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Religious gestures and secular strengths: Emerson, Nagel, and Kateb on the religious temperament

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Abstract: **What would happen to the reception of Emerson if one does not share his religious sentiments? I argue that appreciating Emerson does not depend upon sharing a similar attitude towards religion not only because we can discern a secular sense of wonder in his writings, as George Kateb claims, but also because his literary excellence shows us ways of wonder in the first place. Further, I show that though there is a brief exchange of similar ideas between Emerson and Thomas Nagel in the latter's engagement of 'the religious temperament', their responses to what they call the tremendousness of existence is fundamentally different.**

Introduction

'It is a horror to say so', Kateb is afraid to say so, but 'it may be rather wasteful to study Emerson unless one shares his religiousness' (Kateb (2003), 65). In what follows I'll pose a challenge to this claim. In order to do so I need to clarify what Emerson and Kateb mean by 'religiousness' and, further, why Kateb thinks it would be a waste of time to read Emerson if we are not in sympathy with his religious dispositions. I argue that on the whole Emerson's writings on religion are marked by the overflow of what we could call the 'oceanic sentiment' or what he himself calls 'ecstasy' or 'the excess of life'. As it is well established by many commentators, there are strong connections between Emerson's religious orientations and the religious movements of his time such as Unitarianism and American Transcendentalism. My focus on the oceanic sentiment is mindful of the evolving nature of Emerson's reflections on the varieties of religious experience from his early sermons and the 'Divinity School Address' to later essays

such as 'Worship' and 'Fate'. The main argument is that what Randy L. Friedman calls Emerson's tendency to 'lowering the profile of a supernatural God' is manifested in his constant references to natural phenomena (Friedman (2012), 36). I first discuss the centrality of experiencing nature in Emerson's thought and its bearings on his religiousness and then I argue that there are points of convergence between Emerson's 'religious sentiment' and Nagel's 'religious temperament' to the extent that what, in different words, they call the tremendousness of existence calls for a response. Finally, in response to Kateb's question, I suggest that appreciating Emerson does not depend upon sharing a similar attitude towards religion not merely because we can discern a secular sense of wonder in his writings, as Kateb claims, but also because of Emerson's literary excellence in providing us with a 'millions fresh particulars' to wonder at. We could still read Emerson not because we have established, or need to establish, that religion is not an integral feature of Emerson's philosophy of life. His emphasis on cultivating the capacity to see things as if for the first time, that is, to see things self-reliantly, transcends religious/secular divides.

What's the moon and the barley for? Naturalizing Transcendence in Emerson's works

A defining feature of Emerson's philosophy of life was to share a way of experiencing life best described in his definition of ecstasy as the excess of life. Noting the centrality of this experience in Emerson writings, F. O. Matthiessen writes: 'the first and recurrent upsurge of his conviction was that "life is an ecstasy", that the moment was an almost unbelievable miracle, which he wanted, more than anything else, to catch and to record' (Matthiessen (2013), 441). On the whole, understanding Emerson entails understanding what he means by the excess of life in his writings. Such sentiment, as Matthew Ratcliffe suggests, is an intense feeling of being in which one experiences a sense of unity with the world in its most primal form (Ratcliffe (2005), 47). In Emerson's works this feeling is recorded on many occasions but a passage in *Nature* where he writes of his famous walk in the woods has received much more attention. His special experience as he was passing a 'bare common' is worth quoting at length:

> in snow puddles, at twilight, under a clouded sky, without having in my thoughts any occurrence of special good fortune, I have enjoyed a good a perfect exhilaration. I am glad to the brink of fear. In the woods too, a man casts off his years, as the snake his slough, and at what period soever of life, is always a child. . . . I feel that nothing can befall me in life, – no disgrace, no calamity, (leaving me my eyes,) which nature cannot repair. Standing on the bare ground, – my head bathed by the blithe air, and uplifted into infinite space, – all mean egotism vanishes. I become a transparent eye-ball; I am nothing; I see all; the currents of the Universal Being circulate through me; I am part or particle of God. (Emerson (1983), 10)

In such state of receptivity one is in tune with the 'announcements of the soul'. 'The trances of Socrates, the "union" of Plotinus, the vision of Porphyry,

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the conversion of Paul' are exemplary but there are other forms of such ecstatic knowledge of life which manifests itself in 'the faintest glow of virtuous emotion, in which form it warms, like our household fires, all the families and associations of men' (*ibid.,* 392).

Emerson reminds us that such way of experiencing the world 'cannot be received at second hand' (*ibid.,* 79). The capacity to be moved by what lies right in front of one's eyes, that is, by the ordinary, is inevitably a first-hand experience, an experience which at the same time, in Friedman's words, is a call for 'practice of a life lived at first-hand' (Friedman (2012), 36). For a person susceptible to such way of looking at life everything seems to be a call for wonder. The kind of wonder Emerson refers to seems to be different from what Aristotle had in mind in his *Metaphysics*. Aristotle writes:

> For it is owing to their wonder that men both now begin and at first began to philosophize; they wondered originally at the obvious difficulties, then advanced little by little and stated difficulties about the greater matters, e.g. about the phenomena of the moon and those of the sun and of the stars, and about the genesis of the universe. And a man who is puzzled and wonders thinks himself ignorant (whence even the lover of myth is in a sense a lover of Wisdom, for the myth is composed of wonders). (Aristotle ([350 BC] 1924), 982b)

As Dylan Futter (2013) has pointed out, Aristotle's view of wonder is linked with '*aporia*', or a state of perplexity and puzzlement. On this view, wonder ignites a sense of curiosity in us to overcome our ignorance. In other words, for Aristotle, *aporia* could be alleviated. Philosophy begins in wonder, but in A. W. Nightingale's words, it 'ends in *theôria*' (Nightingale (2001), 43). Not all conceptions of wonder, however, are aporetic as implied in Aristotle's view. Wonder, we might say, is an umbrella concept that covers a wide range of experiences or ways of seeing.[1] Traditionally, wonder has been associated with fear, awe, perplexity, or a manifestation of our search for meaning.[2] On this view, what inflicts awe or fear unsettles the ordinary. Here what we take for granted, the usual, is not particularly awe-inspiring. In contrast, the Emersonian sense of wonder, to put it in Stanley Cavell's terms, is not merely the manifestation of search for 'knowledge', as in Aristotle's *aporia*, but also a space in which one 'acknowledges' the world. Emerson is so impressed with the world, with the things in life, that he understands why pre-Socratic philosophers would go around and say in 'joy or fear' that 'this is god', or 'that is god' (Guthrie (1975), 10). The upshot of Emersonian wonder is an appreciative acknowledgement of the world; that things exist is not something he could easily get used to. Note, for example, his awe at the observation that 'The sun and moon and the man who walks under them are miracles that puzzle all analysis' (Emerson (1972), III, 278). In the very experience of wonder, Emerson, as Cornell West puts it, carries a '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' (West (1989), 24–25). In this enthusiastic sense of wonder the strangeness of being there brings about

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ecstasy and not angst. There are undiscovered regions of life, which could only be arrived at with ecstasy:

> I arrive there, and behold what was there already. I make! O no! I clap my hands in infantine joy and amazement, before the first opening to me of this august magnificence, old with the love and homage of innumerable ages, young with the life of life, the sunbright Mecca of the desert. And what a future it opens! I feel a new heart beating with the love of the new beauty. I am ready to die out of nature, and be born again into this new yet unapproachable America I have found in the West. (Emerson (1983), 485)

At the core of Emerson's writings one could discern a tendency to convey the same primordial sentiment which made him clap his hands 'in infantine joy and amazement'. Without a certain degree of receptivity to such sentiment it would be difficult to understand the conviction that 'the deepest pleasures' in life come from 'the occult belief that an unknown meaning and consequence lurk in the common every day facts' (Emerson (1960–1982), V, 212)

There is another dimension to this mode of being with which Emerson was certainly familiar, as we can gather from the last paragraph of 'Circles'.[3] That dimension, however, was explored and poetized by Nietzsche, who went so far as to suggest that ecstasy reveals something about a mode of existence that he came to describe as a Dionysian way of experiencing life, the life of thrusting oneself against the boundaries of one's existence in often wild outburst of emotions. One might wonder if Emerson's ecstasy is a manifestation of a Dionysian way of being. It could be. There is a similarity between the two in the overflow, the intensity, the excess of life, but Emerson was in the grip of the wish to become a 'transparent eye-ball' not with the intention to say 'yes' to destructive forces of nature.

Such an affirmative sense of wonder is transient by nature but it has a significant impact on the orientation of one's life; it presents one with a way of appraising life, informed by 'these flames and generosities of the heart' (Emerson (1983), 414). He writes in 'Intellect',

> Our thinking is a pious reception. . . . We have little control over our thoughts. We are the prisoners of ideas. They catch us up for moments into their heaven, and so fully engage us, that we take no thought for the morrow, gaze like children, without an effort to make them our own. By and by we fall out of that rapture, bethink us where we have been, what we have seen, and repeat, as truly as we can, what we have beheld. As far as we can recall these ecstasies, we carry away in the ineffaceable memory the result, and all men and all the ages confirm it. (*ibid.*, 418–419)

To a person who is in the grip of such sentiments the world looks new and 'untried', a world in which things are still too fresh to be ordinary. In her view, as Robert Penn Warren's noted, 'significance shines through everything' (Warren (2013), 475). When she stands by the seashore or when she is in the woods, she might as well be the first person 'that ever stood on the shore, or entered a grove' (Emerson (1983), 102). The world is 'not yet subdued by the thought'; everything seems to be bursting into existence, and all is needed is a fresh mind to

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capture and to record their senses. The world needs to be translated. Emerson genuinely thinks that there is so much to see, that the world could be rediscovered. 'The long slender bars of cloud float like fishes in the sea of crimson light. From the earth, as a shore, I look out into that silent sea' (*ibid.*, 15). Capturing the extraordinariness of the moment is of the essence: this 'humble kitchen where the daily bread is baked' (Llewelyn (2001), 54); the eyes, come to think of it, the eyes – 'Could a greater miracle take place than for us to look through each other's eyes for an instant?' (Thoreau ([1854] 1971), 10). A comet streaks away in full speed, with the memory of those who are not here. You are the silence at the bottom of the sea and world is alone. 'Here about us coils forever the ancient enigma, so old and so unutterable. Behold! There is the sun, and the rain, and the rocks: the old sun, the old stones' (Emerson (1983), 129). The capacity to be moved by the rock and the rain, that is, by the commonplace, would challenge the very assumption that the sublime is something rare and remote:

> All around us, what powers are wrapped up under the coarse mattings of custom, and all wonder prevented. It is so wonderful to our neurologists that a man can see without his eyes, that it does not occur to them, that it is just as wonderful, that he should see with them; and that is ever the difference between the wise and the unwise: the latter wonders at what is unusual, the wise man wonders at the usual. (*ibid.*, 608–609)

In this view, a most quotidian object or phenomenon could cause a feeling of the sublime. The infinite space, which brings about the 'mathematical sublime', and nature's enormous spectacles, which creates the 'dynamic sublime', could naturally make us wonder at the magnitude of the natural world and the fragility and insignificance of human life. Emerson, however, wants to establish the sublimity of the mundane. The 'raging sea' and the 'dark stormy skies' are breathtaking; so is the smell of the desert after rain. Having said that, both Kant and Emerson seem to share the conviction that the sublime reveals something about our capacity to transcend nature through the moral quality of our characters. Nature has power over us, yet, Kant writes, 'the humanity in our person remains undemeaned even though the human being must submit to that dominion' (Kant ([1790] 2000), § 28, 145). We are capable of discovering and acting upon the moral law within us; a law impervious to the tyranny of nature. Half a century later, and in a more defying spirit, Emerson would write of the ways a human being 'may abolish all considerations of magnitude' by 'the moral quality radiating' from her countenance (Emerson (1983), 529).

Before discussing Nagel's thoughts on the religious temperament, I need to address a number of concerns about my emphasis on Emerson's 'infantine joy'. The first concern is that I am advocating Emersonian wonder as a source of value in life but certainly the orientation of one's life or what could confer meaning on one's life is not merely a matter of being awestruck; our propositional attitudes are important but one could also argue that a meaningful life is more a matter of orienting our lives towards projects and goals that are of objective value.[4]

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The sense in which wonder could be a source of value, however, has to do with its intimate nature. Emersonian wonder takes an interest in the world and makes us receptive to appreciate truly what is of value. In this regard, receptivity, openness, and appreciation are often all we need to begin orienting our lives towards objective values.[5] Perhaps Emerson was alluding to this when he wrote that 'Nothing great was ever achieved without enthusiasm' (*ibid.*, 414).

Second, one might suggest that the sense of joy I'm trying to highlight is in sharp contrast to a more prevailing sense in Emerson's works and that is the problem of 'double consciousness' as vividly, or painfully, described in his later works such as 'Experience' and 'Fate'. How can we reconcile Emerson's gay science with his lamentations over 'evanescence and lubricity of all objects, which lets them slip through our fingers then when we clutch hardest' (*ibid.*, 473)? One might even go so far as to suggest, as Stephen Whicher did in his classic, *Freedom and Fate*, that the 'double consciousness' is at the core of Emerson's philosophy of life.

But I'm not suggesting that all that there is to Emerson is a joyous 'acceptance of the universe'. Far from it. Emerson's engagement with religion is an evolving and dynamic engagement from his early sermons and the 'Divinity School Address' all the way up to later works such as 'Worship' and 'Fate'. My aim is not to essentialize Emerson's multifaceted engagement with religion by claiming that for him religion boils down to an ecstatic experience of the world. While I establish that Emerson's reflections on the religious experience throughout his career are often marked by ecstasy, I am not undermining or trivializing other equally important features such as the doctrine of compensation, which was present throughout his writings. The same can be said of the centrality of the idea of 'double consciousness' in Emerson's thought. By focusing on Emerson's enthusiastic embrace of the world in conjunction with Thomas Nagel's 'religious temperament' I intend to flesh out their similarity and differences.

Furthermore, I suggest that without a certain degree of receptivity to the Emersonian sense of wonder it would be difficult to see the point or the value of making the common affairs of the day 'interesting'.[6] For Emerson the ordinary transcends; there is always an added value; there is always an angle of vision charged with a sense of appreciation for 'the near, the low, the common', as he famously announced in 'The American Scholar' (*ibid.*, 68). In his early works the idea of seeing the sublime and the spiritual lurking in 'suburbs' of nature captivates him (*ibid.*, 69); the idea of establishing an 'original relation to the universe' captivates him.

This last point, in turn, leads to the third concern, which is about the overall implications of emphasizing Emersonian wonder at the cost of overlooking the fact that Emerson's key early essays such as 'The American Scholar', 'Divinity School Address', or 'Self-Reliance' say a great deal more than telling us the world is untried; in these essays he talks about self-reliance, or the ebb and flow of scholarly life as well.[7] In response, I would like to draw attention to the connection between self-trust or self-reliance and Emersonian wonder. The look

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of wonder is often solitary; it cannot be conformist. It takes self-reliance to see the world as if for the first time. '*There* are the stars', Thoreau writes, 'and they who can may read them' (Thoreau ([1854] 1971), 102). It is true that the orientation of one's life is subject to more factors than wonder, factors such as basic beliefs that make up one's total vision of life or *Weltanschauung*. But it is also true that Emerson's total vision of life is marked by a kind of enthusiasm that came with a 'heavy' toll (Spiller (1981), 106). The reason I focus on Emersonian wonder is to flesh out the relevance of his way of seeing today and his contribution to an ongoing debate: the relation between a secular and a religious sense of wonder. I attend to Nagel's engagement of 'the religious temperament' next.

Nagel on the religious temperament as a secular response to the world

In *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, William James defines religion as 'the feelings, acts, and experiences of individual men in their solitude, so far as they apprehend themselves to stand in relation to whatever they may consider the divine' (James ([1902] 1987), 36). But what would happen to those feelings and experiences when the very possibility of a relation with divinity is ruled out? Is it justified to hold unto one's religious temperament even when the prospect of a relation with the divine is denied? Would it be possible to replace the traditional religious sentiments with what Kateb calls 'an unreligious emotion of the sublime, with a secular ecstasy' (Kateb (2003), 79)? One way of responding to this question would be to argue that no secular alternative can or should be introduced as a substitute to religion. We should do away with the emotional residue of religion, as they would lead us to what David Hume called the 'extravagances of conduct' (Hume ([1738] 1968), bk I, part 4: § 7). Nagel is sympathetic to such a sobering approach and yet he finds himself resisting the pervasive assumption that ultimately scientific naturalism is the only viable world-view we are left with. Even after rejecting a theistic world-view, a secular alternative could still be an option. Now the question is: could Emerson's way of seeing be of any help in this search for a religious temperament of a secular kind? In what capacity if the answer is positive? And if the answer is negative what are the reasons?

According to Nagel, the realization that one is part of something much bigger could bring about a feeling akin to a religious experience but at the same time categorically different from it. As he writes,

> Without God, it is unclear what we should aspire to harmony with. But still, the aspiration can remain, to live not merely the life of the creature one is, but in some sense to participate through it in the life of the universe as a whole. To be gripped by this desire is what I mean by the religious temperament. (Nagel (2010), 6)

Such a temperament is a manifestation of a desire 'to live in harmony with the universe and not just in it' (*ibid.*, 5). That long and improbable chain of events, which made life on earth possible, is truly incredible; the consciousness which

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made it possible to contemplate life is even more incredible. And when we contemplate life as a whole it often happens that we start to grow a tender attitude about it. In such moments of receptivity, we might come to the conclusion that 'in each of us, the universe has come to consciousness, and therefore our existence is not merely our own' (*ibid.*, 6).

From this perspective, one's religious temperament is not hinged upon one's belief in God. That is, even when we cut ties with a religious answer to the problem of life we could continue asking the same questions for which our religions used to provide answers. Nagel wants to find out 'what becomes of the question if one does not give it a religious answer' (*ibid.*, 5).

I wonder if Nagel's 'religious temperament' could be put in the same category as James's 'religious attitude'. For the latter, 'there must be something solemn, serious, and tender about any attitude which we denominate religious' (James ([1902] 1987), 42). On the whole, the defining concern of religion is 'with the manner of our acceptance of the universe' (*ibid.*, 44). Nagel's religious temperament, too, is concerned with the possibility of a harmonious relation with the world but from a naturalistic standpoint. He is considering what the religious temperament in its secular sense has to offer, but at the same time he acknowledges that he lacks 'the *sensus divinitatis* that enables – indeed compels – so many people to see in the world the expression of divine purpose as naturally as they see in a smiling face the expression of human feeling' (Nagel (2012), 12).

One secular alternative to the divine purpose could be a kind of Platonism according to which we can discern a naturalistic teleology in the making of the world as we know it through science. Such a non-reductionist view 'does not postulate intention or purpose behind one's existence', but still opposes the 'essentially mechanistic conception of nature', which has been the dominating world-view in the scientific age. On this view each of us 'is a part of the lengthy process of the universe gradually waking up' to consciousness (Nagel (2010), 16–17). It is through us that at last the universe has come to understand itself.

But even such awakening, Nagel has it, is not quite satisfactory. 'Without an intentional designer', he writes, 'perhaps there is no sense to be made of our lives' from any large perspective and that 'we just have to start from what we contingently are and make what sense we can of our lives from there' (*ibid.*, 17), an approach exemplified in the key distinction between the 'cosmic' and 'individual' answers to the question of life's meaning in the current literature on life's meaning.[8] We are here for a while and perhaps, as Nagel writes in *The Last Word*, 'there is no alternative but to try to decide what to believe and how to live, and the only way to do that is by trying to decide what is the case and what is right' (Nagel (1997), 143).

Divine purpose is not the case; self-deception is not right; and we could grow out of our religious temperament in the way we did with our infatuations or self-importance. And if such line of argument is valid, then Nagel may be right to claim that ultimately we would be left with a sense of the absurd. Or maybe not.

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By invoking Emerson, Kateb argues that even when we reject the divine purpose the world could still be 'significant' provided that we look at it with wonder. It is here that Emerson and Nagel cross paths briefly.

Kateb on the 'problem' of Emerson's religiousness

There is a response to cosmic questions about life in which Nagel and Emerson could have found an unexpected common ground in the quintessential attitude of wonder.[9] In his *Emerson and Self-Reliance* Kateb undertakes the task of fleshing out what he takes to be a secular sense of wonder in Emerson's works. His approach is similar to Nagel's treatment of the religious temperament as he argues that even without a supernatural source of value the world could still be 'significant' (Kateb (2003), 66). He sets forth the sense of wonder as an alternative to Emerson's 'religiousness' as he is concerned that the religious tone of Emerson's writings could be an obstacle in our reception of him; anyone who wishes to show the relevance of Emerson needs to be reminded that 'the enlightened mind of our age will not endure Emerson's religiousness' (*ibid.*, 91).

But what is it about Emerson's religiousness that the enlightened mind finds problematic? We have good reasons to believe that Emerson is a genuinely religious thinker, that for him the beauty of the world springs from that which transcends it. Things are not complete on their own; they are perfect when they are symbols of the source that created them. And here lies the problem: such way of seeing the world 'makes things vanish into a higher expressiveness. The look of things, which is life's greatest blessing, is demoted. The sun is not good enough; the unreligious, democratic eye that uses sunlight to see is not good enough' (*ibid.*, 73).

If for Emerson 'the sun is not good enough' on its own; that is, if all that is profane is just a manifestation of what is sacred, then Emersonians are faced with an uncomfortable question: should they let go of Emerson, if they do not share his religiousness? The answer to this question, however, is not readily available. And in his forty-odd volumes of notes and writings one could come across a wide range of views. It is largely thanks to the rich and multifaceted nature of Emerson's writings on religion that Kateb still thinks there is a way to stay with Emerson in spite of his religiousness. We shouldn't be too quick to dismiss him since he has a 'redemptive vision' to offer (*ibid.*, 81). He thinks that although Emerson employs a religious rhetoric, he gives many hints along the way that the metaphysical strings attached to many of his remarks about 'the All' or Divinity, or, in general, a supernatural source of value, can be bracketed. If we could establish that religion is not integral to Emerson's philosophy of life, then the door would be open to a more secular reception of him. If we could establish that he is religious but his religiousness is not a serious obstacle in our reception of him, we could find a place for him in our secular picture of the world. He thinks a strand of remarks in Emerson's

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writings lends themselves to the idea that we could take Emerson towards 'a more unreligious direction' (*ibid.*, 95). Emerson's appeal to 'religious or theological vocabulary' is more often just a strategy to emphasize the sense that 'humanity has inscrutable depths' (*ibid.*, 87).

In light of this interpretation, Kateb thinks it would be justified to leave aside Emerson's 'ritualist appeals to divinity' and take a selective approach towards his writings (*ibid.*, 91). But here I cannot help noticing a tension in Kateb's approach. First, he is adamant on finding the truth of the matter 'even if we lose Emerson in the process' and, then, later he seems to take a more lenient approach to his religiousness and presents an Emerson whose gestures are 'religious', but whose 'strength' remains 'secular' (*ibid.*, 92). But if we have good reasons to believe religiousness is a defining feature of Emerson's thought, then, in Kateb's judgement, we are to part ways with him even though at times it appears that he offers things we can't refuse. Simply, the tension lies in first presenting Emerson's religiousness as a deal-breaker then toning down his appeals to divinity as rhetorical gestures.

There is also a methodological concern about the way Kateb fleshes out Emerson's secular considerations. Emerson's corpus adds up to more than forty volumes, from his journals to his essays and lectures to his sermons and letters. Kateb himself acknowledges that in dealing with Emerson's works, 'one runs the risk of arbitrarily deciding which statements more nearly represent Emerson's views, and which statements he is only trying out' (*ibid.*, 10). He has undertaken an enormous task to establish how deep the idea of self-reliance runs in Emerson's thoughts as a whole. Yet in his exegesis on the 'problem' of Emerson's religiousness he provides us with numerous quotations, and not mainly from his published essays, only to convey the idea that even though Emerson believes in a divine source of value 'sometimes' he *tries out* a secular sense of wonder as an alternative. But the problem, or the fact, with Emerson's style is that *sometimes* if you dig enough in his text you can turn him into almost anything.[10]

At this point, one might ask: what would be at stake if we received Emerson's 'religiousness' as it is? What would we miss if we take Emerson at his words? What would be the harm of reading Emerson on his own terms? Isn't Kateb's approach yet another example of the seemingly unavoidable dilemma, which many philosophers dealing with the history of philosophy are bound to face? The dilemma, in Alasdair MacIntyre's words, manifests itself in this way:

> *Either* we read the philosophies of the past so as to make them relevant to our contemporary problems and enterprises, transmuting them as far as possible into what they would have been if they were part of present-day philosophy, and minimizing or ignoring or even on occasion misrepresenting that which refuses such transmutation because it is inextricably bound up with that in the past which makes it radically different from present-day philosophy; *or* instead we take great care to read them in their own terms, carefully preserving their idiosyncratic and specific character. (MacIntyre (1984), 31)

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It is hard to imagine what would have happened to Emerson's enthusiastic vision of life if he was present today. Perhaps we could suggest that his enthusiasm for life would have been revised if not abandoned altogether. Perhaps he wouldn't have said some of those 'shallow and callous things' (Whicher (1962), 44). Perhaps, he would have embraced a secular sense of wonder today; the same Emerson who was adamant in 'Worship' that 'I have no infirmity of faith' (Emerson (1983), 1055) would have abandoned his affirmative appeals to divinities.

I think there is a way in which we could read Emerson's religiousness on his own terms without losing him in the process, for which we need the collapse of a dichotomy. So, let me ask again the question I was avoiding: is it possible to leave aside Emerson's religious attachments and remain Emersonian? It seems to me that regardless of one's position towards his religious affiliations there are immense benefits in his way of seeing. To be Emersonian or to remain one is not hinged upon establishing that his religious outlook is not an integral part of his total vision of life. Kateb provides us with a false dichotomy: *either* we should establish that Emerson is not as religious as he appears to be *or* abandon his way of seeing. Religious or secular, however, Emerson shows us the urgency of seeing the world or cultivating a way of seeing that chooses enthusiasm over detachment or apathy. Religious or secular, he could offer insights to those who are open to the idea that wonder, in its quintessentially philosophical sense, transcends one's religious affiliations; wondering not at how things are in the world or at their causal explanations but at their sheer existence. The attitude of wonder, as Ludwig Wittgenstein noted, could be an attitude towards all explanations (Wittgenstein (1980), 85). Emerson writes in 'The Sovereignty of Ethics':

> You have meditated in silent wonder on your existence in this world. You have perceived in the first fact of your conscious life here a miracle so astounding, – a miracle comprehending all the universe of miracles to which your intelligent life gives you access, as to exhaust wonder, and leave you no need of hunting here or there for any particular exhibition of power. (Emerson (1903–1904), X, 200–201)

Catching up with the world in the making where so many things still don't have names is the Emersonian enterprise: Bees are in the lavender and kids are skipping the Latin class; eyes meet, hearts beat. And Emerson wants to report these moments. 'A man is the faculty of reporting', he writes, 'and the universe is the possibility of being reported' (Emerson (1983), 747). This urge to capture and to record his observations shapes even his style of writing. In Richard Poirier's shrewd observation, Emerson's restless and fragmentary style is a consequence of 'the fear that he might block and therefore forever lose some momentary, partial conviction simply because he desperately wants instead, and impossibly, to discover a formula that will express fully whatever is going on inside him' (Poirier (1992), 69). What is going on inside him, more often than not, is how to capture what he calls 'the quality of the moment' (Emerson

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(1983), 204). He was of the belief that by definition 'transcendence' must be an elegant experience. He thought it would be a kind of performative paradox to write of transcendence or ecstasy or religious sentiment without the presence of a sense of beauty. One might even say that Emerson viewed the beauty of one's religious sentiment as a testimony for the existence of that which it aims at. In *Representative Men* he raises this point in criticizing Swedenborg's failure to find a poetic expression for the belief that all things are poetically constructed. Likewise, in 'Divinity School Address' he talks of the duty of preachers to reveal the 'poetic truth' hidden in all sermons and prayers (*ibid.*, 85). In this view, the mark of a religious temperament is its poetic expression. 'A true conversion' is hinged upon the 'the reception of beautiful sentiments' (*ibid.*, 82). The implication of such an outlook might be that living up to the recognition that 'existence is something tremendous' is ultimately shown in the quality of its poetic expression (Nagel (2010), 34). In this regard, it seems to me that Emersonian wonder and the capacity for poetic expression are inextricably linked. The combination of the two, in Lawrence Buell's words, beckons us 'towards a state of aesthetic exaltation' (Buell (2003), 312). It was only through such state of being that he could promise 'sooner or later that which is now life shall be poetry' (Emerson, (1903–1904), VIII, 75).

In the final analysis, speaking of 'living in harmony with the universe', of not being alone in it, or of transcendence or reconciliation, or, in general, any talk of an especial relationship with the world, requires some degree of surrendering to what Emerson calls 'the torrent of poetic inspiration'. One is, so to speak, to love the world 'out of gratitude' (Emerson (1983), 760). But If the idea of gratitude is too much, or if, as Nagel suggests, 'the idea of a natural sympathy between the deepest truths of nature and the deepest layers of the human mind, . . . makes us more at home in the universe than is secularly comfortable' (Nagel (1997), 130), then, by the same token, the idea of indulging our religious temperament would eventually make us uncomfortable too. Consciousness is a contingent glitch in a system run on mud and silence and what we call home, all our enthusiasms, are the symptoms of a Stockholm Syndrome on a cosmic scale.

In contrast to Nagel, the religious temperament Emerson had in mind was intimate with the world of 'a million fresh particulars' (Emerson (1983), 581), since they were the building blocks of a reality in the absence of which, for the restoration of which, in 1844, he 'would even pay the costly price of sons and lovers' (*ibid.*, 472–473).

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Notes

1. For an elaborate discussion of family resemblances between various concepts of wonder, see Vasalou (2015).
2. For more on various conceptions of wonder in the history of philosophy, see Rubenstein (2008).
3. See Emerson, (1983) 414: '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'.
4. See, for example, Wolf (2010), Metz (2013).
5. A fresh argument for meaning-conferring dimension of wonder is offered by Schinkel (2018).
6. See Cavell (2003), 36.
7. For a recent study of the evolving nature of Emerson's thoughts on scholarly action, see Hosseini (2018).
8. For a detailed analysis of the difference between cosmic and individual answers to the question of life's meaning, see Metz (2013), 17–73. For a critical stance on making the distinction between cosmic and individual approaches to the question of life, see Hosseini (2015).
9. In this article, I'm not discussing wonder in its 'inquisitive sense', one that Richard Dawkins has in mind in his *Appetite for Wonder* (2013). Dawkins argues that it is not religion but 'real science' that should be feeding our awe-inspiring experiences of the world. For a critical discussion of Dawkins's views about the cause, function and the cognitive value of wonder, see Fuller (2006), especially ch. 4.
10. In fact, a growing number of scholars have expressed their concerns about reading too much into Emerson's unpublished works and invite Emersonians to 'resist the temptation to over-emphasize' Emerson's journals and letters and focus instead on his published essays (Porte (2004), 49; see also Van Leer (1986), xiv).

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