

A Pitch of Education

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There is something miraculous about perfect pitch: a note heard on a saxophone identified faultlessly as B flat; C sharp sung or hummed or whistled on demand. How can there be this perfect attunement to the physics of these notes, as if to the music of the spheres? And yet, my musician friends tell me, this particular perfection can be a hindrance, as when in a concert hall that is too hot or too cold the instruments shift very slightly in pitch and *they* must call the tune; or when, playing against a large orchestra, a solo violinist makes her instrument stand out by playing ever so slightly “bright,” which is to say ever so slightly sharp. But still perfect pitch leaves me amazed, condemned as I am to finding my E and G relative to the C you give me. I can play my part, but the knowledge that I have is decidedly partial.

So what has this question of attunement to do with Naoko Saito’s eloquent discussion of perfectionism, narrative, and Stanley Cavell? She is interested, her title tells us, in what it is to find perfect pitch, but while she tells us quite a lot about perfectionism, she has rather less to say about pitch. Perfectionism, it is clear on her account, is not to be understood in terms of perfectibility: it is not some realizable end-state, but perfection always still-to-come, understood ateleologically. What, though, is intended here by the idea of pitch?

Cavell’s title *A Pitch of Philosophy* puts at least three thoughts into play. In the first place, and remembering his experience as a musician, there is the obvious connotation of sound, which implies in relation to language a sense of register, an attunement of words — to the occasion, to the audience, and to the demands of their substance. There is, second, the idea of a trajectory, of the projecting and perhaps curving of a ball in baseball. And, third, one might think of the pitching of a tent: Henry David Thoreau builds his hut, as Cavell makes clear, not in the already nostalgic expectation that this will be some permanent dwelling-place, a fixed home, but rather a place to sojourn. This is Thoreau’s experiment in living.

In Saito’s elaboration of the theme of voice, it is clear that language is to the fore. If we are to “speak with necessity” and to “stand for humanity,”¹ as she says, this might imply the *projecting of a world*. Thus, Ralph Waldo Emerson identifies high points in this *poiesis*: “For it is not metres, but a metre-making argument that makes a poem — a thought so passionate and alive that like the spirit of a plant or an animal it has an architecture of its own, and adorns nature with a new thing.”² The poet’s role is to announce and affirm. For what nature offers is to be understood semiologically: “Nature offers all her creatures to him as a picture-language. Being used as a type, a second wonderful value appears in the object, far better than its old value; as the carpenter’s cord, if you hold your ear close enough, is musical in the breeze.”³ Elsewhere, in “Nature,” Emerson writes: “Parts of speech are metaphors, because the whole of nature is a metaphor of the human mind.... The axioms of physics translate the laws of ethics.”⁴

“Handsome” thinking such as this both anticipates and corrects the line of Martin Heidegger’s thought. The difference between the poet and the mystic is that the mystic

nails a symbol to one sense, which was a true sense for a moment, but soon becomes old and false. For all symbols are old and fluxional; all language is vehicular and transitive, and is good, as ferries and horses are, for conveyance, not as farms and houses are, for homestead.⁵

Just as “every spirit makes its house, but afterwards the house confines the spirit,”⁶ so pitch, we might say, hardens paths into roads of thought. That language is not the house of being, but the vehicle of becoming, indicates something other than turning back home. Thinking thus looks for new ways to actualize its energy: the speaker-poet becomes “the conductor of the whole river of electricity.”⁷ Emerson is registering currents of power that intensify in *The Conduct of Life*, where power is inseparable from forms of antithesis — “beauty and disgust, magnificence and rats”; and where, as Michael Lopez points out, the “whole economy of nature is bent on expression.... Life expresses...life conducts.”⁸

Can these thoughts give further substance to the insufficiently elaborated epigraph to Saito’s essay: “Speak your latent conviction, and it shall be the universal sense:...our first thought is rendered back to us by the trumpets of the Last Judgment”? To be sure, this Last Judgement will be no datable event, but a trumpeting to see how far my words ring true. Lawrence Buell identifies “mineness” here in terms of its “impersonal character,” which Saito takes to be a depersonalization. She subsequently sets herself the task of finding a way beyond the *aporia* of the self’s being both personal and universal. Yet does the exploration of this in terms of *Stella Dallas* slightly distort the point? For there the concern with the character and fate of Stella cannot have quite the same accent as the achieving of neutrality of which Emerson speaks, a state exemplified in his “nonchalant boy.”⁹

The film and Emerson are rightly brought together with Cavell’s reading of ordinary language philosophy. Elsewhere — most obviously in *The Claim of Reason* — Cavell has painstakingly elaborated the political implications of this. On that account, the ordinary language formula of “when we say...we mean...” is explained in terms of two facets of that expression: the usage is first-person, requiring me to say how things seem *to me*, and it is plural, indicating that my speaking is dedicated toward my community — it is my best effort to speak *for them*, to appeal to them in what I say. Such speaking, such conversation, is not then a Rawlsian negotiation over individual or shared projects, but rather the very medium in which I might come to realize what my projects might be. Saito rightly points out that selflessness, whether in the vein of Kantian universality or, let me add, that of a debased Christian humility, is at odds with this. But the opposite of selflessness is not selfishness: my best possibilities must lie somehow in my investment in community (if not this one, then another I must find), so that selfishness and selflessness must alike be forms of denial.

The poignant closing scenes of *Stella Dallas*, where Stella turns away, toward a different possibility of community, are interpreted by Cavell as a search for the mother’s gaze, which is understood as underlying perfectionism’s quest. But does

this not bear the trace of a further nostalgic negativity? Against the search for the mother's face, why not say: "Get over it. Grow up now"? In the pre-Freudian Emerson, comparison might be sought in the face of the sphinx (the title of the epigraph poem for his first collection), but the relationship depicted there, the sphinx in dialogue with the poet, is less singular, and more enigmatic, in appeal: the sphinx is animated by poetic acceptance; metamorphosing through metaphor, she becomes rhetoric; and the riddle of existence is not "man" but language.¹⁰ "I am thy spirit, yoke-fellow," says the sphinx, "Of thine eye I am eye-beam." That whole economy of nature bent on expression requires the speaking of our latent conviction, partial though this inevitably is.

Can students learn to speak their latent conviction? Not if our assessment does nothing more than target an exhaustive checklist of criteria. Not if what we teach is ready-made, easily digestible, and plainly transparent. Not if we train teachers to think only in these terms. But you can lead your students out of that world to find a place where they may learn to speak (again). You must reveal that they are in partial darkness to themselves, the aesthetics of which is of a piece with the experience of critique. Aesthetic judgment models political voice: without sincerity, the former is worthless; without it, democracy becomes hollow. Can students learn this? Just possibly the *reading* that Saito's paper demonstrates can extend downward through the curriculum — the axioms of physics translating the laws of ethics — enabling students to find their pitch.

1. Stanley Cavell, *Cities of Words: Pedagogical Letters on a Register of the Moral Life* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2004), 31–32.

2. Ralph Waldo Emerson, "The Poet," in *Selected Essays*, ed. Larzer Ziff (Harmondsworth, England: Penguin, 1982), 263–264.

3. *Ibid.*, 266.

4. Ralph Waldo Emerson, "Nature," in *Selected Essays*, ed. Ziff, 53.

5. Emerson, "The Poet," 279.

6. Ralph Waldo Emerson, "Fate," in *Selected Essays*, ed. Ziff.

7. Emerson, "The Poet," 283.

8. Michael Lopez, "The Conduct of Life: Emerson's Anatomy of Power," in *The Cambridge Companion to Ralph Waldo Emerson*, eds. Joel Porte and Sandra Morris (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 252.

9. Ralph Waldo Emerson, "Self-Reliance," in *Selected Essays*, ed. Ziff, 177.

10. See Sandra Morris, "'Metre-Making Arguments': Emerson's Poems," in *Cambridge Companion to Ralph Waldo Emerson*, eds. Porte and Morris, 222.