Aversive Education: Emersonian Variations on 'Bildung'

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Abstract: The paper discusses Emerson’s thought in relation to the German Bildung tradition. For many, Bildung still signifies a valuable achievement of modern educational thought as well as a critical, emancipatory ideal which, frequently in a rather nostalgic manner, is appealed to in order to delineate problematic tendencies of current educational trends. Others, in a sometimes rather cynical manner, claim that Bildung through its successful institutionalization has shaped vital features of our present educational system and has thus served its time and lost its critical potential. When thinking through Emerson’s variations of Bildung I argue against the nostalgic appeals to Bildung that the criticism against it has to be taken seriously. Against the cynical assessment of Bildung having run its course, I will hold that with Emerson we can develop the idea of an “aversive education” as a call for Bildung to be turned upon itself, which allows to revive it as a conceptual tool for transformation, drawing particular attention to its political dimension.

“Our life is an apprenticeship to the truth, that around every circle another can be drawn.”
(Ralph Waldo Emerson, Circles)

“I ask not for the great, the remote, the romantic; what is doing in Italy or Arabia; what is Greek art, or Provencal minstrelsy; I embrace the common, I explore and sit at the feet of the familiar, the low.”
(Ralph Waldo Emerson, American Scholar)

1. Introduction
The task I take upon myself in the following is to read Emerson’s thought in relation to the German Bildung tradition. As Stanley Cavell writes, “Emerson’s […] message to the scholar is to raise and cheer, as if the alternative is not to be ineffectual (which one might either fear or desire), but to depress and cynicize and ironize, which in a democracy are political emotions” (1988/1990: 125). For many, Bildung still signifies a valuable achievement of
modern educational thought as well as a critical, emancipatory ideal which, frequently in a rather nostalgic manner, is appealed to in order to delineate problematic tendencies of current educational trends. Others, in often rather cynical manner, claim that Bildung through its successful institutionalization has shaped vital features of our present educational system and thus served its time and lost its critical potential. When thinking through Emerson’s variations of Bildung in the pages to come, I do that in an Emersonian, cheerful spirit. Against the nostalgic appeals to Bildung, I will argue that the criticism against it has to be taken seriously. Against the cynical assessment of Bildung having run its course, I will hold that with Emerson we can develop the idea of an “aversive education” as a call for Bildung to be turned upon itself, which allows to revive it as a tool for transformation.

In 2003 a special issue of the Journal of Philosophy of Education was dedicated to exploring the possible meanings of the concept of Bildung in postmodernity. The preface emphasizes that “there is no doubt that the idea of Bildung has been of crucial importance to the development of the idea of education, most obviously in Germany and parts of northern Europe but also indirectly throughout the Western world.” (viii) However, the goal of the essays collected in the mentioned issue was not merely to add further historical accounts to the wide body of existing research on this influential idea, rather its concern was with questioning its relevance under contemporary conditions, and some of the authors’ assessments turn out to be rather bleak. Roland Reichenbach, for example, concludes his essay stating that “one can view the idea of Bildung and education as the vehicle of emancipation and future justice as becoming a rather ironic affair.” (102) Similarly, Jan Masschelein and Norbert Ricken skeptically question the critical potential of the concept in today’s time when they argue in an article in Educational Philosophy and Theory that while “at one moment in history it probably did play a critical role, Bildung has long since lost the possibility of functioning as a point of resistance and critical principle for analyzing the ways in which we conduct our lives and the ways in which our conduct is itself conducted, i.e. the ways we are governed and also govern ourselves” (2003: 139). The provocation put forth by Masschelein and Ricken is that Bildung rather than still being a valid starting point for articulating and developing opposition to present power structures is (and, as they argue later, always has been) part and parcel of the very problem it is so frequently invoked to criticize. I think we ought to take the criticism put forth by these authors very seriously, and that they are
right in cautioning against naïve and nostalgic calls for a return to (the original meaning of) Bildung. Such appeals easily underestimate to which extent the ideals articulated in the concept of Bildung have already been realized as well as the extent to which they might be complicit in the tensions, power dynamics and injustices of present social reality.

So what then warrants reconsidering the concept of Bildung yet again? First and foremost I believe that there is a need to discuss Bildung because people actually use it. Insofar as it in fact still enjoys the status of being one of the key terms in German educational sciences and politics, and is increasingly appealed to in international contexts, the concept of Bildung requires further analysis. This does not necessarily imply that we will find Bildung defensible in our time. But at least it means that we need to engage with it. The path that the present paper will take is to start by sketching the outlines of some of the contemporary debates around the influential neo-humanist concept of Bildung: its appeal to the individual and the charge of a problematic individualism; its appeal to an integrated whole and the charge of a problematic universalism; its relation to thinking democracy and the charge of a problematic elitism; its idea of human perfectibility and the charge of a naïve trust in progress. In the second part of the paper I will then turn to the way in which central lines of Bildung thought became reworked in the writings of Ralph Waldo Emerson. The promise and potential I see in this American appropriation and transformation of neo-humanist thinking could be summed up as the notion of Bildung becoming turned onto itself. Both Reichenbach and Masschelein/Ricken emphasize that their refusal of the concept of Bildung or the depiction of its present ironic character should not be taken as “turning towards a resigned cynicism” (2003: 150), but they keep relatively silent as to how this could be accomplished. With the present paper, I will try to make a contribution to this quest by showing that Emerson’s thought can be remarkably instructive with regard to how to go on from the dead-end that the discussions on Bildung appear to have hit.

2. Promises, Ambiguities, and Success as Failure: Sketching Bildung in Late Modernity

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”; i.e. freeing yourself of the images of the sensual and empirical illusions in order to be followed by “einbilden”; i.e. forming/imag(in)ing yourself into the soul, and then
culminates in “überbilden”; i.e. 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 announces as our ultimate task to give the concept of the human being a maximal content by connecting the “I and the world” in the “most general, most animated, and most unrestrained interplay.” (von Humboldt, 2000, p. 58ff.) 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. Humboldt’s neo-humanism is not only rejecting a submission of the individual to tradition authority, but also critically directed against the Enlightenment’s narrow rationalism, its belief in progress and mechanistic world-view. It is a commonly recited line of argument (often following Adorno’s critique in his theory of “Halbbildung” (1959)) that Humboldt’s ambitious emancipatory and socio-critical ideal of Bildung became watered down to a mere strategic means of introducing new social distinctions when it was taken up by the emerging German middle classes. The individuality proclaimed by Humboldt is said to be misunderstood as a shallow individualism by the German bourgeoisie already in the beginning of the 19th century, leading to an exaggerated focus on the inner to the detriment of critical social and political reflection. (cf. Borst 2011, 59)

Against these juxtapositions of a ‘good’ original concept with its later “abuse” or “betrayal”, Masschelein and Ricken argue that “such a reading obscures the specific implication of the concept of Bildung in power relations” (2003: 147) as these power relations are “not external to the idea of Bildung, as often assumed, but inscribed in it from the very
Deconstructing the notion of Bildung, the authors not only reveal how Bildung is situated in an era where the power of legal norms is surpassed by empirical norms (“facilitating bio-power” (146)), but also what the ideal seems to exclude, such as stable, non-critical identities and social bounds that are valued over the individual’s desire for self-realization. For them, the idea remains irrevocably tied to “the ‘birth of the modern subject’, which Foucault time and again described as a strategic operation of individualization and totalisation” (ibid.: 148), and they further clarify:

Humboldt’s ideas illuminate the ambivalence of the concept of Bildung which still obtains today: that which on the one hand can be read as a critique of definitions and determinations which ascribe identity, becomes a positively formulated project in its articulation as a defence of a permanent non-identity, oriented towards structured progress as the principle of social transformation. In this way critique is seen as the practical realization of the project of Bildung, so that its negating moment is transformed into a new positivity and therefore becomes obsolete as critique. (ibid.: 149)

Such an assessment forces the question upon us if Bildung inextricably leads to a divisive individualism and ultimately encourages a tendency of democratic education’s denigration to the upbuilding of a conformist mass society. In a way, one wants to say that nothing seems further away from Humboldt’s idea and I am inclined to rather follow Charles Taylor’s assessment that it is the trivialization of the Romantic ideal of authenticity which we can observe today. As Honneth summarizes, this process is successful “to such an extent that its dialogical and communicative aspects are lost without anyone noticing, thereby vacating the field for the purely solipsistic aim of self-discovery” (Honneth 2004: 467). In his article on the paradoxical character of individualization, Honneth outlines the pathologies of today’s individualism, arguing that “the individualism of self-realization” has resulted in consequences under which “individuals today seem more likely to suffer than to prosper” (474), as “this paradoxical reversal, where the processes which once promised an increase of qualitative freedom are henceforth altered into an ideology of de-institutionalization” leads to “the emergence in individuals of a number of symptoms of inner emptiness, of feeling oneself to be superfluous, and of absence of purpose.” (463) Employing a quote by Georg Simmel, Honneth towards the end points to a crucial problematic: if we are interested not only in “freedom from something” but in “liberty to do something” (Ibid.: 475), then it is not sufficient to concern ourselves only with freedom in a purely negative sense, but
we have to carefully consider the positive conditions of freedom. Honneth turns to this critique of a limited understanding of freedom as individual in his recent work on Hegel’s social theory (Honneth 2010). In this way his reflection on the paradoxes of individualism lead him to a similar appeal as when Masschelein and Ricken call for renewed attention to our “being-together” (2003: 150). When we turn to the similarities and differences between Bildung and its Emersonian variations in the following parts of the paper, I will focus on some of those transformations of the Bildung concept which specifically address these modern paradoxes and allow us to rearticulate a more humble, and at the same time more promising vision with the help of Emerson.

3. Experimentation, Perfectionism and the Ordinary

What Emerson calls for is something we do not want to hear, something about the necessity of patience or suffering in allowing ourselves to change. What discipline will call for this if philosophy does not? (Cavell, Em’s Etudes, p. 223)

Turning to the work of Ralph Waldo Emerson, even today after the commendable work by Stanley Cavell, John T. Lysaker, and others, it still requires some effort to approach his work as the writings of a philosopher to be taken serious as philosopher. Emerson has an indisputable status in the American literary canon as a renowned essayist and founder of the influential Transcendentalist movement. His reputation as a philosopher however is not established to an equal degree. First and foremost, his questionable status as philosopher can be attributed to his style of writing. In distinction from many other Western philosophers, his work is not designed so as to form a comprehensive system and his language is demanding insofar as it does not settle and define technical terms in order to put forth philosophical theses. As Emerson himself warns:

> But lest I should mislead any when I have my own head, and obey my own whims, let me remind the reader that I am only an experimenter. Do not set the least value on what I do, or the least discredit on what I do not, as if I pretended to settle any thing as true or false. I unsettle all things. No facts are to me sacred; none are profane; I simply experiment, an endless seeker with no Past at my back. (CW II, p. 187)

As Stanley Cavell expresses: “Emerson does not sound like what, especially in the Anglo-American tradition, we are accustomed to think of as philosophy” (Cavell 2003, p. 2). Yet it is
this distinctive “sound” of Emerson writings, his resistance to formal argument, which resounds with the themes he is concerned with, with the apparently obvious and ordinary, with the struggle for a language that strives for an honesty of expression, an aversion to conformity in every word we use through their continuous conversion and transfiguration. If considering Emerson’s refusal of normal philosophy as itself a philosophical move, we can come to understand his choice of style as a conscious endeavor to return philosophy to a more human, more surprising form adequate to the form of life Emerson wishes to express through it. Cavell suggests taking this style as a serious challenge to rethinking how we do, how we write and think philosophy, and how we conceive of reason. In the America that in Emerson’s mind is still to be founded “philosophy and literature would bear a relation to each other not envisioned in the given, outstanding traditions of philosophy in England and in Germany” (Cavell 2003, p. 4). When we now turn to the way in which Emersonian themes and ideas can be thought of as reformulations, appropriations and transfigurations of the German Bildung tradition, that his form of writing, if read together with ‘what’ he is trying to express, marks his seriousness in conceiving of a distinctive way of doing philosophy as well as of what he deems achievable by it which coincides with and is inseparable from the content he wishes to put forth.

For the sake of finding a manageable entry point into a very complex discussion, I will discuss the Humboldtian notion of Bildung first and foremost in relation to Stanley Cavell’s prominent interpretation of what he terms “Emersonian moral perfectionism” (Cavell 1988/1990; Saito 2005: 50). The idea of Bildung can similarly be understood as proposing a form of (non-teleological) perfectionism, but as Naoko Saito has carefully shown in relation to Dewey’s idea of ‘growth’, it requires a careful analysis of Emerson’s specific thinking on perfectionism in order to see that they are not perfectionists in the same sense. In contrast to the two prominent strands utilitarian/consequentialist and deontological moral theories, perfectionism, currently enjoying a widely spread revival in its Aristotelian form, is concerned with the question of how we can live a good life before and beyond questions of the maximization of that good or questions of what is the right thing to do. Insofar as perfectionism is concerned with the conditions of a good life it provides a good platform from which to spell out the conditions of freedom in the positive sense of ‘liberty to do’ something
as discussed above, which is what we need to look at if we want to avoid the paradoxical (i.e. enslaving rather than liberating) consequences of a merely negative notion of freedom.

Naoko Saito distinguishes three main characteristics of Emersonian moral perfectionism: “(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” (Saito 2005: 53). Saito’s bullet points summarize some prominent characteristics of EMP. In the discussion of the political dimension of EMP and its implications for democratic theory in the following part, we will however find that EMP is not just relevant as an American democratic ideal, but has relevance for all societies where a certain degree of democratic stability has been achieved. This does not just imply the successful establishment of functioning protective institutions, but also some basic understanding and acceptance of the principle that each and every member of that society should have equal rights and opportunities for personal flourishing as well as social and political participation. As for point 3), Saito certainly mentions central notions that can inspire an Emersonian Bildung, but an even more complex picture can be drawn and might do Emerson better justice. But before going deeper in the political and educational implications of EMP, I would like to give a rough sketch of what Emersonian perfectionism as “perfecting with no fixed ends” is out after.

As we already pointed out above, perfectionism in Cavell’s reading is not to be understood as a theory alongside or as in competition with other ethical theories, such as deontology or utilitarianism. Also, Cavell resists any definition of his perfectionism in a sense we might be used to from other philosophers’ developing moral theories. It is in the course of his writing and thinking with a variety of authors, his working through our words that he exemplifies for us as readers what Emersonian perfectionism implies. Nevertheless, in his 1988 Carus Lectures, later published as Conditions Handsome and Unhandsome (1990), we find him spelling out some significant characteristics or aspects which allow us to describe his approach to perfectionism closer. Emersonian perfectionism, as he conceives of it, is: “something like a dimension or tradition of the moral life that spans the course of Western thought and concerns what used to be called the state of one’s soul, a dimension that places tremendous burdens on personal relationships and on the possibility or necessity of the
transforming of oneself and of one’s society” (Cavell 1988/1990: 2). What then is Emersonian perfectionism and how is it distinct from other perfectionisms?

The question, “Is moral perfectionism inherently elitist?”, which introduces Cavell’s Carus Lectures, receives such careful attention because its negation is central to Cavell’s project of articulating his specific occupations with an understanding of the moral and ethical dimensions of our human lives which diverge rather radically from traditional moral and ethical reasoning in professional philosophy. Defending that we can articulate a variation of moral perfectionism which is non-elitist and democratic is of utmost concern to Cavell. His understanding doesn’t defend as the morally good that which maximizes excellence in a given society. Against John Rawls’ dismissal of perfectionism in A Theory of Justice (1971/1999), Cavell suggests that perfectionism does not have to be about the distribution of goods with the telos of reaching (or at least maximizing) human excellence. His understanding of perfectionism considers our present state of the soul, which at each and every instance, is complete, and yet we are drawn to becoming ashamed of our present self, we are drawn to draw another circle around the present circle. This critical self-aversion, this becoming ashamed of the present shortcomings, implies a non-conformism as regards societies rules and norms that we blindly follow without questioning, but also a non-conformism, an aversion to our present or earlier selves.

Cavell’s Emersonian perfectionism is an open-ended, a-teleological perfectionism. It is not reserved for elite or especially talented individuals. Rather it is democratically spread as a quality of human existence, as the potential in each and every individual’s ordinary life to develop their own distinct voice, requiring a continuous openness to change and demanding, radical transformation, to overcoming my present state of self through self-criticism as well towards overcoming the present state of society. Furthermore, this reaching for a next self that, in his discussions on the importance of friendship Emerson often describes as represented and exemplified in the figure of the friend, is always a reaching for a next self, a hope and pushing for a next, a further state of society, which is not necessarily a higher self. This continual call for change is not a call for change for the sake of change (as in ever new and faster creation of consumer’s desire for the latest trend, the next hot product). Rather, it takes the form of a constant reminder of the “possibility and necessity of transformation of oneself and society” (Cavell 1988/1990: 2). Cavell wants to describe that dimension of moral
life which points again and again this dimension which he considers as vital for democracy. Perfectionism in this sense is positively “called for by the democratic aspiration” (Cavell 1988/1990: 1). In the following part, we will now look more closely at the way in which Emersonian perfectionism provides interesting means to counter cynical and other attitudes that hinder democratic community from amounting to more than mass conformism. This dimension of Emersonian-Cavellian perfectionism is important for understanding the political reach of Emersonian Bildung as aversive education.

4. Emersonian Bildung and a democratic politics

The relation between Emerson’s thought and contemporary political theory is in no way straightforward. While Emerson during his life was still renowned for his writings and activism in the context of the anti-slavery movement as well as his ideas concerning the specific form liberal democracy could take in the United States, the reception after his death toned down these aspects of his work so that its political dimension became almost forgotten. It was only in the later years of the 20th century that scholarly interest in Emerson’s politics was revived through the work of political theorists and philosophers as well as literary historians. As the editors Alan M. Levine and Daniel S. Malachuk emphasize in their introduction to the pioneering volume A Political Companion to Ralph Waldo Emerson (2011), it required “painstakingly careful research” (2001: 1) to destroy the myth of Emerson as a proponent of an a-political individualism and write a “new history” (ibid.) of his political involvement as well as the political implications of his work.

The Humboldtian notion of Bildung has also been criticized for lacking in political acuteness. The context in which the notion was developed is that of a German intellectual elite whose political (as well as economic) influence was rather limited. In this way, Bildung has often been interpreted as a frail attempt at compensating for a felt lack of actual power (Borst 2011; Konrad 2012). However, one clearly political dimension of Humboldt’s work can be found in his notion of “Allgemeine Bildung”. When Humboldt became active as a politician in 1809 and put forth several suggestions for school reforms, his school plans encompassed the idea of a general state school “for all children and adolescents and was thus a school of allgemeine Bildung” (Konrad 2012: 116). The plans foresaw a period general education “equally necessary for all classes” (HW IV, p. 217, quoted in Konrad 2012: 116).
Even if the eventual years spent in school would differ for certain groups of students depending on their future professional or academic paths, this idea of an inclusive primary education with a content that aimed at a general rather than a specific employment-oriented content was quite revolutionary in terms of its transgression of class boundaries through education.

The dimension of Emerson’s thought which makes it politically relevant and interesting is however located on a different level. The vital point here is not so much with a concern for equality and justice as for example in contemporary models of deliberative democracy. Rather, Emerson’s thought becomes relevant when we try to tackle those questions and challenges when state democracy is already in place. As Cavell describes:

Emerson’s prose enacts in this way the state of democracy – not because it praises the democratic condition we have so far achieved but because its aversive stance toward our condition only makes sense on the assumption of democracy as our life and our aspiration. Only within such a life and aspiration is a continuity of dialogue with one another, and with those in power over us, a possibility, and duty. (Cavell 1986: 13)

Emersonian moral perfectionism, following Cavell, becomes politically relevant because it allows us to address the question of how we can go on from a state of crisis, when we are tired and dissatisfied with the present state of democracy. It allows us to attend carefully to the ways in which potential failures and shortcomings of lived democracy might be faced without falling into a cynical or defeatist mode of disappointment. Emerson’s philosophy is concerned with keeping the possibility and duty for continued dialogue open in order to keep democracy alive and bearable. In distinction from elitist and aristocratic understandings of perfectionism, Emerson’s version presupposes a democratic state.

Cavell’s emphasis on distinguishing Emerson’s perfectionism from other elitist versions is specifically interesting in light of contemporary theorizing of democracy. As Aletta J. Norval has carefully argued, “Cavell’s reading of Emerson provides […] a starting-point from which to develop an account of the character of democratic identification that is commensurate with broader post-structuralist insights, but which is not reluctant to address issues of a normative character.” (Norval 2007: 12) In her engagement with the post-structuralist critique of the shortcomings of deliberative conceptions of democracy, she formulates an alternative approach based on an Emersonian non-teleological perfectionism which encompasses the post-structural criticism while at the same time retaining a normative dimension, emphasizing
the importance of ordinary political life in opposition to a conflation of the political with regimes and institutions. Furthermore, she develops a conception of political community as not just constituted through the exclusion of an Other. In Norval’s account of aversive democracy an “aversion to conformism [becomes] a key feature of democratic subjectivity” (Norval 2007: 13). As she later elaborates:

Aversive identity is based precisely upon a problematization of the given, of prevailing opinion, and it is closely tied in with self-definition, which [...] is essentially communal in character. This is the moment of the political within already constituted democratic regimes. [...] Democracy and democratic identity are not given once and for all, fully constituted and then simply subject to administration. To the contrary, [...] democracy is to be conceived of as an ongoing project of renewal. (Norval 2007: 185)

In Norval’s proposal of aversive democracy, the formation of a democratic ethos required as a starting point for a constant renewal of democratic conversation rather than the articulation of a substantive, universally applicable ideal that we strive to realize.

What Norval takes from Emersonian moral perfectionism and rearticulates into a political proposal for an aversive democracy, is a constant call for trying to make ourselves intelligible to ourselves and others even when the claims we raise or are confronted with are a challenge to existing democratic grammar or can presently not even be registered within it. The cultivation of an aversive subjectivity (she discusses the example of Nelson Mandela in light of apartheid), cultivation the aversion to conformism, here implies that we do not simply find ourselves with a voice. A voice is something to be founded again and anew in order to articulate that which is important to us, especially in light of these situations where the grammar and the language we are given are insufficient to register the claims we need to make. Norval stresses the importance of imagination and exemplarity, as discussed in Emerson (and building on Emerson later in Nietzsche), for illustrating for us the possibility of a further self as well as a different community beyond the present state of affairs.

Only through being able to imagine a further self and a different, so far unattained but attainable, community, only through the insistence on the possibility of ever further transformation of our democratic grammar towards a democracy that is still to come, can we imagine a transformation of the present imperfect state. Conceiving of democracy as an “ongoing project of renewal” rather than as a merely administrative regime, implies not only the continuous strive for establishing an own, aversive voice, but even more so it requires a
specific kind of responsiveness to the claims raised by others, especially to those claims that
are not easily heard within present democratic grammar. It implies that our discontent with the
present state of affairs, its “distance from perfect justice” (Norval 2007: 208), to which we
always already assent by our continuing to live in an imperfect society, should not be taken as
a failure of democracy to live up to its promise in the face of which we succumb to despair.
Rather the democratic ethos means that the confrontation with this imperfect state instigates a
sense of responsibility on our part to make possible a transformation, to search for a further
self and the possibility of a further community which is responsive to and can register claims
beyond the present democratic grammar. The kind of transformations envisioned here are
neither “revolutionary upheaval, where everything changes, [nor] conservative change, where,
allegedly, nothing changes” (Norval 2007: 189), but slight “shifts in direction” (Ibid.) or to
speak with Derrida “iterations” (cf. ibid.: 208) which can lead to a renewal and transfiguration
of our democratic grammar and ordinary democratic practices. When we now turn to the
educational implications of Emersonian moral perfectionism, the reflections on its political
dimension will be central to understanding in which sense his re-working of Bildung provides
a valuable and critical outlook for contemporary educational challenges.

5. Being partial: Turning Bildung upon itself
Emerson’s writing educates attention for every single word, it’s exemplary of a writing and
reading that requires a responsiveness “in which your entire sensibility and his are involved,
and not only your mind and his mind” (Putnam on Cavell in Saito/Standish 2012: 4). As with
the neo-humanist notion of Bildung, Emerson’s adaptations allow to place central importance
to the aesthetic and political dimensions of Bildung as opposed to narrower, more
instrumental forms of education. I want to suggest that Emerson’s appropriation of Bildung
can provide the means of a therapeutic intervention in contemporary educational
conformisms. In times when calls for a ‘return’ to Bildung become either connected to a
conservative canon, Emerson can help us to develop a different outlook on the relationship
between tradition and originality, one of a necessary aversion to conformism. In times when
flexibility and individuality become institutionalized in the name of Bildung, Emerson shows
that the self only comes into being in relation to the social, in an aversion (and return) to the
social. This relational focus suggests that the therapeutic movement in question today might
be an aversion to the conformist demand for flexibility, and thus allow us to respond to claims
for stability, such as through the creation of attachments to communities, through social welfare, or public funding for education.

Emerson’s account of Bildung does not only provide a broader account of education and its goals than provided by neoliberal trends for standardization, quantification, and an increase in bureaucratic regulation in the name of a heightened freedom, but it reminds us of the possibility and potential necessity of an educative aversion to these trends. What are the educative examples, asking not for discipleship but for non-subservient, new attachments, that we could call on which might inspire such an aversion in us? As Norval reminds us: “The first step in attending to our education is to observe the strangeness of our lives, our estrangement from ourselves, the lack of necessity in what we perceive to be necessary.” (Norval 2007: 207) In today’s times then, it might be the strange necessity we attach to powers such as “globalization” and “international standards” which might call for our aversion in order to become our education.

Already in the preface to Conditions Handsome and Unhandsome Cavell is very outspoken about the fact that his thoughts on moral perfectionism as a possibility and necessity for democratic life presuppose conditions of “good enough justice” (Cavell 1988/1990: xxii). He clearly delimits the reach of his analyses to a group of individuals who is neither most advantaged nor most disadvantaged economically, and he also takes for granted that basic democratic constitutions are in place and functional enough so as to exclude political chaos or tyranny. Insofar as the educational politics of Emersonian Bildung, as discussed above, are more relevant to the issues we meet in the face of the comfort that functioning democratic institutions provide, serious threats to these institutions, cutbacks, downsizing, destabilization will require a different politics. Education or Bildung in an Emersonian perfectionist perspective can help us meet the political challenges induced by the way in which democratic institutions can become lifeless. If those institutions’ (relatively) fluent operation induces visionless, uncritical conformism, if it makes us feel too cushy, and we lose the vigilance to passionately apply ourselves, if we sit comfortable enough to withdraw into a cynical distant spectator’s or commentator’s seat, then Emersonian Bildung can help us counter the cynical attitude in response to the despair with the imperfect state of those institutions. It can remind us to draw another circle, to approach another nextness, that further self-transformation and a further transformation of our society is possible and necessary. In light of the present political
situation, however, it might be equally urgent to rethink political strategies which help safeguard those democratic institutions which first make an Emersonian Bildung possible and relevant, i.e. those institutions that are concerned with providing educational justice, protecting vulnerable individuals as much as possible from political oppression as well as economic exploitation.

6. Bibliography


