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Emerson and Bildung: Self-Cultivation, Social Critique, Democracy

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The idea of *Bildung* and Emersonian perfectionism

The notion of *Bildung* has long been a central, if often contested point of reference in discussions about education – not only in the German context. The manifold characteristics ascribed to the idea can make it difficult to pinpoint its meaning, and it has been suggested to abandon the idea because of the impossibility to operationalise it for scientific purposes in education sciences and pedagogy (e.g. Lenzen 1997). In spite of attempts like these, the notion of *Bildung* remains influential, and shapes not only the disciplinary discourse, but also public debates in the media and in politics. It is notoriously hard to translate *Bildung* into other languages. For example, even if the English term “liberal education” might come close to rendering some of the typical associations, especially in its non-instrumentalist focus, it is not able to capture other important dimensions of the notion’s meaning, which is why many non-German authors still decide to maintain the notion in the original form (e.g. McDowell 1994; Nordenbo/ Lovlie 2003). With regard to Emerson’s educational thought, I believe there is also good reason to try to understand him through a lens which connects him to the *Bildung* tradition, without losing sight, however, of his specifically American inflections of it.

The origins of the term *Bildung* are said to lie in medieval mysticism. In Meister Eckhart’s *imago dei* doctrine, it is not yet a noun, but a verb describing a process which starts with “entbilden”, the freeing yourself of the images of the sensual and empirical illusions in order to be followed by “einbilden”, forming/imag(in)ing yourself into the soul, and then culminates in “überbilden”, the forming/imag(in)ing yourself over into the image of God. While the notion undergoes a continuous process of secularisation in its transformation through the Enlightenment, German Romanticism and Idealism into Humboldt’s neo-humanism, the basic structure remains a dialectic one spanning the tension between what we are now and what we aspire to become. *Bildung* is neither just natural development or growth, nor is it the mere imposition of societal norms and existing knowledge on an individual, but it requires a twofold alienation: firstly alienation from the present self, the letting go of immediate desires and egotistic interests in order to allow for an immersion into the world, and then again the alienation from the world in order to return home to the self. (cf. Gadamer 1960, 175ff.)

Humboldt in his *Theorie der Bildung des Menschen* (1792) famously determines as our “last task” to give the concept of the human being a maximal content by connecting the “I and the world” to the “most general, the most lively, and the most free interaction”. In this way, he pushes for a general education for everybody, resisting a too early and narrow focus on the pragmatic necessities of vocational training in order to keep the future open to be determined by the goals the respective individuals set for themselves rather than have those goals predetermined by social class or other external factors. However, Humboldt’s ambitious emancipatory and socio-critical ideal of *Bildung* was taken up quickly and watered down by the German middle classes to a mere means of social distinction. This tendency of the ideal of *Bildung* to become reified into a conservative canon, into a merely superficial acquaintance with certain cultural products or as possession of qualification certificates is thus not only a contemporary phenomenon, but can be observed already in Humboldt’s own time. This is also famously lamented by Adorno in his theory of “Halbbildung” (1959). More positively put, however, the idea of *Bildung* – because it is always prone to become reified through various presentisms – reveals itself as a perfectionist ideal towards which we again and again have to struggle and strive, but which we can never achieve because this would constitute a *contradictio in adjecto*.

We find a very similar structure and perfectionist orientation in Emerson’s call for aversions from conformity. In his prominent essay “Self-Reliance”, this reliance means not

to stay inside the self, but we become ourselves because we immerse ourselves into the world. Emerson advises, “But do your work, and I shall know you. Do your work, and you shall reinforce yourself.” (CW 2: 54) Furthermore, not unlike Humboldt’s idea of *Bildung* as allowing for the individual’s development in distinction from societal pre-determinations, self-reliance manifests as “a *continual turning away* from society, [and] is thereby a continual turning *toward* it” (Cavell 1990, 59), and Emerson also warns against an instrumentalist, calculative pragmatism because “We do not know today whether we are busy or idle.” (CW 3: 46) Emerson paints a picture of the human condition where the “evanescence and lubricity of all objects, which lets them slip through our fingers” (CW 3: 49) appears most strongly “then when we clutch hardest.” (Ibid.) He reverses the picture of thinking (or knowledge) as the active, spontaneous side of ours which subdues the world under its categories, and instead likens thinking to passiveness, reception, and thanking. In the *Bildung* tradition, similarly, there has been cautioning against the idea of an omnipotent subject appropriating the world, as when Gadamer writes that those who are really “gebildet” do not know it because “it” is formed like the mountains over Jena (1997, 25), or when Horkheimer says that *Bildung* does not mean to ‘make something out of yourself’, but to give yourself over to something, to fully immerse yourself into a matter and retain yourself working in it (1952). As human beings, for Emerson, we are defined by our inhabiting the world of thought and the practical world *at once*. In order for us to keep and continuously recover our humanity, we have to bear their sometimes despairing separateness and distance where “the hope of the one lies in not denying the other, which each would love to do.” (CW 3, 84) It is this separation that can drive the ever new critical self-reflection on the state of our “Halbbildung” in contrast to the ideal of *Bildung* we can envision.

Heikki Kovalainen

For or Against Elitism? Emerson’s Inclusive Anti-Democracy

In an Emersonian setting, *Bildung* has two basic meanings. In the first place, the term refers to the European Enlightenment tradition reaching from Herder to Hegel, and Emersonian Romanticism provided an American continuation to this tradition. Secondly, the United States exemplifies a home-grown tradition of *culture* or *self-culture* — on Emerson’s view, the latter was the English equivalent of German *Bildung* — and the American tradition of self-culture found original forms in Emerson’s religious forefathers, the Puritans and the Unitarians. As I have argued elsewhere, Emerson is the nexus author *par excellence* of these two lines of American *Bildung*, insofar as he draws key elements from both. Today, however, my topic will be different.

My present objective will be to discuss the threat of elitism that Emerson’s philosophy of *Bildung* has often been taken to invite. This question reaches to the heart of Emersonian moral perfectionism, since the very idea of perfectionism raises the question of *who* may attain perfection. My focal point lies in the Emersonian metaphor of *growth*, both in an ethical and an ontological sense, individual evolution toward ever higher and larger levels of being, such as adumbrated, in particular, in his later philosophy (especially in the essay “Culture” in *The Conduct of Life*). I will respond to the threat of elitism in two different ways, first by explaining how the charge is misguided, and second by arguing that we should not go too far in refuting the charge.

Emerson’s version of *Bildung*, epitomized in his emphatic philosophy of growth, has been criticized for elitism not least because it encourages the strong and the self-reliant to fulfill their potential, while leaving the reader in some doubt as to the fate of the weak. Such a criticism may be leveled not only against Nietzsche’s but also against Emerson’s views on self-culture. While the issue is delicate, I have two main points of criticism against the charge. To begin with, it must be admitted that Emerson uses evolutionary language applied to human culture to the degree of teetering on the brink of elitism. This way of depicting humanity is shared by Nietzsche. But for both thinkers, the alleged elitism implicit in their philosophies is only part of their larger philosophy of culture. For instance, both thinkers have much to say on the importance of *friendship* and the potential within every single human being to reach above and beyond herself. Thus, when the two

philosophers encourage us to live for the greatest exemplars, this can be taken to mean that *each one of us* may potentially attain an exemplary status.

When speaking of culture, secondly, Emerson often makes inclusive mention of the oppressed, in particular, women—whose rights' fearless advocate he was in his lifetime. While Nietzsche, of course, has been celebrated as a precursor to feminism, in spite of his numerous misogynistic utterances, I think a stronger case could be made for Emerson meriting the same praise, consciously and often explicitly partaking in the problematics. In the first place, Emerson specifically takes up the topic "Woman" in some of his addresses, and the American Transcendentalists were politically and socially progressive in their advocacy of women's rights. More importantly, the essayist's writings contain various remarks on the importance of femininity for balanced humanity, not merely exemplified by women but also by feminine traits in men. For example, "A highly endowed man with good intellect & good conscience is a Man-Woman, & does not so much need the complement of Woman to his being as another" (JMN 10, 392; JMN 8, 175). Overall, it should be stressed that Emerson's explicit inclusion of women in the project of self-culture provides an argument for his view of culture being open-ended and inclusive.

Let us come to the flipside. While the anti-elitist strands in Emersonian thought must be clearly seen, we should also keep in mind that his vision of culture is not democratic to the extent of being trivially easy to accomplish. One might say that Emerson advocates a democratic ethics about *opportunities* for personal growth, and an "aristocratic" view about the empirical reality of who have made or will make it. As he words it, "our culture is not come ... none are cultivated" (JMN 5, 470). I believe Emerson would say the same were he to live today — or perhaps something harsher. In speaking of the habit of attending to the vast variety of all sensations — a quintessential theme in his later philosophy of culture — he says that this is "a thing impossible to many & except in merest superficiality impossible to any" (JMN 5, 435). Analogously, he writes in "Culture": "Very few of our race can be said to be yet finished men." In the journals, Emerson speaks emphatically of culture "in the high sense", or of "the high idea of Culture" (note the capital initial), of Culture as "the end of existence"; an idea which he says "does not pervade the mind of the thinking people of our community" (JMN 5, 410–411).

In conclusion, culture in the high Emersonian sense runs parallel to the *unattainable* ideal of endless perfectibility — which may still be a meaningful goal for human existence — perhaps in virtue of its very unattainability, as it were as a religious ideal. Emersonian self-culture is *more* demanding than its easy illustrations induce us to believe, yet striving for the unattainable ideal is not non-sensical. Self-culture in the high Emersonian sense, then, stands less for heightened self-knowledge than an ethical *ideal* — indeed, "the end of existence", analogous to the Kantian ultimate telos *summum bonum* or, say, Peircean Reality. I have my reservations about translating *Bildung* in this context as *liberal education*, in part because this translation flirts too much with liberalism and also because the cited religiousness of Emersonian *Bildung* implies a strand of "conservatism" in his stripe of perfectionism. What this means precisely in the context of his philosophical project, let alone for philosophy of education, is yet to be studied.

Paul Standish **Learning through "Experience"**

In his Introduction to *Conditions Handsome and Unhandsome*, Stanley Cavell provides what might be taken to be a synoptic account of moral perfectionism, an idea that he has explored across a wide range of his writings. Within a few pages the account provides a list of works and authors that might merit this term, as well as an enumeration of the factors that typically justify its application. The provision of this open-ended list of texts and this summary of key features is defended in part on the grounds that perfectionists texts are recurrently under the threat of a kind of repression, in American thought specifically but also in the contemporary world more generally. The defence raises the question of what culture is, which in turn prompts thinking about the kind of education internal to its vitality.

Perfectionism comes under periodic attack, and this for reasons that are easy to fathom, especially where it is mistaken as perfectibility. My starting-point will then be to consider the nature and effects of Cavell's defence of perfectionism here, which I find

problematic in certain ways. I want to juxtapose this against a series of comments from my reading of Emerson's essay "Experience". Several of the salient features of Cavell's account find expression there, but the unity of the essay form allows these features to come to light within a complex and subtle relationship. Indeed, essay form is crucial in achieving this. Given that this is Emerson's preferred form in his writing, its nature warrants further consideration.

A further feature of Emerson's writing is its aphoristic nature. In order to broach the rich themes that interweave in this essay, I propose to concentrate on a series of key aphoristic sentences, all of which open onto connections that inter-relate the themes of self-cultivation, social critique, and democracy. Consider then the following:

Where do we find ourselves?

Emerson famously opens the essay with this seemingly casual question. But the casualness partly hides what turns out to be an exploration of the nature of foundations, for our thought, for our societies, and for our becoming who we are. In this Emerson shows the ways that our actions and words are committed to a continual productive process, however much we may hide from this in various ways.

I take this evanescence and lubricity of all objects, which lets them slip through our fingers then when we clutch hardest, to be the most unhandsome part of our condition.

The somewhat oblique reference of this rich sentence is to an approach to enquiry that presumes that things must be held in our grasp. Emerson's purpose here is to show that often the most important things, or at least the deeper or better understanding of them, are not available to us when we presume to adopt too direct an approach. As he puts this later in the essay, 'The art of life has a pudency and will not be exposed.' But he acknowledges at the same time the uncomfortable nature of this truth, frustrating as it were the very impulse of enquiry.

We thrive by casualties. Our chief experiences have been casual.

Emerson puts into play the extraordinary concatenation of words that derive etymologically from the Latin for 'to fall' (*caedo, cadere, cecidi, casum*). The result is to prompt the association of the seemingly casual with matters of fate in way that prevents the differentiation of what is ephemeral and what is important in any settled way. 'We live amid surfaces, and the true art of life is to skate well on them,' Emerson has said, but whether this is to be read as an encouragement or a warning is not entirely to be resolved.

It is very unhappy, but too late to be helped, the discovery that we exist.

The discovery that we exist mimics Descartes' *cogito ergo sum*, but in a way that calls into question what it is to make this discovery or whether the discovery inevitably comes too late. But the apparent epistemological purchase of these sentences, or the particular form of scepticism in which they are taken to have their place, easily gives way here to a more existential regret: that we have failed to realise we are alive. This echoes the suggestions of the ghostly nature of our existence hinted at early in the essay, implying a failure to live up to the lives we have.

The function of the aphorism in each case works against the clear identification of defining features, in a way quite unlike Cavell's overt listings. The sentences here work in such a way as to be open to connections that stretch across the text, in overlapping and criss-crossing ways, defying expectations of unified linear ordering. This is no mere stylistic

idiosyncrasy. It puts the reader in the position of having to read: a phrase is equivocal, open to different emphasis or tone; a link is opened, but the connections are still to be made, and each will involve an active response; and the sounds and imagery of the words invite associations that are not exhaustively to be defined.

There is a lesson in reading here, which itself is educational and provocative of thought. But the substance of the text also engenders thoughts of a more obviously substantive kind. These encourage reflection on how it is one should live, by first evoking something of what it is to live. While the message here is clearly one of affirmation of life, no tidy moral philosophy is yielded, and the idea that our moral education might need one is revealed in its emptiness.

Emerson's is a philosophy of moods, and the moods to which the text exposes the reader say something about the nature of experience itself. They provide an experience of reading that is indicative of the need for responsiveness and responsibility. These are lessons for our classrooms and curricula, as they are for our lives as a whole.

Naoko Saito

The cross-cultural prospect of Emerson and Democracy

He then learns that in going down into the secrets of his own mind he has descended into the secrets of all minds. He learns that he who has mastered any law in his private thoughts, is master to that extent of all men whose language he speaks, and of all into whose language his own can be translated. . . The deeper he dives into his privatest, secretest presentiment, to his wonder he finds this is the most acceptable, most public, and universally true. (Emerson, 2000, pp. 53-54)

Writing in 1903, Dewey called Emerson the "Philosopher of Democracy" (Dewey, 1977). In the light of his visits to Japan in 1919 and 1920, it would scarcely come as a surprise to Dewey that, in the century since then, Emerson has not been well appreciated in that country. The historical acceptance of Emerson by one Japanese poet and thinker, Togoku Kitamura (1868-1894) in the Meiji Period (1868-1912), when Japan's period of modernization was initiated, is discussed by Megume Sakabe in his "'Freedom' as the Experience of the West" (Sakabe, 1999). According to Sakabe, Kitamura was influenced by what he took to be Emerson's view of spiritual "inner freedom": Sakabe describes this as a "theory of higher freedom." But while Sakabe is appreciative of Kitamura's reception of Emerson, he raises the question, critically and skeptically: "After Kitamura, has Japan ever reached the point where it can discover the way to return to the outer again, starting with inner insight?" (ibid., translated by the author). Certainly it seems that Emerson has been recognised in Japan more as a writer than as a philosopher, and hence he is read and referred to within literacy studies, not within philosophy. In Japan today, especially after what has come to be known as "3/11" – the Fukushima incident – its democracy has been newly questioned and questioned in a more penetrating way. Can democracy be separated from our personal ways of living and from deeper existential questions concerning how we should live with others across borders – borders within and beyond? Confronted with the present national crisis, democracy is tested in Japan, for each of us, and not simply as a political mechanism, but as a "way of life," as John Dewey once remarked (Dewey, 1988). Simultaneously the role of the philosopher is also tested in this crisis of democracy. More than ever, in Japan, the significance of practical philosophy is called for, and hence the potential of a greater appreciation of American philosophy. Now is the time when Emerson's "inmost to the outmost" can perhaps be understood: this is a philosophy of democracy beyond spiritual freedom where transcendence in the ordinary

can be redeemed as part of the political life of Japan.

Against this background this paper thematises Emerson as the “philosopher of democracy” whose voice still to be heard in Japan. It extends this to a more philosophical consideration of what it means to “appreciate” Emerson’s “influence” “across” “borders” – questions internal to Emerson’s thought. By so doing it attempts to explore another way of appreciating Emerson’s contemporary significance in uncharted territory across cultural borders. For this purpose, I shall try to reclaim the global importance of Emerson as *the American* philosopher who can provide us with an alternative concept of the human subject and who thus shows us a way to become cosmopolitan in the age of globalization, transcending borders from within. Emerson’s thought is reconceived as a *philosophy of affirmation*, anticipating Nietzsche (Standish, 2004): his “Man Thinking” then provides a motif for the possibility of living affirmatively in the face of crisis in democracy. This revolutionary concept of the Emersonian subject requires us to redefine what it means to achieve universality and neutrality, starting with the “privatest” realm within. In this task of reconfiguring Emersonian subject, I shall represent Emerson’s thesis from the “privatest” to the “most public” in the light of Cavell’s idea of “philosophy as translation,” and represent it as an alternative route to cosmopolitanism. Translation here signifies more than the linguistic: it involves the translation of the human subject, understood now as being inseparable from language and culture. The idea of translation is crucially related to an anti-foundationalist, transitory concept of the self (Cavell, 1992). This is a standpoint that resists the mentality of monolingualism that permeates today’s global scene. With an entangled relationship between language, subject and culture, it points us to a perception of the human subject beyond the dichotomous scheme of universalism and (American or Japanese) parochialism. Emersonian perfectionism (Cavell, 1990) takes us away from the idea of *the* authentic culture and of a common humanity, understood as somehow pre-given. The common in Emersonian perfectionism is to be achieved “in due time,” through encountering the uncommon within the common, and, that is, most importantly, encountering it within the inmost.

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