Review Article

The Gleam of Light

SAITO, Naoko
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Professor Saito's elegantly written book is a meditation on what she regards as a crisis of nihilism afflicting modern democratic life, especially education. By "nihilism" she means the commercial wasteland that constitutes the spiritual environment within which the young must find themselves and the meaning of life, an environment that does not nourish that spark of originality, individuality, or self-creation which she calls (after Emerson) "the gleam of light." Education in particular is dominated by "the language of performativity" by "procedures of standardization and quantification" and "an obsession with assessment." Efforts to teach "values" simply inculcate rules and do not engage the "complexity of the ethical." Teaching to the achievement tests ignores "the invisible and the silent" dimension of our life-where "the spirit often dwells" (pp.128, 139). She quotes a fourteen year old Japanese boy who says,

The present society does not accept my existence. Therefore I throw my poetry to the society which rejects me. ... There is no one around me with whom I can talk about the philosophical question, "Why do we live? ... The minds of friends at school are occupied with entrance exams into high schools and they cannot afford to talk about concerns of the heart (p.136).

Traditionally, Dewey's philosophy has been the alternative to rigid, formalistic theories of education. But, asks Saito, "How can a Deweyan discourse of amelioration and progress protect us from the sense of isolation, separation, and loss that are at the heart of the contemporary crisis of democracy?" (p.120) Her judgment is that it cannot, at least without major transformation. And

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this is what she proposes to do.

Ralph Waldo Emerson said, “A man should learn to detect and watch that gleam of light which flashes across his mind from within” (p.4). Professor Saito selects this phrase to characterize that vital, uniquely individual soul in each of us that must be nourished if we are to experience life with meaning and joy.1 This is a question for cultural, not just individual, well-being: “The loss of intensity of life among young people darkens the culture as a whole” (p.2). Can there be another view of education that fosters “the invisible, patient transformation of spirit” for the “rekindling of the light” so there “receptivity to otherness” and an “aesthetic and religious experience of the ordinary” (pp.3-4)? Saito believes that an Emersonian ideal of education completes and corrects Dewey's philosophy for contemporary times.

But there is the problem: Stanley Cavell forcefully rejects any attempt to connect Emerson with pragmatism; we should value Emerson for his ideal of inward self-realization. Saito, however, believes that Cavell has ignored a “recessive Emersonian dimension in Dewey's pragmatism” that can be illumined by Cavell's own articulation of “Emersonian moral perfectionism” (p.3).2

Before that, Saito believe she must expose the deficiencies of Dewey's philosophy. Though she occasionally tries to save Dewey from the worst misinterpretations, she reiterates what have been, I believe, the standard criticisms of Dewey based on poor understanding and narrow reading: Dewey was too optimistic and lacked a sense of the tragic; his ethics leads to moral relativism; he reduced all knowledge to science and had a naïve faith in technology for solving all our problems; he had a “totalizing tendency” in a philosophy that was about “power and progress” (Chapter 2 passim). Though she notes various efforts to respond to these charges, she ultimately decides they are failures. This is an uncharitable reading of Dewey, who stressed that life was more than we could ever wholly control, that intelligent inquiry was not putting science on “auto-pilot,” that the experimental method was not the application of the methods of the sciences to other subjects, but the development of other methods with the same habits of fallibilism and open-mindedness in light of actual outcomes, of being methodologically open to the possibility of being wrong. Though Dewey himself tried to correct such misunderstandings, nevertheless Saito may be right when she notes that the rhetorical effect of Dewey's language “cannot respond to the concerns of the critics steeped in the context of our times” (35).3 Whatever Dewey actually said, the tone his readers (followers as well as opponents) have heard in what he wrote was conducive to such misunderstandings, so that if Dewey is to be of use today, new language needs to be introduced.

Here is where she turns to Emerson and Cavell's "Emersonian moral perfectionism."4 While Dewey and Emerson both share the idea of growth without fixed ends, Saito reveals an important difference in their educational approaches regarding the reconstruction of ends. Good ends for Dewey are those that encourage more growth and which are arrived at through social cooperation and “intimate interaction” (p.85). Dewey's emphasis on the social, however, may not preserve the “gleam of light,” Saito and Cavell see as so important. What of the case of the “recalcitrant child” who is conditioned to conform to the group (p.89)? While Dewey nods to the importance of non-conformity, can he deal with this case? Or consider Cavell's example of a situation where a child's questions make the adult's conventional answers fail so that both are brought up against the reality of the human mystery: Why do we die? Why are some people bad? or (the young Japanese boy's question), “Why do we live?” The adult and child must struggle together toward some sort of “mutual attunement,” says Cavell, and at the end of it we may be in “complete surprise at what we have done” (p.93). This is different from Dewey's idea of instrumental reasoning that aims for “clarity, organization and stability”; it is one, rather, “which confronts and assimilates the facts of
uncertainty, disappointment, and surprise posed by life-expressed by the voice of an Emersonian child” (93). The Emersonian child (or the Emersonian child in every child) needs an education that acknowledges “the invisible, the infinite and the imperfect” and that “treasures infinity and myth” (pp.94, 98).

Saito finds the constructive link between these two views of education by connecting Emerson's “gleam of light”-our spontaneous root of individuality-with Dewey's idea of impulse as the originative phase of conduct. Emerson says he will write “whim” over his door-post-every moment we go forth in experience we may encounter “transcendence within nature, in our common lives” (p.103). This comes close to what Dewey says in Art as Experience about the capacity of experience to develop from an originary impulsion toward a consummatory, meaningful experience. The “gleam of light,” if nourished, can help us cultivate an aesthetic awareness in the act of living; it even comes close to Dewey's idea of “the religious” as an imaginative, holistic appropriation of experience for directive ideals (pp.108, 112, 116).

Saito's reading of the “Emsonian side” of Dewey (texts like Individualism, Old and New; Art as Experience and A Common Faith) is quite sensitive and insightful, counter-acting significantly her earlier reading. What if Dewey and Emerson can be brought together? Dewey, in dialogue with Emerson, she says can focus education on “critical re-examination and transformation of the spiritual, aesthetic, and moral basis of our living” and show “creative democracy as a personal way of living” (p.141). With Emerson, she would have education help each child dive into his “privatist, secret presentiment” and say “This is my music; this is myself!” so that his discovery can be shared, enriching all of us (p.142). Cultivation of aesthetic experience gives us “the power to experience the common world in its fullness,” as Dewey says (p.145). Art allows us to see the dark, mysterious, and tragic dimensions of our existence, as well as holistic dimension of human life (p.157). Even just recovering the language of the spiritual, the aesthetic, and the moral helps counter the techno-jargon afflicting modern education and helps direct the teacher away from “measurement” of students to focus on their inner growth as human individuals. In the classroom “patient listening and imaginative seeing” through genuine communication can aim for these goals (p.150). By communication, Saito also means dialogue with other cultures. Education, for her, is “the art of transcendence” where “one re-encounters the intensity and depth of life” (pp.156, 159).

Although this book has much commendable, industrious scholarship, the true strength of this book lies more in the author's own insights into the needs of the young who have been born adrift upon a sea of mindless, meaningless commercialism and technology. She asks educators to remember that, in addition to “skills,” they must impart awareness of the human mystery and the radical uniqueness of each life that lives in it. Education must teach us to live well, not “succeed,” to face the complexity of the world and our own finitude rather than make us turn toward technology to fix problems; it must help us choose a “path with heart” rather than one trying to satisfy the ego and to feel compassion and not indifference. Naoko Saito is clear about these ultimate issues and it is to be hoped that her own poetic and compassionate voice will speak for itself in future work.

Notes
1 Professor Saito's rather nuanced meaning for this phrase can be found in several crucial passages: “Emerson calls the gleam of light ‘Intuition,’ or ‘Instinct.’ It symbolizes one's inner soul, the sense of one's being, of who I am,' or the 'integrity of mind.' The gleam of light originates in an undivided, holistic condition of life as ‘the fountain of action and thought.’ It is the mark of one's particular inclination, serves as the origin of thinking...” (p.101) "...Emerson's
gleam of light is an inventive combination of the spiritual and the pragmatic. Although the gleam of light symbolizes the inner soul and being, Emerson's gleam of light as Instinct is not static, causal [ly] determinant; rather, it is growing as 'the soul becomes’’ (p.104). "As an indestructible, original sense of one's individuality and as a source of perfection, the gleam of light is ever-present in the course of experience. It is, however, only a beginning impulse; it must be watched, nurtured, and guided along the path of its growth” (p.108).


3 Saito makes a good point when she says, “...Dewey's language allows room for old categories and concepts of philosophy to sneak into his innovative philosophy” (p.96).

4 Cavell's use of this term is really a version of the idea of “self-realization” found throughout western philosophy with the emphasis placed here on "releasing the good” rather than “restraining the bad” that is “located in the ordinary” (pp.52-53).

5 The quotation is from Emerson's address, *The American Scholar*. 