norms, and ends cannot be “the only assured protection against moral chaos” (xiii). A philosophical endeavor should be a response to ever-changing situations and an endless effort to fulfill “what we have as yet attained only partially” (xxxix).

Dewey in this book explicitly uses the term “perfection” in an Emersonian way.

The end is not longer a terminus or limit to be reached. . . . Not perfection as a final goal, but the ever-enduring process of perfection, maturing, refining is the aim in living. . . . Growth itself is the only moral “end.”(177)

Growth is perfection; and perfection is perfecting. This echoes Emerson’s message, “Success treads on every right step” (“AMS,” 46); and his use of the natural metaphor of a rose: “There is simply the rose; it is perfect in every moment of its existence . . . [Man] cannot be happy and strong until he too lives with nature in the present, above time” (“SR,” 141). Like Emerson and Cavell, Dewey does not reject our natural sense of happiness (and shame) as the ingredient of such perfection. He does, however, emphasize that happiness is not “a fixed attainment” but resides in the process of searching—“succeeding, getting forward, moving in advance” (RP, 179–80).

Further, as in EMP, Dewey makes it clear that perfection is not merely a matter for the individual self, but is accompanied by the melioration of society as a whole. Democracy in this moral vision
aims at “the all-round growth of every member of society,” and a fortiori the education of the child (186). The book concludes with a symbolically religious expression of perfectibility: “The wind of the spirit bloweth where it listeth and the kingdom of God in such things does not come with observation” (212). Dewey restates Emerson’s perfectionist message that it is “every man,” each of us, who creates—or to put it more correctly who will gradually and hopefully create—the kingdom of God on earth.

In the late 1920s and the 1930s, Dewey’s language becomes richer, which enables us to hear more acutely his Emersonian voice, particularly involving the theme of the rebuilding of the public in American democracy and the rebuilding the individual. Among the works of this period, four writings deserve attention: The Public and its Problems (1927), Individualism Old and New (1930), Construction and Criticism (1930), “Creative Democracy—The Task Before Us” (1939). In each, Dewey’s language conveys his sharp recognition of the obstacles to the progress of democracy, given the difficulties of the age, and in that sense, he becomes more realistic and less optimistic about the attainability of his democratic ideal.

*The Public and its Problem* is a book in which he criticizes the “eclipse of the public”:

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?

A sense of struggle permeates the text, with its recognition that a democratic community “does not occur all at once nor completely,” and that “it sets a problem rather than marks a settled achievement” (*PP*, 331). Dewey’s concern with the eclipse of the public, the disintegration of American society, resonates with Emerson’s criticism of the fallen state of democracy in “The American Scholar”:

The state of society is one in which the members have suffered amputation from the trunk, and strut about so many walking monsters—a good finger, a neck, a stomach, an elbow, but never a man. ("AMS," 38)
Emerson’s powerful call for the rebuilding of Man Thinking in the name of “Culture” originates in his sense of shame, as Cavell suggests, over what degrades society into the meaningless mass. Dewey shares this sense of shame.

Concerning the question of “how far” we will succeed in reestablishing “the void left by the disintegration of the family, church and neighborhood,” Dewey tells us: “We cannot predict the outcome” (PP, 369). Still, his vision of participatory democracy is unflagging. To create a democratic public, Dewey renews his faith in education, “not just in the sense of schooling but with respect to all the ways in which communities attempt to shape the disposition and beliefs of their members” (360). He also emphasizes the significance of face-to-face communication between self and others (371). In intimate social relations, democracy as a way of life is the process of mutual education—learning how to think, communicate, and act together. The book concludes with Dewey’s allusion to Emerson: “We lie, as Emerson said, in the lap of an immense intelligence” (372). Intelligence here connotes broader implications that include the capacities, habits, and attitudes that are needed for the recreation of the public. The citation can be interpreted as Dewey’s restatement of the Emersonian task of democracy—democracy that necessitates the education of “Man Thinking” in order to attain “true union” (“AMS,” 51).

Individualism Old and New also addresses the task of creating a democratic community, but here it is with sharper focus on the individual. The tone of Dewey’s text is more severely realistic, being permeated with a sense of shame for the degraded condition of American democracy as it becomes more and more materialistic and defined by a more uniformly corporate culture. Dewey says that he does not have in mind here “an ‘optimistic’ appeal to future time and its possibilities”; and that the “promise of a new moral and religious outlook has not been attained” (ION, 49). He is warning particularly of the crisis of the “lost individual” (66) who is “divided within himself” by conformity (65). In Emersonian vein, Dewey describes the crisis as one of “the human soul” (52), for democracy is a matter of the “spiritual” (49). This echoes Emerson’s critical voice: “How many
individuals can we count in society? How many actions? how many opinions? So much of our time is preparation, so much is routine, and so much retrospect, that the pith of each man’s genius contrasts itself to a very few hours.”

Despite all these difficulties, Dewey proposes the creation of a new type of individual, an “integrated individuality.” This is not a proposal for isolated individualism. Rather, as if to follow Emerson’s faith that “man is one” (“AMS,” 48), and indeed by alluding to Emerson, Dewey concludes the book with the Emersonian vision of democracy—the vision of a universal community of mankind, and “the connection of events” (from Emerson’s words in “Self-Reliance”), in which alone an integrated individuality is realized:

To gain an integrated individuality, each of us needs to cultivate his own garden. But there is no fence about this garden: it is no sharply marked-off enclosure. Our garden is the world, in the angle at which it touches our own manner of being. By accepting the corporate and industrial world in which we live, and by thus fulfilling the pre-condition for interaction with it, we, who are also parts of the moving present, create ourselves as we create an unknown future. (ION, 123)

This is a manifesto of Dewey’s ideal vision of democracy with the metaphor of cultivation as a matter of “Culture” as Emerson proposes: “Each philosopher, each bard, each actor, has only done for me, as by a delegate, what one day I can do for my self” (“AMS,” 49). Since this is a state of democracy that is yet to come, it is the creative task of democracy, and hence, the task of education in the broadest sense. And if this is the task of perfection, perfection is not the monopoly of selected individuals; it is the task, the responsibility, that is assigned to each individual. This is the perfectionist theme that will be passed down and taken up again in his later essay, “Creative Democracy.”

Construction and Criticism is a continuation of the theme of Individualism Old and New, a search for a new individual, one engaged in the critical reconstruction of democracy from within—the theme that Cavell finds in Emerson’s perfectionism. Dewey here discusses vari-
ous themes relating to individuality—the creative mind, individual responsibility, freedom, and criticism. The vocabulary that he uses, however, becomes more elaborate and subtle. He does not write only about the individual, but passionately speaks for the individual, as an individual with the Emersonian anticonformist spirit. Along these lines, Dewey cites words from Emerson’s “Self-Reliance”: “A man should learn to detect and watch that gleam of light that flashes from within.”39 By citing these words of Emerson, Dewey recognizes the significance of the education of the “active soul” as Emerson says—the activities of critical and creative individuals. He concludes the essay by saying: “Creative activity is our great need; but criticism, self-criticism, is the road to its release” (“CC,” 143). This resonates with Cavell’s idea of the “criticism of democracy from within” and with the Emersonian passage towards true union, a road that is being re-built from the private to the public. Emerson writes: “[Man Thinking] is one, who raises himself from private considerations, and breathes and lives on public and illustrious thoughts” (“AMS,” 46).

The 1939 essay, “Creative Democracy—The Task Before Us,” highlights Dewey’s philosophical endeavor to articulate his spiritual vision of American democracy.40 He reiterates his claim: “Democracy is the faith that the process of experience is more important than any special result attained.” What gives this impetus is the “[n]eed and desire” that make us “go beyond what exists, and hence beyond knowledge, beyond science,” for “[t]hey continually open the way into the unexplored and unattained future” (“CD,” 229). Attaining an unattained future—we are plainly close here to Cavell’s description of the “journey” of perfection that Emerson recurrently takes.

What is at the heart of creative democracy is, according to Dewey, the cultivation of the “capacity of human beings” to be engaged in “free inquiry, free assembly and free communication” (227). Hence he declares: “faith in democracy is all one with faith in experience and education.” As one of the conditions of such an educative process of democracy, Dewey highlights the significance of friendship—the practice of mutual learning and the “habit of amicable cooperation” (228).
To sum up the theme of perfection, the essay concludes with the following statement:

The task of this release and enrichment is one that has to be carried on day by day. Since it is one that can have no end till experience itself comes to an end, the task of democracy is forever that of creation of a freer and more humane experience in which all share and to which all contribute. (230)

This statement can be complemented by Emerson’s strong call for the rebirth of the American Scholar: “In self-trust, all the virtues are comprehended. Free should the scholar be, free and brave. Free even to the definition of freedom, ‘without any hindrance that does not arise out of his own constitution’” (“AMS,” 47). For both Dewey and Emerson, democracy is the ongoing and endless task of perfection. It is also the ongoing task of creation as it is related to newer and better experiences of each and all individuals, and hence, constitution of culture itself. The central fire of the private man cannot be “enshrined in a person” (49); it is the matter of inspiration and sharing that is at the heart of Emerson’s and Cavell’s perfectionist idea of the public, and with which Dewey’s thought resonates. “Creative Democracy” can be considered Dewey’s mature restatement of the EMP proclaimed thirty-six years before in “Emerson—The Philosopher of Democracy.” These writings of Dewey reinforce the view that he is an Emersonian idealist even after he has parted company with Hegel and in spite of his joining hands with Darwin.

In view of these striking similarities between Dewey and Emerson, it is understandable why Dewey praises Emerson as the “Philosopher of Democracy”; why he associates the task of creative democracy with Emerson’s idea of the education of the human soul; and why the defenders of Dewey find a connection between the two. Despite Cavell’s refusal to call Dewey an Emersonian moral perfectionist, the present rereading of Dewey’s text in dialogue with Emerson has revived Dewey’s muted voice; it has shown that his idea of naturalistic growth has too much in common with Cavell’s EMP just to be ignored. Just as Rorty’s framework is inadequate, so too is Cavell’s criticism not
wholly fair to Dewey; but Cavell’s unfairness can, in fact, be helpful in directing us toward a metaphysics of growth. Though the limitation of stylistic range that Cavell criticizes in Dewey needs to be acknowledged, and indeed, though there is still a need to conduct a more thorough critical reading of his work, something I shall undertake in later chapters, the standpoint of EMP can now be seen to disclose more about the recessive, rich dimension of Dewey’s naturalistic philosophy of growth than is achieved by Rorty’s “Dewey between Hegel and Darwin.” The account thus far may then enable us to find what it means to live a life of growth without fixating its ends, and to create the passage of the attained and unattained self in continuous growing.

Let us move on and see what we can gain from considering the closeness between Dewey and Emerson, and then come back again to Cavell’s sense of distance.41