Emerson and the "Pale Scholar"

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ABSTRACT: A recurrent theme in Ralph Waldo Emerson's writings is his struggles with the problem of scholarly inaction. Commentators have given much attention to "The American Scholar" but less to his remarks about the "pale scholar." In this paper, I focus on the latter and argue that understanding the evolving nature of Emerson's views about what counts for action could not only deepen our understanding of his philosophy and its orientation toward the conduct of life but also explain why, according to Emerson, there seems to be no reconciliation between "the theory and practice of life."

RÉSUMÉ : Le problème de l'inaction des intellectuels est un thème récurrent dans les écrits de Ralph Waldo Emerson. Les commentateurs ont accordé beaucoup d'attention à «l'intellectuel américain», mais moins à ses remarques concernant l'«intellectuel pâle». Dans cet article, je me concentre sur ce dernier point, en montrant qu'une compréhension de la manière dont évoluent les idées d'Emerson sur ce qui compte pour l'action permettrait non seulement d'approfondir notre compréhension de sa philosophie ainsi que son orientation vers la conduite de la vie, mais aussi d'expliquer pourquoi, selon Emerson, il ne semble pas y avoir de réconciliation possible entre «la théorie et la pratique de la vie».

Keywords: Emerson, action, inaction, "The American Scholar," the "pale scholar," theory and practice of life

I

A cardinal feature of Emerson's philosophy is his urge to overcome the gap between theory and praxis. There seems to be a consensus among Emerson scholars that he was more of a "thinker" and not a "joiner and doer."[1] The uncomfortable

[1] Buell, *Emerson*, 243.

Dialogue **57 (2018), 115–135.**
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doi:10.1017/S0012217317000920

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https://doi.org/10.1017/S0012217317000920 Published online by Cambridge University Press

situation where he would find himself supporting a cause in principle and staying somewhat aloof from it in practice has been noticed by many commentators.[2] Throughout his life, Lawrence Buell suggests, "Emerson had trouble deciding which was worse: to keep silent about practicalities while the world burned, or to intervene at the risk of falling into programmatic myopia to the detriment of a scholar's proper work."[3] But what is the proper work of a scholar? What is it that she does besides domesticating thoughts or thinking about the nature of things or learning the tricks to secure a tenure? What does Emersonian action or inaction say about scholarly life or the life of armchair contemplation? Was Joel Porte right when he claimed that Emerson was suffering from a "Hamlet-complex," that "made him perennially concerned with questions of manliness and potency"?[4] In what follows, I'll address these questions and argue that the problem of acting in the world is at the core of Emerson's writings. I limit the scope of my research to the evolving nature of Emerson's thoughts on what it would mean for a scholar to act as a scholar. I suggest what Henry Nash Smith calls Emerson's 'problem of vocation' is a telling example of an inherent problem of philosophy insofar as it is in the grip of a wish to fuse thought and action. I refer to "philosophy" in this paper in its Emersonian sense as "the account which the human mind gives to itself of the constitution of the world."[5]

Emerson wrote extensively about the discrepancy between thought and action, theory and praxis, words and life, and about ways of overcoming the gap, to reunite 'words' with 'things,' to convert 'life' into 'truth,' and 'genius' into 'practical power.' These thoughts are scattered throughout his writings and surface in various ways when the opportunity arises to the extent that if we were to make a case for a consistent Emerson tracking his constant reflections on ways of engaging with the world as a scholar would be a promising starting point. From the idea of establishing 'an original relation to the universe,' located at the first page of his first book, *Nature*, to a quiet acceptance of things as they

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[2] See, for example, Joseph Blau, "Emerson's Transcendentalist Individualism as a Social Philosophy," 488. According to Kenneth Sacks, some of the earliest biographers of Emerson such as Oliver Wendell Holmes, Sr. and James Elliot Cabot, with their "socially conservative" views, were instrumental in cementing the image of Emerson as a thinker "distant from abolition." See Sacks, Introduction to *Emerson Political Writings*, xxvi. For evolving nature of Emerson's commitment to the cause of abolition, see, among others, John Carlos Rowe, *At Emerson's Tomb*.

[3] Buell, *Emerson*, 244.

[4] Porte, *Consciousness and Culture,* 64.

[5] Emerson, *Ralph Waldo Emerson: Essays and Lectures,* 637; hereafter abbreviated *EL*. I use the words 'scholar' and 'philosopher' interchangeably by which I mean a person who is in the grip of questions such as "What is the character of this universe in which we dwell?" See William James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, 35.

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are in his later works one could trace the evolvement of a wish for what F.O. Matthiessen calls "the union of labour and culture."[6]

A main theme in essays such as "The American Scholar," (1837) "Divinity School Address," (1838) and "Self-Reliance," (1841) is a militant call to fuse thought and action, a predominant feature of Emerson's early works. "The American Scholar" sets forth the image of a scholar who is "covetous of action":

> Life is our dictionary. Years are well spent in country labours; in town; in the insight into trades and manufactures; in frank intercourse with many men and women; in science; in art; to the one end of mastering in all their facts a language by which to illustrate and embody our perceptions. I learn immediately from any speaker how much he has already lived, through the poverty or the splendor of his speech. (*EL*, 61-62)

What he calls 'the final value of action,' lies in its capacity to be an unlimited resource on which the scholar can always fall back. Nothing could publish the force of one's "constitution" better than "the doings and passages of the day" (*EL*, 62). When books do not inspire and the Muses are away, the scholar has a sturdy life to return to. Reproaching young graduates who are disheartened by the prospect of not getting jobs in academe, Emerson writes in "Self-Reliance,"

> A sturdy lad from New Hampshire or Vermont, who in turn tries all the professions, who *teams it, farms it, peddles*, keeps a school, preaches, edits a newspaper, goes to Congress, buys a township, and so forth, in successive years, and always like a cat falls on his feet, is worth a hundred of these city dolls. He walks abreast with his days and feels no shame in "not studying a profession" for he does not postpone his life, but lives already. He has not one chance, but a hundred chances. (*EL*, 275)

In other words, Emerson seems to say the scholar should feel at home with the ordinary demands of the day. He would be wary of the view that takes the life of 'contemplation' to be the happiest life, as in Book X of *Nicomachean Ethics*. For Aristotle, the activity of contemplation is considered more valuable than practical activities since such activities are of instrumental value whereas contemplation is pursued for its own sake. We "take thought of things noble and divine" for its own sake.[7] Emerson thinks there are better ways of defending

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6 Matthiessen, *American Renaissance*, 96.

7 Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1177a15. Translating *theoria* as 'contemplation' is a familiar translation but some commentators are wary of its connotations. In general, many commentators find Book X of *NE* at odds with the rest of the book. For a fresh discussion of the meanings of 'theoretical activity' or *theorein* in Aristotle's corpus, see David Roochnik, "What is Theoria? *Nicomachean Ethics*, Book 10.7-8." As far as this research is concerned, it seems to me that whether we take *theorein* to mean the

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the life of knowledge. He thinks the scholar would need to stay in touch with the demands of the day or with what Aristotle calls "the necessaries of life,"[8] since that is ultimately what would give her insights into the nature of things. Eloquence through action—that is what Emerson seems to say. As he writes in "The American Scholar,"

> 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. It is pearls and rubies to his discourse. Drudgery, calamity, exasperation, want, are instructors in eloquence and wisdom. (*EL*, 60)

The scholar, in other words, receives the vicissitudes of her life with a poetic attitude. She agrees with Emerson that her life must be "handled poetically."[9] Besides, Emerson thinks it is good to be here; he wants us to be intimate with the world. That intimacy is jeopardized not only by scepticism but also by what Emerson calls 'postponing life.'[10] Or, one might say, for Emerson scepticism is one way of postponing life. His discontent with books and armchair contemplation has to do with the conviction that they wouldn't be of much aid in recovering a lost intimacy with life or establishing an 'original relation to the universe.' He is bashing a theory-laden educational system that turns its pupils to passive receivers of ideas, which do not have much bearing on the practicalities of life, an education that contemplates on the nature of time but that couldn't teach one how to tell the hour by the sun, notebooks that impair memory, libraries that overload one's wit, an insurance that only "increases the number of accidents" (*EL*, 280). Likewise, he is wary of an education that puts the "noblest theory of life" on the heads of young people to no avail, leaving them as "pale and hungry" as they were before schooling began (*EL*, 478).

In contrast, there is a sense of groundedness and consistency about Emerson's sturdy lad, which reminds one of his tender words about farming and farmers. As he writes in "Farming," the 'constitutional excellence' of this way of life lies in its closeness to nature (or 'Nature' as he tends to capitalize it.) The sailor is on the sea, the sea, the hunter is in the wild; the farmer tames the soil, and the knowledge of rain and fire is builders' areas of speciality and competence.

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activity of thinking, or contemplating 'eternal laws' or 'study' or a natural capacity of human beings to observe and to be curious, the fact remains that for Aristotle happiness or eudaimonia "is thought to depend on leisure" and the life of *theorein*, as the most flourishing or the happiest life, requires leisure (*NE* 1177b4). In "The American Scholar," Emerson seems to be saying that scholarship or pursuit of truth is not totally depended on leisure.

[8] *NE*, 1177a28.

[9] Emerson, *The Early Lectures of Ralph Waldo Emerson*, 3: 239.

[10] Cf. Stanley Cavell, *Emerson's Transcendetal Etudes*, 36.

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The kind of admiration Emerson shows toward them reminds one of Tolstoy's fascination with "simple people" in his intellectual autobiography.[11]

Emerson had a soft spot for the idea of manual work, simplicity, and sturdiness but it was Henry Thoreau who in deed put that idea to the test and took it to extremes. Here I discuss Thoreau briefly as his excursions is a living example of an Emersonian resolve to fuse thought and action and reveals much about its implications. Emerson's 'smiling interest' in manual work, in the writings of Thoreau became the defining feature of a serious philosophy of self-discipline to embrace the elements. Thoreau's disdain for people who sit down to write when they have not "stood up to live" is unrivalled.[12] His resolve to discover or to attain a first-hand experience of the world in its totality was turned into a plan of action by building a hut in the Walden Pond and settling there for two years. In this regard it stands in sharp contrast to the armchair method of enquiry, personified in the image of René Descartes in his study. As a crucial passage in *Walden* reads:

> I went to the woods because I wished to live deliberately, to front only the essential facts of life, and see if I could not learn what it had to teach, and not, when I come to die, discover that I had not lived. I did not wish to live what was not life, living is so dear; nor did I wish to practice resignation, unless it was quite necessary. I wanted to live deep and suck out all the marrow of life, to live so sturdily and Spartan-like as to put to rout all that was not life, to cut a broad swath and shave close, to drive life into a corner, and reduce it to its lowest terms, and, if it proved to be mean, why then to get the whole and genuine meanness of it, and publish its meanness to the world or if it were sublime, to know it by experience, and be able to give a true account of it in my next excursion.[13]

The concern here is not to obtain philosophical certainty but to extract the essence of life from the elements and scatter it with weathered words. And that would mean hard work. In *Walden*, the sublimity or meanness of the world reveals itself through work, through what Thoreau calls 'economy' or the practical knowledge of providing for one's basic needs like food and shelter. At the same time, it would be hard to imagine that Thoreau had begun his enquiry with a neutral disposition toward the sublimity or the meanness of life and one might wonder if it is possible to begin a philosophical enquiry of such

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[11] See, specially, Chapter VII and VIII. Tolstoy writes, for example, "They dug out the iron, taught us how to cut the timber, tamed the cattle and the horses, showed us how to sow crops and live together; they brought order to our lives; they taught me how to think and to speak. … and now I have proved to them that it is all meaningless! 'Something is wrong here,' I said to myself." See, *Confession*, 54.

[12] Thoreau, *A Year in Thoreau's Journal: 1851*, 165.

[13] Thoreau, *Walden*, 59.

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calibre without having one's heart settled for either of them; but yet this question is raised from the isolation of the study and not next to the pond of a self-made house. What is striking in the above passage is Thoreau's choice of words in announcing his intention to publish the meanness if it would have turned out to be the case for him; as if he was going to blow the whistle on the world and expose its emptiness had it revealed anything but sublimity to a person whose dwelling and excursion into the wild was a sublime act in the first place.

Thus, for Thoreau, the problem of scholar's inaction resolves since he provides her with the task of discovering "the Atlantic and Pacific Ocean of one's being alone."[14] By moving away from the concept of leisure and toward engagement with the demands of the day, this stoic philosophy of life seems to transcend the notion of '*vita contemplativa*' to one that is lived through '*vita activa*.' For if "the pond is shrinking, and the fish are nervous," and the hut is leaking and the axe needs to be sharpened, etc., certain questions are better left to the "professors of philosophy."[15] Using a dull axe is ineffective; it could be dangerous too in that the blade might glance off the wood instead of lodging in for a clean cut. In a sense, life in the woods depends on clean cuts.

Thoreau's almost exclusive focus on objects and affairs of a self-sustained life, in Matthiessen's observation, creates the sense that he is a person "whose hand can manage both his knife and his pencil."[16] To sustain a life, Thoreau tried to establish, one wouldn't need much more than an axe and some seedlings.[17] He thought the problem of inaction wouldn't arise in the lives of those who could handle the axe as effectively as they do the pen.

This 'moral perfectionism' and its liveability, however, is a matter of temperament, and, potentially, it could cause a problem for Thoreau and eventually for Emerson. Let me elaborate. Perfectionism in its Emersonian/Cavellian sense could be defined as striving towards our 'unattained but attainable self.' According to Thomas Hurka, perfectionism singles out certain properties as definitive of us as humans. "The good life, it then says, develops these properties to a high degree."[18] And Thoreau seems to be saying that total self-sufficiency

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14 Ibid., 208.

15 Ibid., 9, ("There are nowadays professors of philosophy, but not philosophers.")

16 Matthiessen, *American Renaissance*, 92-93.

17 As he writes, "I borrowed an axe and went down to the woods by Walden Pond, nearest to where I intended to build my house … The owner of the axe, as he released his hold on it, said that it was the apple of his eye; but I retuned it sharper than I received it" (*Walden*, 26). There is an undeniably conceited tone in *Walden*, but I don't think it was intended. Polemic expressions is part of what makes *Walden* an intense book. Besides, one could always read *Walden* with the same attitude that Augustine wished people read his autobiography, that is, to read it with "charity" (*Confessions*, Book X: III).

18 Hurka, *Perfectionism*, 3.

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through labour is our defining property and the key to our better selves. Now, immersing oneself into active life and manual work could be an exhilarating *idea* for a person who deals with the world of ideas, but borrowing one of Emerson's favourite terms, if the temperament for such way of life is not 'in the constitution,' it remains to be an idea among others. Thoreau sets an unusually high standard with his intense devotion to life, one that is not easy to meet. Emerson himself would have failed dismally, had he tried it. As Barbara Packer put it, "the self-possession born of a life of action in the real world" was just what Emerson lacked.[19] He didn't try it, and eventually he grew out of it and parted company with Thoreau on this matter around the time he wrote in *The Conduct of Life*, "It is of no use to argue the wants down: the philosophers have laid the greatness of man in making his wants few; but will a man content himself with a hut and a handful of dried pease? He is born to be rich" (*EL*, 990-991).

Coming back to Emerson, upon reading his words of praise for sturdy life one might have a nagging feeling that perhaps a scholar is drawn toward a scholarly life because the world of ideas might seem ethereal but it is elegant, far from the hurly burly of street life. What Emerson calls 'sturdy life,' at a closer look could be a vulgar thing to be part of. Emerson's response to this concern, in one of his most quoted passages, would be to challenge the assumption that the low, the near and the common is vulgar. The assumption that what is beautiful and the sublime is remote from everyday life is a myth created by "the multitude of scholars and authors" among whom "we feel no hallowing presence; we are sensible of a knack and skill rather than of inspiration; they have a light and know not whence it comes and call it their own" (*EL*, 396). If a scholar is resourceful in her actions, she would see that "The perception of the worth of the vulgar is fruitful in discoveries" (*EL*, 69). What a 'sedentary intellectual' calls the vulgar is 'the everyday' for the active scholar. To be Emersonian is to discover, in Cavell's words, "that the everyday is an exceptional achievement."[20] Such discovery is the result of a kind of attentiveness that Iris Murdoch described as "a just and loving gaze," and the true "mark of the moral agent."[21] The discovery is made by care.[22]

Following Cavell's observation, we could suggest that the scholar Emerson praises on many occasions is a romantic scholar.[23] But would it be possible, or desirable, to make a romantic out of every scholar? Should all scholars concern

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19 Packer, *Emerson's Fall*, 200.

20 Cavell, *The Claim of Reason*, 463.

21 Murdoch, "The Idea of Perfection," 327. For a fresh discussion of the current literature on the importance of "attention" in Murdoch's moral thought, see Christopher Cordner, "Lessons of Murdochian Attention."

22 Cf. Laugier, "The Ethics of Care as a Politics of the Ordinary."

23 Cf. Goodman, *American Philosophy and the Romantic Tradition*, 35.

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themselves with “announcing undiscovered regions of thought, and so communicating, through hope, new activity to the torpid spirit”? (*EL*, 45) What about scholars who know all about “the meal in the firkin; the milk in the pan; the ballad in the street; the news of the boat; the glance of the eye,” (*EL*, 69) but who also know the meaning of commonplace sacrifices, systematic injustice, and daily humiliations; those who seek oblivion from the ordinary; those who wish to dismantle the edifice of the ordinary and build a better one from scratch?

It is from this angle of vision that some commentators portray Emerson as a self-absorbed essayist whose engagement with socio-political problems was at best half-hearted. Cornel West, for example, labels Emerson a “petit bourgeois libertarian” and claims that his inactivism has its roots in his mysticism, which did not encourage him to

> invest too much of himself—his time, energies, or hopes—in the immediate results of human efforts. It allows him to downplay injustice, suffering, and impotence in the world and rest content with inaction or minimal resistance to evil. His mysticism … rests upon his silent yet discernible sense of being jubilant and celebratory that he is alive. He discloses a sense of being contented and full of joy that he “dwells” in the house of being.[24]

There seems to be something missing in this moving image of Emerson. Yes, he was happy to be in the house of being, but as Newton Arvin and others have shown, he had also been to “the house of pain.”[25] His reluctance to engage with reform movements was more a matter of temperament. That is to say, by temperament Emerson was impatient with the idea of collaborating with others to advance a cause and tackle the technicalities of socio-political transformations in the field.[26] At the same time, he was acutely aware of this tension, or of what Porte aptly calls his ‘Hamlet complex.’ Emerson’s sense of impotence and failure upon reflecting his insufficient contribution to the Abolition movement are often reflections on his immediate duties in the face of a call for action.[27]

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24 West, *The American Evasion of Philosophy*, 24-25.

25 Arvin, “The House of pain,” 46-59.

26 As Emerson writes to Margaret Fuller, “At the name of a society, all my repulsions play, all my quills rise and sharpen.” Quoted from Smith, “Emerson’s Problem of Vocation,” 63.

27 For example, he writes in his journal, “I waked at night, and bemoaned myself, because I had not thrown myself into this deplorable question of slavery, which seems to want nothing so much as a few assured voices. But then, in hours of sanity, I recover myself, and say, God must govern His own world, and knows His way out of this pit, without my desertion of my post which has none to guard it but me.” See *The Journals and Miscellaneous Notebooks of Ralph Waldo Emerson*, VII: 190; hereafter abbreviated *Journals* with volume and page numbers. Kateb argues that in principle,

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In light of these unsettling tensions, it seems that Emerson's thoughts on the nature of action and its relation to thought evolved to one that was more in tune with his temperament: the scholar's thought can be the originator of action. In this revised view, active life is not commendable so long as it is the scholar's way of seeking oblivion from her solitary life of contemplation; action is futile so long as it is a way of seeking recognition from the world. Thus, in "Self-Reliance," he is ashamed of thinking how, in the name of action, we easily "capitulate to badges and names, to large societies and dead institutions," (*EL*, 262) and in "Spiritual Laws" he sees no reason 'to be cowed by the name of Action.' After all, it

> is a trick of the senses,—no more. We know that the ancestor of every action is a thought. The poor mind does not seem to itself to be anything unless it have an outside badge—some Gentoo diet, or Quaker coat, or Calvinistic prayer-meeting, or philanthropic society, or a great donation, or a high office, or, any how, some wild contrasting action to testify that it is somewhat. The rich mind lies in the sun and sleeps, and is Nature. To think is to act. (*EL*, 322)

Likewise, in "Literary Ethics," he encourages scholars to receive the ascetic simplicity of a scholarly life with gratitude. In solitude "he may become acquainted with his thoughts" (*EL*, 105). With a "patient courage" the scholar may "theorize and hope" (*EL*, 98). By contemplating in 'silent wonder' on her existence in this world in due time she would share the fruits of her receptions and that is her defining action:

> We call the poet inactive, because he is not a president, a merchant, or a porter. We adore an institution, and do not see that it is founded on a thought which we have. But real action is in silent moments. The epochs of our life are not in the visible facts of our choice of a calling, our marriage, our acquisition of an office, and the like, but in a silent thought by the wayside as we walk; in a thought which revises our entire manner of life. (*EL*, 321-321)

As we see in the next section, in this idealization of 'real action' lies the seeds of a yet further development in Emerson's account of action, which put into question the very idea or possibility of the life of knowledge.

II

In *Emerson and Self-Reliance*, George Kateb makes a distinction between 'active' and 'mental' self-reliance and argues that for Emerson mental self-reliance is

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self-reliance as the core of Emerson's philosophy is incompatible with political engagements. However, the evil of slavery made Emerson "change his attitude on the subject of associating for reform." See Kateb, *Emerson and Self-Reliance*, 177.

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of much more value. With mental self-reliance, one transcends to the realm of 'impersonality' and becomes a pure receptor and contemplator of the world and what is in it. The direct aim of such a way of contemplating life from the standpoint of eternity is "to find reason to love or admire or appreciate" the beauty of the world.[28] In comparison, Kateb thinks that for Emerson the life of active self-reliance is commendable only to a certain degree (for example, to the extent that it makes one economically or psychologically self-contained). The life of action and being out there in the world implies certain obliviousness. "In being worldly," Kateb writes,

> one looks at one's life as something obvious and hence does not *look* at one's life at all; one does not try to live from point zero. One knows how to play the game, but not why they exist or why one should play them. Worldliness is conformity, but conformity cannot be self-reliance. Conformity is the main antithesis to self-reliance.[29]

Certainly there are many occasions in Emerson's writings where one gets the sense that detachment from the realm of action is a requirement for mental self-reliance, that in contemplation all the things one experiences or goes through can be appraised under a different light, that action is incomplete without reflection. But, at the same time, one gets the sense that Kateb's reading comes at the cost of brushing aside another equally important aspect of Emerson's views about the relation between thought and action.

The brushed aside aspect is in "Experience." Isn't a key feature of that essay the idea that human capacity for experience is limited by the conditions that colour our understanding of the world? In other words, isn't it the case that "Experience" doubts the very possibility of mental self-reliance? Kateb doesn't think so. He thinks that "Experience" wants to caution us about the limits of experience or action or doing but it doesn't deny that the human mind has the power to go beyond all these limits and see the reality of life. Detachment is the key to reality. Personal experience "can be blind or numb, too self-engrossed or too passive; it is suffered. The mind of the detached ego is more successfully or genuinely active than the acting self."[30]

Detachment of the kind Kateb praises is indeed the philosopher's favourite mode of being, that is, viewing the world *sub specie aeternitatis*. But, what would be Kateb's response to the idea that maybe the sense of illusion and unreality of experience begins in the first place because of detachment and not in spite of it? More importantly, we should think about the logistics or the implications of detachment. I wonder if detachment is as straightforward as Kateb claims it to be: to contemplate incomplete or incoherent experiences in search

[28] Kateb, *Emerson and Self-Reliance*, 138.

[29] Ibid., 152.

[30] Ibid., 45.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0012217317000920 Published online by Cambridge University Press

of an unnoticed or hidden beauty or connection between phenomena, and in doing so to get as close as one could get to the mind of God and *see* that the world is there and the daylight shines through it in the horizon of a beautiful mind—beholding the wind that shakes the barley and remembering things of the past.

Kateb has it that the life of contemplation or 'seeing' is a desirable mode of being and that there is an overriding value in mental self-reliance. "Seeing is the heart of mental self-reliance."[31] But it seems that there is a point Kateb misses entirely: for Emerson in his later works there is a limit set not only on our experience and actions but also on our very capacity for detachment and contemplation, embodied in scholarly life. "Experience" marks Emerson's disillusionment with the very idea that one way of life has more access to 'reality' than others. Whether one is contemplating the true nature of things in the study or sailing in the sea of action, "Experience" seems to say, one is born to despair. All the houses of life that look "agreeable to the eye" from afar, are houses of "tragedy and moaning women and hard-eyed husbands" (*EL*, 472). The ship we praise as a "romantic object" looks so inviting, but, "Embark, and the romance quits our vessel and hangs on every other sail in the horizon" (*EL*, 472). Everyone is at a loss and everything slips through our fingers and on a larger scale of things it doesn't matter if we lose with action or with the thought of all the "things that are remarkable, admirable, difficult, and divine, but useless."[32]

Yet, at the end of "Experience" Emerson comes to see that there is more value to the life of contemplation and 'the hiving of truths' than meets the eye:

> People disparage knowing and the intellectual life, and urge doing. I am very content with knowing, if only I could know. That is an august entertainment, and would suffice me a great while. To know a little, would be worth the expense of this world. (*EL*, 491)

As David Van Leer noticed, at the end of "Experience," Emerson turns to scepticism and yet he "inverts Hume's famous willingness to live in the world of backgammon and beef by announcing his own intention to reascend to his study."[33] From the promises of establishing an original relation to the universe and domesticating 'unsung' thoughts to acquiescence in the quiet of his study one could trace a range of interconnected thoughts about the nature of action and its relation to the world of ideas. At the same time, it seems that Emerson's final turn in "Experience" puts him in a position that is not much different from the position of the "pale scholar" with which he was not happy to be associated in the beginning (*EL*, 515). Alluding to his rhetorical demand in his first work,

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31 Ibid., 49.

32 Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1141b-6.

33 Van Leer, *Emerson's Epistemology,* 186-187.

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Nature, to build our own world, he acknowledges that he has been unsuccessful, but he also makes it clear that his failure is not a licence to seek oblivion in the ordinary affairs of life:

> We dress our garden, eat our dinners, discuss the household with our wives, and these things make no impression, are forgotten next week; but, in the solitude to which every man is always returning, he has a sanity and revelations which in his passage into new worlds, he will carry with him. Never mind the ridicule, never mind the defeat; up again old heart! (*EL*, 492)

In a sense, the allure of philosophy as the thought of the world begins only at the end of "Experience" like the way "the owl of Minerva begins its flight only with the falling of dusk."[34] In "The Transcendentalist," likewise, one could gather a sense of lamenting over the lives that are "miserable with inaction," (*EL*, 204) and yet he concludes with reminding the importance of appreciating the scholar's work and her way of life. Scholars, or, in this contexts, transcendentalists, tend to prolong their privilege of childhood, "of doing nothing, but making immense demands on all the gladiators in the lists of action and fame" (*EL*, 201). Every voice is praising the life of action, but even so "will you not tolerate one or two solitary voices in the land, speaking for thoughts and principles not marketable or perishable?" (*EL*, 208) With an unmistakably stoic tone, which reminds one of Marcus Aurelius and his *Meditations*, he reminds scholars that soon all the modes of living the life of action will be "lost out of memory;" "all gone, like the shells which sprinkle the seabeach with a white colony today, forever renewed to be forever destroyed" (*EL*, 208-209).[35] But scholar's thoughts shall leave traces.

David Robinson argues that the ultimate question of "Experience" is enquiring about "the possibility of action," and yet by denying the possibility of knowledge and opening the door for scepticism it lets go of the wish to locate the ground for action and instead it reaches a "truce between knowledge and action."[36]

34 Hegel, *Outlines of the Philosophy of Right*, 16.

35 "Words in common use long ago," writes Aurelius, "are obsolete now. So too the names of those once famed are in a sense obsolete. … All things fade and quickly turn to myth: quickly too utter oblivion drowns them. And I'm talking of those who shone with some wonderful brilliance: the rest … are immediately 'beyond sight, beyond knowledge.' But what in any case is everlasting memory? Utter emptiness" (Book V, § 33).

36 Robinson, *Emerson and the Conduct of Life*, 69. An anonymous referee drew my attention to the analogy between the notion of 'truce between knowledge and action' and the stoic notion of a skill of life (*téchnê perì tòn bíon*). For more on this, see John Sellars, *The Art of Living*, especially Chapter 3; cf. Emerson's sobering voice in the middle of "Experience," "We live amid surfaces, and the true art of life is to skate well on them" (*EL*, 478).

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This realization, as both Van Leer and Robinson suggest, need not be disheartening, as he finds solace in 'patience,' a solution he appeals to at the end of both "Experience" and "The Transcendentalist."

But in patience there always seems to be the case that one's patience is aimed at something, as in waiting for something to begin or to end. What is Emerson's patience aiming at? According to Clark Davis, Emerson's patience is informed by a Calvinistic conception of "grace," that "presupposes a kind of passivity or, at least, a recognition that actions will not determine the fate of the soul."[37] He links the predominant assumption that there is only "one kind of genuine action," one that leads to collective movements, to the liberal progressive rhetoric and suggests that quietism,

> tends, in our day, to be characterized as a kind of failure or as a way in which to fail. The quietist is afraid or too lazy to take action, join a cause, take a position, keep busy—*do* something. … Emerging from the mystery of grace, … quietism imagines a form of human existence in which actions are not measures of the self, and history is not a product of our intentions or an account of our progress (and our failures to progress).[38]

Certainly, a strand of remarks, as I have discussed some of them, lends themselves to the idea that Emerson was more at home with the life of solitary reflection and "entranced waiting,"[39] but this should be qualified with the fact that for a while he was of the conviction that "The true scholar grudges every opportunity of action past by, as a loss of power" (*EL*, 60). Smith suggests that the "intellectual forces" that pushed Emerson towards solitary reflection instead of action "were quite various," including his temperament, his "precarious state of health," and even the influence of "English Romanticism."[40] What seems to be missing in Smith's list is the gravity or the force of the very ideas Emerson was engaging. That is, maybe the very nature of his philosophy would require a way of life receptive to detachment and passivity. Or, maybe it is in the very nature of philosophy to feel at times that it doesn't touch anything, or that it stands in need of justification. What is consciousness, a philosopher might ask *à la* Emerson, but to find out unhappily that one exists? Maybe such philosophical enquiries are bound to sound lonely; maybe Alasdair MacIntyre is right to think that "philosophy inescapably involves some measure of self-alienation."[41]

Leaving aside the 'mystery of grace,' we could say the patience Emerson appeals to time and again is aimed at reception of the kinds of insights and

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[37] Davis, "'Not Like Any Form of Activity': Waiting in Emerson, Melville and Weil," 44.

[38] Ibid., 56.

[39] Emerson, *The Complete Works of Ralph Waldo Emerson*, 12: 56.

[40] Smith, "Emerson's Problem of Vocation," 63-64.

[41] MacIntyre, *The Tasks of Philosophy,* 1:127.

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illuminations that were the cause or the driving force behind philosophical enquiry in the first place, insights that make investment of one's life in doing philosophy justified, and in a sense legitimize the pursuit of wisdom in a world that is defined by injustice and suffering. The philosopher, Pierre Hadot reminds us, is deeply aware of the threat of a sense of "solitude and impotence"[42] in the face of random or commonplace tragedies that are often "without bloodshed, but certainly not without tears,"[43] and she might be susceptible to questioning the foundation of the very enterprise that has given her some means of survival. The suffering can be contemplated but it cannot be stopped by a sedentary scholar. If philosophy cannot do anything but to contemplate it, doing philosophy "will therefore also mean to suffer from this isolation and this impotence."[44] But the scholar might gather the courage to say if philosophy "does nothing for these sufferings, it does nothing at all."[45] It seems that what Emerson calls the few 'real hours of life' wouldn't be enough to justify the scholar's fragile existence. The world passes and the few real hours of life with it. In the face of such picture one might relate to Cavell's definition of philosophy, in his reading of "Experience," as "the perplexed capacity to mourn the passing of the world."[46]

I think we should pause here and ask whether we wouldn't be better off if we didn't keep green this so-called capacity to mourn the passing of a world where, in Kobayashi Issa's consoling words, "insects, lovers, stars themselves, must part."[47] Would it be desirable to live in a world that doesn't pass?[48] Instead of this gloomy outlook, why don't we engage the world head on and try to alleviate some of the avoidable or unnecessary sufferings of sentient beings. Instead of lamenting over an aggrandized conception of action and intervention, as in 'to take arms against a sea of troubles and by opposing end them,' one could pay attention to the far reaching implications of making a distinction

42 Hadot, *What Is Ancient Philosophy?*, 281.

43 Hook, *Pragmatism and the Tragic Sense of Life*, 22.

44 Hadot, *What is Ancient Philosophy?,* 281. I wonder if Cavell was thinking of the same thing when he wanted to find out what makes philosophy "painful." Cf. *Emerson's Transcendental Etudes,* 192.

45 Nussbaum, *The Therapy of Desire*, 101; it is striking that in both *The Fragility of Goodness* and *The Therapy of Desire* she takes the key questions to be about the very idea of doing philosophy in the face of a world where suffering is randomly distributed. "[W]hat business," she writes, "does anyone have living in the happy and self-expressive world [of philosophy], so long as the other world exists and one is a part of it?" (*The Therapy of Desire*, 3). Emerson, in a sense, was "using philosophy against the hurts of life" (*Journals*, V: 148).

46 Cavell, *Emerson's Transcendental Etudes*, 115.

47 Quoted from Manuela Dunn Mascetti, *The Little Book of Zen,* 34.

48 Bernard Williams doesn't think so. See "The Markopulos Case: Reflections on the Tedium of Immortality."

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0012217317000920 Published online by Cambridge University Press

between avoidable and unavoidable suffering and orienting one's life toward tangible and concrete plans of action (to raise awareness about the effects of global warming, to participate in campaigns for gender equality, to improve basic education, easy access to water and sanitation, affordable health care, etc.)[49] Wherever real action is, it is not in 'silent moments.'

III

The "transformation of genius into practical power" through action was a cardinal concern of Emerson throughout his life, but what he calls 'action' could mean different things in different contexts (*EL*, 492). In all its apparent inconsistency or its multi-faceted layers one might see an image of the scholar's endeavours to present her ideas and find a solid ground in life. But, more important, according to this image, she comes to terms with the limits of human power to actualize those ideas and ambitions, and to that extent, scholars and non-scholars alike are in the same boat, as he writes at the end of "Montaigne,"

> Each man woke in the morning, with an appetite that could eat the solar system like a cake; a spirit for action and passion without bounds; he could lay his hand on the morning star: he could try conclusions with gravitation or chemistry; but, on the first motion to prove his strength,—hands, feet, senses, gave way, and would not serve him. He was an emperor deserted by his states, and left to whistle by himself, or thrust into a mob of emperors, all whistling … In every house, in the heart of each maiden, and of each boy, in the soul of the soaring saint, this chasm is found,—between the largest promise of ideal power, and the shabby experience. (*EL*, 708-709)

One might be tempted to add the image of dethroned emperors to Thomas Nagel's list of examples of absurd situations, where there is an incongruity between values we attach to things and their worth from an objective point of view, but such comparison would be superficial.[50] For the emperors are touched by the pettiness of what is left for them to do. Here there seems to be a yet further shift in Emerson's views about the relation of thought to action as the mob of emperors are idling around whistling, whereas at the end of "Experience" there was a defiant promise of 'victory' through 'patience.' Compare that tone at the end of "Experience" with the end of "Montaigne" where he reminds us that we are "here not to work, but to be worked upon" (*EL*, 709). At this stage, we could discern a wide spectrum of views about the relation of thought to action, from his reassuring words in *Nature*, that one could build one's 'own world,' to the spirit of resignation or 'acquiescence' (as Whicher puts it) at the end of "Montaigne."

There seems to be a point that I think Emerson comes close to discussing on a few occasions but he never talks about it explicitly, which I would like to

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49 As argued in Peter Singer's book, *How Are We to Live?*

50 Nagel, "The Absurd," 143-152.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0012217317000920 Published online by Cambridge University Press

address here.[51] In reading Emerson, one often gets the sense that he is in the grip of a certain image of life, someone with a seemingly abundant supply of energy to meet the demands of his 'appetite' to squeeze the essence of this world and drink it all, a craving, as he writes in "Methods of Nature," for "that redundancy or excess of life which in conscious beings we call *ecstasy*" (*EL*, 121). However, it seems that beyond a certain point even ecstasy could lose its aura. If one becomes a 'transparent eye-ball' once one would see pretty much everything there is to see, since presumably, as Emerson writes in *Nature*, one would become 'part or parcel of God' in these transient moments. But the view from above could be as much susceptible to banality as the view from within. This is the point he doesn't get to discuss openly.

It seems that we seek these transient moments, as Emerson did, not only to become one with something bigger but, more importantly, to experience a different mode of being, to eat the lotus and dive into an unknown territory in the life of the mind. As he writes at the end of "Circles,"

> The one thing which we seek with insatiable desire is to forget ourselves, to be surprised out of our propriety, to lose our sempiternal memory and to do something without knowing how or why; in short to draw a new circle. Nothing great was ever achieved without enthusiasm. … 'A man,' said Oliver Cromwell, 'never rises so high as when he knows not whiter he is going.' Dreams and drunkenness, the use of opium and alcohol are the semblance and counterfeit of this oracular genius, and hence their dangerous attraction for men. For the like reason they ask the aid of wild passions, as in gaming and war, to ape in some manner these flames and generosities of the heart. (*EL*, 414)

In principle, we cannot rule out the possibility that maybe whistling emperors at the end of "Montaigne" run out of 'enthusiasm,' because they come to realize that ecstasy is overrated. Emerson's philosophy could be viewed as notes on domesticating enthusiasm. But does it mean that with Emerson at the end, when the 'flames and generosities of the heart' fade away, the emperor/scholar is left with despair or some 'shabby experience'? It depends. Robert Spiller once wrote that Emerson's efforts to understand life "makes for either faith and confidence or tragic despair. Emerson knew both; his followers often chose."[52] And I choose to think that at the end a sense of confidence is not totally lost. The focus, however, is no longer on world-building and cashing out genius into practical power but on the immediate surroundings of one's domestic life. This shift in perspective in Emerson's later works becomes more and more visible. Both *The Conduct of Life* (1860) and *Society and Solitude* (1870) are "marked in particular by a growing attention to daily life as the grounding of ethical

[51] For example, in the last two pages of "Montaigne."

[52] Spiller, "The Four Faces of Emerson," 105-106.

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concern."[53] A key passage in "Domestic Life" represents this 'pragmatic turn': the scholar's search for "the subtle spirit of life" is turned toward "facts nearer." Now, "it is what is done and suffered in the house, in the constitution, in the temperament, in the personal history, that has the profoundest interest for us."[54] In this manner, the scholar returns to the same place she had departed from at the beginning of her quest for a sense of reconciliation between "the theory and practice of life" (*EL*, 705).

In the beginning, I suggested that "The American Scholar" has overshadowed what Emerson has written about scholars in general and their struggles to act, and thus to justify themselves. And there is a reason for that, I think. Kenneth Sacks characterises "The American Scholar" as the most famous academic speech "ever given in the United States."[55] Oliver Wendell Holmes called it "our intellectual Declaration of Independence."[56] At the same time, we should remember that the address is written and delivered by a scholar for scholars; it is intimate and it has a strange capacity to leave the scholar with the impression that her dreams are valid, or, in Fuller's apt phrase, it has the capacity to leave one "intellectually breathless and, paradoxically, self-validated."[57] Emerson would treat words with care since he knew what they were capable of. He knew that certain words are "capable of exploding" when they touch "the bottom of our consciousness."[58] He knew that "a sentence in a book, or a word dropped in conversation, sets free our fancy, and instantly our heads are bathed with galaxies." He knew too that "this benefit is real," and that, "once having passed the bounds, [we] shall never again be quite the miserable pedants we were" (*EL*, 622). Hence the feeling that after "The American Scholar" things are not quite the same; hence the sense that we are witnessing Emerson's "greatest call to arms."[59] But that call was made when he was in the grip of the conviction that without action "thought can never ripen into truth," (*EL*, 60) that if he put the scholar in an 'undecked boat' then the discovery of the 'New World' is guaranteed.[60] This aspect of Emerson's philosophy gradually gained more currency in the general reception of him and eventually found its way to manliness industry and other lame enterprises.

At the end of *What is Ancient Philosophy*? Hadot writes of the philosopher's exposure to "many risks" the worst of which being the danger of coming to believe that "one can do without philosophical reflection."[61] In examining the

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[53] Robinson, *Emerson and the Conduct of Life*, 135-136.

[54] Emerson, *The Complete Works* of Ralph Waldo Emerson, 7:107.

[55] Sacks, *Emerson Political Writings*, xix.

[56] Holmes, *Ralph Waldo Emerson*, 115.

[57] Fuller, *Emerson's Ghosts*, 18.

[58] Porte, *Consciousness and Culture*, 163.

[59] Whicher, *Freedom and Fate,* 48.

[60] Cf. *EL*, 280.

[61] Hadot, *What is Ancient Philosophy?*, 281.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0012217317000920 Published online by Cambridge University Press

shifts in Emerson's thoughts about what counts for action one might get the impression that at the end he loses interest in philosophy and indulges himself "in a quest for power."[62] It might appear that in tracking the movement of thoughts in Emerson's writings about scholarly engagement we move toward a path that eventually, if taken to extremes, would lead to the conclusion that one can do without philosophy.

Something does not feel right about such conclusion. I think Emerson's reflections on ways of engagement with the outside world are, at the same time, reflections on what philosophy is or ought to be. The scholar takes up "the unpaid task of observation" and becomes "the world's eye" and "the world's heart" (*EL*, 63). She is here and the world is an overwhelming place to the primitive eye. The Emersonian imperative, in short, is to act in life in such a way that "no trait of beauty" could escape you.[63]

But beauty, of the kind Emerson had in mind, postulates innocence. When "innocence is no longer possible," beauty does escape.[64]

Acknowledgements: I would like to thank Brian Treanor and two anonymous reviewers for their insightful comments on a previous draft of this paper. I'm grateful to Veronica Cibotaru for translating the abstract into French.

62 West, *The American Evasion of Philosophy*, 36.
63 Emerson, *Journals*, VII: 134.
64 Kateb, *Emerson and Self-Reliance*, 198.

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