

“From a Calmer Height of Love and Wisdom”:
Emerson, Religious Sentiment, and Environmental Intimacy

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This dissertation by Nicholas Aaron Friesner is accepted in its present form by the Department of Religious Studies as satisfying the dissertation requirement for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy.

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CURRICULUM VITAE

Nicholas Aaron Friesner grew up in Baltimore, Maryland where he obtained a traditional Lasallian education. He attended Brown University and received his A.B. in Philosophy with a Capstone Thesis in Literary Arts in 2006. He earned a Graduate Certificate from the Ecumenical Institute at St. Mary's Seminary and University in 2009, and a M.A.R. in Philosophical Theology and Philosophy of Religion from Yale Divinity School in 2011. He then returned to Brown University to join the Religion and Critical Thought program. At Brown, he participated in a NEH Summer Institute on Transcendentalism and Social Action, and has been awarded the Brown/Wheaton Faculty Fellowship, the Cogut Center for the Humanities Graduate Fellowship, the Presidential Award for Excellence in Teaching, and the American Academy of Religion (New England-Maritime Region) Graduate Student Award for Excellence. Additionally, he has published articles in *The Journal of Religious Ethics* and *Soundings: An Interdisciplinary Journal*.

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Finding one's intellectual way is sometimes an aimless task. Being a graduate student and trying to make it in the academy applies new and different pressures to that process. Most of us go on this path despite the economics of higher education, not because of them. And though we are sometimes driven to our particular forms of labor because of the potential professional accolades it may garner on the current scholarly marketplace, it would be listless choice if it were solely that pragmatic. Or at least I hope. Nevertheless, I still strongly believe that finding one's intellectual way matters because it takes place in a world where things matter, that scholars are of their place, and their place isn't always covered in ivy. My Emersonian sense is that scholarship is only possible because of the relationships that surround it, that make it possible, that keep it grounded in a world that isn't just articles, seminars, and fellowships. No matter how much we read, the sun still shines and people continue to make shift to live. So, first and foremost I thank Constance and Clementine, who aren't buried at the back, but sit at the front of work like this. As I invoke love in this dissertation, I know of no other way to understand it except through these relationships, and that is perhaps how it should be. You are the entrance, and everything else follows in the wake.

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ABBREVIATIONS

- CS *The Complete Sermons of Ralph Waldo Emerson*. Ed. Albert J. Von Frank, et al. 4 vols. Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1989-1992.
- CW *The Collected Works of Ralph Waldo Emerson*. Ed. Alfred R. Ferguson, Jean Ferguson Carr, and Douglas Emory Wilson, et al. 10 vols. Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1971-.
- EAW *Emerson's Antislavery Writings*. Ed. Len Gougeon and Joel Myerson. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995.
- EL *The Early Lectures of Ralph Waldo Emerson, 1833-1842*. Ed. Stephen E. Whicher, Robert E. Spiller, and Wallace E. Williams. 3 vols. Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1959-1972.
- JMN *The Journals and Miscellaneous Notebooks of Ralph Waldo Emerson*. Ed. William H. Gilman et al. 16 vols. Cambridge: Belknap Press of Harvard University, 1960-1982.
- L *The Letters of Ralph Waldo Emerson*. Ed. Ralph L. Rusk and Eleanor M. Tilton. 10 vols. New York: Columbia University Press, 1939-1995.
- LL *The Later Lectures of Ralph Waldo Emerson, 1843-1871*. Ed. Ronald A. Bosco and Joel Myerson. 2 vols. Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2001.
- LMME *The Selected Letters of Mary Moody Emerson*. Ed. Nancy Craig Simmons. Athens: The University of Georgia Press, 1993.
- W *The Complete Works of Ralph Waldo Emerson*. Ed. Edward Waldo Emerson. 12 vols. Boston: Houghton, Mifflin Co., 1903-1904.

INTRODUCTION: THE NEED FOR AN EMERSONIAN RECOVERY

In all my lectures, I have taught one doctrine, namely, the infinitude of the private man. This, the people accept readily enough, & even with loud commendation, as long as I call the lecture, Art; or Politics; or Literature; or the Household; but the moment I call it Religion—they are shocked, though it be only the application of the same truth which they receive everywhere else, to a new class of facts. (JMN 7:342)

This study begins with what may seem to be an overly ambitious claim: that a figure who has been long recognized as immensely important for American intellectual life, who has spawned a veritable mountain of scholarship, who has been scrutinized by nearly two centuries of readers without a significant waning period, and who has been claimed by countless religious, philosophical, and intellectual movements as their own, that this figure, Ralph Waldo Emerson, still suffers from an interpretive lack. Boldly and to the point, I will here claim that because of the fraught interpretive politics of how we have examined and evaluated the idea of *religion* in Emersonian thought, both in his own time and in ours, the nuance and creativity with which Emerson articulates his views on religion have too often been underappreciated by his readers. Just as Emerson's critics in his own day tended to dismiss his religious thought as unworthy of serious consideration, contemporary scholars tend to view it as either a quaint and passing reference that is not a serious part of his "secular" literary and aesthetic project, or a problematically antiquated commitment that ought to be purged from his work to make it relevant for our current times. In his own day he was labeled a pantheist and atheist, even if he claimed to the contrary; nowadays he is often labeled a proto-secularist, even if he didn't realize it. When interpreters do grant Emerson his *religion*, he is usually seen as an overly optimistic

spiritualist or mystic, the herald of a purely inward religion of self-regard and self-gratification, one that dies a slow death from its pernicious individualism and delusions of self-fulfillment. For many with this view, we can attend to this religion by excavating its influence on late nineteenth and twentieth century American religious movements, but it certainly wouldn't much interest philosophers, ethicists, and theoretically-minded scholars of religion. It is a passé moment in liberal Protestantism, best left to the dustbin.

The study that follows takes a different path. Rather than beginning with a strong sense of what *religion* means—either one informed by an essentialist definition of the term that picks out a certain quality of the human experience across time and place, or one informed by the consensus opinions on religion in the early and mid-nineteenth century—here I hope to allow Emerson to develop his own peculiar understanding of what constitutes *the religious*. In many ways, my hope is to allow Emerson the latitude to experiment with the concept, much as he tended to experiment with the many titular concepts that headline his essays in the corpus, playing with the meaning that would have been most recognizable to his audience while trying to shift that meaning in search of some ethical, social, or political progress. Like he does with some of the best essays, such as “Experience” or *Nature*, the goal is never to accept the predominant understanding of the titular concept, but to incorporate its re-imagining into a comprehensive ethical vision—that is, to preach a truth that provokes, to inspire an always further movement, rather than describe its details. Because this is not a detached speculation on the essence of a topic but an engagement with a concept in its expression in the contemporary world, one must be attentive to one's own place and the traditions that form us collectively to think in particular ways. Although his legacy has sometimes tended to the contrary, Emerson is very much focused on how traditions might be changed for the better, finding the ways that people can be provoked

from within them, not forced to abandon one for some other. For my work here, that means attending to Emerson's relationship to the Calvinist Puritan Christianity of New England, the emerging liberal theology of the Unitarians, the idealism of the German and English Romantics, as well as his commitment to continuing an idiosyncratic family tradition, all the while focusing on how the confluence of these traditions allows him to speak to a common people and how they understand their own religious life and practice. Contrary to the many portrayals of the iconoclastic anti-traditionalist Emerson, I will show how Emerson sees his work as a part of a longstanding tradition of religious thought, not a grand departure from it. However, while it belongs to this ever-evolving tradition, it is not merely a reiteration of that tradition—Emerson is in this sense not committed to a stable set of resources that must remain ineluctably a part of that tradition. His aim, so to speak, is to make a positive contribution to how people think about the elements that constitute religion, not accepting its past forms as definitive for what it is, but letting its future possibilities inform how one ought to strive in the present. To do so requires that he occupy and explore the conceptual margins of his time where the boundaries of how people have thought about their lives open up just a bit more onto a new territory without completely abandoning the terrain that makes those lives recognizable.

This is, of course, not to say that the scholarship has not paid attention to Emerson's religion. In many ways, focusing on Emersonian religion is an antiquated scholarly approach. Before he was made the secular and aesthetically minded poet and essayist that many see him as today, there was a body of scholarship that was willing to see him as a kind of minister his entire life. Oftentimes the question about Emerson's religion comes down to a simple one: when Emerson resigned his pastorate at Second Church Boston in 1832, did he resign his ministerial career as a preacher and religious leader trying to sway the congregation of all who would hear

him towards a better lived *religious* life however constructed? Or did he merely resign his pulpit within the mainstream Unitarian church and the particular forms of pastoral obligation and institutional responsibility required from a full-time minister? Does he throw out the ministerial baby with the institutional bathwater? Late nineteenth and early twentieth century readers were much more willing to grant him the former without the latter—contemporary scholarship often equates the two.¹ Much of my account of Emerson in the following chapters hinges on the claim that the resignation of his official pulpit made a serious impact on his professional life, and very little impact on his religious thought.

Nevertheless, this is not an intellectual biography of Emerson. I am less concerned with how the person Emerson negotiated the complex relationship between his individual views, his relationships with the people around him, and the institutions that variously applauded and condemned him. Rather, the chapters that follow focus on the public works of Emerson that develop, I claim, a worked out and intricate account of religion that was meant to be received by an audience of listeners and readers. This is a methodology which I lay out at the beginning of chapter two, in contradistinction to much of the current research on Emerson's religious thought. As such, I do not deal with many of the topics on which much of the secondary literature focuses, such as whether he had a crisis of faith after the death of his first wife Ellen, or his personal feelings of betrayal by those in the Unitarian mainstream after the Divinity School Address. These are important questions for Emerson Studies, but they are not here my questions. As such, I do not try to correlate Emerson the person with every particular position that he

¹ In 1920 it was far more common to hear proclamations like the one by American philosopher and idealist, Jay William Hudson, that "religion permeated everything Emerson ever thought or did; it was not a function of his soul,—it was his soul. Emerson was the sage essayist only as he was a religious sage, an orator only as he was a religious oracle, a philosopher only as he was a prophet, a poet only as he was a priest." Jay William Hudson, "The Religion of Emerson," *The Sewanee Review* 28, no. 2 (April 1920): 203.

develops in his public works. Those moments where I do venture beyond the public works—the sermons, lectures, and published essays—I try to do so sparingly so as not to lose sight of Emerson’s public engagement as an essential feature of his thought. This does leave me vulnerable to the accusation that my account of Emerson might stray from what Emerson *actually* believed. Nevertheless, what I am concerned with here is Emerson as a social critic and a public figure, and not necessarily what he considered to be his *private* religious views.

“From a Calmer Height of Love and Wisdom”

The title of this study comes from a journal entry that Emerson wrote in 1832 as he contemplated the White Mountains in Conway, New Hampshire while struggling to come up with what he would say in an upcoming sermon. In an entry a few days earlier he expressed doubts about his position in the ministry: “I have sometimes thought that, in order to be a good minister, it was necessary to leave the ministry. The profession is antiquated.” But although the profession might be antiquated, the prophetic voice that the preacher wields is not. Thus, he writes in his journal:

Here, among the mountains, the pinions of thought should be strong, and one should see the errors of men from a calmer height of love and wisdom. What is the message that is given me to communicate next Sunday? Religion in the mind is not credulity, and in the practice is not form. It is a life. It is the order and soundness of a man. It is not something else *to be got*, to be *added*, but is a new life of those faculties you have. It is to do right. It is to love, it is to serve, it is to think, it is to be humble.

Emerson’s mountaintop “revelation” tells him that religion is about seeing one’s life from a different perspective, and responding accordingly. It is not directed at some other world, nor is it reliant on supernatural entities—it is purely this-worldly. But it is a kind of transcendence, since one can only get there from a calmer height of love and wisdom. As Emerson writes nearly thirty years later concerning the state of religion in his own day: the “flowering and completion” of

human culture “may be described as Religion, or Worship,” but this does not mean that all religion fits this role. Indeed, we need to keep in mind that religion in the abstract—as a set of capabilities, perspectives, modes of self-cultivation—is different from religion in practice—as a particular instantiation of that abstract through a particular cultic form.² One can be averse to one’s contemporary religion (as a cultus), without supposing that all such hope of a renewed religious life ought to be abandoned. On the contrary, Emerson’s view is that the contemporary American landscape, where the old faiths seem no longer responsive to the current needs of the people, requires that people think differently about religion. Methodologically, my reading attempts to do what John Lysaker describes as an effort “to work with Emerson [rather] than to talk about him,” which is possible because Emerson’s essays and lectures are meant to be “agitating performances, rhetorically provoking us.”³ In other words, Emerson uses a conversation about the higher ideals of a people which form the heart of a religious life, and the expressions that those ideals take in the lives of individuals both conceptually and in practice, as the opportunity to inspire continued and evolving religious reflection. As a specific interpretive contribution to Emerson Studies, I am proposing that Emerson’s corpus is better read through the lens of his continuing efforts to articulate a means by which to perform a philosophical reflection on religion, which includes within it a reflection on the nature and function of religion that reorients popular thinking about religion. He hopes to perform this philosophical reflection so as to be, using Thoreau’s term from *Walden*, a “chanticler” to the people around him.

But what then *is* religion for Emerson? There is no easy answer at this junction, and that seems to be Emerson’s point. Chapters two and three try to present this perspective in all its

² I develop this distinction in chapter two as an essential part of the Divinity School Address.

³ John Lysaker, “Taking Emerson Personally,” in *New Morning: Emerson in the Twenty-first Century*, ed. Arthur S. Lothstein and Michael Brodrick (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2008), 122, 138.

variations. But for a general introduction, I can say the following: religion refers to that particular faculty which enables, provokes, describes, habituates one into, and expresses higher moral ideals in a person, while, also, it refers to the set of institutions, traditions, cultural forms, literatures, etc. that work in conjunction with this faculty. Religion, in this sense, is fundamentally about promoting and improving moral life by working on a person through a variety of media. Emerson uses “religion” both ways, sometimes using the more specific “religious sentiment” versus “religious form,” but not always. Part of the point of this conflation, as I read it, is to make it difficult to disentangle the quite complicated ways that humans are shaped to have a particular kind of religious sentiment by the influence of particular kinds of cultivation; but also, how this sentiment shapes the way in which that cultivation happens. Emerson’s inability to specify a clear linear causation between the faculties of an individual self and the community practices in which she participates seems to be an aspect of what he thinks makes human life so multifarious.

Nevertheless, there is a clear sense that for Emerson religious practices are better or worse attempts to bring about an understanding of the life of moral ideals. This is where the metaphor of “higher elevation” plays the biggest role, and it is one that is found throughout the corpus. In one of his earliest sermons Emerson writes that the purpose of the contemplation of God is that

It leads men up out of the low ground in which they have been dwelling, to a high moral elevation,—to a point of observation like the Mountain of Pisgah of the ancient prophet, from whence they may behold undisturbed the wide-lying landscape of the past and the future, may measure what has been done and what remains to do, may look forward to that shadowy valley wherein terminate all the roads of life, and descry beyond the dim and solemn magnificence of other worlds towering in the distance. (CS 1:104)

This same kind of image shows up in some of the most well-known essays. For instance, in “Self-reliance” Emerson claims that “Prayer is the contemplation of the facts of life from the

highest point of view” (CW 2:44). But Emerson also reminds us that we ought not to assume that this elevation is an intellectual abdication from the world, because “Man can paint or make or think nothing but man.” Rather, our elevation comes from our concrete relations in the world: “Our affection towards others creates a sort of vantage or purchase which nothing will supply” (CW 4:4). One of the central concerns of the account of Emerson that follows is how we might make sense of this vantage point of a higher elevation in two registers. First, I explore how both intellectual and affective approaches lead us towards but also secure this higher elevation. And, second, I make the case that for Emerson this vantage warrants the label “religion.” This requires following Emerson’s logic on these issues, but constantly returning to the question of why these labels, rather than some other.

Finally, this raises the question of whether mine is a rational reconstruction or an attempt at salvaging some aspects of Emersonian thought for twenty-first century concerns. Broadly put, the first three chapters are primarily interested in supplying a rational reconstruction of Emerson’s religious thought. My concern in these chapters is giving the most coherent account of Emerson that I can based on the body of public work that he delivered over the course of his lifetime. As such, I offer very little criticism of the Emersonian picture in these chapters. Instead, my criticism is mainly leveled at the tradition of Emerson scholarship which I find to have insufficiently attended to the account of religion in those works. The final two chapters are where I become most concerned with what we might consider the contemporary applicability of Emersonian thought, or the question of what might be salvaged. I take more leeway in these latter two chapters by using parts of Emerson’s religious thought in ways that are guided more by my interest in addressing the topics at hand (intimacy in chapter four, and the environment in chapter five) than in absolute fidelity to Emerson’s work. In these chapters I try to note my

differences with Emerson when I find it necessary. Nevertheless, as with all such parting of the waters, they have a tendency to flow into one another despite our best efforts to the contrary. And such should be expected. My desire to salvage Emersonian thought in the final chapters depends on my reconstruction of it in the beginning chapters, and my reconstruction depends in part on what I hope to do with it in the later chapters.

A Selective Account of the Recent Literature

There has recently been a renewed interest in reading Emerson as providing a deeply entrenched and complicated religious project throughout the corpus, one that is just starting to come together. This interest has come from religious studies scholars interested in the philosophical and theological side of the discipline, many of whom find encouragement from the movement that Cavell inaugurated to recover the philosophical Emerson, but find Cavell's omission of the more socially-oriented elements in Emerson's corpus to be a troubling lacuna. I find this movement to be exciting. It has not only sought to add significantly to the connection between an early American intellectual tradition and its European roots, but has also provided a critical interrogation of those overly simple narratives about the retreat or spiritualization (perhaps two sides of the same coin) of American religious thought. Indeed, much of the best current work on Emerson by scholars in religious studies begins with an understanding that the categories that we have used to talk about religion in the nineteenth century have been distorting, and we cannot take it for granted that figures from this period can be easily grouped into those who support some form of yet unnamed secularism (either in literary, philosophical, cultural, or political terms), and those who wish to hold onto some form of Christian orthodoxy. The point, as I understand it, is how the very idea of religion is being negotiated during this period and how

scholars ought to attend to the often subtle ways that it is being (re)constructed, rather than imposing from without an understanding of what is and is not religious, what is and is not Christian, or what is and is not tradition. Indeed, these are the very categories that Emerson is concerned with in his own work, and they make up the core of his intended philosophical intervention.

Let me, then, briefly highlight what I take to be some of the most productive recent work on Emersonian religious thought for my own account in the following chapters.

Although he has published various exceptional articles on Emersonian religion over the past few decades, David L. Smith's recent "'Who Shall Define to Me an Individual?' Emerson on Self, World, and God" has been deeply influential for my own understanding of Emerson. Like many other scholars, Smith has been attentive to the ways that Emersonian concepts tend to defy easy explanation because they often attempt to straddle two irreconcilable positions. Smith, perhaps more forcefully than anyone else, urges us not to try to resolve the conflict between these irreconcilable positions, but to see them for what they are: Emerson's attempt to describe the human condition in which humans are not systematically sound machines. Instead, both nature and the human self are Gordian knots made up of real and often contradictory experiences. The tendency in a lot of scholarship has been to read Emerson as asserting some sort of transcendental realm in which the self is one thing, and our experience in the world is another (we might here think about what Reason is supposed to give us access too, as opposed to Understanding). Instead, Smith insists that for Emerson there are not two metaphysical realms, but "two ways of seeing a single world." Much of Emerson's god-language that asserts there is only a single mind is not meant to refer to some other world above or beyond, but "this world as

an interrelated field without supernatural remainder or surplus.”⁴ My own reading concurs with Smith’s claim that Emerson’s invocation of idealism is not meant to offer an alternative to the world we have, but to recognize the doubleness of the one world, a doubleness that asserts “the seamless intimacy of self and world” and is inherently opposed to any philosophical attempts at mastery, either through materialism or supernaturalism.⁵ What this intimacy allows us to see, according to Smith, is Emerson’s profound contribution to modern religious thought: “a purely this-worldly conception of transcendence.”⁶ Both the idea of a this-worldly transcendence and the importance of the intimacy between self and world have been crucial to my account of Emerson’s religious project of finding “the transcendentalism of common life” (CW 2:187). In fact, much of my own understanding of how to read the *transcendence* of Emerson’s transcendentalism is indebted to Smith’s work over the past few decades.

The sense of Emerson’s non-dual naturalism is echoed in a recent article by Robert Neville in which he details how difficult it is for an “American pragmatic naturalism” to be understood in terms of both the contemporary analytic and continental philosophical frameworks. Although Emerson receives only a small amount of attention in Neville’s text, there is a way that he seems to loom large over Neville’s understanding of naturalism. Sandwiched between an account of Jonathan Edwards setting the American agenda with an interest in both affection and dispositions, and Charles Sanders Pierce’s claim that all experience is inferential, Emerson supplies the needed energy for American intellectuals to declare themselves

⁴ David L. Smith, “‘Who Shall Define to Me an Individual?’ Emerson on Self, World, and God,” *American Journal of Theology & Philosophy* 30, no. 2 (May 2009): 195.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 196.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 211.

independent from Europe, even if it is “adolescent, perhaps even Oedipal.”⁷ Neville’s understanding of why pragmatism seems to be so incomprehensible within philosophical frameworks that take a kind of separation between consciousness and world to be foundational evokes the same kind of this-worldly transcendence that Smith finds to be so provocative in Emerson. Indeed, it is pragmatism’s interest in the intimacy between self and world, and the focus on the forms of practical action that can be performed in that intimate relation that seems most reminiscent of some of the best contemporary work on Emerson. As I argue in chapter four, this sense of intimacy between self and world is one of Emerson’s most vital philosophical and ethical contributions.

One of the persistent topics of Emerson’s work that receives undue neglect is his notion of the religious sentiment. A recent work by Emily Dumler-Winckler has helpfully portrayed this idea of a religious sentiment as central to the intimate relation between self and world. Dumler-Winckler traces the idea of religious taste from Burke through Kant to Emerson, where the latter seems less interested in the kinds of divisions made by the former and more interested in combining various religious and aesthetic experiences into one ongoing dialectic.⁸ Although not explicitly focused on Emersonian naturalism, Dumler-Winckler presents a portrait of religious sentiment that fits with the views of Smith and Neville. “For Emerson,” she notes, “the religious sentiment—in which sublimity and beauty, reverence and love intermingle—renders one quite at home in the world.” She connects this to the rejection of philosophical attempts to master the

⁷ Robert Cummings Neville, “Self-Reliance and the Portability of Pragmatism,” *American Journal of Theology & Philosophy* 35, no. 2 (May 2014): 107.

⁸ I do think that Dumler-Winckler overemphasizes the influence that Burke and Kant had on Emerson. She is correct that Emerson would have had a decent understanding of Burke’s aesthetic theory, although he probably knew very little of Kant’s during the period that Dumler-Winckler focuses on. Even Burke probably didn’t make that large an influence on Emerson. Wordsworth and Coleridge probably had a more prominent role on his notions of aesthetic and religious taste.

world, which are superseded by an assertion of an intimacy in the world: “it is by this [religious] sentiment, and not by ‘science or power’ that ‘the universe [is] made safe and habitable.’”⁹

According to Dumler-Winckler, Emerson’s profound contribution to aesthetics is his claim that we ought to view nature as our companion during times of grief and loss, a companion that grieves along with us. It is through this companionship with nature that one can come to find sublime beauty.¹⁰

Jennifer Gurley has recently argued against the Cavellian reading of the Emersonian self as autonomous subject reveling in an anti-realist position towards the world. For her, Emerson’s corpus should be read as presenting a portrait of human experience that is fundamentally religious, and his writing as “a work of *devotion* rather than aversion.”¹¹ To counter an anti-realist reading that supposes the only form of agency is resistance, Gurley reads Emerson as offering a two-step strategy for understanding one’s experience of the world: assimilation and expression.¹² Assimilation is the characteristic form of Emersonian piety, where the “pious learner forces himself and his own impulses out of the picture in order to be able to behold what

⁹ Emily Dumler-Winckler, “Romanticism as Modern Re-Enchantment: Burke, Kant, and Emerson on Religious Taste,” *Zeitschrift für Neuere Theologiegeschichte* 22, no. 1 (December 2015): 19.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 20.

¹¹ Jennifer Gurley, “Devotional Emerson,” *Zeitschrift für Neuere Theologiegeschichte* 22, no. 1 (December 2015): 25.

¹² Although it is not a part of her account, the idea that the only form of legitimate agency is found in resistance has rightly been under criticism in religious studies in recent years. For the canonical expression of this critique, see Saba Mahmood, *Politics of Piety: The Islamic Revival and the Feminist Subject* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005). Mahmood’s account of feminist agency within forms of piety that accept dominant norms is perhaps a stronger version of Gurley’s Emersonian piety, which rather than accept norms, accepts a kind of realist experience of the world. My own account of Emerson, especially in chapters two and three, is more similar to Mahmood in that I try to make the case that Emerson is functioning within a particular religious tradition that he does not entirely reject, while also looking for forms of agency within it. Of course, Emerson’s tradition is not one that requires forms of female submission; nonetheless, there are norms in play that are more than a strictly experiential relation to what Gurley labels “laws of reality.”

lies before him on its own terms.”¹³ Assimilation requires the willingness to be receptive, a willingness that seems at times to be anathema to readings of Emerson as arch-skeptic or aversive non-conformist. Once one has been receptive, then he must work to express what he has beheld. This is primarily a work of devotion, according to Gurley, because its goal is “to remake the divine as best according to our own particular talents.”¹⁴ Like the Unitarian perfectionist William Ellery Channing, Gurley sees Emerson as a religious thinker precisely because he models how one both thinks and acts “after a likeness of a divinity he believes he understands.”¹⁵ Although I think that this account has the tendency to see Emerson’s religion as a private drama expressed outwardly, and thus to reinforce the view laid out in chapter two that Emerson’s religion is self-reflexive rather than intended for a particular community’s betterment, Gurley does an admirable job bringing together the idea that Emerson is after new forms of thinking about Divinity with the idea that he positions the self as intimately situated in a world which is not its own making.

For my own purposes, Randy Friedman has offered a compelling account of why we ought to read Emerson as offering a philosophy of religion that retains a “deep religiosity” while not entailing a “secular individualism.”¹⁶ For Friedman, Emerson’s approach to religion is “anti-dogmatic, pluralistic, and ‘tough-minded’,” shifting the focus of agency to the human and away from “any causal and transcendent supernatural being.”¹⁷ Emerson’s major intervention, on this view, is to see the type of religion that surrounded him at the time as unable to reflect the

¹³ Gurley, 30.

¹⁴ Ibid., 32.

¹⁵ Ibid., 34.

¹⁶ Randy L. Friedman, “Religious Self-Reliance,” *The Pluralist* 7, no. 1 (Spring 2012): 28.

¹⁷ Ibid., 28, 35.

“vastness and possibility of the religious he found through nature.”¹⁸ Thus, Emersonian philosophy of religion is meant to create a new kind of openness to the immense plurality of religious forms and expressions that one might potentially inhabit. Friedman’s reading of Emerson also moves away from the focus on language and private experience that has been all too common in Cavellian readings, and replaces it with a kind of dialectic relation between Self-reliance and the Over-soul. The Over-soul, he claims, secures the self-reliant self in a world that is not solely the self’s making, a world that is not captured by language but which provides the location in which all self-reliant activity can take place. Taking the “*moral or religious sentiment*” as central to Emerson’s project, Friedman places a great deal of emphasis on the Over-soul as that which holds the self together: “the Over-soul that the moral sentiment uncovers represents the ultimate grounding of the self, and its revelation serves as the basis for religious self-reliance.”¹⁹ In essence, it is the moral aspect of humans—the actual practice of life as one attempts to live out the demands of a moral self—that keeps in check the claims of autonomy by the self-reliant. As Friedman notes, this requires careful attention to the ongoing role of divinity for Emerson as expressed by something like the Over-soul, and how he configures the divine to be open to a plurality of experiences of nature. Friedman isn’t entirely clear what this Over-soul is, though, beyond its place outside of language as an anchor for the self. My reading of Emerson in chapter two tries to be as explicit as possible about the nature of the Over-soul as Emerson presents it by reading across the essays. Although we might have slight variations on how we are reading Emerson, I believe my account is in concert with Friedman’s general position on Emerson as a philosopher of religion.

¹⁸ Ibid., 38.

¹⁹ Ibid., 46.

I take all of these developments as positives for the study of Emerson's religious thought and its importance for understanding broader philosophical and intellectual currents in American thought. They all present elements of a general trend toward seeing the sophistication and the importance of the way that Emerson commits himself to various conceptions of religion as supportive of his overall social and intellectual goals. And, importantly, they all bring out features of Emerson's religious thought that hold potential for a productive revival of Emerson as a philosophical and religious resource in the twenty-first century.

CHAPTER ONE – THE AMERICAN PROPHET: EMERSON AND RELIGIOUS HISTORIES

It is natural to believe in great men. If the companions of our childhood should turn out to be heroes, and their condition regal, it would not surprise us. All mythology opens with demigods, and the circumstance is high and poetic; that is, their genius is paramount. In the legends of the Gautama, the first men ate the earth, and found it deliciously sweet. (CW 4:3)

Introduction

It is a commonplace among scholars to view Ralph Waldo Emerson as having a significant role—if not the most significant role—in the evolution of American religious thought. Harold Bloom offers the boldest declaration in this regard, essentially conflating Emerson with American religion by claiming that “the mind of Emerson is the mind of America,” whose central concern is the “American religion, which most memorably was named ‘self-reliance.’”²⁰ Few have been as radical as Bloom, who describes American religion, nearly in its entirety, as operating in the wake of Emerson. More circumspect interpreters are inclined to read Emerson’s *religious* influence as confined to either a particular tradition of thought or a set of specifically religious social movements. One can find portrayals of Emerson in the secondary literature in which his primary domains of influence include mysticism, spiritualism, New Thought, Christian

²⁰ Harold Bloom, “Emerson: The American Religion,” in *Bloom’s Modern Critical Views: Ralph Waldo Emerson, Updated Edition*, ed. Harold Bloom (New York: Infobase Publishing, 2007), 33. Elsewhere, taking a cue from Sydney Ahlstrom, Bloom has written that if “the American religion” had a theologian, then “it was Emerson.” Harold Bloom, *The American Religion: The Emergence of the Post-Christian Nation* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1992), 16. It should be pointed out that Ahlstrom’s usage of “American Religion” is in parallel with his usage of “America’s own philosopher,” and seems to indicate a radical criticism of “religion,” not a continuance of its traditional forms, a point which Bloom develops into his own form of “gnosticism.” Sydney E. Ahlstrom, *A Religious History of the American People*, second edition (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2004), 604.

theology, pragmatism, nature religion, radical democracy, metaphysical religion, idealism, environmentalism, as well as a host of others. This broad spectrum of influence can be partially attributed to the nature of Emerson's written work, in which, as Barbara Packer has noted, "Emerson did everything he could to make the reader's task difficult," because of his belief that "a text's susceptibility to misinterpretation was itself a mark of greatness."²¹ Indeed, we ought to expect that a writer who makes nearly superhuman demands upon the attention of his readers would inspire such disparate interpretations.²² The unfortunate consequence of this situation is that the movements that were influenced by Emerson are often given too much leeway in determining the interpretation of his religious thought, thereby occluding the complex way in which Emerson sought to rethink the very basic terms of what constituted religion in his time.

The first section of this chapter gives a brief historical account of how scholars have dealt with the place of religion in the Transcendentalist movement. My claim is that the question of whether or not the Transcendentalists, Emerson included, were a religious movement has been more informed by how the scholar chooses to view their legacy, rather than the content of their work. Furthermore, I contend that the question of whether or not Emerson or the Transcendentalists were *truly* "religious" ought to be replaced with a careful attention to the ways that they both consciously and unconsciously reiterated, abandoned, and adapted practices, concepts, and traditions that changed the very meaning of what was and was not religious. In other words, what I find to be most interesting about the debate over whether or not Emerson was a religious thinker is not the final answer of yes or no, but what it reveals to us about the

²¹ Barbara L. Packer, *Emerson's Fall: A New Interpretation of the Major Essays* (New York: Continuum Publishing Company, 1982), 6. For a detailed account of what makes Emerson's rhetoric so difficult, see chapter one of *Emerson's Fall*.

²² The daunting task for the careful reader is one of many aspects of Emerson that Friedrich Nietzsche admired and developed in his own work. George J. Stack, *Nietzsche & Emerson: An Elective Affinity* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 1992).

nature of the parties in the debate. This requires more than the simple all-too-common narrative about the progressive secularization of American intellectual life. The second section of this chapter looks specifically at one recent example of scholarship that considers Emerson to be an essential figure for the emergence of a distinctly American liberal religion, Leigh Eric Schmidt's *Restless Souls*. I argue that this work is emblematic of the broader trend of substituting Emerson's legacy for his thought by showing how Schmidt attributes foundational ideas to Emerson that are not clearly suited to his corpus, but instead are more prominent in the "lesser" Transcendentalists. I thus question whether Emerson is placed at the head of this narrative about liberal religion because of his actual corpus, or because of some perceived influence. Lastly, I begin to develop a more circumspect and conflicted portrait of Emerson's religion by attending to his relationship with his aunt, Mary Moody Emerson. By focusing on Ralph Waldo's inheritance of the tenuous religious thought of Mary Moody Emerson, who tried to hold together Unitarian liberalism with both a Calvinist view of evil and a "New Light" enthusiasm, I make the case for what Phyllis Cole calls a "family history." My claim is that focusing on Waldo's earlier familial religious education helps to construct a more intricate picture of Emersonian religion than is presented by much of the literature on religion in America, which problematically focuses on a particular lineage of influence. That is not to disavow Emerson's legacy in influencing broad religious movements in the United States; rather, my goal is to situate Emerson in a particular family tradition amongst a select group of members, one that sought to bring together a conglomeration of religious ideas and trends in early nineteenth century New England. In subsequent chapters I draw upon this initial portrait of Emerson to stress his place in an ongoing re-interpretation of the fundamental structures of an expansive religious tradition, not an abandonment of it for something radically new.

I. A Brief Account of Emerson and Religious Histories

One of the central debates for twentieth century readers of Emerson was whether or not he ought to be read as primarily a religious thinker, or if it would be better to read his corpus as pursuing a literary or aesthetic project. Much of this debate hinged on the larger question of the religious nature of the Transcendentalists as a group, since whether or not one sees Transcendentalism as a religious movement goes a long way towards determining how one sees Emerson's place in it. Perry Miller is often credited with inaugurating the modern effort to understand the Transcendentalist movement as operating within a theological context, thus providing a counter to those mid-twentieth century literary critics who viewed religion as a non-central or secondary issue for the movement.²³ David Robinson has been integral to continuing this line of thinking. He has claimed that the Transcendentalists' critique of Unitarianism, which is often read by literary critics as a rejection of Christian theology, "has tended to obscure the extent to which [the Transcendentalists'] theological project extended Unitarian assumptions."²⁴ Robinson situates Emerson strongly within this reading of the Transcendentalist movement, arguing that Emerson's harsh critiques of Unitarian orthodoxy have led interpreters to undervalue not only the ways in which he was working with theological commitments that would have been largely acceptable to many Unitarians, but also Emerson's own understanding of what he was doing as a religious project. In his work on the early Emerson, Robinson views him as

²³ Perry Miller, *The Transcendentalists: An Anthology* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1978). Miller was responding to literary critics like F.O. Matthiessen, who read the Transcendentalists as an aesthetic movement, understood apart from their historical context. For an overview of Miller's contribution in this regard, see David M. Robinson, "'A Religious Demonstration': The Theological Emergence of New England Transcendentalism," in *Transient and Permanent: The Transcendentalist Movement and Its Contexts*, ed. Charles Capper and Conrad Edick Wright (Boston: Massachusetts Historical Society, 1999), 49-72.

²⁴ Robinson, "A Religious Demonstration," 57.

“the most influential inheritor of the liberal theological tradition which Channing represented, and all his strikingly original work is an extension of that tradition.”²⁵

On the other hand, many literary scholars have continued to read the Transcendentalists as such harsh critics of their religious peers that they can only be considered revolutionaries and not merely reformers. For instance, Joel Myerson, while acknowledging that the Transcendentalists were extending “to an obvious conclusion” the liberal theology of the Unitarians, claims that they, in fact, democratized religion to such an extent that it no longer resembles Unitarianism in its most essential elements, and thus he no longer labels it a “religion.” After leaving the religious milieu, Myerson claims, the Transcendentalists “wrote primarily nonfiction prose or poetry,” which as a matter of practicality included “religious topics” alongside “travel literature, reform literature, and essays that suggestively promoted autodidacticism (or as they are called today, self-help works).”²⁶ This move to literature as a source of inspiration is one that completes a post-Christian migration out of “corpse-cold Unitarianism,” as Emerson once called it, culminating in something with religious interests, but which is not properly a “religion.” Some scholars have split the difference between these two views, allowing that Transcendentalism was a religious movement, especially among its more theologically radical members, but concluding that it should be viewed as a new kind of religion, one that hardly resembles its antecedents. The problem with this compromise, as Charles Capper rightly points out, is that the view that Transcendentalism is a “new religion” has never been able to properly account for either the “character, parameters, and sources of that religion,” nor its close relationship to its contemporary religious peers, both those that are traditionally

²⁵ David M. Robinson, *Apostle of Culture: Emerson as Preacher and Lecturer* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1982), 2.

²⁶ Joel Myerson, *Transcendentalism: A Reader* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), xxviii-xxx.

institutional, and those that are practically radical.²⁷ Thus, it seems as though this religion sprung up from nowhere as something radically different, which somewhat paradoxically reinforces the idea that its hereditary distance from what is classically “religion” makes it difficult to explain in what way it might be considered religious.

Despite a minority of views to the contrary, the attempt to give a “secular” account of the Transcendentalists has been a consistent aim of scholars throughout the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. As Kevin Van Anglen has claimed, the effort to read Transcendentalism as a proto-secularism usually allies the Transcendentalist movement with “the freethinking tendencies of its own age or [treats] it as the forerunner of later, explicitly nonreligious, intellectual developments.”²⁸ Sometimes this secular reading acknowledges the intertwining of the religious and secular aspects of the movement, but it reads this as a form of compromise attributed to the historical location of the Transcendentalists—often by focusing on how a Unitarian synthesis of faith and reason comes to grapple with German biblical criticism and Humean skepticism. However, these readings often end up “privileging ‘secular’ interpretations of the evidence at hand, thereby problematizing the explicitly religious element in Transcendentalist art and experience.”²⁹ Alternatively, some scholars have split the careers of certain writers, especially Emerson and Thoreau, into earlier “religious” periods, which are contrasted with their later “secular” works, despite the continuing presence of common themes

²⁷ Charles Capper, “‘A Little Beyond,’ The Problem of the Transcendentalist Movement in American History,” in *Transient and Permanent: The Transcendentalist Movement and Its Contexts*, ed. Charles Capper and Conrad Edick Wright (Boston: Massachusetts Historical Society, 1999), 29. Capper’s essay is a fantastic overview of how Transcendentalism has been treated from its time to the present.

²⁸ Kevin Van Anglen, “Reading Transcendentalist Texts Religiously: Emerson, Thoreau, and the Myth of Secularization,” in *Seeing into the Life of Things: Essays on Literature and Religious Experience*, ed. John L. Mahoney (New York: Fordham University Press, 1998), 152.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 154.

throughout. These interpretations place the Transcendentalists within the narrative arc of a secularization story about the United States, one where history moves, in a more or less linear fashion, from early religious commitments, through a crisis of faith, ending with less or no religion. This reading can place the Transcendentalists either in a march toward something like unbelief,³⁰ or a kind of liberal anti-dogmatic spiritualism.³¹ If the latter should be considered a “religion,” it might be better to consider it a denuded form of the “religion of no religion,” to use Kripal’s phrase, one that lacks any strong normative hold over its adherents because it swings free from those elements around which religions are supposed to cohere (for instance, traditions, community practices, authoritative doctrines or texts, etc.).³² Importantly, how one constructs the Transcendentalist legacy—by defining who is the proper inheritor of their work, whether

³⁰ For example, Barbara Packer situates Emerson as part of the emerging feeling of “religious indifference,” which is connected to a general stance of unbelief towards prevailing traditions. Thoreau intensifies this feeling with his “insouciance,” which further pushes away from religion. Barbara Packer, “Signing Off: Religious Indifference in America,” in *There Before Us: Religion, Literature, and Culture from Emerson to Wendell Berry*, ed. Roger Lundin (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing, 2007), 1-22. Similarly, James Turner has the Transcendentalists figure prominently in his story of how “religion caused unbelief.” In this story, the Transcendentalists’ attempt to save a conception of God counter-intuitively “slowly strangled Him.” James Turner, *Without God, Without Creed: The Origins of Unbelief in America* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1985), xiii.

³¹ For example, Jeffrey Kripal argues that an institute like Esalen, which figures prominently in the human potential movement, is “a clear heir of the progressive Transcendentalism of Emerson and Thoreau, and of Whitman’s ‘Song of Myself’ (and, behind them all, a distant Tantric Asia),” insofar as it represents the logical extension of “the American Religion” invented by Emerson. Jeffrey J. Kripal, *Esalen: America and the Religion of No Religion* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2007), 467. Or, as Albanese has claimed, Emerson not only leaves a blueprint for a movement to hold onto nature, but also for “a mind-cure movement to leave lower for ‘higher’ nature.” Catherine L. Albanese, *Nature Religion in America: From the Algonkian Indians to the New Age* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990), 86-87. Albanese gives a bit more nuance when she says that there are four major directions in which “Transcendental nature religion” moves: “environmentalism, metaphysical religion, ... the physical religion of healing the body and embodied mind,” and Jamesian pragmatism. Catherine L. Albanese, *Reconsidering Nature Religion* (Harrisburg: Trinity Press International, 2002), 20. Because Albanese is concerned with her category of “nature religion,” it is unclear where the more institutional Unitarianism would fit in this legacy.

³² That is, a religion that “locates itself within no single historical tradition and rejects the game of religion itself” because it has “no official alliance with *any* religious system. It can provide, like a kind of American Mystical Constitution, a spiritual space where almost any religious form can flourish, provided—and this is crucial—that it does not attempt to impose itself on the entire community or claim to speak for everyone.” This is a kind of modern mysticism that realizes a plurality of religious ways of being, one that resembles the comparative study of religions: “A basic democratic dynamism advances through a simultaneous embrace of all religious systems as symbolic expressions and a deconstructive urge to deny ultimacy to any one of them.” Kripal, 9-10.

religious or secular—goes a long way towards answering the question of whether or not they are treated as a religious movement.

Nonetheless, the question about whether the Transcendentalists were a religious movement does not necessarily answer the question of how one ought to interpret Emerson, since it has been entirely possible to separate Emerson from the general movement by way of his perhaps distinct theological views, which one finds both lauded and condemned by his peers. On the one hand, some scholars have put Emerson squarely at the forefront of Transcendentalism, making his work essentially the articulation of the movement. For instance, in Catherine Albanese's classic 1977 examination of the original six members of the Transcendental Club, she writes: "With his penchant for exact word and precise phrase, Emerson often was able to express a religious sensibility which lay half-hidden for the others. Perhaps he told them what they already knew, but they were glad in his ability to name and order it."³³ Nevertheless, Albanese spends a disproportionate amount of time with Emerson's religious views, and never fully succeeds in weaving the other voices into what seem to be uniquely Emersonian ideas. Conversely, Sydney Ahlstrom famously argued that we ought to view Transcendentalism as essentially a commentary on Unitarianism, one in which the "Transcendentalist impact on Unitarianism all but eliminated the conservative party from the denomination."³⁴ Importantly, though, Ahlstrom makes a distinction between the religious aims of Emerson and his nearest peers, especially "[the] fundamental distinction between the poetic, literary, and contemplative approach to religion that Emerson best represents and the naturalistic aspects of Parker's

³³ Catherine L. Albanese, *Corresponding Motion: Transcendental Religion and the New America* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1977), xviii.

³⁴ Sydney E. Ahlstrom and Jonathan S. Carey, "Introduction," in *An American Reformation: A Documentary History of Unitarian Christianity* (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 1985), 29.

preaching.” For Ahlstrom, Emerson’s role for Unitarianism, in distinction to Theodore Parker, was “to eliminate almost completely the prophetic, Judaic element from the Christian heritage that had come down to him.”³⁵ On this view, Emerson is the more theologically radical voice among the major players in the movement, not necessarily representative because he was “a mystic and a pantheist and an idealist.” For practical purposes, Parker is the more important figure in this specific “religious” history, with Emerson being the heretical outsider, a somewhat radical view in the context of this discussion, since it downplays Emerson’s religious role to a very serious extent.³⁶ Famously, Perry Miller’s anthology of Transcendentalism nearly left out Emerson and Thoreau entirely, preferring to let the members of the Transcendentalist movement “speak for themselves,” because they are “quite capable of holding their own.”³⁷ Thus, Miller’s effort to portray the movement as “a religious demonstration” led him to highlight the cacophony of voices in the debate, especially those of the ministers and activists that lacked the literary skills of some of their peers, yet who had just as large an impact on the ways in which the new forms of “worship” were being worked out.³⁸ As Garvey points out, one of the legacies of Miller’s work has been the central divide in Emerson studies between the spiritual Emerson, whose ethereal works evoke a specific kind of religiosity that may or may not be aligned with the more practical projects of the other Transcendentalists, and the political Emerson, whose condemnatory social addresses stand as critiques of his times and who only recently has been

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ In his monumental work, *A Religious History of the American People*, Ahlstrom seems to go even further: “religiously speaking, [the] rejection of history and heritage makes Emerson a new kind of romantic pagan, one who throws from the temple not only the money changers, but the priests as well, and with them their beliefs, creeds, and rituals.” Furthermore, his lack of concern for evil, pain, death, and sin ultimately limits his thought, especially its religious potential. Ahlstrom, 604-605. It should be noted, though, that Ahlstrom limits Emerson’s influence only to the extent that we can abide by what he counts as “religious” as opposed to literary.

³⁷ Miller, 3.

exhumed from his literary grave.³⁹ That is to say, Perry's "spiritualized" Emerson does not always cohere with the social activist Emerson, which goes to show the very different senses in which Emerson might be involved in a "religious" intervention. To add to this question of who carried the torch of religious reform among the Transcendentalist, a growing body of recent scholarship has focused on the importance of the so-called "minor" voices of women in the movement, showing how these previously neglected figures actually played quite prominent roles in the development of the movement.⁴⁰ The emergence of women's voices have reignited the conversation about the connection between the religious and political writings of the Transcendentalists generally, not only heightening the question of the nature of what it means to engage in "religious" reform, but also further lessening the power that Emerson had for defining the religious terms of the movement more generally.

Often the question of Emerson's place within the specifically religious intervention of the Transcendentalists comes down to a particular interpreter's agenda in his or her interpretive work. As Lawrence Buell has written, Emersonians who are uncomfortable with the subject of religion have been "seeking to extricate him from the taint of religiocentrism" since his own day.⁴¹ Just as Emerson was deployed by some in his own time as the legitimating voice for a movement, so too is he still appropriated as an authoritative voice even though we might have

³⁸ Ibid., 8-9.

³⁹ Garvey writes: "The revival of interest in Emerson that occurred in the wake of Miller's reconstruction of American intellectual history revolved around a recognition of the importance of Transcendentalism in understanding the relationship between spirituality and individualism in the development of American thought. This new area of concentration directed Emerson's critics away from his political writing and toward explaining Transcendentalism as a spiritual and intellectual movement." T. Gregory Garvey, "Introduction: The Emerson Dilemma," in *The Emerson Dilemma: Essays on Emerson and Social Reform*, ed. T. Gregory Garvey (Athens, Ga.: University of Georgia Press, 2001), xix.

⁴⁰ For instance, see: Phyllis Cole and Jana Argersinger, "Exaltadas: A Female Genealogy of Transcendentalism," *ESQ: A Journal of the American Renaissance* 57, no.1-2 (2011): 1-18.

⁴¹ Lawrence Buell, *Emerson* (Cambridge: The Belknap Press, 2003), 158.

reservations for doing so.⁴² For various religious movements, this has meant that Emerson becomes *their* prophet, as he has for many twentieth century spiritualist and metaphysical movements. For many scholars, this has meant that Emerson reflects the particular disciplines in which he is studied. Literary theorists have often read Emerson as a writer and artist, one whose religious affinities are more a deference to bygone days than an essential element of his thought. Although somewhat dated, Jonathan Bishop's influential 1964 book, *Emerson on the Soul*, serves as an excellent example of this. It claimed without irony that Emerson's relevance for the contemporary era derives from his status as a "prophet" and "a true ancestor," because "*Nature* is our primal book" that inaugurated a tradition of prophecy and art descending from it.⁴³ The irony of Bishop's account is that he reads Emerson as being prophetic for the nature of the soul, yet gives almost no attention to how the development of this notion of the soul is either indebted to a tradition of religious thought, nor how it might itself be a religious project, despite Bishop's appropriation of numerous traditionally religious themes. For Bishop, Emerson is clearly a kind of idol, but one whose legitimacy stems from his literary artistry—and not from pastoral ministry, mystical insight, or his reworking of Christian tradition—a view that seems to derive solely from Bishop's own literary commitments. The consequence of this was a further distancing of the literary Emerson from the Transcendentalist movement generally insofar as the latter was understood to be embroiled in parochial theological debates unbecoming to the literary prophet.

As a scholar operating in the discipline of religious studies, I make no claim to mine being an impartial account of Emerson divorced from any particular disciplinary boundaries. My

⁴² Most famously, this happened when many in the women's suffrage movement asked Emerson to speak on their behalf, but were disappointed to find that his views did not match their radicalism.

⁴³ Jonathan Bishop, *Emerson on the Soul* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1964), 7-9.

claim is rather that the absence of a compelling account of Emerson's religious thought has led to an impoverished account of the whole of his corpus. As I specified at the outset, what is most interesting about this debate over whether or not Emerson is primarily religious is not the possibility of a definitive answer, but what it reveals to us about how specific conceptions of religion operate, often implicitly, within our interpretations of a diverse corpus. In the following chapters I attempt to fully substantiate my own view that Emerson is making a religious intervention that seeks to advance what he saw as an ongoing religious evolution—hence making him both distinct from and yet deeply tied to a religious tradition that he was invested in continuing. In general, this view of Emerson is one that is more similar to many historians of American religion, and perhaps less to scholars of literature and philosophy. On the whole, I believe that it will contribute to a more expansive notion of the production of notions of “religion” in nineteenth and twentieth century American thought, and further lay bare some of the stakes of this debate about Emerson's work.

Nevertheless, the claim I want to explore in the rest of this chapter is that recent historians of American religion, many of whom take seriously Emerson's religiosity, have hindered the interpretation of Emerson's religious thought because, for them, Emerson becomes the principle figure in the development of a particular set of traditions or religious movements, which, *ex post facto*, have a disproportionate role in the interpretation of his work. On my view, it is often not clear that Emerson *should be* aligned with these religious movements precisely because some other member of the Transcendentalist milieu fits better (usually Jones Very, Channing, or Parker), or because the movement seems to miss important elements of Emerson's thought that are critical of the very core of that religious movement.⁴⁴ To put it somewhat

⁴⁴ In fact, Emerson is wary of all endeavors to look backwards for religious belief and practice. In his largely positive account of George Fox, he makes this clear: “Meantime whilst there is a substantial identity of the religious

simplistically, while we cannot ignore the way that the appropriation of Emersonian ideas colors our contemporary interpretation of them, we also cannot take it for granted that those earlier appropriations were good interpretations—nor that they reflected the true depth of his thought.

Emerson is notoriously difficult to pin down, and his tendency to see life as made up of conflicting tendencies perpetually vying for expression makes it all too easy for his descriptive claims about the lives of humans to be misunderstood as prescriptive claims about which tendencies we ought to make primary.⁴⁵ Thus, it becomes easy to isolate passages and portions of his work and declare them to be representative of the whole. This seems to be how Emerson could be labeled a social pragmatist but also an individualistic spiritualist, an environmentalist but also a strict idealist, a radical but also a reformer. When narrating religious history, Emerson too easily becomes the American prophet for a particular strand of thinking, which inevitably flattens and misconstrues his religious thought. In the next section, I explore one recent account where Emerson figures prominently, even though it seems that he is the wrong person for the job. My hope is that this single example will help illuminate a trend which is common in scholarship on Emerson.

II. Schmidt's Spiritual Emerson

Leigh Eric Schmidt's *Restless Souls* details the rise of a spirituality movement in

sentiment in men under the widest disagreement in modes and terms, yet it happens that all attempts to confine and transmit the religious feeling of one man or sect to another age, by means of formulas the most accurate, or rites the most punctual, have hitherto proved abortive. You might as easily preserve light of electricity in barrels. It must be lived. It cannot be writ. Therefore the newly stricken soul wanders among churches from sect to sect and never finds any that fits him, but in proportion to the depth of his convictions finds himself at first unlike all and alone, and afterwards to be in a degree of union with the good of each name" (*EL* 1:167-168).

⁴⁵ David L. Smith has pointed out how this works for the often frustrating way in which Emerson seems to be both a voluntarist and a determinist at the same time. Smith writes that Emerson is not urging us to see two different metaphysical worlds, one where we are free and one where we are not. Rather, he is giving us two ways of seeing and experiencing the one world with its "irreducible doubleness." Smith, "Who Shall Define."

America that is aligned with a broader form of liberal progressivism found among the religious left. As he describes, this movement is primarily characterized by “a seeker’s code for the rejection of the exclusive salvation, moral correctness, and institutional apparatus of conservative Christianity.”⁴⁶ The rise of this movement begins with Emerson’s attempts, detailed on the first page of Schmidt’s book, to liberate his spirit from a society dominated by traditional forms of Christian authority. Schmidt endorses Emerson’s rejection of religious authority, admitting that his own “colors” are “Emersonian and Whitmanite.” In fact, Schmidt tells this story about spirituality in Emerson’s wake, exploring the trajectory that he initiated in the early 1830s, and over which he still appears to loom even as Whitman becomes, by the end of the book, the prophet whom the reader is instructed to read again and again.⁴⁷ If we are to answer our most pressing religious discontents in the contemporary world, according to Schmidt’s conclusion, we ought to “work with what got us here—a robust liberal tradition with strong religious elements.” This tradition is glossed as the binary sets of desiderata, filled with internal tension and paradox, that Emerson originally laid out: “mystical openness and social justice, spiritual seeking and political emancipation, globalism and localism, universality and variety,” as well as “the religious experience of free and equal individuals” who bring together the solitude and silence of meditative interiority and creative self-expression with the development of community and alliances across global divides.⁴⁸

Schmidt’s version of religious liberalism begins in the 1820s as “a radical form of Protestant Christianity,” words which the reader should see Schmidt carefully choosing because

⁴⁶ Leigh Eric Schmidt, *Restless Souls: The Making of American Spirituality* (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 2005), xii.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 288.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 289-290.

it allows him to distance liberalism from its more particular grounding in nineteenth century Unitarianism. By speaking broadly, liberalism appears as a meta-category, one that encompasses “Transcendental Newness,” “Universal Religion,” and “New Spirituality,” and not just a particular parochial current in New England Unitarianism.⁴⁹ Emerson plays the part of one of the “disaffected Unitarians” who had an important influence on the “religious life and spiritual aspirations” of many Americans by reacting against Unitarianism instead of continuing its internal logic.⁵⁰ Rather than read the Transcendentalists as engaging in an intramural debate with their more conservative Unitarian counterparts (even those who we would still consider Transcendentalists, like the more conservative Hedge, Brownson, and Clarke), Schmidt’s Transcendentalists are best represented by their more radical wing. The effect of reading the Transcendentalists through their radical wing enacts a clear separation from Christianity and its particularistic principles at the nascence of religious liberalism in America. Liberalism becomes anti-authoritarian while also universal, a move beyond what we might narrowly construe as “Christian,” even as we admit that its fundamental roots are primarily with thinkers who still saw themselves as “Christians,” as even the radical Transcendentalists did.

This becomes most apparent in Schmidt’s examination of the “new mysticism,” which he dates “from Emerson forward.”⁵¹ The mysticism that is handed down from the Transcendentalists, Schmidt writes, is “an ahistorical, poetic, essential, intuitive, universal, wildly rhapsodic mysticism.”⁵² He locates the origin of the “new universal mysticism” at a meeting of the Transcendental Club in 1838 where the question of mysticism was the central

⁴⁹ Ibid., 12-13.

⁵⁰ Ibid., 14.

⁵¹ Ibid., 15.

⁵² Ibid., 53-54.

topic of debate. Schmidt rightly notes the enthusiasm with which Theodore Parker, Jones Very, George Ripley, and even Bronson Alcott engaged with the topic of mysticism, since Emerson, by his own admission, had “not one thought nor one aspiration” during the conversation. Schmidt is thus forced to conclude, at this juncture at least, that Alcott “was a better measure of the impact that this Transcendentalist turn to mysticism would have on American religious life.”⁵³ It is important to note for my purposes that Schmidt reads Emerson’s silence as a tacit approval of Alcott. Nevertheless, Emerson’s letter to Margaret Fuller on the event, which uses some of the language from the journal passage, makes a somewhat different point:

I was at Medford the other day at a meeting of Hedge’s Club. I was unlucky in going after several nights of vigils & heard as though I heard not & among gifted men I had not one thought or aspiration. But Alcott acquitted himself well & made a due impression. So the meeting was good. I nevertheless read today with wicked pleasure the saying ascribed to Kant that ‘detestable was the society of mere literary men.’ It must be tasted sparingly to keep its gusto. If you do not quit the high chair, lie quite down, & roll on the ground a good deal, you become nervous & heavy-hearted. The poverty of topics the very names of Carlyle Cambridge Dr Channing & the Reviews become presently insupportable. The dog that was fed on sugar died. So all this summer I shall talk of chenangoes & my new garden spout that is to be. Have you heard of my pig? I have planted forty four pine trees. What do you think will my tax be this year? —and never a word more of Goethe or Tennyson. (*L* 2:135; compare to *JMN* 5:502)

If we read Emerson’s approval of Alcott with the commentary that follows, it is hard not to see a subtle criticism for the intellectual conversation that had occurred. Since Fuller herself was known to be inclined toward mysticism (Emerson will even criticize her for this in her posthumously published memoirs), it is hard not to read Emerson’s advice to “roll on the ground” as a warning against the overreliance on both, seemingly, the insularity of literary men as well as how it might incline towards a certain disconnected mysticism.⁵⁴ Nevertheless, Schmidt uses significant details from Alcott’s fascination with mysticism, including his wide

⁵³ Ibid., 33.

⁵⁴ See my conclusion to chapter three for more on Emerson’s criticism of Fuller’s mysticism.

reading on the topic and his various attempts at articulating “mysticism’s global significance,” to inform a more general Transcendentalist position on the connection between mysticism and spirituality.⁵⁵ Additionally, Jones Very plays an important role since he is generally acknowledged as the most genuine mystic of the early Transcendentalist Club, even by Schmidt.⁵⁶ Nevertheless, Emerson is supposed to be the central figure in this account of mysticism, and even among nineteenth century interpreters he is taken to be the primary instigator for the group’s interest in mysticism.⁵⁷ Thus, to make his own case for the connection, Schmidt uses three parts of Emerson’s work—the Divinity School Address, *Nature*, and the writing on Swedenborg—to illustrate his compatibility with the more energized Transcendentalist mystics. Nevertheless, each of these is somewhat problematic.

In the Divinity School Address, Schmidt highlights Emerson’s anti-authoritarian proclamations, his provocations to firsthand knowledge of the Deity, and his condemnations of all forms of conformity.⁵⁸ Clearly, these are the elements that make up the core of religious liberalism’s mystical streak. But then Schmidt notes the following: “Though his address ended on a cautious note in *self-contradictory praise* of breathing new life into the old institutions of the Sabbath and regular preaching, the oration nonetheless created a considerable stir.”⁵⁹ Interestingly, Emerson’s evident enthusiasm for the renewal of the preaching function and the Sabbath among Harvard’s newly minted class of Unitarians does not accord with Schmidt’s

⁵⁵ Schmidt, 43-44.

⁵⁶ Ibid., 49.

⁵⁷ For instance, Schmidt quotes, among others, Robert Alfred Vaughan, who called Emerson the “chief singer of his time at the high court of Mysticism.” Quoted in *ibid.*, 51.

⁵⁸ Ibid.

⁵⁹ Ibid. Emphasis added.

fiercely anti-institutional mystic. When Emerson urges his audience “to rekindle the smouldering, nigh quenched fire of the alter” by “[letting] the breath of new life be breathed by you through the forms already existing,” Schmidt’s religious liberalism hears a self-contradiction. Rather than identifying Emerson’s revival of the fiery role of the preacher as the truth speaker who would “cheer the waiting, fainting hearts of men with new hope and new revelation,” Schmidt’s religious liberalism hears a weak-kneed consolation (*CW* 1:92). To stress Emerson’s belief in the continuance of the preacher’s function and the Sabbath—which seems warranted given its position as the culmination of the address and not a curious reversal in the conclusion, as well as his belief in the function of the preacher throughout his life—is to align Emerson more closely with his puritanical ancestors and their anti-hierarchical, yet charismatically-led religious enthusiasm.⁶⁰ Such a view would make the explicit contrast between a kind of energetic faith inspired by a preacher who can “acquaint men at first hand with Deity,” and the formalism (the cold “system”) and Lockean Enlightenment rationalism into which the Unitarian church had become invested (*CW* 1:90-92). This, of course, does not rule out the mystical element of Emerson’s criticism. But the continuing praise of the function of the preacher especially in some form of Sabbath ritual show that Emerson, if anything, is calling upon models of worship with deep roots in New England Protestantism, but which had perhaps fallen out of favor with the Unitarians.⁶¹ In essence, if the critique of the Unitarian Church is a

⁶⁰ Even in 1861, Emerson was still emphasizing the importance of the preacher: “Neither is the office of the preacher to be dispensed with. The lines of the religious sects are very shifting: their platforms unstable: the whole science of theology, of great uncertainty, and resting very much on the opinion of who may chance to be the leading doctors of Oxford or Edinburgh, or Princeton or Cambridge, today. No man can tell what religious revolutions await us in the next years; and the education in the Divinity colleges may well hesitate and vary. But the Science of Ethics has no mutation, and, whoever feels any love or skill for ethical studies, may safely lay out all his strength and genius in working in that mine. The pulpit may shake, but this platform will not. He cannot utter any ethical statement out of his experience, to any assembly of living men, but he will find it received into welcoming, tender, and jubilant hearts” (*LL* 2:182).

⁶¹ Van Anglen has made the case for a deep connection with early American Protestantism: “Paradoxically, this is

reiteration of certain Calvinist and Puritan claims about acquaintance with God through the inspiration of certain traditional institutional forms, then we might wonder why it is that Schmidt reads Emerson as inaugurating a new form of mysticism rather than trying to call upon a longer tradition of Christian enthusiasm.

Thus, Schmidt has to turn to the oft-overused “transparent eyeball” passage from *Nature* in order to establish Emerson’s reputation as “the movement’s greatest mystic.”⁶² Schmidt is surely right that the passage has served for many as the central portrayal of Emerson’s mystical vision. As Barbara Packer has brilliantly illuminated, the passage draws heavily on Emerson’s division between the Reason and the Understanding, in which there is a kind of pleasure at realizing the “insubstantiality of the world of experience” given through the Understanding.⁶³ Any account of this mystical moment must also explain Emerson’s odd turn two paragraphs later, when the “lover of uncontained and immortal beauty,” which is realized during his transfiguration into a transparent eye-ball, is told to use these experiences “with great temperance,” for “Nature always wears the colors of the spirit” (CW 1:10).⁶⁴ We are not, then, ego-less in such moments, though we might feel as though we are. And we are not untainted by the Understanding when we might suppose we are outside ourselves in touch with pure Reason. In other words, Emerson’s idealist realization that our subjectivity structures our experience

why even in his most ‘forward-looking’ works, the ones most influenced by the Higher Criticism and the secularist thought of his age, Emerson was as much engaged in continuing the traditions of New England Protestantism as in pulling that particular temple down around him.” Van Anglen, 162. The Calvinist critique of Unitarianism which Emerson shares has also been attributed to the influence of Mary Moody Emerson. See esp. chapter 8 of Phyllis Cole, *Mary Moody Emerson and the Origins of Transcendentalism: A Family History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998).

⁶² Schmidt, 34.

⁶³ *Emerson’s Fall*, 55-56.

⁶⁴ A similar sentiment is expressed in “Circles,” where Emerson writes that “our moods do not believe in each other,” which allows for the contradictory feeling that “I am God in nature; I am weed by the wall” (CW 2:182).

seems to be saying that because it is not possible for us to be without all egotism, moments like the transparent eyeball are themselves moments to be superseded. The book, after all, seems to treat us as not transparent eyeballs in the remaining seven chapters, but as beings in search of a kind of harmony in our relationship with “nature,” a harmony premised on the mutual constitution of the human-nature relationship (through the connection of realism and idealism). Or as Emerson concludes at the end of *Nature*, returning to the metaphor of the eye, but modifying it from its earlier exuberance: “The axis of vision is not coincident with the axis of things, and so they appear not transparent but opaque. The reason why the world lacks unity, and lies broken and in heaps, is, because man is disunited with himself. He cannot be a naturalist, until he satisfies all the demands of spirit” (CW 1:43). In other words, it would seem that given the place of the passage within the whole work, a subtle commentary is being made on the nature of idealism and its notion of absolute subject, a fact which is apparent as the metaphor of the “eye” evolves over the course of the book.⁶⁵ I take up the question of mysticism in the following chapters where I attempt to show that Emerson’s mysticism is less universal and revealing than it is often taken to be, and that, in fact, it has been unfairly read as a kind of intuitionism rather than a subtle ecstatic affective relation between people and the natural environment. For now, though, I hope only to show that the transparent eyeball does not immediately suggest, in its context, Schmidt’s goal of “an ahistorical, poetic, essential, intuitive, universal, wildly rhapsodic mysticism.”

To further elaborate on this notion of mysticism, we can look to the connection between

⁶⁵ David L. Smith argues that in *Nature*, the infamous “crack” that Emerson worried over deals with the inconsistency of idealism and his attempts to illustrate its irreconcilability in our lives. As Smith writes: “Given the division of subject and object in modern thought, he holds, attempts at reconciliation are inevitable; but given the incoherence of idealism’s notion of absolute subject, they are impossible. In ‘Nature,’ then, as in the Divinity School ‘Address,’ we will find Emerson using the vocabulary and form of a tradition in order to subvert it or, rather, to show how it deconstructs itself.” David L. Smith, “The Open Secret of Ralph Waldo Emerson,” *The Journal of Religion* 70, no.1 (Jan 1990): 29.

Emerson and Swedenborg. Schmidt specifically focuses on Emerson's criticism of Swedenborg's use of Christian symbolism in order to assert that Emerson was "charting (so he believed) a more independent course far freer of such baggage."⁶⁶ If Schmidt is correct that Emerson sought to be free of this particularist symbolic baggage, then his truly post-Christian Emerson can be read as attempting to free religious liberalism from reliance on traditional Christian symbols. Indeed, Emerson's highest praise for Swedenborg stems from the latter's attempts to act as both a scientist and a mystic: he attempted "to put science and the soul, long estranged from each other, at one again" (CW 4:63). This doctrine of correspondence between "thoughts and things," where physical things are symbols of spiritual realities, is one that Emerson himself tried to develop, especially in his early work (CW 4:68).⁶⁷ Schmidt is correct to point out that Emerson criticizes Swedenborg for his attachment to "the Christian symbol, instead of the moral sentiment," but I think more stress needs to be put on Emerson's larger criticism of Swedenborg: that Swedenborg's work is "true in transition," but becomes "false if fixed" (CW 4:74). Or, in other words, Swedenborg failed to see that he had hoisted his own perspective upon the whole of the universe for all time, that "the universe, in his poem, suffers under a magnetic sleep, and only reflects the mind of the magnetizer." Consequently, "Swedenborg is retrospective," since he was unable to see that the universe does not simply wear the color of his theological commitments (CW 4:74-75). Schmidt would read this criticism as an indication of Emerson's move towards ahistorical, universal, post-Christian mysticism. However, the point of the criticism seems to be that all such mysticism is only true in transition, and that it always reflects the mind of the mystic. This does not get us to an ahistorical universal

⁶⁶ Schmidt, 46.

⁶⁷ For an account of Emerson and Swedenborg, see Packer's *Emerson's Fall*, 38-39.

mysticism—quite the contrary, it urges the mystic to realize her own historicity and particularity, to see how her own theological commitments inform how she understands the connection between her symbols and the universe, and that such an understanding will naturally change over time, even, perhaps, from day to day. The point is not to escape this position, but to gain self-clarity about how one sees, and to develop ever better and more productive attitudes towards it.

These questions are important because they cut right to the heart of how we construct our histories of religion in America. For instance, consider John Modern's immensely influential recent book, *Secularism in Antebellum America*, in which he criticizes Schmidt for not attending enough to the ways that spirituality unconsciously reinforces a particular system of liberal politics. Modern argues that there is a way that the nebulous character of Schmidt's understanding of spirituality unwittingly feeds into certain political ideals. He writes:

Given the degree to which spirituality is involved in a complex game of truth—a game that happens not so much in relation to the political but is already wholly saturated with politics—it is necessary to subject spirituality and its conceptual constellation (reasoning objectivity, transcendental communion, solitary transformation, anti-institutionalism, etc.) to thick genealogical investigation.⁶⁸

There are ways in which Schmidt's construction of the mystical as an ahistorical anti-institutional position has written the awareness of historical particularity out of his subjects, which only gives fuel to Modern's criticism. If Schmidt is right, then it would seem that spirituality in the Emersonian mold was doomed to conceptual failure—it attempted to escape the vary conditions of its own existence. But I as I have tried to show above, Emerson himself was much more circumspect of the idea of “spirituality” as it is being constructed by Schmidt and criticized in Modern's Foucaultian analysis. In fact, Emerson seems to be advocating a more historical and more self-critical religion than Schmidt portrays him as doing, one that accepts its

⁶⁸ John Lardas Modern, *Secularism in Antebellum America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011), 124.

constitutive conditions rather than trying to escape them. If anything, Schmidt's determination to put Emerson at the forefront of a self-critical tradition of spiritual seeking has paradoxically let Emerson's legacy (both with the Transcendentalists, and their successors) flatten his religious thought.⁶⁹ Schmidt ought to double down on Emersonian circumspection rather than wild rhapsody.

Schmidt is correct that many who followed in the wake of Emerson saw his contribution to religious discourse as a kind of mysticism. But much of this picture depends on the particular ambitions of these inheritors—especially those of the late nineteenth century—who mistook the tensions in Emerson's thought to be full-blown approval (or rejection) of their own religious commitments. Despite wanting a self-critical tradition of spirituality, Schmidt overemphasizes Emerson's break with tradition while not spending enough time on his critical claims about mysticism. In reality, Emerson's criticism of aspects of spirituality would be useful to Schmidt in fortifying it the face of Modern's legitimate criticisms. A full account of Emerson's place must necessarily take seriously his intended religious intervention and his decades-long development of that intervention insofar as it attempts to hold together strands of nineteenth century religious thought that are often seen as possibly incompatible. For this, it makes sense to turn to Emerson's most intimate connection to the currents of religious thinking in New England, his aunt Mary Moody Emerson. Though I stress the importance of his radical aunt, I am not claiming that Waldo is only tangentially influenced by the central figures of the day, such as Henry Ware, William Ellery Channing, among others. What follows then is not a comprehensive account of how Ralph Waldo came to the religious views that he did, but an attempt to show how attention to his family tradition can situate his religious thought in a way that more adequately grasps

⁶⁹ Schmidt, 23.

some of its inherent tensions, tensions which will be developed in more detail in chapters two and three.

III. Family History and Mary Moody Emerson

Among Emerson scholars it has long been recognized that Mary Moody, Ralph Waldo's aunt and sometimes substitute parent, had a profound influence in shaping his religious thinking from an early age.⁷⁰ Nevertheless, it was not until the 1980s that scholars began to explore the specific influence of Mary on her nephew by attending to the voluminous corpus of journals and correspondence that she left behind.⁷¹ Additionally, this increased attention to the iconoclastic, self-educated woman, who Waldo half-jokingly deemed the "angel of Death" because of her renowned obsession with her own mortality, has rightly portrayed her as an intellectual in her own right apart from the shadow of her nephew (W 10:404).⁷² Prior to this renewed interest, the most important source of information on Mary was the essay that Waldo wrote celebrating his aunt after her death, and the scarcely representative work of George Tolman.⁷³ Many have

⁷⁰ Edward Emerson noted the debt in *The Complete Works*: "To her remarkable degree of literary culture, though almost unschooled and brought up by relatives who had hardly more than the reading of the Bible gave, her nephew owed much; but more to her native gifts, the fire of her piety, her zeal for learning, her brilliant expression and the unsparing criticism, which yet could but thinly mask her affection" (W 10:593-594).

⁷¹ From this point until the end of the chapter, I will use "Waldo" and "Mary" to designate the two figures.

⁷² Tolman describes her fascination with death using his characteristically insightful yet somewhat dismissive way of describing Mary: "There is in almost every page of her religious musings a certain morbid tone, that, when you first hear it, is touching and pitiful; later it becomes monotonous and even irritating; and at last when you have become quite used to hearing it, it seems ludicrous, even comic." Tolman's strategy is to deal with her language concerning death as "simply a manner of speaking, not to be taken literally." George Tolman, *Mary Moody Emerson*, ed. by Edward W. Forbes (Private Printing, 1929), 8.

⁷³ Tolman was the first to transcribe portions of Mary Moody's *Almanack*, some of which has since been damaged, leading scholars to rely to some extent on these transcriptions. For an overview of the relatively brief history of scholarship representing Mary Moody Emerson, see Cole, *Mary Moody Emerson*, 316f12. Noelle A. Baker and Sandra Harbert Petrulionis are currently creating an electronic transcription of the *Almanacks* with the Women Writers Project as *The Almanacks of Mary Moody Emerson: A Scholarly Digital Edition*. The project represents the first attempt to reproduce the *Almanacks* in their entirety. See their "General Introduction," http://www.wwp.northeastern.edu/research/projects/manuscripts/emerson/general_introduction.html.

criticized Waldo's treatment of his aunt in his public remarks, in which he seems to understate the influence of Mary on his work by treating her as a representative figure for his own purposes rather than an intellectual in her own right. She is, according to Waldo's remarks, "a representative life," but one "of an age now past, and of which I think no types survive" (W 10:399). As Evelyn Barish shows in one of the first full treatments of Mary's influence, even though Waldo elevates her into a representative figure, "he never placed her in the broader contexts of her familial and social relations, and he was too close to her to discuss—or possibly even to recognize—the extent of her influence on himself."⁷⁴ The proximity of Mary to Waldo's work has long been noted because of the presence of lines from her *Almanacks* and letters in his published work, where Waldo's words tend to blend with his aunt's so that they become literally his. This appropriation and internalization of Mary's voice complicates any simple narrative about the relationship between the two. Nonetheless, it makes it all the more imperative to examine the specific religious education, replete with its peculiar and idiosyncratic components, that Mary sought to impart to Waldo.

Accordingly, my goal in what follows is to understand Waldo's religious thought in light of what Phyllis Cole calls a *family history*. Explicitly attempting to counter the tendencies toward high church history by scholars of American religion, Cole proposes to understand Waldo and Mary's religious views not primarily in terms of their allegiances to what were the main doctrinal debates preoccupying the seminaries and large institutions of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. Instead, she situates their religious thought in terms of the intergenerational family culture of the Emersons and the specific kinship between Mary and Waldo, "where books and parlors, public and private affairs, speech and silence, male and female

⁷⁴ Evelyn Barish, *Emerson: The Roots of Prophecy* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1989), 37.

literally cohabitated.”⁷⁵ Looking at a family history in this way reveals a particular and under-recognized tradition that can easily be elided by other kinds of narratives. My argument here is that the tradition that is revealed in this family history does not fit neatly into the kinds of trajectories that I examined in the previous section of this chapter. In fact, much of the distortion of Waldo’s religious thought occurs because he gets placed into narratives that are not so easily connected with the particular family history developed between Mary and him. His resemblances with his aunt connect him to larger traditions of Christian thought, while his differences with her cannot all be attributed to him being the more “liberal” or less “religious” of the two. In Mary we find views that are both liberal and orthodox, Unitarian and Calvinist, concerned with self-perfection and pervasive sinfulness as well as the relation between sentiment and reason. But the familial tradition that she inhabits, which Cole’s work reenvisions from Mary’s particular vantage point, exists only in silent conversation with, and at some remove from mainstream intellectual discourse at the time.⁷⁶ She is well-versed in British and German Romanticism, steeped in both Edwardsian enthusiastic Calvinism and rational Boston Unitarianism, and is one of the most important articulators of a perfectionist ethics, but yet she writes and converses on a marginal fringe composed primarily of young family members and female protégés. Nevertheless, this fringe is the circle in which Waldo takes shape.

My intention here is to offer a way of understanding how to situate some of the most difficult to place aspects of Ralph Waldo’s religious thought by attending to the undeniably important family history that constructs the tradition in which Waldo was shaped at an early age, and which continued to resonate for him throughout his life. Indeed, it will become apparent that

⁷⁵ Cole, *Mary Moody Emerson*, 10.

⁷⁶ This is Cole’s strategy for seeing Mary as more than Waldo’s “‘eccentric’ aunt,” placing her at the center of a larger tradition. Cole, *Mary Moody Emerson*, 7.

many of the ways that Waldo does not quite fit into the dominant histories of American religion are in parallel with how Mary does not quite fit. In terms of broader questions about how we study religion, what this notion of tradition as family history shows is that the idea of tradition can and is often inflected by emotional bonds that sometimes undergird and sometimes transcend the intellectual, but which nonetheless serve as the vehicle by which individuals are intellectually shaped. This is not to dismiss the importance of ideas as epiphenomena of irrational desires or material circumstances, but rather to recognize that there is an integral element of intimacy to particular ideas because of their place in a familial identity. The institutions that support this kind of tradition are not only ecclesiastical or institutional, but familial and quotidian. The history of this tradition is made and remade by the members of the family unit, not just in search of a coherent system of ideas, but as a means to construct an identity situated amongst intimates with bonds that transcend adherence to particular doctrines or ideas. This does not require a “new” understanding of tradition, but requires us to look at the ways that traditions are transmitted and how they bind through forms of affective connection. In this particular example of a familial tradition, Mary was considered amongst her cohort to be the family historian, and Waldo repeatedly turns to her, especially in his middle years, to get stories about his father, grandfather, and the family members he had never met yet to whom he feels connected.⁷⁷ What we can see, as Alasdair MacIntyre would say, is an ongoing argument, but in this case, it is quite literally an argument about the evolution of a family tradition between a few individuals with intense familial and emotional bonds. As such, the tradition must be more than merely a history of ideas—any analysis must also make sense of the particular forms of intimacy that family entails,

⁷⁷ For instance, Mary responds to a letter from Waldo in 1850, which has not survived, wherein he asks about past family members and the resemblance between parents and offspring, specifically his father and/or grandfather (*LMME*, 526-527).

how particular notions of religion become entangled in those intimate bonds, and how one's religious and familial identity is subsequently shaped.

When Waldo delivered his celebratory address for his aunt in 1869, the question of Mary's religion was front and center. Noting her "eloquent theology," which reminded him of Dante while displaying her "deep sympathy with genius," he ends the address with a question that surely he must have heard by those who had met but perhaps had not known Mary well: "'And was she ever a Christian in practice?'" (W 10:402-403, 432). The question evokes an apparent conflict in Mary's personality: she was a professedly pious and humble Christian woman, but she was considered at best a gadfly, although most seemed view her as insufferably severe and unbearable to be around. Playing with the language of what it means to "practice" Christianity, he answers that Mary ought to be valued for the "immeasurably high standard" that she offered to people, the "lofty abstractions" that she supplied despite her inhospitable manner. As such, Mary's role was to operate on a higher level than the "mackerel fisher ... banker, shopkeeper and wood-sawer," by elevating the moral code in which all are invested (W 10:433). Mary's peculiar "practice" thus is not intended to comfort, but instead to remind people that there is a higher ideal and that all are to benefit from it. The address then ends on a note that would have been surprising to those who would have expected Waldo to espouse a liberal theology: "Very rightly, then, the Christian ages, proceeding on a grand instinct, have said: Faith alone, Faith alone" (W 10:433). The invocation of faith alone, rather than a Unitarian emphasis on works or some mixture of the two (as he would often do in his own sermons), echoes Mary's own continuing anti-Arminian position that held onto a sense of Divine power and kept her from being, in her words, a "moral humanitarian." Furthermore, it also finds that a kind of faith in the moral ideal and powers beyond the self are important aspects of the progress of a Christian

society, without which, as Mary herself might have claimed, all particular moral actions are aimless. Waldo's subtle reinterpretation of the meaning of Christian faith attempts to find through Mary a connection to fiercely fought theological debates, while at the same time placing himself in the line of an ongoing evolution of Christianity. Waldo cannot merely side with the liberals in abandoning something as ephemeral and precarious as faith, because to do so would be to separate his own thinking from the sources in which it was shaped, those deep roots of Calvinist piety that Mary had represented for him. A failure to recognize the continuing power of this vision for Waldo makes it difficult to understand the theological positions that he establishes in his sermons—which are not straightforwardly Unitarian liberalism—and which carry through, in complex ways, through the rest of his career. This will become more apparent as I return to it in chapters two and three.

Indeed, it was Mary's broad attempt to hold together New England liberalism and Calvinism in the 1810s and 1820s in a somewhat idiosyncratic but forcefully argued theology that formed the basis for Waldo's earliest religious education. This is perhaps most clearly expressed in the ongoing argument that she had with her brother (and Waldo's father) William, the liberal Unitarian minister of First Church in Boston. Mary's quarrel with her brother mirrors the problems she found inherent in most of her contemporary Unitarians: they lacked an adequate enthusiasm in their theology and their worship, which caused them to be unable to energize the masses to seek the moral improvement of themselves and their world. In a letter to her brother in 1810, she spares no time with pleasantries, attacking his preaching with her very first line: "You *will* talk of coolness and calmness in religion— Let Angels and burning Seraphs be calm—let *man* struggle and agonize for truth, while any thing remains to be done or known relating to his salvation" (*LMME*, 55). What her brother lacks, she claims, is the ability to find

emotion in religious contemplation, to be able to find wonder, fear, hope, terror, joy, and faith in his religious practice. William's coolness and calmness as a minister, Mary thought, inhibited his congregation's abilities to understand what humans really are in relation to their creator, and gave them no impetus to work towards such an understanding. In many ways, Mary's criticism anticipates Waldo's later, now iconic condemnation of a "corpse-cold Unitarianism."⁷⁸ She would eventually recommend to her brother's oldest son, also William, that he abandon the pursuit of "honor and glory" in the world, and instead "throw aside your pomp, descend into the tomb—behold there that *the worm is thy sister, and corruption thy appointment*" (*LMME*, 70). This advice, which was given to her nephew less than two years after the death of his father, seems clearly intended as a counter to what she saw as the problematically comfortable religion of mainstream Unitarians. This was no small matter for Mary, who linked her brother William's unhappiness late in his life to his incorrect theological views. Writing to his widow, Ruth Haskins, Mary made plain her views on the connection between a right view of sin and human depravity with how one lives appropriately in the world, while also displaying her renowned ability to critique a person without worrying about how hurtful her remarks might be: "Oh how differently would that ardent mind [William's] have left the world had it viewed sin and human depravity as the gospel, I think, represent them—had he viewed Jesus Christ, in his astonishing characters, as some have believed—with what fervid solemn delight would he have taken leave of a world of sin and sorrow!" (*LMME*, 73). During his life, William's response to his sister's criticism was to dismiss her as too vague and beholden to an outmoded enthusiasm to be useful for the average Christian in society.⁷⁹ By contrast, William saw himself as what his sister was

⁷⁸ This is one of the phrases that has been important to the literary distancing of Emerson from religion, as exemplified by Myerson in the previous section.

⁷⁹ Barish, 42.

not: a respectful and tolerant Unitarian minister with a congregation to lead and no time for his sister's impractical and fantastical poetic excesses. For Mary, this was precisely the problem with the liberals—they had made a pragmatic concession for the status quo rather than using the poetic tools of inspiration and realizing the prophetic power of poetic imagination. When Mary began to take control of the education of her nephews, she seemed determined to make sure that they got what she deemed was a rightly *poetic* religious education, one that inspired and unsettled, rather than comforted and reassured.

Opposing the cool and calm theology of the Unitarians, Mary's was a Christianity that was infused with terror and the innate corruption of the world. Writing to Sarah Alden Bradford after reading Dante, she asked: "Is not man formed for terror, grandeur? Why then divest christianity of it?" (*LMME*, 86). Because of the terror seeped into the heart of her Christianity, Mary saw earthly existence as one of suffering. For her, Christianity is "a religion founded in suffering[.] Its' sorrows are richer—sweeter than the joys or mere earth" (*LMME*, 352). It was this pervasive sense of suffering that Unitarianism lacked, and which ultimately made it unable to approach the most entrenched moral problems of the day. For Mary, the liberal school's greatest failing was that it was unable to examine "the nature of man & the origin & nature of evil" with due complexity and seriousness (*LMME*, 194, 198). It was not that the Calvinists could explain evil while the liberals could not—as if it were the case that the liberals simply lacked an adequate answer. Rather, for Mary, the world presents the Christian with a mystery that should not be easily solved and gotten over. It is a mystery to be continuously contemplated and before which one must humble herself. In failing to dwell in this mystery of the world, the liberal school whitewashed the true character of human nature and thereby gave false assurances of security to its members.

Informed by her extensive reading of the Romantic poets, Mary understood nature as a necessary part of any theological reflection, while at the same time it is not something that can be given a simple or scientific explanation. To see it as such would be to ignore the terror at the heart of the human experience. Nature, instead, ought to serve as an object for reflection that does not lead one to the oneness and unity of the world, but reminds one of the lack of comfort that the world provides. The proper response to this experience of inclusiveness and discomfort is to be always searching and always humble. If natural religion meant a rational mastery of the world through dispassionate investigation, Mary was not for it. In her extensive conversations with Waldo on natural religion, she urged him to look “beyond the bounds of pure reason or naturalism,” which when wielded by imperfect people in a mysterious world, are unable to get to the heart of what humans truly are (*LMME*, 310). Taking her cue from New Light evangelical doctrines, Mary saw the need for a spiritual regeneration that could not be simply the product of human effort, but must be conferred by a Divine gift.⁸⁰ Although Waldo would ultimately differ from Mary’s stronger sense of the need for grace, as chapters two and three will show, he was to take this more affective and mysterious sense of natural religion as a project that he developed at points throughout the rest of his life. Indeed, it is Mary’s peculiar version of natural religion—with its somewhat idiosyncratic emphasis on the mysteriousness and terror of nature, while at the same time viewing it as a possible source of proper religious attitudes—that sets the stage for Waldo’s own idiosyncratic take on natural religion.

Quite understandably, Mary’s greatest intellectual disagreements with Waldo emerged in response to her nephew’s emphasis on individualism and the lack of a strong sense of divinely conferred grace in his work in the early 1840s. As Cole points out, Mary did not have many

⁸⁰ Barish, 44.

objections to the positions articulated in the Divinity School Address that caused the most controversy. The address' critique of the church as an institution that fails to challenge its congregants was in large part consistent with her position. Additionally, she did not object to Waldo's portrait of Jesus, even though it came closer to the Socinian position that she had long rejected in favor of a more moderated Arianism. Instead, Mary was concerned that Waldo was leaving the "poor" without enough spiritual resources, and she responded by making the case that human limitation and suffering were inherent parts of the human condition that should have been included in the address.⁸¹ What Waldo needed to do, then, was to attend more to the plights of all people in their lives as they live them, without abstracting beyond these lives to a comfortable place away from the moral problems of the day. Thus, Mary has high praise for Waldo in 1848, when she sees his work "once more mingl[ing] with the woes & cares of *practical life*" (*LMME*, 503). She was perhaps most enthusiastic about Waldo's decision to begin lecturing on slavery, having shown her public opposition to it as a moral catastrophe far earlier than many of the male Transcendentalists. As she sees it, Waldo had not strayed from the truth in his more abstract transcendental moments in the early 1840s, but he had failed to bring that transcendental philosophy back to its practical place in the moral lives of people, an effort which lay at the heart of Christianity for Mary. She was certainly not averse to individualism—indeed, her anti-ecclesiastical streak and tendency towards individual inspiration allowed her to understand religion primarily in terms of the individual's pursuit of a relationship with Divinity. What Mary saw in "Self-Reliance" was the retreating of the individual's relationship with Divinity, making it a mixture of "atheism and false independence," one which caused her to declare that Waldo had become an "enemy" to his early Christian faith (*LMME*, 426, 427).

⁸¹ Cole, *Mary Moody Emerson*, 253-254.

Lurking beneath Mary's distaste with portions of Waldo's religious views during this period is one of the fundamental disagreements between them that ebbed and flowed throughout the history of their relationship: despite Mary's insistence that transcendental philosophy return to the practical lives of all people, she held on to a conviction that "*Our* kingdom (blessed be God) is not of this world" (*LMME*, 120). Her God would always remain, as Barish puts it, "a distant, awesome, ineffable presence, infinitely greater than mankind."⁸² She would always remain uncomfortable with Waldo's attempts to make the otherworldly this-worldly, to collapse the distance by making divinity a part of our universe. Furthermore, though Waldo would inherit Mary's idealism, even as he downplayed its formative power for him, Mary was more circumspect about the individual's ability to see clearly the human's position in the world. Ultimately, Mary seemed to straddle two positions: she both wanted a distant, ineffable God with an otherworldly kingdom, and an emphasis on the common life instead of the extraordinary. For instance, although she had a mystical streak, she ultimately seemed to favor Wordsworth over Swedenborg, showing her preference for the poetry of the common over the obscurity of the mystic's vision.⁸³ Waldo would also side with the poetry of the common by doubting the mystic's ability to see the world as it truly is, as we saw with his critique of Swedenborg.⁸⁴ But Waldo was much more willing to give up Mary's otherworldly gestures, and as we shall see in the next chapter, was willing to completely leave behind the notion (central to Mary) that our kingdom is not of the world.

⁸² Barish, 46.

⁸³ In response to reading the Swedenborgian Sampson Reed, Mary tells Waldo that he could do better than the "triteness obscurity & swedenishness" of Reed (*LMME*, 222).

⁸⁴ The issue Waldo's mysticism is much contested. I raised the issue in the previous section of this chapter. I return to it again in the next chapter. In short, my contention is that he wasn't much of a mystic and was often more critical of the accuracy of the mystic's vision than the traditional picture of him has allowed.

Despite their disagreement, perhaps Mary's most profound contribution to Waldo's religious thinking is their shared ongoing concern for moral sentiment. Sentiment is a particularly thorny concept that lacked a single formulation in the first half of the nineteenth century. Accordingly, reconstructing a coherent and singular definition of what sentiment meant among Mary's intellectual milieu is a nearly impossible task. Furthermore, the specific question of the sentiment, both moral and religious, has been underappreciated aspect of Waldo's religious and moral thought (a topic which I explore in more detail in the following chapters). Nevertheless, some comments on what sentiment meant for Mary are important to set the stage for the discussion of sentiment that comes in chapters two and three because Mary serves as one of the prominent resources on which Waldo will draw.

Mary was acquainted with sentiment as a particular human faculty from the work of Germaine de Staël, an author that she emphatically urged upon her nephews.⁸⁵ For de Staël, the concept of sentiment connected Plato to the German idealists through the shared realization that all metaphysical inquiry is ultimately towards the end of ethics, that is, that all people are "summoned to something better than the present world."⁸⁶ The version of German philosophy that de Staël transmitted to her avid readers in America supported a nascent moral perfectionism that was taking hold of many, including Mary Moody. De Staël portrayed philosophy, broadly understood, as only one among many different pursuits through which people strive after the "end of existence—our advance to moral perfection."⁸⁷ In this formulation, sentiment works as a kind of limiting factor for philosophy—if one's intellectual pursuits cause him to come upon

⁸⁵ Cole, *Mary Moody Emerson*, 151.

⁸⁶ Germaine de Staël, *Germany*, vol 2, trans. O.W. Wight (New York: Derby & Jackson, 1859), 118.

⁸⁷ de Staël, 115.

conclusions that run counter to his pursuit of moral perfection, then they ought to be disregarded. De Staël calls this taking “sentiment as a fact,” one which ought to be investigated and explored, rather than disregarded as irrelevant to philosophical reasoning.⁸⁸

Mary’s longtime friend, Elizabeth Palmer Peabody, thought that the idea of sentiment was so important for Mary that she felt it necessary to reference it in her tribute written soon after Mary’s death. Peabody wrote of Mary that “she was not without sentiment—the union of thought with feeling; but was so far removed from what we call *sentimental*, that she impressed some persons as having no affections.”⁸⁹ Peabody defends her late friend as having deep affections, both directed towards her friends in their moral lives, as well as her own devotion to the truth. But this invocation of affection calls for explication because the common notion of affection inadequately expresses what Mary was truly after. By glossing sentiment as the union of thought with feeling, Peabody situates Mary within a central insight of Romantic philosophy, which she transmuted to young Waldo, that philosophical reason is only one aspect of truth. But she also legitimates the notion of sentiment as something more than just feeling, something philosophically integral in itself.

Peabody, a profoundly underappreciated and well-read intellectual in her own right, situates the Emersonian notion of sentiment as against sentimentalism as it was understood in British moral philosophy. It is possible that Peabody meant to distinguish Mary’s understanding of sentiment from the moral theories of those “sentimentalists” like Hutcheson who interpreted the source of moral norms as a discrete moral sense. Instead, sentiment is glossed as a unification of thought and feeling, a way of bringing together one’s intellectual with one’s affective life into

⁸⁸ de Staël, 118.

⁸⁹ Elizabeth Palmer Peabody, “The Late Miss Mary Moody Emerson,” *Boston Evening Transcript*, May 14, 1863, <https://news.google.com/newspapers?id=XIthAAAAIIBAJ&sjid=zDgHAAAAIIBAJ&pg=754%2C2818238>.

a cohesive moral whole. Most importantly, this particular understanding of sentiment makes sense of the connection between it and moral perfection. The topic of moral perfection had been much discussed by the circle of women that surrounded the Transcendentalists, especially Peabody, Mary Moody, and Elizabeth Hoar (*LMME*, 479). Moral perfection for them, following de Staël's lead, was tied to the right understanding of moral sentiment. In other words, for this circle of romantically-influenced Transcendentalists, life was understood as a process of betterment that was achieved by a fusion of their rational and affective lives.

Waldo shared this sense that moral sentiment and moral perfectionism went hand-in-hand. Writing to his aunt early in life, he noted that modern philosophy ought to be more "conversant with feelings," and follows with an assertion that would have clearly pleased his aunt: "Bare reason, cold as a cucumber, was all that was tolerated in aforetime, till men grew disgusted at the skeleton & have now given him in want into the hands of his sister, blushing shining changing Sentiment" (*L* 1:174).⁹⁰ In this letter Waldo echoes the sense that many of the women around him had, that is, rational moral systems, including those that had come to dominate liberal Unitarian circles, need to be tempered by a return of sentiment. Mary had made a similar point in her pseudonymously written letters as Constance in *The Monthly Anthology*, wherein she rejected the pursuit of pure reason by urging that one follow one's "less logical guide": "If, as philosophers tell us, the sublime abodes, where truth unveils her light and demonstrates her eternal counsels, cannot be ascended but by an almost endless chain of reasonings, we must be content to remain in the plains of ignorance." She claims that the philosopher might trick himself into thinking that his "aerial castles" are built without affection, but "character and happiness" always remain an influence, and the philosopher must always

⁹⁰ See also, Cole, *Mary Moody Emerson*, 192.

return to “ordinary life” and its “social feelings.”⁹¹ It is no wonder that Waldo consistently treated sentiment as feminine in his work, even though, ultimately, his praise of a feminine sentiment only reinforced notions of the feminine as counter or averse to masculine rational inquiry.⁹²

But sentiment is not enough for moral perfection. What is most notably added by Mary is her longstanding interest in “imajanation,” a deliberate misspelling of the Romantic idea of *imagination* that made it her own. “Imajanation,” according to Mary, “is spent in forming pictures of a great and splendid world which does not exist” (*LMME*, 96). Because the actual world is too flawed to support the full consummation of virtue, the highest virtues must point towards a world that exists in the imajanation. However, this ought not to cause us despair over our seeming impotence in the world. Rather, the imajanation supplies us with a forward-looking perspective on this world—we are to strive towards moral improvement because we have a vision of a better world that could be. Echoing her romantic influences, Mary claimed that the highest task of the visionary poet is to portray a better world in order to incite virtuous acts among people in the present.⁹³ In 1818, she put this vocation onto her nephew Waldo, enjoining him to take the poetic path with his life:

Those who paint the primitive state of man’s creation are sweet poets—those who represent human nature as sublimed by religion are better adapted to our feelings and situation; but those who point the path to the attainment of moral perfection are the

⁹¹ Mary Moody Emerson, “To Cornelia,” *The Monthly Anthology, and Boston Review* 1 (August, 1804), 453-454.

⁹² This has been a point of criticism of his work. For instance, Cole reads his feminization of sentiment as a way of separating the feminine from politics. Phyllis Cole, “Pain and Protest in the Emerson Family,” in *The Emerson Dilemma: Essays on Emerson and Social Reform*, ed. T. Gregory Garvey (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2001), 67-92.

⁹³ Writing as Constance, Mary made imagination (not yet misspelled) a means to pursue truth: “Imagination is a province so freely conceded us by the Proprietors of mental ground, that to explore and cultivate it seems our bounden duty. Whether it borders on the noblest fields of intellect, it becomes not us to inquire. If our lords are pleased to accept propitiously any of its refreshing waters or beauteous flowers, it is the same to us, you know, as if we possessed indisputable claims to the realms of truth.” “To Cornelia,” 453.

guardian Angels. But this is no easy poetic task. The lowly vale of penitence and humility must be passed before the mount of vision—the heights of virtue are gained. (*LMME*, 113)

In many ways, Mary has already supplied the words for Waldo's eulogy of her: penitence and humility, those virtues that are valued in polite Christian society, are the "lowly vale" out of which one must climb to get to "the heights" of virtue. And those who are able to point to such heights eclipse those lowly virtues and appear to society to be impolite. To be a Christian in practice, to return to Waldo's words from 1869, is more than to be a good member of one's social group—it means that one shines a light on a better world through the active combination of thinking and feeling in all of one's activities.

This linkage between imagination, moral perfection, and sentiment is the apparatus that forms young Waldo's religious thought. Of course, he will take it to heights that Mary could not have anticipated. Despite her progressive understanding of how the world changes through imagination, Mary would not relinquish the conviction that behind all change in the world stood a single eternally fixed Deity, a being at some remove from the world as we have it.⁹⁴ Ironically, both traditional Calvinism and corpse-cold Unitarianism shared this picture of distant divinity, although the latter had taken away much of the terror and mystery. Waldo's early work took the immanence of the divine to a much greater extreme than either was willing to accept, refocusing the question from inquiries into and reflection on the nature of God to an emphasis on the particular ways that the ideal of God functions in our moral activity. Nevertheless, writing in his journal in 1866, three years after the death of his Aunt and over three decades since he had begun to develop his own theological views, Waldo notes the continuing power that his aunt's

⁹⁴ Mary attacked Frederic Henry Hedge's conception of a progressive Divine by arguing that if the Deity could change, then the pursuit of virtue and happiness would become impossible. Small changes in an infinite God, she claimed, would cause dramatic revolutions in the thinking of finite humans, so much so that they would be set adrift, not knowing how to act in the world (*LMME* 358).

Almanacks still have on him, and he puzzles over the curious fact that they tend to have little impact on those with whom he shares them:

They make the best example I have known of the power of the religion of the Puritans in full energy, until fifty years ago, in New England. The central theme of these endless diaries is, her relation to the Divine Being; the absolute submission of her will, with the sole proviso that she may know it is the direct agency of God (& not of cold laws of contingency, etc.) which bereaves & humiliates her. But the religion of the diary, as of the class it represented, is biographical; it is the culture, the poetry, the mythology, in which they personally believed themselves dignified, inspired, judged & dealt with, in the present & in the future. And certainly gives to life an earnestness, & to nature a sentiment, which lacking, our later generation appears frivolous. (*JMN* 16:15-16)⁹⁵

In many ways, this short reflection is broadly emblematic of Waldo's complicated relationship to and inheritance of his Aunt's religion. First, it expresses his disappointment with it as a relic of the past with its Puritanical devaluing of the human in the face of an overwhelming and violent God, while, at the same time, he laments its disappearance as marking the loss of something powerful which might anchor the contemporary generation. Second, it recognizes that this religion has a power over him and seemingly no one else within his circle because it pertains to a particular family tradition in a way that does not appeal to those outside it. He is the one who can find in Mary's *Almanacks* a theological voice with which he must contend because Mary is a person who not only shaped him intellectually, but who stands as one of the major figures in his family tradition. As a member of that tradition, Mary's voice must be heard. Waldo can find something of immense value in her religion, the way it supplies nature with "a sentiment," while also disparaging the particular forms that this religion took. This is not a simple reflection by a theological liberal glad that he has been able to move away from a Calvinist past. As he develops his own theological positions, he understands himself to be operating in the midst of this family tradition, which he must grapple with even as he seeks a way forward from some of its thornier

⁹⁵ Edward Emerson found these lines to be representative of the influence of this "spurring, guiding, rebuking and loving enthusiast" on her nephew (*W* 10:600-601).

aspects. And, importantly, this tradition is broadly tied to currents in New England religion, currents that are not always seen as cohering together. Waldo doesn't simply abandon this tradition when it fails to suit him—rather, he works within it to find progress.

Mary Moody and Ralph Waldo had clashed for many years over the enduring value of Calvinism, with Mary Moody often defending her brand of Calvinist piety as an antidote to a liberal theology that would so far remove God from the world as to disable divine action entirely. As she writes to her nephew in 1829, “Let us not complain of calvinism—its’ most terrible points are better than nothing,” with the “nothing” here not being atheism, but the groundlessness of a religion drawn solely from German idealism (*LMME*, 264).⁹⁶ For Mary, Calvinist New Light theology offered a check on human hubris and false confidence in human abilities—the same modern hubris and confidence that Waldo would be concerned to limit in his work, even in those moments where we find the most enthusiastic individualism. While never able to subscribe to Mary Moody's attempt to preserve Calvinist piety, he nevertheless found new ways of reinterpreting that piety in ways that bucked liberal orthodoxy by taking seriously those religious forms that have the power to evoke and cultivate sentiment.

IV. Conclusion

This chapter has attempted to show some of the difficulties in determining how Ralph Waldo Emerson's legacy for religion in America should be understood. Many of the ways that historians and literary scholars have situated his religious thought have tended to either dismiss it entirely as unimportant in light of his “secular” literary and aesthetic achievement, or have

⁹⁶ Throughout the 1820s, the correspondence between Waldo and Mary often evokes themes from the Calvinism that Mary Moody developed while traveling in the Connecticut Valley, visiting Professor Moses Stuart at Andover, and staying with Elijah Parish in Byfield for several months. Cole, *Mary Moody Emerson*, 174.

flattened it to such an extent that it becomes difficult to understand the nuances that make him more than just a mystic, spiritualist, or anti-ecclesiastical individualist. By turning to the tradition that one finds in the Emerson family history, I have hoped to illustrate a way in which to understand how Emerson is part of an ongoing negotiation of a religious tradition so as to bring the past into the future. If such is the case, then Ralph Waldo is not at the head of a new religion—like Bloom, and to an extent Schmidt place him—but an inheritor of a very specific tradition which he can no more completely abandon as he can completely accept. He is connected to his past, has an eye toward the future, and in the interim has a project wherein he is working with the complex terms of both liberal and Calvinist Christian traditions, while drawing insight from a variety of philosophical resources. To divorce him from this complex set of traditions is to fail to understand the forms of sympathy that he has for both liberal and orthodox views, a sympathy that can be witnessed in his early education from his aunt. It is vital that one have this tradition in mind when reading the sermons, and as I will argue, many of the themes that first emerge in those sermons carry throughout Waldo's intellectual career. His is neither the religion of no religion, nor a liberal anti-dogmatic spiritualism, but part of an ongoing reimagining of religious possibility given the forms that now exist. In a sense, the tradition has authority for him based on both its intellectual and its affective effects on his identity, even while the particular claims of that authority are constantly renegotiated. And although he has one particular family history, Waldo sees this history as one that is shared amongst many in his community. To say that this is the religion of no religion, with its thin sense of authority and its radical sense of newness, cannot do justice to the ways that Waldo will seek to sway his contemporaries with his own progressive vision.

Of course, this brief account of the relationship between Mary and Waldo is neither

biographically nor intellectually sufficient to account for Waldo's religious thinking. My claim has been that it is a significant influence, not the only influence, and that attention to this particular way of seeing the early development of Waldo's religious thought can illuminate the inadequacy of many of the ways that historians and literary scholars have treated it. It points a spotlight on the main elements of Waldo's corpus, human perfection and moral sentiment, while also noting how these are rooted in his early intellectual milieu. We see the influence of the poet's generative imagination, and also the tragic understanding that the world is not as it should be.

There is no doubt that Emerson has had a profound influence on religion in America in a variety of different arenas. Yet, there are ways that his corpus evades and becomes suspicious of the simple reductions that have often been central to many of the movements that have claimed Emerson as their prophet. To understand it, then, one must attend to the many different ways that he developed his religious thought throughout the corpus. It is this project to which the next two chapters are devoted.

CHAPTER TWO – EMERSON AS PREACHER

It is my desire, in the office of a Christian minister, to do nothing which I cannot do with my whole heart. (CS 4:194)

Speaking before the Second Annual Meeting of the Free Religious Association in 1869, Emerson expressed his pleasure that a “more realistic” church had begun to come into fruition, one that he saw embodied by the members of this newly formed group of religious liberals. He also took stock of his own views, briefly giving what he understood to have been, and which continues to be, the foundational claims of religion for him: “that the Author of Nature has not left himself without a witness in any sane mind: that the moral sentiment speaks to every man the law after which the Universe was made; that we find parity, identity of design, through Nature, and benefit to be the uniform aim: that there is a force always at work to make the best better and the worst good” (W 11:486). What is striking about this declaration is how much continuity there is between it and many of the central features that Emerson had developed forty years prior during the beginning stages of his career as a minister, where he would describe the “religious nature” as “this deep seated veneration of goodness, this invincible belief that whatever is, is wisely ordered, this love that in us is always seeking objects on which it can dwell and never finds here what it seeks, what satisfies it” (CS 4:27). In fact, to read elements of Emerson’s religious views as having a vital importance throughout his writing career would not have been

startling for those who knew him well. Speaking on his vocation as a preacher soon after his death, Elizabeth Palmer Peabody, one of Emerson's closest and longest-standing friends, noted that throughout his life he remained always a preacher, one who was "faithful unto the end to his early chosen profession and the vows of his youth."⁹⁷

Despite the continuing importance of his religious views and his position as preacher (without a pulpit), many scholars still read Emerson's career as one of an ongoing secularization. On their account, Emerson begins his active career as a minister, but becomes disillusioned with the inadequacies of Christian religion for expressing his growing literary and secular ambitions. This, in turn, compels him to leave behind his religious views, the lack of which characterizes his mature period (the 1840s). This narrative of secularization is reflected both in the historical and the literary discourse. In the historical, Emerson's ongoing secularization reflects a larger American disillusionment with the staid institutions of Christianity throughout the nineteenth century, culminating at the end of the century with the emergence of pseudo-religious spirituality movements, as well as the formation of explicitly irreligious institutions. For the literary discourse, Emerson's secularization reflects the emergence of an independent American literary tradition, one which rises out of a primarily religious pre-modernity in which theology and literature were one and the same, and which marks the beginning of a period of disenchanted modernity. Both of these discourses were the topic of the previous chapter. What this chapter seeks to illustrate is that while there may be justifications for reading Emerson's corpus as reflecting a retreat of the importance of religion, we get a clearer sense of his entire project if we read him as grappling with how he can articulate a progressive understanding of religion that is evolving to fit a new future, rather than retreating in the face of modern pressures. This account

⁹⁷ Elizabeth Palmer Peabody, "Emerson as Preacher," in *The Genius and Character of Emerson*, ed. F. B. Sanborn (Boston: James R. Osgood and Company, 1885), 146.

takes its cue from his son, Edward Emerson, who makes the following comment on the first of his father's two speeches to the Free Religious Association: "Doubtless there were many young and active radicals strong for destructive criticism. Mr. Emerson wished to see that in their zeal to destroy the dry husk of religion they should not bruise the white flower within" (W 11:638). By far, the dominant reading of Emerson's religious views supposes that religion was only truly relevant for him in the early period of his career, that the white flower had been so bruised by the headwinds of emotional turmoil and growing pessimism that it had lost all its petals by the end of his life. But those who would read Emerson this way tend to under-appreciate how malleable the religious is for Emerson (both individually and collectively), and, consequently, they read his criticism of the particular forms that religion has taken, and the criticism of the theories that inform those particular manifestations, as a rejection of religion *tout court*.⁹⁸

An important key for reading Emerson's religion, I will argue, is to recognize the distinction that he makes between his formulation of what religion is in essence (considered philosophically and abstractly) versus how that religion appears in manifestation (considered as a particular "form"). Emerson's terminology for this difference is not always consistent, but the idea he is after is integral for understanding how he views the evolution of religion through time. This evolution is both in the human understanding of the essence, and in the various forms in which people participate. He often, especially in his early period, will refer to the abstract conception of religion as "true" or "pure" religion, and will contrast this with "formal" religion—or, as my account of the Divinity School Address highlights, between "general views"

⁹⁸ In a map of the field in Emerson Studies in 1984, Lawrence Buell identified two emerging trends for reading the relationship between Emerson and his religious context: David Robinson's evolutionist reading and Philip Gura's reading of a distinct break between Unitarian and rationalist explanation. These remain two of the most prominent paths to take. It is worth noting, however, that despite Robinson's claims about certain continuities between Emerson and the Unitarian mainstream, neither reading puts much emphasis on the kind of continuities that I will develop below. Lawrence Buell, "The Emerson Industry in the 1980's: A Survey of Trends and Achievements," *ESQ* 30, no. 2 (1984): 124-125.

on religion versus its “administration.” In fact, Emerson’s point will ultimately be that neither subject, either religion in essence or in manifestation, remains static for humans precisely because our understanding of them is doubly insufficient: we have a partial and always evolving understanding of what the nature of religion is in abstraction (an evolving philosophy of religion), and we are only able to represent that understanding of religion in partial and incomplete forms (the beliefs and practices of one’s local religion). There are certain functions of religion that it ought always to keep in sight—this is its promotion of moral life—but beyond these rather slim functions, there is no stable essence of religion throughout time that humans can grasp hold of. This way of understanding religion is both analytically helpful, insofar as it allows him to make sense of the relation between ideas of religion and their formal manifestation, and normative, insofar as it offers him a way of talking about forms of religion which better enable the pursuit of the ideal. The idea of God is an important element for understanding how this picture of religion is operating, but it is not wholly sufficient for accounting for it. Accordingly, I separate the question of the nature and being of God from the question of religion and treat them in their own sections (sections III and IV). This separation is merely heuristic, of course, since they are intimately related to each other in how they support a single moral project—one that both provides ideals towards which we ought to aspire while also specifying how those ideals are both entrenched in the world of our experience and promoted by concrete actions. Nevertheless, by treating them separately, I hope to illuminate some of the nuances of Emerson’s views on religion that receive little attention when the question of God is taken to be the essential question of his religious views. I end this chapter with a reading of the Divinity School Address that uses the account of Emerson’s views on religion to make sense of some of the more famous aspects of that lecture (section V).

I. Preliminary Considerations

Before wading into Emerson's work, there are two important methodological considerations that need to be addressed in order to make it clear how I will develop Emerson's religious thought. There has been a great amount of work done on Emerson, and on his religion in particular. And yet, much of it fails to deliver a focused and sustained engagement with his corpus as offering a unique and thoroughly developed theological and religious perspective, one that deserves attention and serious scholarly engagement.

This is partly due to the fact that, for quite some time, scholars have viewed Emerson's sermons, which were delivered between 1829 and 1839, and to a lesser but still substantial degree his lectures, as relatively insignificant in the development of Emerson's thought. In what is still the most significant book-length treatment of Emerson's sermons, Wesley Mott's *Strains of Eloquence* begins by noting that the dominant trend among Emerson scholars has been to write as if "nothing in Emerson's career as a minister became him like the leaving it," and to treat the quite extensive collection of sermons as "merely warmed-over journal stuff."⁹⁹ Although Mott was writing in 1989, his claim is still true today. Indeed, many of the most significant treatments of Emerson's early career, excepting those which are explicitly about his religious thought, focus more intently on the journals as a record of Emerson's intellectual development than his publicly delivered sermons and lectures.¹⁰⁰ As Mott appropriately notes,

⁹⁹ Wesley T. Mott, *"The Strains of Eloquence": Emerson and His Sermons* (University Park: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1989), 2, 4. This is a sentiment that has perhaps been so pervasive, in part, because of Emerson's own cultivation of his "rebelliousness," as Robinson has noted, one "that has made it necessary to see his ministry as an unusable past that he—and we—had to discard." David M. Robinson, "The Sermons of Ralph Waldo Emerson: An Introductory Historical Essay," in *The Complete Sermons of Ralph Waldo Emerson*, vol. 1m ed. Albert J. Von Frank (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1989), 2.

¹⁰⁰ Harold Bloom is a particularly strong instance of the preference for the journals, as he dismisses the sermons and lectures as having little importance: "Though he is in the oral tradition, his true genre was no more the lecture

relying too heavily on the journals for an account of Emerson's intellectual development tends to misunderstand the context and purpose of the journal, which is less about the presentation of a single, well-developed viewpoint, and more a repository of immediate and decontextualized fragments, experiments with language and ideas, and pieces that may be of use later.

Furthermore, focusing too intently on the journals can sometimes make Emerson seem incoherent, seemingly flipping from strident faith in God to deep doubt in short spans of time. Thus, Mott rightly concludes that the journals "seldom reveal unambiguous linear development of ideas over time."¹⁰¹ Such should be expected, since the journals are not a structured and revised statement produced after careful consideration, but a repository of the thoughts of the moment.¹⁰²

Those who have used the sermons and lectures most extensively are historians; many literary theorists, especially those inclined to read Emerson philosophically, infrequently show interest in anything but a few of the major essays and *Nature*. Insofar as the sermons and lectures are deemed important, it is only to the extent that they foreshadow the canonical works. The account that follows focuses on the sermons and lectures in conjunction with these major essays because my goal is to recount Emerson's religious thought as a philosophical expression that is multifaceted and dynamic, one that is developed as a public expression intended to have a public

than it had been the sermon, and certainly not the essay, though that is his only formal achievement, besides a double handful of strong poems. His journals are his authentic work, and seem to me poorly represented by all available selections." Harold Bloom, "Introduction," in *Bloom's Modern Critical Views: Ralph Waldo Emerson*, updated edition, ed. by Harold Bloom (New York: Chelsea House, 2007), 6.

¹⁰¹ Mott, 64.

¹⁰² Daniel Malachuk makes a similar argument in favor of prioritizing the "public" writings over the journals when dealing with Emerson's political philosophy. He connects this to two other broad tactics that many current scholars use to offer a "detranscendentalized" Emerson: secularizing his concepts, and focusing on the "detachable utterance." Daniel S. Malachuk, "Emerson's Politics, Retranscendentalized," in *A Political Companion to Ralph Waldo Emerson*, ed. Alan M. Levine and Daniel S. Malachuk (Lexington: The University Press of Kentucky, 2011), 270.

influence. To put it directly, my concern is less with Emerson's biography, and more with his contribution to the development of a particular body of religious thought, one that fulfills the object of religion by "*exhibiting a true account of the soul and its relations to induce it to act in a manner agreeable to its whole nature*" (CS 2:88, italics in original). Accordingly, I place a premium on the distinctive way he presented this thought to his audience. My intention with developing his religious thought in this manner is to take seriously the fact that Emerson attempts to impart a set of structured and coherent ideas about religion to his audience—an audience which, as is evident throughout his long speaking career, was overwhelmingly eager to hear him.

It might seem as though this way of reading Emerson would be natural. But in fact, far too often even the best accounts of Emerson's religious thought tend to view it less as a worked out philosophical and theological statement, and more as a solipsistic internal monologue that, for pragmatic reasons involving Emerson's need to make a living to support his family, happened to be read aloud before an audience. Even Mott's extraordinary account of the sermons tends sometimes towards this mode—whenever interpretations become tough, the sermons are read as reflecting one of Emerson's personal aspirations for his life, rather than a statement intended for an audience. Instead of reading the sermons as promulgating a particular Emersonian theology, at crucial moments they are read as Emerson's private working-out of his personal relationship with religion.¹⁰³ Perhaps this is due to the common tendency of scholars to

¹⁰³ For instance, this happens frequently with how Mott describes Emerson's Christological views: "Sermon No. V incorporates the major motifs we have found in the early journals and letters and reveals the constructive impact of Emerson's ministerial training, which enabled him to identify with the heroic 'character' of Jesus and, in preaching his virtues, to assume the mantle of eloquence crucial to his own sense of greatness." Mott, 20. Indeed, by making eloquence the central motif around which the sermons are analyzed, nearly every element of what Emerson says can be reduced to his aspiration to become more eloquent. This understanding of eloquence, however, is not one that is in large part defined by one's ability to move an audience, but rather aspires towards a certain form of rhetorical excellence based on a set of higher ideals about one's voice regardless of whether or not an audience is able to follow.

blur the line between biographical and intellectual treatments of Emerson's religious thought, a problem that is exasperated by Emerson's own tendency to conflate biography and philosophy.¹⁰⁴ This tendency is at the forefront in "Literary Ethics," where the value of history is understood as biography, and biography is understood as a way of philosophically fortifying oneself, as in his claim that "I also will essay to be" (CW 1:103). The double meaning of "essay" here—in the sense of writing oneself and trying to be—is often read as conflating biography and philosophy, that one has to write one's story in order to philosophize on one's being, or, if taken to the extreme, that one can only be by writing oneself.¹⁰⁵ But this conflation of biography and philosophy, when taken to its extreme, can make it seem as though Emerson is only ever writing himself in a kind of internal monologue. Susan L. Roberson's account of Emerson's sermons is most explicit in this regard; for her, the sermons are best read as "a serial autobiographical narrative," where the acts of being oneself and writing oneself become simultaneous, even while standing before a congregation as its presumptive spiritual leader.¹⁰⁶ For an account of Emerson's religion that takes this route, biography explains the origin of every idea, making the only coherency that which can be found in the events of Emerson's own life as they get reflected in his mind.¹⁰⁷

On the other end of the spectrum are readings of Emerson that do not seek after the

¹⁰⁴ This actually seems to be less a problem in literary treatments, which are often more than willing to ignore the person of Emerson to deal with the meaning and power of his writing.

¹⁰⁵ In Cavellian terms, this is Emerson representing writing as the aspiration to the human, which is a core of moral perfectionism. Stanley Cavell, "Aversive Thinking: Emersonian Representations in Heidegger and Nietzsche," *Conditions Handsome and Unhandsome: The Constitution of Emersonian Perfectionism*, The Carus Lectures (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990).

¹⁰⁶ Susan L. Roberson, *Emerson in His Sermons: A Man-made Self* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1995), 4-5.

¹⁰⁷ The classic account in Emerson studies that reads all of his thought as a series of personal crises is Stephen Whicher, *Freedom and Fate: An Inner Life of Ralph Waldo Emerson* (New York: A.S. Barnes, 1961). Ever since, the attempt to trace the inner life of Emerson has been one prominent method for understanding his work.

person behind the ideas as a way of explaining his philosophical expression. Perhaps more than anyone else, Stanley Cavell has aided the effort to read the Emersonian essay as asking its reader to engage in the “philosophical mood”—the “frame of mind” in which we seek after philosophy.¹⁰⁸ He has also described this as Emerson’s “call for philosophy,” which is not an engagement in the formal structures of a philosophical argument, but an engagement that itself creates and criticizes the form of philosophy. In this sense, philosophy in the Emersonian mood is a prose that is a “philosophy-making argument.”¹⁰⁹ Thus, to read Emerson is to allow his words to prompt you into “thinking,” to reflect the instability of our philosophical discourse, and consequently, to open us to transfiguration and conversion. In so doing, philosophy is (re)made.¹¹⁰

Despite the immense influence that Cavell will have on the account that follows, there are two crucial differences that must be noted. First, even though Cavell insists that Emerson is offering a “teaching”¹¹¹ or giving a “call,” Cavell is little concerned with those occasions where Emerson was actually speaking to others. For Cavell, it is the written Emersonian essay that is most important as a philosophical expression, and despite Emerson’s concern with the moral

¹⁰⁸ Stanley Cavell, *Emerson’s Transcendental Etudes*, ed. David Justin Hodge (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003), 26-27.

¹⁰⁹ Ibid., 139-140. Arsić and Wolfe put it this way: those who reject the claim that Emerson’s work is a work of philosophy often presuppose a particular understanding of what philosophy is, to which Emerson does not conform—mainly, the dominant paradigm of Anglo-American analytic philosophy and its idea of rationality. This paradigm presupposes certain ideas that Emerson tells us to be question: “What is thinking? What is philosophy? Can it be said to have a ‘proper’ shape and protocol? If so, on whose authority?” Branka Arsić and Cary Wolfe, “Introduction,” *The Other Emerson*, ed. by Branka Arsić and Cary Wolfe (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2010), xxiii.

¹¹⁰ Cavell has given four claims about Emerson’s work as evidence that it is philosophical: 1) it endlessly subjects every word of itself to criticism; 2) it asserts itself as the foundation of its own existence; 3) it is both a turning away from, and a turning towards society; and 4) it never comes to a point, thus enacting the state of democracy as “our life and our aspiration.” *Transcendental Etudes*, 181-182.

¹¹¹ Cavell, *Conditions*, xxix.

lives of people, and the connection between the lectures and the major essays to which Cavell restricts himself, it is Emerson's "words"—i.e. the language employed in the essays—that are most important. So when Cavell appropriately describes Emerson's focus on transfiguration and conversion as a kind of "aversive" thinking, what he means is that Emerson is most concerned with the action of words. This concern for words can "[cause] understanding or illumination on a par with that of religion," but it is not itself religion, presumably because the focus on linguistic transfiguration is amenable to Cavell's understanding of the endless openness of human life in a way that the practical moral actions of individuals (their religion) is not.¹¹² This is a topic that I explore in more detail in chapter four when I present Cavell's account of moral perfectionism.

This leads into the second way that the following account departs from Cavell. Cavell consistently distances Emerson's philosophical work from the religious, and does this by means of the focus on language. For instance, he specifies two different ways that we might read the famous passage from "Self-Reliance" that we "lie in the lap of immense intelligence." The first, according to Cavell, would be to read it as a metaphysical (or, religious) claim about God. The second, and his preferred way, is to read it as "an allusion to, or fantasy of, our shared language." He continues: "while of course there are things in the world other than language, for those creatures for whom language is our form of life, those who are what 'Experience' entitles 'victims of expression'—mortals—language is everywhere we find ourselves, which means everywhere in philosophy (like sexuality in psychoanalysis)."¹¹³ This fairly strict conflation of

¹¹² *Transcendental Etudes*, 193.

¹¹³ *Ibid.*, 140. Elsewhere, Cavell writes that for him, Emerson's prose "is an enactment of a sense that the language that discovers the world is that which veils or covers it." Stanley Cavell, "Afterward," in *The Other Emerson*, ed. Branka Arsić and Cary Wolfe (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2010), 305. This line is characteristic of Cavell's emphasis on dealing with epistemological skepticism as the decisive issue for philosophical reflection. Insofar as Emerson is philosophical, then he must also have his hand in dealing with the problem of skepticism. Cary Wolfe has appropriately criticized Cavell for this reading, suggesting instead that what is at issue is "the epistemological and ethical fallout" of modernity. Cary Wolfe, "'The Eye is the First Circle': Emerson's

philosophy and self-reflective language leads to some highly obtuse renderings of Emerson's concern for practical action—a concern, I should note, which is most apparent in the sermons and lectures (i.e. when speaking to an audience with whom Emerson would like to connect). This is not to say that Cavell separates language entirely from action—for indeed, he does think that his work on Emerson and Thoreau aids the development of a liberal democratic theory.

Nevertheless, there are examples where the focus on language tends to be exaggerated to such an extent that Emerson's meaning seems lost. For instance, Cavell reads Emerson's proclamation in “Self-Reliance” that you should “do your work, and I shall know you. Do your work, and you shall reinforce yourself,” as saying that “your work now, in reading him, is the reading of his page, and allowing yourself to be changed by it.”¹¹⁴ I will not here contest this particular interpretation; I highlight it only to show how constrained a Cavellian reading can be when it is forced to suppose that Emerson's philosophical contribution is focused wholly on the words that he uses in the development of reading practices that might offer the possibility of transformation.¹¹⁵ That is not to say that Emerson isn't concerned with reading practices that can be transformative. However, I do think that for Cavell, Emerson's pastoral concern—which emerges most clearly in the more didactic sermons and lectures—seems to fall away from

‘Romanticism,’ Cavell's Skepticism, Luhmann's Modernity,” in *The Other Emerson*, ed. Branka Arsić and Cary Wolfe (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2010), 274.

¹¹⁴ *Transcendental Etudes*, 223. In fact, often Emerson uses “work” to refer to labor or vocation, claiming that by engaging in one's vocation he is able to morally self-cultivate. The important conclusion for Emerson is that there is no special vocation that leads to moral development; rather, as long as one rightly labors—meaning physically laboring at something—he can develop himself properly regardless of social position (CS 4:183).

¹¹⁵ The over-focus on language as constituting the self is a criticism that Randy Friedman has made of Richard Deming, who offers a Cavellian reading of Emerson on reading. I agree with Friedman that “poetry may be redemptive, but words are not the sum-total of the world for Emerson.” Randy Friedman, review of *Listening on All Sides: Toward an Emersonian Ethics of Reading* by Richard Deming, *Transactions of the Charles S. Peirce Society* 45, no. 1 (2009), 117. I would add, I think that this focus on language goes a long way to showing why Cavell has such trouble labeling Emerson a pragmatist. Cavell seems to suppose that pragmatism is essentially a form of positivistic science—or, at least, that the highest philosophical form of pragmatism in analytic philosophy verges on positivism—and therefore an Emerson who is about instability and the self-reflexivity of language seems not to fit.

Emerson's philosophical contribution. For Cavell, religion is always "under criticism" in Emersonian thought insofar as it is unable to be as endlessly self-critical and "aversive" like the philosophical mood.¹¹⁶ Religion here becomes one of philosophy's others: whatever philosophy is, it is defined against religion, which is unable to perform as philosophy, because it is unable to be endlessly self-critical. For Emerson, though, to cease subjecting religion to verification, free discussion, and fair examination is indicative of infidelity, of a lack of true religion.¹¹⁷ Despite the enormous amount of influential work that has followed in the sea-change that Cavell brought about, this aversion to religion has continued.¹¹⁸

Accordingly, in what follows I present Emerson as *preacher* (or, as will be shown to be the same thing, *lecturer*, as well as *theologian*) and philosopher, and philosophy as a form of preaching, bringing together the pastoral and the philosophical in a way that I believe keeps with the spirit of a Cavellian reading, though it departs with some of the substance.¹¹⁹ Thus, this is a philosophical Emerson that is doing more than writing the philosophical essay.

¹¹⁶ *Transcendental Etudes*, 193

¹¹⁷ This is the main topic of Sermon CXXII, where Emerson elaborates on the idea of truth as receptivity, while also warning that we must temper our self-trust with a constant reminder that we do not wholly make ourselves, but are caused by things out of our control.

¹¹⁸ For instance, in the collection of essays by scholars indebted to Cavell in *The Other Emerson*, there is extensive engagement with subjectivity, politics, and philosophy, but religion receives nearly no part—which, as I hope to display in this chapter and the next, would be a surprise to Emerson. The exception is Paul Grimstad's contribution, which uses a distinction between revelation (in the form of scripture) and reason, one that he describes as the motivation behind Emerson's resignation of his ministry, to illustrate a dramatic break from Emerson's "Unitarian" period. Paul Grimstad, "Emerson's Adjacencies: Radical Empiricism in *Nature*," in *The Other Emerson*, ed. Branka Arsić and Cary Wolfe (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2010), 251-270. To use Cavell's phrase, people continue to "condescend" to Emerson's overtly religious views. *Transcendental Etudes*, 140.

¹¹⁹ For one of the strongest accounts of Emerson as a "public, national preacher" throughout his career, see Mark S. Cladis, "Religion, Democracy, and Virtue: Emerson and the Journey's End," *Religion & Literature* 41, no. 1 (Spring 2009): 49-82. The conjunction of preacher and philosopher also evokes Bruce Kuklick, *Churchmen and Philosophers: From Jonathan Edwards to John Dewey* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1985). Although I am taking a less historical approach, I am in agreement with Kuklick's claim that the non-secular/secular distinction is a modern imposition on eighteenth and nineteenth century American thought.

II. Contextualizing the 1820s and 1830s

Emerson was employed as a preacher in various roles between 1827 and 1839, from ministering to his own congregation at Second Church in Boston to being an itinerant supply preacher. During this period he developed many of the distinct ideas that would eventually bring him to prominence as public intellectual and popular American figure. Importantly, Emerson's period behind the pulpit did not cease when he resigned his ministry at Second Church in 1832, though he gave up the official pastoral duties of the "reverend." In fact, he continued to preach many of the same sermons, sometimes in revised form and sometimes not, that he had written during his ministry, up until 1839 when the controversy over the Divinity School Address proved to be so toxic that it became problematic for him to continue behind the pulpit. It is worth noting that he continued to deliver sermons both while he was developing and writing *Nature* (1836), which extended some materials that originally appeared in the sermons, and while lecturing on the lyceum circuit. It would be shortsighted, therefore, to suppose that either 1832 (the resignation from Second Church) or 1836 (the publication of *Nature*) somehow represent periods of decisive intellectual break from what came prior. While the importance of these two events for changing the circumstances of Emerson's personal life are surely significant, and they certainly had effects on his thought, notions of intellectual discontinuity have been greatly exaggerated.¹²⁰ In fact, had his delivery of the Divinity School Address in 1838 not caused such a serious controversy, one which made it difficult for him to continue preaching in established churches, it

¹²⁰ Lawrence Buell in *Literary Transcendentalism* echoes the general consensus when he calls Emerson's resignation from his pastorate the "outstanding symbolic event in the history of Transcendentalism," and attributes this to a distrust of institutional religion in general. Lawrence Buell, *Literary Transcendentalism: Style and Vision in the American Renaissance* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1973), 21. Barbara Packer puts it more polemically, attributing Emerson's rejection of the rite of the Lord's Supper (and with it his ministry as a whole) to the "boredom" he felt towards the rite, "elevat[ing] distaste into a principle of criticism." This latter view would seem to prevent us from seeing any proper theological claim Emerson might be making, instead turning his resignation into a mere loss of interest. Packer, "Signing Off," 9.

is possible that he could have continued to deliver an occasional sermon.¹²¹ Nevertheless, it is true, as many critics have pointed out, that the lyceum circuit provided new opportunities for Emerson to explore various topics that would not have been as well received within the confines of a Unitarian sermon structure, scientific and literary topics especially. Within the sermon structure, the set of expectations for him were narrower than in the looser lyceum structure. Claiming that the “Lecture Room” would be the “true Church of the coming time,” Emerson noted that one of its merits is that the lecture room leaves out no aspect of contemporary life: “Here, everything is admissible, philosophy, ethics, divinity, criticism, poetry, humor, anecdote, mimicry,—all the breadth and versatility of the most liberal conversation, and of the highest, lowest, personal, and local topics—all are permitted, and all may be combined in one speech” (LL 1:48). Indeed, though there are references to scientific and literary topics in the sermons (for instance, his sermon on astronomy, Sermon CLVII), they are few. Nevertheless, as far as his views on religion are concerned, the sermons provide a wealth of insight into how Emerson intended to develop his own view of religion, and for my purposes here, provide a stable basis for discerning the nature and function of religion and theology when they appear in the later corpus.

What is most striking about the sermons is not their Unitarian orthodoxy, but rather how Emerson attempts to negotiate the terms of liberal Unitarianism in ways that are not always strictly liberal, but sometimes involve a degree of appreciation for orthodox theological views from the past, a topic that I began to develop in chapter one. This methodology is in many ways

¹²¹ For instance, the outline for what would eventually become “New England Reformers,” the final chapter of *Essays: Second Series*, carried the original headline of “Sermon,” presumably because it ends with an exhortation to the “higher life.” See chapter three for a discussion of this lecture. Richardson offers a good account of Emerson’s reaction to the controversy that he had caused with the Divinity School Address: Robert D. Richardson Jr, *Emerson: The Mind on Fire* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995), 295-300.

parallel to Emerson's understanding of how we ought to view the Jesus of the Gospels: Jesus was a teacher of the truth, but that truth is "clothed in the manner of speaking and in the manner of thinking of the times," because without this accommodation to the context of the listener, no truth can be heard (CS 4:213). Insofar as the preacher "solicits your attention to truths which engage him and therefore should engage you," he must do so as friend and brother, not as a distant oracle that proclaims truth on its own terms in some unique and ahistorical language (CS 4:247). What we see in the sermons is that there is a great deal of adaptation of the traditional images and topics of Christian theology—an engagement that reaches out to the listener as brother—while at the same time an effort to radically restructure the meaning of those images and topics to fit within a larger understanding of how religion evolves over time.¹²² This is an approach that Emerson shares with his romantic predecessors, and it would have been familiar to him through their work. For instance, in the supplement to the preface of Wordsworth's *Poems* in 1815, he explains why the language of poetry is especially suited for expressing religious concepts:

The concerns of religion refer to indefinite objects, and are too weighty for the mind to support them without relieving itself by resting a great part of the burthen upon words and symbols. The commerce between Man and his Maker cannot be carried on but by a process where much is represented in little, and the infinite Being accommodates himself to a finite capacity.¹²³

¹²² Lawrence Buell has linked this to the methods of Unitarian preaching in general, where a complex form of translation was occurring between traditional Calvinist doctrines and Unitarian redefinitions. Buell also links this to the emergence of comparative religion. *Literary Transcendentalism*, 114-117. Neal Dolan makes a similar kind of argument to the one I am making here, but focuses instead on Emerson's usage of the language of property to appeal to the terms that his listeners used to make sense of their ordinary daily experience, all the while trying to reconfigure that language to engage a more spiritual meaning. Neal Dolan, "Property in Being: Liberalism and the Language of Ownership in Emerson's Writing," in *A Political Companion to Ralph Waldo Emerson*, ed. Alan M. Levine and Daniel S. Malachuk (Lexington: The University Press of Kentucky, 2011), 343-382.

¹²³ William Wordsworth, *The Major Works*, ed. Stephen Gill (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 644. Octavius Brooks Frothingham identified this passage as an important influence on the Transcendentalists in his *Transcendentalism in New England*. But Frothingham seems to indicate that the difference lies in Wordsworth's metaphysical leanings and the Transcendentalists' focus on the moral. Octavius Brooks Frothingham, *Transcendentalism in New England, A History* (New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1897), 97-101.

Wordsworth is here tapping into a traditional apophatic theological paradigm in which words are mere attempts to describe that which ultimately eludes their description. This emboldens the poet as a generator of new representations, a move that motivates Emerson's own thinking on how religious language ought to meet the listener anew in her situation.

Consider, for example, Emerson's preaching on the kingdom of heaven. This is a topic of interest for Emerson throughout the 1820s and 1830s. One of his first significant treatments of the idea is in Sermon XXXVII, first preached in 1829 and last preached in 1838.¹²⁴ He begins by acknowledging to his congregation that all have a vision of heaven, "these glowing pictures of future life" which everyone both desires and expects (CS 1:285). In fact, this "onward look" is itself a part of human nature, and no amount of *reason* (or, perhaps more appropriately, *skepticism*) can destroy this vision of heaven and the expectation that it will be achieved, however distant that may be. But while Emerson can affirm the vision of heaven for his congregation, he brings the kingdom of heaven back down to earth, connecting it to the society out of which it emerges: "Heaven is not a place, but a state of the mind. *Hell* is vice, the rebellion of the Passions, the army of cares, the night of selfmade ignorance, the stings of self accusation. *Heaven* is the well ordered, informed, benevolent, self devoted mind when it adopts God's will for its own" (CS 1:287). In other words, it would be wrong to suppose that our visions have some metaphysical reality apart from the human mind, but this reorientation makes them no less *real*. Rather, the vision of heaven ought to be understood as an indicator of our very real threefold duty on earth at the moment: to acquire knowledge, to act morally, and to experience the affections. A proper understanding of these visions as directly related to present duty ought to

¹²⁴ In addition to Sermons XXXVII and LVIII, see also XCIII where Emerson explains why the idea of the "Kingdom of Heaven," which is actually describing human character, has not become clearer over time.

lead us to realize heaven in our present state to the best of our abilities.¹²⁵ Or, as Emerson concludes: “It is not that I wish to lower your views of the future, but that I would exalt your views of what may be done in the present” (CS 1:290). Keeping in mind a vision of the future, in which one glimpses a more perfect state, is one of the vital moves in Emerson’s perfectionism. Returning to the topic of heaven in another sermon, Emerson will describe it as the “state of a holy mind,” one which “consists in making the right choice in all the alternatives that every day offers you” (CS 2:99). On this configuration, not uncommon to Unitarianism at the time, speculation ought always to remain in the midst of the world, among society and the people of it, with a love “of all that is truly lovely” (CS 2:100). The method here is to find the ethical import of traditional and seemingly metaphysical claims—or as Emerson will put it, to move from *external* religion to *internal* (CS 4:87).¹²⁶ This internalization of the vision of heaven is the first step in developing an account of the striving for perfectibility that many, most notably Cavell, have identified as one of the enduring legacies of Emersonian thought, one that “places tremendous burdens on personal relationships and on the possibility or necessity of the transforming of oneself and of one’s society.”¹²⁷ Reinterpreting traditional theological concepts which would be familiar for his audience, Emerson’s perfectionism can be seen taking shape in these earliest sermons through the strong orientation towards a future ideal state that is

¹²⁵ Wordsworth calls this a valuing of the “imperfect shadowing forth” that we can intimate from what we see, and which raises us to partake in that future state that is to come. Wordsworth, 644.

¹²⁶ This movement is not unlike that which one finds in Kant, where the “supreme principle of all scriptural exegesis” is to look for that which constitutes the “true end” of religion, “the moral improvement of human beings.” Immanuel Kant, *Religion within the Boundaries of Mere Reason*, in *Religion within the Boundaries of Mere Reason And Other Writings*, trans. Allen Wood and George Di Giovanni (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 6:112. The similarities between the metaethics of Kant and Emerson have been thoroughly explored by Van Cromphout, who sees that the two share a view on the primary of ethics, even if, according to Van Cromphout, Emerson’s god is pantheistic while Kant’s is personal. See chapter two of Gustaaf Van Cromphout, *Emerson’s Ethics* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1999).

¹²⁷ Cavell, *Conditions*, 2.

nonetheless immanent and premised on practical moral activity—a topic that I trace through his later career in chapter three, and explore in relation to Cavell in chapter four.¹²⁸

Emerson's exit from the ranks of the official Unitarian clergy is often interpreted as a signal of his dissatisfaction with the confines of what passed for liberal orthodoxy at the time. David Robinson writes that the question confronting Emerson as he was developing his own version of a "spiritual religion," one with similarities to the revivalism of the Second Great Awakening, was "would he accept 'divinity' as he found it in the church of his day, or would he attempt to explore his own belief that divinity lived both in nature and in the human soul?"¹²⁹ What I believe the sermons show, however, is that the options were not strictly an either/or—one could disagree with the divinity of the Unitarian mainstream while occupying a position within the clergy and also exploring an alternative theology. What one couldn't do was object to the ritual forms of that mainstream and still be supported by enough of one's congregation to continue as their head. Thus, it was ultimately Emerson's progressive theological understanding of the form of worship that ended his career, even though much of the theology that supported that understanding of forms remained relatively cohesive throughout the 1820s and 1830s.

Even Sermon CLXII (the so-called "Lord's Supper" sermon, the only sermon published in Emerson's lifetime, albeit in 1876) is hardly the jeremiad against Christian tradition that many have taken it to be. Many critics focus on Emerson's claim that the rite "is not suitable to me" and that this "is reason enough why I should abandon it," which is interpreted as asserting self-

¹²⁸ In general this can be described as part of Emerson's development of a religious naturalism. As Jonathan Kahn points out, religious naturalism depends on a prior theological understanding as a background, one that isn't simply abandoned, but which is instead reworked into a new naturalistic picture. The naturalist works in and through this common theological background in order to build his own naturalist version of it. Jonathon S. Kahn, *Divine Discontent: The Religious Imagination of W.E.B. Du Bois* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011).

¹²⁹ David M. Robinson, "Divinity," in *Ralph Waldo Emerson in Context*, ed. Wesley T. Mott (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 92.

reliance in the face of religious tradition.¹³⁰ Whatever his personal decision may have been, his stated reason for finding the ritual of the Lord's Supper unsuitable is that it resembles for him more a "stiff sign of respect as men do to those whom they fear" than an inspiration towards love of Jesus as "a glorified friend after the free way of friendship" (CS 4:192), a claim which fits in with the various uncontroversial Unitarian attacks on Calvinist theology that Emerson routinely employs. Furthermore, the above objection is only the third of the four that Emerson supplies: the first questions the authority of the rite based on an analysis of the scripture and the context of the initial event in relation to Passover (utilizing a Quaker argument); the second asserts that the rite leads to a misunderstanding of the authority of Jesus; and the fourth points out that rites ought to change, since freedom is the essence of Christianity, and its institutions ought to reflect that freedom by focusing on the reformation of the soul and not strict adherence to traditional religious forms (CS 4:191-193). Furthermore, the sermon ends on a decidedly untriumphant note: "I have no hostility to this institution. I am only stating my want of sympathy with it. ... I am content that it stand to the end of the world if it please men and please heaven, and shall rejoice in all the good it produces" (CS 4:194). With this in mind, Richardson is most correct in his commentary on the sermon and Emerson's subsequent resignation: "It is ... untrue that his break with the church marked a loss of faith. If anything, Emerson believed too much, not too little."¹³¹

III. Theology and the Being of God

¹³⁰ For instance, this is the central line for Packer's account of the sermon. Packer, *Emerson's Fall*, 126.

¹³¹ Richardson, *Mind on Fire*, 125. However, Richardson is incorrect in supposing that by leaving his pastoral office behind he was also "leaving theology" behind. Ibid., 127. Mott also rightly links the resignation to certain strains of Puritan thinking: "Emerson's break with Second Church resulted from a conscientious examination of doctrine in terms that, ironically, made use of Puritan modes of thought." Mott, 156. These views can be put into contrast with those of a scholar like Packer, who claims that Emerson began his ministry with such religious doubts that he intentionally choose the denomination with a "mild faith" that over time proved to be even too restrictive in its mildness. *Emerson's Fall*, 33.

For many readers of Emerson's religious thought, the most common question concerns his views on the being and personality of God. Indeed, the ontological status of the deity is often presumed to be the defining issue for determining what constitutes Emerson's views on religion. Thus, it is often taken for granted by readers that if we are able to determine what it is that Emerson understood God to be, we will have gone a long way toward determining how it is that something like religion relates to the development of the moral sentiment, and how we ought to understand the relationship between humans and the world. Even Lawrence Buell's otherwise excellent account of Emerson's religious thought begins with the question of the nature of the divine for Emerson, and portrays Emerson's religious innovation, "his most contrarian act of intellectual radicalism," in terms of "his insistence both on a God-in-me and on the 'impersonality' of the divine."¹³² The problem with readings that suppose Emerson's religious views to be essentially his views on the being of God is that they take Emerson's religious thought to be essentially the affirmation of opposites: God is both intensely individual and universally shared; God is both the object of my personal religious experience and the foundation of an impersonal shared moral sentiment. In itself, this view isn't necessarily a contradiction, for one might hold that all have an idiosyncratic and personal religious experience of an infinite God that can be individual to all. The problem arises when trying to adjudicate between mutually exclusive personal experiences without a strong way of deferring to a shared, agreed-upon authority—whether that is traditions, texts, institutions, etc. This would be especially problematic for Emerson, since in his haste to problematize the universality and immutability of traditional religious authority, he *seems* to lack a strong sense that there is some interpersonal collective authority to ensure that an individual's experience aligns with what are for him

¹³² Buell, *Emerson*, 162.

universal moral laws. It would seem that we can have either a religion in which God is understood through the idiosyncrasies of one's private experience of God, or a religion in which God is understood as a way of understanding universal moral law—the former would incline towards a mystical theism, the latter towards pantheism and/or humanism. In fact, one of the common ways of understanding this contradiction is to divide the Emersonian corpus into an early mystical period, and a later moral or pragmatic period.

In this section, I take a different path by focusing on the question, what is the meaning and function of God-discourse? To phrase it differently, what does a reflective consideration about divinity allow the human to achieve, and how does it support the religious goal for Emerson of cultivating humans into more complete beings? By shifting the focus on the being of God to a focus on the function of how we reflect on God, I am attempting to follow Emerson's own aversion to metaphysics—that it is more productive to examine the function of the language of divinity than it is to build a comprehensive theory of divinity. Or as Emerson poignantly puts it in "Self-Reliance," you may have "denied personality to the Deity" in your metaphysics, but there may come a time when the "devout motions of the soul" present God "with shape and color," and then you must "Leave your theory as Joseph his coat in the hand of the harlot, and flee" (CW 2:33).¹³³ I take this to be Emerson's warning that theories of divinity are at constant risk because they attempt to engage in a metaphysics of divinity that seeks to make it stable and universal, rather than open and revisable. As we will see, Emerson believes that traditional theology has made this mistake, trying to systematize and hold stable ideas that, in reality, should be understood as attempted representations of human duty. Consequently, Emerson does not believe that entire project of theology is a failure in principle—in fact, there is a way that

¹³³ I examine this line in more detail in the next chapter, especially the question of who the "you" refers to.

Emerson leaves room for a certain kind of theology that openly acknowledges that it does not seek to hold stable theological representations throughout history. In his alternative, theology functions as a site for the production of and reflection upon revisable ideals that drive our moral activity in the world. Ultimately, what “religion” is for Emerson is related to what he understands God-discourse to be, but “religion” is not merely reducible to any particular set of claims about God. In what follows I treat these topics separately, starting first with how Emerson treats theology as a language of human duty, and then moving to the common question of pantheism and the personality of deity. In the next section, I turn specifically to the topic of religion.

a. A language of human duty

What, then, does Emerson think about how people talk about God? It is certainly true that early in Emerson’s ministry he showed a concern for reflection on the nature and being of God that often drew upon a particular version of a design argument, one which was employed specifically to instill confidence in the Divine against an atheistic challenge. Although his formulation of Divinity in the very earliest sermons had not yet rejected the attempt at finding “evidences” that characterizes the period after 1840—such as in 1841 when he declares that nature teaches “the lesson of an intimate divinity,” the doctrine of “Supreme Presence” (CW 1:136)—many of the crucial elements of his mature period were already in place in the late 1820s, even in his otherwise commonplace references to design.¹³⁴ For instance, in Sermon XXIII, Emerson asks whence the idea of God comes to the human mind, posing the question as a matter of what would seem more probable: that the natural order that humans experience should have come about by chance, or should have come about by design (CS 1:205). This is the

¹³⁴ Especially in his correspondence with Mary Moody Emerson, it is clear that design arguments were already in doubt for Emerson in the mid-1820s. See the note about Hume below.

common traditional philosophical question about the reasonableness of a faith in God the designer, and it certainly would have been a familiar question for nineteenth century Unitarian intellectuals, many of whom were attempting to supply a rational basis for belief in God.¹³⁵ Yet despite posing this question, Emerson seems less interested in how natural order came about, and more in the question of how moral order came about, which marks a shift from the traditional questions of natural theology that are focused on material design, to a focus on how one ought to understand one's moral life. The question of chance, then, is more important for how one ought to understand the moral sense: could it be that our understanding of duty—which for Emerson is a universal sense even if it manifests in different forms, in different degrees, and at different places and times—is merely a product of a chance order between the requirements of duty and the rewards of pleasure? Or, as he puts it, could it simply be chance that pleasure is distributed to virtue, and pain to vice (*CS* 1:206)?¹³⁶ Already we have left behind the traditional question of design as he would have learned it from Paley and the Anglo-philosophical tradition. In fact, Emerson viewed Hume as more or less unsurmountable on the question of whether it was possible to view the perception of design in the material universe as evidence of a creator.¹³⁷ The

¹³⁵ Emerson gives a fairly standard account of a “watchmaker” design argument in Sermon LXXXV as well. In it, the idea of God “explains and vindicates itself” insofar as it provides a way of harmonizing all that we know about the world (*CS* 2:238-239).

¹³⁶ Although it is unlikely that at this point in his career Emerson knew much about the Kantian postulate of God as lawgiver that is necessary for ensuring that virtue redounds to happiness, Emerson is concerned with a similar kind of problem: how to ensure that virtuous action is in accord with happiness. And like Kant, Emerson uses a meditation on this accord to talk about the Divine.

¹³⁷ Emerson was reading Hume's work on the history of England in 1823, which prompted him to call himself an “idolater of David Hume save when he meddles with law & prophets” (*L* 1:135). During this period he must have also been engaging with Hume's philosophical works, because he begins a long correspondence with Mary Moody Emerson in 1823 over Hume, asking his aunt “where is the accomplished stripling who can cut off his [Hume's] most metaphysical head?” before proclaiming that though many may refer to their “feelings as a triumphant confutation of the glozed lies of this Deceiver,” there is no one who has been able claim victory over him (*L* 1:138). Mary Moody responded quite harshly, referring to Hume's “sophistry” and saying that he “was never touched by the love of virtue or glory;” the only purpose of Hume is to indicate that they are in “infidel times” where conscience is all that can secure them (*LMME* 179). In 1826, Emerson writes to his aunt on his view that Hume is a vital part of the further development of moral perception: “He is one of those great liminary angels to whom power is given for a

question of the reasonableness of claims about God in this sermon turns from a focus on forms of evidence to the experience of the moral sentiment, even if the full repercussions of this move have not been fully come into view for Emerson. It is because of the presence of virtue within us that we “are so formed that all things declare him to us” as we act in the world, a fact about our constitution that should be far more convincing than “the voice of thunder, the earthquake, the explosion of comets” (CS 1:206).¹³⁸ This position is already anticipating that which will take shape in the later sermons, even if at this early point Emerson still presents it under the framework of design: the question of how I ought to understand my duty in relation to my earthly existence and how the two can be jointly secured. As the nature of humans as moral creatures becomes more robust for Emerson, he will shed the talk of design presumably because of its relation to the problematic notion of “evidence.”¹³⁹

season over the minds & history of men not so much to mislead as to cast another weight into the *contrary scale* in that vast & complex adjustment of good & evil to which our understandings are accommodated & thro’ which they are to escape by the fine clue of moral perception” (L 7:140). Mary Moody responds with indignation, reiterating her claim about the importance of miracles and the legitimacy of the gospel narrative, which Hume had attacked, and which her nephew seems to discount (LMME 208-209). Mary Moody eventually declares, in 1828, that because her nephew had read Hume at such a young age, he has become “so imbued with him [Hume’s] manner of thinking, that you [Emerson] cannot shake him off” (LMME 241). Emerson’s acceptance of Hume partially explains his early interest in the philosophical idealism of the Germans as a potential solution to materialist skepticism. Of this, Packer notes that Emerson’s eventual answer to Humean skepticism is an amalgamation of de Staël, Coleridge, and Carlyle, which denies all searches after evidence for divinity, which “are rendered superfluous by the discovery that the divine is present here and now, in individual human beings, and that it requires of individuals only that they not deny those truths they inwardly perceive.” Barbara L. Packer, *The Transcendentalists* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2007), 37.

¹³⁸ Robinson has also pointed to this sermon as an important transition moment for Emerson, one that begins to anticipate the idealism that he will develop later: “it is an interesting early instance of his attempt to extricate himself by rational means from what he considered a possible dilemma of natural theology,” that is, its failure to prevent the assumption that “God is a withdrawn and uncaring technician, unrelated vitally to his creation.” David Robinson, “Emerson’s Natural Theology and the Paris Naturalists: Toward a Theory of Animated Nature,” *Journal of the History of Ideas* 41, no. 1 (1980): 75.

¹³⁹ Emerson does return to the design argument in his 1859 lecture on morals, but there he seems to give the same conclusion, that the witnessing of God in the world isn’t something gained by evidences, but something that pertains to the particular constitution of a person: “A great deal of learned pains have been taken to prove the existence of God by the design apparent in the material world. And each philosopher accumulates a multitude of examples showing thought, which, of course, we read with pleasure. But this seems wasted labor, when one considers that there is no fact in the universe which the least attention does not bring into the category; nay, that the looking for it, was already the announcement of it, as he who is able to state a question, is already near the solution of it” (LL

Emerson will occasionally preach a somewhat robust confidence in the nature of divine providence, while at the same time showing his awareness of the inadequacy of our means of arriving at that confidence by any human effort. He is able to declare that “I believe that God hath that interest in every event that it is impossible to separate his part from man’s part in any; for our souls grow in him as the oak grows in the globe, or rather as the animal body in the earth, made of it, supported by it, yet having an independent will” (CS 2:142). Or, he claims that conscience is the aspect of human life “connecting every human soul with God its maker, and making it impossible to any to elude for a moment his irresistible dominion,” which thus functions as “an overpowering proof of the Being and government of God” (CS 1:195). One may be led at this point to conclude that at least in the early part of his ministerial career, Emerson was willing to articulate aspects of a somewhat independent and personal deity that mixed together parts of Unitarian mainstream with parts of a traditional Calvinist piety which values the immediate dominion of God over the evidences of a faulty reason. We might be led to at least entertain Robinson’s notion that Emerson considered accepting something like the divinity of the mainstream during his day—a divinity that we can witness in ourselves as being the stamp of creation.

But Emerson’s difference from the Unitarian mainstream was his consistent championing of the diversity of ways that one can contemplate the nature of the divine—a point which would have made it difficult for him to ever seriously pursue the homogeneous depictions of divinity in Unitarian theology. That is to say, despite however much weight Emerson places on the internal attestations for the being of God, he advocates a great deal of theological exploration that opens space for various forms of contemplating the nature of the divine. As he notes in Sermon LXIX,

2:138).

“every mind hath its favourite resorts in the spacious domain of truth, its church of virtuous thoughts, whither it repairs morning and evening,” and Emerson’s goal as preacher is “to explore the nature of God” while enlarging his congregation’s conception of the divine (*CS* 2:159-160). Nevertheless, Emerson is not advocating that each person has a merely individualized conception of divinity that is private to him. If this were the case, a merely inward-turned reporting of one’s sentiment as it relates to the being of God (“its favourite resorts”) would make for little more than an individualized mystical theology, one that is unable to account for the shared sense of moral obligation that is at the core of Emerson’s understanding of duty. If one’s notion of God is nothing but the reporting of personal experience, then there would be a substantial problem with bringing it into accord with what are interpersonal, and more universal, human duties. Nevertheless, it seems that Emerson is after an answer.

One of the most important sermons for specifying this relation between individual and universal God is Sermon VIII, first written in 1827 and preached several times in the late 1820s. The sermon begins with a lament that the language of theology, “that important part of language in which man’s relations and duties are expressed, partakes of the time from whence it has descended; it is gross and erroneous; it is human and bigoted” (*CS* 1:107). Traditional theology has clothed Christ “in a garb of wild fable” and “shrouded in terrible clouds the benign majesty of God” (*CS* 1:107-108). What has amounted to theology in the past, and which Emerson thinks has continued in too many places, is “dark blasphemy,” one that condemns human action on earth as corrupt (*CS* 1:110). Such a theology is necessarily in conflict with the purpose of religion, which ought to be “cheerful, social, masculine, generous ... inquisitive of the ways of man, inquisitive of the works of God.”¹⁴⁰ Part of the confusion of reading this sermon is

¹⁴⁰ It is unfortunately that Emerson, especially early on in his career, often used “masculine” to refer to the creative quality of the human in distinction to the receptive or affective “feminine.” As commentators have pointed out,

determining exactly what it would mean to define theology as the language of human relations and duties. In characteristic Emersonian style, the facile equivocations of the sermon are striking: from the idea that God is love Emerson claims that the character of God is the character of religion, which is also God's law, and therefore pure religion is doing good. By equating the language that we use to talk about the character of God with the language that we use to talk about human social relations, Emerson should be understood as rejecting metaphysical inquiries about the being of God—they are melancholy errors that are the product of earlier “less enlightened ages.” These metaphysical inquiries divorce God from the moral lives of individuals, who no longer identify themselves with the being of God, but instead see God with a “tinge of terror” because God is portrayed as a being distant from the actions of worldly life (CS 1:109). The conflation culminates in the finale of the sermon where Emerson, exhorting his congregation to action, says that “every moral agent, from the Angel to the child, who gives his strength, much or little, to the service of God and man, is an anointed apostle of the cause” (CS 1:112-113). In this context, the religious service of God and worldly service of “man” are the same. To suppose them different is to misunderstand that the character of God and the practice of religion are united in the law of love, which requires that we perform good to our fellows (CS 1:110). The joint nature of human and God were clearly on Emerson's mind, as the very next sermon (originally delivered the next week) asserts that, “What is man, is in fact wholly dependent on the question What is God?” (CS 2:114). We might be tempted here to add, for reasons that will soon become apparent, *and vice versa*.

Emerson's appropriation and extension of the joint notions of likeness to God and human

Emerson thinks that all humans, whether male or female, are a mixture of these masculine and feminine traits. Nevertheless, this has been one of the points that perhaps relates to his lukewarm reception of the women's rights movement in the middle of the century.

moral perfection, which he originally received from William Ellery Channing, has been extensively explored in the secondary literature.¹⁴¹ One of the important aspects of this appropriation is the idea that the language that people use to talk about God, and therefore also the language of theology, is ultimately a language derived from human moral life. In Sermon LXXXVI, Emerson makes this explicit. He begins by noting that the God that we address is not experienced in the normal way of sensation, since “our faculties are yet unable to comprehend him.” Instead, “we worship him by forming the most pure and elevated conception of which the mind is capable,” which, upon investigation, turns out to be “our own soul stripped of all inferiority and carried out to perfection, aided by all the images of power which the sight of His works can give” (CS 2:243). The contemplation of this idea of God is performed as an effort to elevate ourselves, ultimately bringing ourselves nearer to that perfection. The idea that we form a conception of God by attending to our own nature and elevating that conception to discover a kindred nature is one that Emerson takes directly from Channing. But for Channing, there is still a role for revelation in this process. Channing thought that we needed some kind of revelation to get to the idea that God is a father who looks down upon us with parental interest and stands in direct relation to us. Thus, Channing will still speak of God calling humans by both nature and revelation.¹⁴² In other words, Channing talks about the likeness between God and human, but he does so in a way that preserves ontological claims about the being of the deity, and the role for special revelation—we might best know God through the particular similarities that we have, even as God is still treated as a higher being with a parental interest in humanity.

¹⁴¹ Perhaps the best work on this relation has been done by Robinson, who writes: “Channing worked toward his perfectionist theology over a lifetime, beginning from a context of Calvinism. Emerson began, in a sense, where Channing left off, and was extending Unitarian assumptions almost from the first of his ministry.” Robinson, *Apostle*, 50.

¹⁴² William Ellery Channing, “Likeness to God,” in *Transcendentalism: A Reader*, ed. Joel Myerson (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 13.

As much as Sermon LXXXVI resembles Channing's theology in its call to use the vision of the perfected human soul as a means to rise toward the Divine, Emerson conspicuously removes the parental relation from the schema. Instead, Emerson emphasizes the effects of the contemplation of "Him who is Truth and Love," of attempting to "carry up our mind to a greater mind and converse with it as we converse with men" (CS 2:243). As for the object of this contemplation and conversation, Emerson eschews the parental relation for the realization of the omnipresence of the Divine as a part of all human experience: "his participation in every action in life, in every shade of thought, and therefore, in every thing that interests me" (CS 2:244). In *Nature*, Emerson is more explicit about his rejection of the parental relation, saying that "Father" is just a way that we express how "Spirit is the Creator," which has life in itself (CW 1:19).¹⁴³ Thus, Emerson can conclude by finding the usefulness of prayer—i.e. contemplation of and communication with the Divine—in its power "to dignify our life and to connect every action on earth with the world of spirits" (CS 2:245).

This view of prayer is echoed again in *Nature*, where it is described as "a study of truth,—a sally of the soul into the unfound infinite," one which detaches objects from their relation to us (their usefulness) so that they might be considered "in the light of thought." When one engages in this contemplation, one's "holiest affections" are kindled, and "God go[es] forth anew into the creation" (CW 1:44). Accordingly, we can say that the purpose of prayer amounts to the following: it offers the potential of bringing together in thought the earthly and the spiritual, or what are often glossed as the actual and the ideal. One of Emerson's essential moves

¹⁴³ This is another example of translating a traditional theological concept, which is here being employed outside of a sermon. As Hodder has effectively argued, *Nature* is intentionally modeled after the apocalyptic books of the Bible: "*Nature* grows out of the Bible, recapitulates its structure, and participates in its vision." Alan D. Hodder, *Emerson's Rhetoric of Revelation: Nature, the Reader, and the Apocalypse Within* (University Park: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1989), 6.

is to take the practice of prayer as having theological import. Prayer is how an individual can attempt to think in her own way about the divine by contemplating the spiritual/ideal and its relation to the earthly/actual. He is not rejecting that each individual will come upon different ideas, since each person has his own idea of God, “which is more pure in one mind than in another but is most inadequate and elementary in all” (CS 2:61). Even the “highest” and most refined theology, “i.e., our description of God, must be the gropings of infant weakness, when compared to God himself,” since our ability to fully contemplate the spiritual/ideal is always hampered by the limitations of our actuality. We see our own nature through a “glass” which is clouded, and which presents to us only a distorted image—the ideal must necessarily be clouded for us as well.

The idea of being in two worlds is a central part of Emerson’s thought, and the idea of God that one develops plays an essential role in how one negotiates the fact of her dual nature, the fact that she is drawn to be more than she currently is. Emerson claims that “It is only the knowledge of God that unites this bright outward Creation of brute matter to the brighter inward Creation of intelligent mind” (CS 4:154). But knowledge here is neither meant to indicate a dispassionate scientific pursuit, nor a kind of objective sufficiency. Rather, knowledge involves a degree of affection. We are beings made to love, Emerson says, and that which we love ultimately governs what we know. We do not have the choice whether or not to love, but only the choice of what to love. For Emerson, the object of our most passionate and consuming love will take the place of a God for us: “The human heart requires a God. Some god, a true or a false one, it must and will have” (CS 4:28). Or, as he writes: “The soul wants a pilot, a star, a stronghold amidst the vicissitudes of life to which it can repair continually for refreshment and instruction. In short it wants an object as great as its love” (CS 4:31). When this love is set upon

infinite goodness and spiritual ideals, it becomes a love of God, which is a part of what Emerson frequently calls “true religion.” But when this love is set upon those things which “catch the outward eye,” making a partial material object into the highest for oneself, it becomes a form of idolatry that stunts one’s movement towards the ideal. For understanding Emerson’s religion, the importance of the direction of one’s love is that “the language of love approaches very near to the language of worship” (CS 4:29). The emphasis on a rightly directed love will later be integral to Emerson’s account of reform in “Man the Reformer,” as will the way in which love can serve as a mediation of our dual nature. After noting that “one day all men will be lovers” and equating the “finished man” with the image of Jesus that eventually, in some quite distant eschatological time, all will approximate, Emerson notes that this finished person will function as the “mediator between the spiritual and actual world” (CW 1:159). This “finished man” is equivalent to our understanding of full divinity, one which even Jesus only approximates—a position for which Emerson will become famous in 1838 when giving the Divinity School address, even though he had been preaching the same view for almost a decade. Nevertheless, by early 1832, Emerson’s views on theology had solidified around the idea that “right reason and pure love are the most we know of him [God], that his right worship consist in the constant acknowledgment that our individual life flows from him continually as light from the sun” (CS 4:87). The nature of God to which humans are privy is that “God is *in* our soul,” which is related to the realization that “There is something in us which is higher and better than we” (CS 4:175). This something in us—in 1841, Emerson will come to call this the “Perfect” or the “Supernatural” insofar as it cannot be accounted for strictly on the terms of our worldly life—is the “mysterious fountain” that comes to us by way of the moral sentiment, where the presence of this idea of the Perfect is

what drives our efforts at reform in the world (CW 1:173-174).¹⁴⁴ Efforts to speak this Perfect are the efforts to speak about the Divine—although Emerson will warn that too much inquiry concerning the origin of our idea will lead us to “the inner boundaries of thought, that term where speech becomes silence, and science conscience” (CW 1:174).¹⁴⁵

In many ways, Emerson’s early understanding of theology culminates in his “Demonology” lecture in 1839. Here he does his best to dismiss forms of supernatural speculation that are at odds with a naturalistic understanding of the world, or what Emerson approvingly calls “spiritual laws.” The “demonological” is what one gets when an individual or partial view of the human gets projected onto the spiritual realm—oftentimes indicated by “some foreign, unacknowledged element in nature” that is supposed to either violate or be contrary to ordinary laws (EL 3:151). These supposed “demonological facts” to which people commonly adhere are often misunderstood as theological or metaphysical, the two arenas in which we might want to account for “supernatural” violations of the natural. These “facts,” to Emerson’s chagrin, form the basis of many religious creeds. Rather than eschew them as simply contrary to our knowledge of the whole and therefore unworthy of consideration, they ought to be understood as “semi-medical questions, respecting our structure” (EL 3:167). In fact, theological discourse, rather than being insulated from natural science, is and should be more closely integrated with and changed by the latest revelations of science. In particular, Emerson happily notes that “the science of astronomy has had an irresistible effect in modifying and enlarging the doctrines of

¹⁴⁴ Or, also, “holiness is the undervaluing of all actual attainment, in the on-look of the soul” (EL 2:351).

¹⁴⁵ Or as Emerson will write in *Nature*, we are able to see God at some distance in matter, “but when we try to define and describe himself, both language and thought desert us, and we are as helpless as fools and savages,” which means that “he that thinks most, will say least” (CW 1:37). This is one of the areas where Cavell is right in bringing together Emerson with Nietzsche and Wittgenstein. Specifically, Nietzsche’s assertion that “One should speak only where one *may* not be silent,” and Wittgenstein’s that “What we cannot speak about we must pass over in silence.” *Transcendental Etudes*, 232.

theology” (CS 4:156). Astronomy has expanded people’s understanding of God, while making certain doctrines which inflate the importance of humans, such as the “theological scheme of Redemption,” now too incredible to be true (CS 4:157). Rather than viewing science and religion as incommensurable, science should be understood as providing “correction” and “purification” to views that have always been subject to human error (CS 4:158). Demonological speculations, which attack the cohesiveness of natural science, ought to be understood as a fable of human imagination; nevertheless, they are not wholly groundless because they arise from sincere efforts to adequately express a human condition, even if they fall into error in the process. It is in this sense that “demonology is the Shadow of Theology.” It deals with the subject matter of theology—“The whole world is an omen and a sign... Man is the Image of God”—but it tries to express these relations with partial and inadequate concepts (EL 3:170). The goal, then, is not to abandon the effort to speak theologically, but to do so in a way that strives towards a universality of the spiritual that is enlarged (not reduced) by advancing natural understanding, rather than in the parochial manner of many religious creeds.

What should be clear from the foregoing section is that Emerson is not averse to theology, but he is averse to those forms of theology that aspire towards metaphysical universality or which separate the divine from human life. Emerson thinks that theology has misunderstood itself, and it ought instead to affirm consciously that it is a partial and ever-changing language used to express human duty. God functions in this theology as an ideal point towards which humans aspire, but a point that is not wholly other from the human. This ideal is an object of love, because it is love that orients the person towards an appropriately “spiritual” form of moral becoming. How this is achieved will be the focus of the next section.

b. Pantheism and Impersonality

It is tempting to suppose, and many have, that the outcome of Emerson's theological development by the end of the sermons is something akin to pantheism. Van Cromphout offers one of the strongest versions of this argument, claiming that Emerson was faced with the choice between an anthropomorphism that granted "individuality, awareness, emotions, [and] subjectivity" to God at the risk of idolatry, and "a pantheistic denial of personality to God." For Van Cromphout, Emerson would eventually settle on pantheism much in the same vein as Goethe.¹⁴⁶ This picture of Emerson as a pantheist has both benefits and limitations. It is true that towards the end of his official ministry at Second Church, his attention turns more to the "one great thought of God," in which God "is immensity and eternity... is Wisdom and Power and Love and in him all particular beings are lost as drops in the sea" (CS 4:94). The emphasis on immensity and eternity works in conjunction with Emerson's turn towards using "Unity" as a referent for the divine, which can be read as pointing in the direction of pantheism. Nevertheless, it is important to note that this "one great thought" is still tied to the "foundation and subsistency [sic] and perfection of all the virtues"—i.e. it is not a claim about the being of God, but one about God's function in the development of individuals insofar as God represents a kind of idealized virtuous (unified and universalized) character that unites the two natures of the human. So while Emerson must reject those aspects of personality that would lower the thought of God to idolatry—making God into an all-too-human creature prone to what for him is pettiness and selfish earthly motivations—God still has to have enough resemblance to the human to function

¹⁴⁶ Gustaaf Van Cromphout, *Emerson's Modernity and the Example of Goethe* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1990), 28. For an earlier and greatly influential account of Emerson as pantheist and mystic, in which he is the fulfillment of a theological trajectory set by Jonathan Edwards, see Miller's classic essay: Perry Miller, "From Edwards to Emerson," in *Ralph Waldo Emerson: A Collection of Critical Essays*, ed. Lawrence Buell (New Jersey: Prentice Hall, 1993), 13-31; originally published as "Jonathan Edwards to Emerson," *The New England Quarterly* 13 (1940): 589-617.

as a shaper of human will, that humans may become a “refulgent mirror of the presence and power and love of God” (CS 4:177). In other words, there must be enough “likeness,” to use Channing’s terminology, for the idea of God to stand as an example of a kind of perfect virtue—that it is not just the idea of a unity, but an idea of the *mind* or *will* of God, two expressions that Emerson will use extensively, to which one can rightly order oneself and towards which one can aspire. This accounts for the claim in *Nature* that religion and ethics are similar in how they introduce “ideas” into life, but that the latter is “the system of human duties commencing from man,” whereas the former is from God (CW 1:35). In this way, “Religion includes the personality of God; Ethics does not.” Religion, insofar as it represents the spiritual, is concerned with “the thoughts of the Supreme Being,” which in Emerson’s formulation of idealism in *Nature*, are the same as the “ideas” that humans are led to upon contemplation of nature (or, “intellectual science”).¹⁴⁷ By coming upon these thoughts/ideas, humans come in contact with “divine natures,” and thereby become more divine themselves (CW 1:34). Thus, the divine, at least in the late 1830s, while sometimes evoking the language of a natural pantheism, is still composed of the ideas that are supposed to be shared with humanity, and insofar as humans continue to contemplate these ideas, they continue to become more like the divine. Even in one of his last sermons, delivered for the final time in 1838, Emerson describes the purpose of worship as contemplating the idea of God, “to ask whence we came and *who* is that whence” (CS 4:162, italics in original).

Robinson is much more nuanced on this question of pantheism. His portrayal of Emerson

¹⁴⁷ Van Cromphout reads this passage as ultimately placing ethics over religion, as a superior way of considering human duties. I have trouble finding evidence for this in the text. Certainly Emerson would put ethics over the forms of religion that are manifesting at his historical moment. But in abstract, it is hard to see Emerson making a claim about religion as such. Rather, the point seems to be more about the joint nature of religion and ethics—two ways of seeing the same—than any hierarchy of them.

in the 1830s has him moving from a picture of God in which God is an elevated conception of character, to a later concept of God “freed from personality.”¹⁴⁸ For the latter position, which Robinson sees becoming prominent around 1836, there is an increased level of mysticism and a sense of the nondiscursivity of religious experiences, which makes the idea of God too ineffable to retain the elements of personality that seem to be required when God is identified with the character and the development of the soul. Thus, for Robinson, as “unity” becomes more of the mark of divinity, there is a growing impersonality to the idea of God, and God becomes more a direction of the mind than an idea of the mind. Crucial to this development is Robinson’s claim that a person is something that can be defined—whereas the notion of self-surrender to the influx of divinity, and the affective relation to unity, involves the inability to define divinity, to put it into words. Robinson focuses on the “Holiness” lecture, delivered in 1838, to make this claim. In the lecture Emerson says that the “moral sentiment” is “wholly impersonal,” but his gloss on “impersonal” is revealing: “it refers me to all the world; and is as present to every other creature, as to me. It is the law of soul, and not of my soul. It melts all things into itself, for it is itself their ground of being” (*EL* 2:345). “Impersonal” here means to indicate that what is being considered is not individual, but universal and shared; or to put it another way, to see every creature partaking of and grounded in the same moral sentiment (“our unity with all other beings” (*EL* 2:346)), even if that sentiment might reveal itself in different degrees and various “exhibitions.”¹⁴⁹ This is similar to how Sharon Cameron defines Emerson’s notion of

¹⁴⁸ *Apostle of Culture*, 129-130.

¹⁴⁹ The power of the moral to support unity and equalize all people is a crucial notion that is central for the entirety of Emerson’s career. In his 1859 lecture titled “Morals,” he puts it this way: “The moral equalizes all,—enriches, empowers all. It is the coin which buys all, and which all find in their pocket. Under the whip of the driver, the slave shall feel his equality with saints and heroes. In the greatest destitution and calamity, it surprises man with a feeling of elasticity which makes nothing of its loss” (*LL* 2:132).

impersonality as “the antidote for the egotistical, the subjective, the solipsistic.”¹⁵⁰ I take Emerson to mean the same thing when he turns to the idea of God: he identifies a tension between the human need for a “biography” of God in which God has “fingers and head and hair,” and the grandness of spiritual truth which is sublime precisely because it is separated from a “personal history” (*EL* 2:354). Giving a “name” to this God is a consequence of the human need to “apprehend the relative as flowing from the absolute” even as we strive to elevate our conception of God to that absolute. Nevertheless, the elevated conception of God is not separate from the effort to elevate one’s character, precisely because “I, the imperfect, adore my own perfect.” To be receptive to the “great soul,” he points out, is to become “less and less a private will, more truly public and human in my regards and actions” (*EL* 2:355). This idea serves as the culmination of “The American Scholar,” when Emerson concludes: “A nation of men will for the first time exist, because each believes himself inspired by the Divine Soul which also inspires all men” (*CW* 1:70). In other words, the social human can only come into being when she recognizes herself as partaking in that which everyone partakes in—an oft-misconstrued idea that one becomes more of an individual when one is able to rise above her own partiality. Robinson is right that there is a failure of language to adequately describe this unity, but this failure seems to have a deep connection to the character of human soul, insofar as that soul is equally difficult to place fully into language, especially as it concerns the growth of that soul towards becoming more public and human—and not just, as Robinson puts it, a matter of self-surrender. God is the idea attached to the direction of the mind that is indicated by the

¹⁵⁰ Sharon Cameron, *Impersonality: Seven Essays* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2007), 80. My difference with Cameron is that she takes impersonality to be, at bottom, the essential nature of humanity: that humans are only a part of the impersonal. Lawrence Buell means something similar when he describes the “impersonality” of Emerson’s God. For him, impersonality is the opposite of the individual—it is an attempt to move beyond the confines of one’s own experience to speak more broadly. I will touch on this more in the next chapter.

moral sentiment, but it seems to be no more or less definable than one's idea of a person: they are both in flux.¹⁵¹ Therefore, I don't take these claims about God to be indicative of a form of mysticism that requires self-surrender through silence like Robinson does. Rather, I take the sense of an elevation of the idea of God to involve more openness to the potential malleability of that idea, one that comes with removing it from the biographical theology that becomes another form of demonology. The stress here is on seeing oneself as more public by virtue of a higher and more unified conception of the perfect that one adores.

IV. A Theory about Religion

The previous section attempted to answer the question concerning Emerson's views on the being of God by examining how Emerson talks about theology as a language of human duty. As I noted at the outset, the question of what Emerson thinks about God is often presumed to be the most important question, or even a substitute question, for considering what Emerson thinks about religion. In this section, I develop an account of what religion is for Emerson that expands upon the claims made above, but which is not tied to the confines of God-talk. Instead, I will focus on a somewhat uncommon question concerning Emerson: what does it mean to be religious? The answer, for Emerson, has to do with how one orients oneself towards one's duties in the world, and how one's ideal (God) functions to enable one to better understand and act on those duties.

a. True Religion

One of the more common problems in reading Emerson is distinguishing between what

¹⁵¹ David L. Smith has connected this flux of the self to a larger religious project captured by the Emersonian idea of the "secret": "The mystery of the self, in its formless unity and absolute interrelationship with the world, is like a secret, and all secrets, in turn, refer to it." David L. Smith, "'The Sphinx Must Solve Her Own Riddle': Emerson, Secrecy, and the Self-Reflexive Method," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 71, no. 4 (Dec. 2003): 852.

he says about the religions of his day and what he will occasionally but not consistently refer to as “true religion.” The former refers to religion as manifested in present forms, while the latter refers to what religion could and should be, or, on Emerson’s understanding of the ideal as the truly real, what religion really is in its fully realized or essential form. When Emerson writes about religion, he is often employing one or the other sense, either religion in its social and historical manifestations, or religion in its ideal form. Too often portrayals of Emerson’s religious views focus on his condemnation of certain existing forms of religion and suppose that these criticisms extend to every possible social and historical form—i.e. that religion in all particular manifestations must be left behind, that it is all retrospective and dogmatic and unfit in its representation of Reason. This dismissal of all particular, or what Emerson calls “formal” religion, often goes hand in hand with the position that is common in the secularization thesis (see chapter one), namely, that what Emerson says of “true” or ideal religion is not actually religion at all, but a kind of secular or proto-secular ethical project. This is certainly the dominant way of reading his work from the 1840s and after (this is the topic of chapter three). Both of these views tend to obscure the careful ways in which Emerson tried to present an account of religion that would have continuing relevance as religion, preserving certain forms (the “white flower” within), and extending what he took to be the essential features of a religious life that were first developed in the sermons, but which appear throughout his corpus.¹⁵²

First, it is important to note that for Emerson the question of religion is not separate from the question of the being of God in the earliest sermons, although even in this early work the

¹⁵² This division into ideal and actual forms echoes how Andrew Dole makes sense of a similar phenomenon in Schleiermacher’s account of religion, which has also caused a great deal of confusion in the secondary literature. The difference between Schleiermacher and Emerson seems to be that the tendency for readers of Schleiermacher has been to undervalue his criticisms of actually existing religion, whereas Emerson is often taken to be critical of existing religion but not to offer an account of how religion should have and could have developed. Andrew C. Dole, *Schleiermacher on Religion and the Natural Order* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 24-27.

elements are in place for the conceptual distinction that becomes more prominent in his later established position. At the beginning of his ministry, in a sermon that he preached multiple times between 1827 and 1829, Emerson claims that the primary fact upon which all religion depends is “that there is a God to whom we stand in the relation of creatures” (*CS* 1:100). But by 1830 this relation between religion and God had begun to change. Consider, for instance, the somewhat confusing Sermon LXXXV first preached in 1830, in which Emerson rhetorically asks himself what is religion, and answers by saying: “It is the knowledge of God. It is to every mind the knowledge of God in his connexion with itself” (*CS* 2:237). He then compares this knowledge of God to a belief in the Copernican System, arguing that just as the latter supplies a “complete solution” to the observation of planetary movements, a belief in God answers a “speculative difficulty” by suppling “a rational and consistent account of the origin and destination of our race, of the inequalities of condition and the existence of pain and death” (*CS* 2:238). The first half of this sermon is devoted to laying out an answer to the skeptical question of how one can have reasonable faith in God on par with any other rational belief, as if this were the highest question that religion could ask and on which it depends. The “knowledge of God” in this sense seems to be parallel to the kind of theory that one might have with any empirical science—it supplies a way of making our observations about the world consistent with each other. But around the midway point, the question of a reasonable faith in God is changed to the importance of a “rule of life, an unerring standard by which to measure the value of every object and the claim of every duty upon us” (*CS* 2:239). Despite the seeming importance of the design argument in the first half of the sermon, God now becomes a way of making sense of the growth of our moral nature, for it is because of the “idea of God” in humans that it is possible to separate the physical person—where we find all differences of condition, all the inequalities of the human

condition—from the moral nature where no such distinctions are possible. It is in the moral nature that

[the human] is the equal of angels, of seraphim, formed of the same spiritual body, subject to the same laws, capable of their knowledge and their pleasures, comprehending what they comprehend, a spark of the same fire, a ray of the same source of light from which they same, mean as he may be, not too low for the power and the love of God to stoop, nor too far from him to inhale the breath of an immortal life. (CS 2:240)

If anything, the evidence that one would have for this idea of God is not of the head but of the heart; it is not one that needs a Copernican system to justify it, but one that only needs to awaken one's sense of the moral element that reveals a new element of a person, apart from her bodily reality. The "knowledge" in this latter instance ceases to be a way of ordering experience, but a way of creating a higher kind of human activity.

In short, Sermon LXXXV seems to supply two different ways of looking at how one might think about the essential role of religion. It both supposes that religion is dependent on having a faith in God that supplies one with an understanding of the creation of the world and humans in it (which he calls its "evidence to our understandings"), and it supposes that religion is about the activation of the moral sense in people so that they are able to recognize themselves as more than just their material condition (which he calls its "evidence to the heart") (CS 2:241).¹⁵³ Despite their presence together in the sermon, and despite the fact that one might want to hold these two elements together so that one's empirical and moral understandings of religion fit perfectly into one cohesive viewpoint, Emerson does very little to show how these two views do or should align. In other words, there is no explanation of how the understanding and the

¹⁵³ The question of the reasonableness of Christianity, represented best by Unitarian arguments concerning the epistemic status of miracles in the early nineteenth century, has been covered extensively in the secondary literature. It is often supposed that Emerson doesn't fully resolve his position on miracles until the Divinity School Address, where he clearly rejects them. Yet, it seems clear that he was already well on his way to rejecting the importance of miracles in 1830, even if he was yet unable to present the case to his congregation.

heart are connected in this view of religion—or whether you need one in order to get the other. Instead, they stand unreconciled with each other, as though Emerson had both of them in mind but hadn't figured out the connection between them yet, or if there was one. Indeed, as we follow the evolution of Emerson's thinking about religion from this point in 1830, we find that the notion of a belief in God as supplying a rational and consistent system for answering speculative questions about the human experience in the world diminishes and eventually disappears, while the notion that religion is essentially a matter of how to cultivate a particular capacity for elevating human character becomes more prominent, despite his persistent claim that most *religions* have failed to adequately pursue this task. The latter will be the option that Emerson explores in the 1830s and after.

The sermons fluctuate between these different accounts of religion as Emerson questions more and more the necessity of “evidences” of faith, and thus begins to reject the dominant role that evidence was given by Unitarian philosophers. There are many crucial places in the early sermons where we can see Emerson beginning to use language that anticipates the view he will come to take on the essence of religion for the rest of his career. For instance, he says that “pure religion” consists in doing good, in “accommodating the life of man to his destiny” (CS 1:110); “religion is the law of love” (CS 1:111); the “whole” of religion is “*in a single moment you do a single thing right*” (CS 1:175); religion is the “*home of the mind*” (CS 1:235); pure and “undefiled” religion consists in “doing good” (CS 1:253); “there is no ground for the distinction that is continually made between religion and morality” (CS 1:295); religion is “our opinion of what is the healthy state of the faculties,” and the “religious life” is the “perfection of man” (CS 2:26). The above are all indications of an account of religion that shows it to be primarily concerned with the practical activities of human life in relation to a notion of moral becoming—

which will ultimately allow him to make both critical judgments on how particular religions fulfill what are the essential purposes of religion itself, as well as make normative claims about the practice of religion in the present and future. Sermon LVI in particular points in this more mature direction as Emerson proclaims that “a religion is a theory of human life,” which can be either true or false given what it is meant to explain. Nevertheless, this theory seeks not to supply speculative answers, but to serve a moral function by giving “an account of the origin, the duty, and the destiny of the human soul” (CS 2:88). Religion in this sense stands in contrast to worldly life: worldly life provides a partial account of the soul, one that only addresses particular aspects of the human. Religion provides a sense of the wholeness of the soul by giving it a trajectory. Furthermore, the objective of any particular religion is “*by exhibiting a true account of the soul and its relations to induce it to act in a manner agreeable to its whole nature*” (CS 2:88).

In essence, a religion which follows this core objective would aim to educate and grow a person so that she is able to recognize herself apart from the value that worldly attributes would assign to her, such as “health, birth, gold, popularity, fashion, beauty” (CS 2:89). The wholeness which religion should seek to expound is one that is concerned with the future insofar as it cultivates a sense that there is an ideal worth pursuing. It is this which Emerson contrasts with skepticism—here, the notion that the human is a product of a chance conjunction of forces—which he supposes has no concrete sense of the future of the human soul, and therefore lacks the ability to shape people into better and more whole beings. The skeptic only has the present, according to Emerson, and as a consequence he is unable to rise to a view above the partial material interests of persons. Without a sense of the whole that would be realized, the skeptic has nothing to strive towards but more of the same, to be a good part of the present social system by adopting one of the roles that the system supplies—one can be “an excellent sailor, or merchant,

or public officer, but a very imperfect man” (CS 2:89). Emerson here seems to be expressing his dissatisfaction with what he takes to be Humean skepticism, which he misreads as unable to rise above the tenets of “common life” to supply a radical-enough philosophical vision of the possibilities of human ethical becoming.¹⁵⁴

The idea that a religion is a theory of human life that presents it in its wholeness is the one that Emerson further develops in his ministry in the 1830s. He will often translate specific Christian theological points into this schema. For instance, Sermon CXI claims that the “law of the Lord” is nothing but “the moral constitution of man,” which all religions are attempting to articulate, although all are necessarily imperfect (CS 3:126). In fact, if one examines each dogma “received by multitudes” (meaning one that is formed by a community with a history, not just a private individual’s religion), one will find that at bottom they are grounded in “some eternal truth in moral nature” however distorted that truth may be (CS 3:127). In a move that would have appeared as an unwelcome conservatism to liberal Unitarianism, Emerson argues that even a doctrine like justification through faith alone has some moral truth in it: “Now though this *language* is incorrect, the doctrine is bottomed in eternal truth. We *must* give up our selfrighteousness. We can have no merits to plead before God” (CS 3:127). The move is a similar one to what we saw earlier: to see the errors of the claim in its misappropriation of language, and to find the truth in what motivated that language—here, the truth is a claim about being humble, a common topic of his preaching. He speaks of the “law of the Lord” as “obedience to the Commandments,” which is another way of saying that all religions supply a sense of what it means to be good by doing one’s duty and bringing one to higher virtue, i.e. a view on “the true or right way of living for the creature Man” (CS 3:253). The language Emerson employs here is

¹⁵⁴ For an excellent account of Hume’s “common life,” see David W. Livingston, *Hume's Philosophy of Common Life* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984).

Christian, but he is explicit that he thinks Christianity is only one particular interpretation of the Commandments, one particular interpretation of duty (CS 3:249).¹⁵⁵

By 1832, Emerson is calling for a “living religion” that flows from all things and controls human life, one in which the belief in the eternity of God is seen for what it really is, a “moral doctrine” that has a practical effect on people by animating every aspect of their lives. With this comes a continually regenerating worship that matches the continually regenerating creation, where people work “to worship more plainly, more directly, with fewer errors, with fewer mediums to offer its homage” (CS 4:160-164). Emerson believed that he had gotten to a central feature of what all particular religions are attempting to express—that is, they are these theories that attempt to specify the moral nature of the individual that give her both a past, present, and future that is distinct from a mere material existence. Once one understands this, Emerson thinks that we can now talk about the relationship of worship to this understanding of what religion is in abstract. In other words, we are in a position to talk about how a changing set of understandings about ourselves ought to lead to a more refined sense of the practice of a particular religious worship. Thus, a living religion would be one that accords with a proper understanding of what religion is in essence.

b. Misunderstanding Religion

Despite there being so many forms of religion, Emerson notes that most people

¹⁵⁵ It is in this sense that religions, for Emerson, resemble “living traditions,” which MacIntyre defines as a “historically extended, socially embodied argument, and an argument precisely in part about the goods which constitute that tradition.” Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory*, third edition (Indiana: Notre Dame Press, 2007), 222. Nevertheless, Emerson would probably be closer to Stout’s understanding of tradition as a “discursive practice considered in the dimension of history,” where Stout explicitly locates Emerson as part of a tradition of democratic thinking that is a tradition but not *traditionalist* because it does not rely on a set of authoritative elements, but is democratically and dialogically open. Jeffrey Stout, *Democracy and Tradition* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004), 135-139.

misunderstand them both in terms of belief and practice. He writes: “Religion as it respects the understanding or Faith is confounded with Credulity; and Religion as its respects the practice is confounded with a form” (CS 3:254). In other words, people mistakenly suppose that religion is all about the willingness to believe certain propositions, or the willingness to engage in certain formal rituals. Instead, a proper understanding of religion ought to include a conjunction of belief and practice, when both are understood in their proper normative context as promoting an ongoing transformation of the person. One must have belief because one must understand and reflect on what one is doing (“Until it is understood, it is not truth to the mind”) (CS 3:255). And one must have practice, but only if that practice is more than merely formal, because if a person is only going through the motions, the “substance” of the practice of religion is not able to affect the heart (CS 3:256).¹⁵⁶ He often will preach on the relation between forms and substances, where the substance is the principle that the form is intended to cultivate: fasting is based on “the subjection of the body to the soul;” humiliation¹⁵⁷ is “the acknowledgment of unworthiness; of sin; of being less than we ought;” and prayer is “a constant acknowledgment, which makes a part of every thought, that we are wholly [God’s] work, and wholly bound to do his will” (CS 4:111, 113, 114). Indeed, one of Emerson’s most recognized criticisms of the Unitarians is that far too many of them are going through the motions for poor reasons such as social standing or an unwillingness to step away from historical traditions. Thus, “pure religion consists in understanding and doing the commandments or in doing right from a right motive, but false

¹⁵⁶ As much as Emerson will place value on the performance of certain religious practices (see below), he does have a great deal of Augustinian anxiety, using Jennifer Herdt’s definition of the term, about the ability of actions to transform the actor without the actor having some virtuous quality of self or motive prior to the action. Jennifer A. Herdt, *Putting On Virtue: The Legacy of the Splendid Vices* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008).

¹⁵⁷ Emerson’s example comes from the instructions to people with leprosy in Leviticus 13:45. He concedes that these are “signs” that have rightly been abandoned, without giving an equivalent example of Christian self-abasement. Thus, it really isn’t clear what particular “form” he has in mind.

religion consists in taking commandments without understanding them and keeping them outwardly and not inwardly” (CS 3:254). Insofar as Unitarianism begins to lapse into an outward keeping of the commandments, it strays from what religion is supposed to do, and becomes false—false because it fails to provide the kind of spiritual elevation and unity that is the essential feature of religion. One could say that for Emerson, proper belief is both inward and outward, just as proper practice must be both inward and outward—one without the other, for either belief or practice, ends up bringing a partial and destructive force that only further suppresses one’s moral becoming.

This sense of religion as both inward and outward is often absent in portrayals of Emerson. Given his indictment of so many religious forms, it has often been supposed by commentators that his ideal religion is an internalized one, that what matters most is the particular internal or mental state of the person (his talk of the “soul”), and not so much the outward manifestations (the particular rituals or rites) that are traditionally taken to be an integral part of religion. For instance, the great historian of Unitarianism, C. Conrad Wright, claimed that Emerson has a defective representation of the religious community because he had “no adequate doctrine of human relatedness, no doctrine of institution, no doctrine of the Church.”¹⁵⁸ Certainly Emerson does place a great deal of emphasis on one’s individual relation to the spiritual, oftentimes speaking of the spiritual as an “internal” nature that is opposed to the external world, which would include one’s social relations. Nevertheless, Emerson does warn against a wholly private worship, and thinks that formal outward worship is important. He claims that some form of public worship is important because public worship engages the senses, which can help practitioners to address the “purposes of life” through engagement with these sensuous

¹⁵⁸ C. Conrad Wright, “Soul is Good, but Body is Good Too,” *The Journal of Unitarian Universalist History* 37 (2014): 18. The article is based on a lecture that Wright gave numerous times between 1978 and 1988.

representations (CS 3:167). In fact, Emerson says that it would be foolish and dangerous to suppose that one is all soul, rather than body and soul: “Those who would have the kingdom of heaven *wholly* within, have sometimes exhibited the kingdom of hell without” (CS 3:167). The point is that it makes little sense to have a genuine inner spiritual life without that sense of spiritually within having direct expression in one’s actions. The “inner” and “outer” are two sides of the same thing. Because of this, attention needs to be paid to religious practices because humans need a form of outward worship with its shared social representations of religious life, one that is integrated with and cultivated by habituation into a right and proper religious feeling.

The role of habit here is important, and serves as one of Emerson’s important practical themes. Because Emerson holds that the nature of humans is not stable but always changing, it is our actions that play a significant role in always reshaping us and/or holding us stable as beings. He writes: “For every man is what he is, not by original creation, but by his way of living, that is, by his habits,” so much so that “Habit sears the Conscience itself” (CS 2:78, 80). Thus, habits can be either beneficial or poisonous: they have the ability to shape us into better creatures when they are cultivated intentionally for the good, and they have the ability to corrupt the conscience when either their importance is neglected or they are cultivated wrongly. We must use our reason to inform our habits so that we do not unreflectively slide into habits, but form them deliberately (CS 4:74). If public worship is to serve as a positive cultivation of persons, then it ought to be such that it habituates certain practices that encourage and develop good religious feeling. Without this proper habituation, it is possible that our moral “compass” becomes useless and “we should not know the way to right” (CS 2:80). In fact, reformers use this process of habit formation to remake society, something which Emerson thinks is especially apparent in the religious education of children, since humans tend to take up habits early that are not so easily

changed later. This fact can be either good or bad, depending on the specific habits that are produced by this education. Thus, education ought to take note that “a habit is stronger than a hundred reasons,” and strive to be as intentional as possible with how children are educated, lest they be given habits that are nearly impossible to change later (CS 4:96).¹⁵⁹

Nevertheless, this sense of public worship informs Emerson’s general reorientation of the “church.” As an institution, he thinks that the church has failed insofar as it “is not broad enough for man” because it has been confined to too narrow a set of resources, unable to speak in anything other than its own “dialect” (EL 3:287). This is why Emerson provocatively flirts with the idea of replacing the word “church” with “education,” since the latter might “be as broad as man.” While this substitution of words is striking, it aligns with the purpose of the church that Emerson had laid out: that it ought to “embody” truths and laws “in outward form, for the sake of preserving to the seer himself the remembrance of his vision, and of provoking all men to efforts after this beatitude” (EL 2:93). When speaking of the “seer” here, Emerson does not mean to indicate the mystic or someone with a special ability. Rather, the “seer” is someone who is able to glimpse aspects of the “true *Revelation*,” which in characteristic fashion, is a term that Emerson redefines in thoroughly naturalistic terms as “the aggregate of the truths concerning the nature of man and the laws for human life, announced at different times and through many media” (EL 2:92).

These points about church and revelation come from Emerson’s 1937 lecture titled “Religion,” the first of a series of lectures with the same title. This particular lecture is important as an early formulation of Emerson’s account of religion outside of the sermon structure, one that

¹⁵⁹ Nevertheless, Wright is correct that there is very little in the way of concrete practical suggestions about how the church ought to be structured. Emerson is clearly more concerned with the theory of religious formation than he is with the specific forms that it ought to take. I will return to Wright’s criticism in the next section in relation to the Divinity School Address.

serves as the groundwork for the Divinity School Address and which contains, in nascent form, some of the themes that become more prominent in the work of the early 1840s. This lecture is particularly notable for its development of a form of immanent transcendence as a primary element of religion. In the lecture, Emerson lays out the importance of the affective dimension of religion by stressing that it activates a somewhat unique kind of feeling. He claims that virtue consists in bringing one's individual will into alignment with universal mind, and that "religion is the accompanying emotion, the emotion of reverence which the presence of the Universal mind always excites in the individual" (*EL* 2:84). The Universal mind is Emerson's way of speaking about the product of "reason"—the sense of shared nature that transcends the particular manifestations of individuals and enables us to act out of duty in accordance with nature to the benefit of all, not just individual pursuits (this is a topic that is developed more in chapter three). But this form of transcendence does not mean that one leaves this world for some metaphysically other world. It is, as David Smith has called it, a "this-worldly" transcendence.¹⁶⁰ As in the question of pantheism, the temptation is to read the universal mind as a metaphysical claim about something above or beyond the world in which we are embedded. But as I argued above, the true import of these claims about universal mind is not meant to be descriptive of the universe as it is, but to describe the moral life of individuals in which there is a sense of shared purpose apart from my personal interests. Although Emerson is relying on this idea in the early work, he will not fully explicate it until the 1840s, where *Essays: First Series*, as I will argue in the next chapter, can be read as an extended meditation on this idea. Nonetheless, it is clear at this point in his career that religion's particular value—a point that is part of Emerson's appropriation of

¹⁶⁰ In this, I agree with Smith's formulation of transcendence: "Emerson's transcendence ... has nothing to do with a metaphysical other world. It consists, rather, in realizing that there is an alternative to the discursive, 'manipular' habit of thought that typically distracts us from the fact of our absolute imbeddedness in this world. If we feel lost or cut off from the whole, it is only because we tend to forget what we really are." Smith, "Who Shall Define," 210.

Coleridge's "reason"—resides in the realization that truths about our moral nature are both intellectual and affective, and that in that conjunction of the intellectual and the affective one can find a form of transcendence that serves practical purposes. Thus, the religious sentiment, or religious feeling, is that particular affective faculty of humans that is stoked upon the acquisition of a better understanding of, and an elevation of, a shared moral nature. One not only thinks herself to be part of something larger than her individual self, but she feels it as well.

Above I mentioned Emerson's claim that sometimes silence is the most appropriate response to describing God. In the 1837 "Religion" lecture, Emerson writes that we "lie open on one side to all the deeps of spiritual nature; to all the attributes of God." But this is not a part of us to which we have constant access, and therefore language cannot always "paint it with his colors" (*EL* 2:85-86). Thus, Emerson gives three marks for knowing that a religious "intuition" pertains to "spiritual being": its universality (that all humans partake in a Unity with regard to duty), its usefulness (right actions prove profitable), and its power to exalt (*EL* 2:86-87). These three marks are central to the core of religion: the "perpetual substitution of Being for Seeming," which is a rehearsal of God saying *I am* (*EL* 2:95).¹⁶¹ They are at the same time thought and felt, and in the interplay of thought and feeling, sometimes language fails. The declaration of being, which Cavell has written about extensively as it appears in "Self-Reliance" as Emerson's way of reading the Cartesian *cogito*, is directly related to the voicing of the divine name—with its universality, usefulness, and power to exalt. Yet Cavell thinks that for Emerson "there is a sense

¹⁶¹ A similar account is given in the "Holiness" lecture: "He quickly sees that this faint spiritual perception in the bottom of the heart is alive, maketh a new state every moment; is of an inexhaustible fruitfulness; is of an agreement with all persons, with all things. Whatsoever is compared with it, becomes a thing, a fact, before it. This forever lives. First, he suspects, then he affirms, *This is God. I am dwelling with Him*" (*EL* 2:343). Spiritual perception (or intuition) is universal (in agreement with all persons and things), useful (it makes things or facts, because it is fruitful), and it exalts (it makes new states and reveals that one dwells with God).

of being the author of oneself that does not require me to imagine myself God”¹⁶² Here, at least, the substitution of Being for Seeming as a representation of the divine name is clearly positing a relationship between human becoming and the sense of being divine—perhaps not that one must imagine herself to be God, but must imagine herself to be a participant in a collective divine nature. This divine nature, though, is our way of talking about the trajectory of human becoming in a this-worldly transcendence. Thus, for Emerson, religion in its essential or “true” form is the full realization and affective experience of this divine participation. The best forms of religion, he would say, are better insofar as they create forms of worship that instill the kinds of virtues that lead to better human becoming, and worse insofar as they distract from it.

V. Interlude on the Divinity School Address

Having tried to recreate Emerson’s account of religion in the 1820s and 1830s in this chapter, I want to turn now to perhaps the most widely read statement of his religious views. I will use the Divinity School Address as the culmination of the period leading up to its delivery on July 15, 1838, deploying the terms that this chapter has developed to inform the address’ theological positions. There is much indication that Emerson worked more diligently on this address as a statement of his religious views than he had on any previous piece he had written, and he was somewhat surprised at the extremes of the reactions against him.¹⁶³ As Robinson points out, the address comes directly after Emerson ended his semi-permanent position as a supply preacher in East Lexington, and it can be read as, at least in part, an attempt to justify the

¹⁶² *Transcendental Etudes*, 89.

¹⁶³ Classically, this was a point made by Whicher. *Freedom and Fate*, 72-76.

decision after the fact.¹⁶⁴ Although many of the views it presents are not new, it does mark the moment when Emerson comes to prominence as a public critic of religion—and by most accounts, the adverse reaction of the public caused him great consternation.¹⁶⁵

The address can be divided into roughly four sections. The first, which consists of the first three paragraphs, is a brisk summary of the emergence of a human self aware of itself, or what can be considered Emerson's somewhat truncated version of the Fall—it begins with the mind's immediate experience of and in the natural world (para. 1); the mind then becomes aware of itself as subject with the questions “What am I? and What is?” (para. 2); and finally it discovers that the end of the human is virtue and duty (para. 3). The second section of the address is made up of the next nine paragraphs which describe the essence of religion as the religious sentiment. The third and longest section looks at the deficiencies of the present church and its insufficient attempts to represent the essence of religion with the three marks that I above highlighted: it must be universal, useful, and exalting. The fourth section, which consists of the final seven paragraphs, is Emerson's instruction to the young ministers in the room (including the established ministers, who were just as numerous) on what can be done to rehabilitate Christian practice and the church to better develop religious sentiment and “acquaint men at first hand with Deity” (CW 1:90). The first two sections are an account of humans and religion in abstraction from the “cultus,” and thus separate from any particular manifestation of a formal religion, i.e. Christianity. This is indicated by Emerson's transition paragraph between the sections, which describes the movement of the address as going from “general views” to their “administration” (CW 1:80-81). Sections three and four are specific to the Christian cultus, and

¹⁶⁴ *Apostle of Culture*, 134.

¹⁶⁵ Robinson, *Mind on Fire*, 298-300.

thus more a question of application than of a general theory of religion. I put it polemically this way because there is often taken to be a kind of discord between the high praise of an exhilarating religious sentiment and the insistence at the end to breathe new life into “the forms already existing” (CW 1:92).¹⁶⁶ The address is attempting to do something that is necessarily tenuous: to say something about the essence of religion even though all attempts to do so are incomplete and soon to be superseded, and to describe how formal religion can best reflect that essence even though forms are partial and evolving. If we were to state the theological purposes of the address as succinctly as possible, Emerson hopes to model the kind of endless self-critical reflection that religious leaders ought to embody if they are to prepare the church for future religious needs.

Perhaps the most important aspect of the first section of the address is that it presents the emergence of the moral sentiment as a development and maturation of the mind. The first sentence gives birth to the mind, as it draws “the breath of life” (CW 1:76). The mind then exists in an immediate sensual relationship with the natural world. The next paragraph begins with the mind opening to the laws of the universe, before which the world shrinks and the mind inquires into its own nature as mind. Here is where the first person pronoun is first used—no longer is it an immediate sensation of and delight in the world, but now “I would study, I would know, I would admire forever” (CW 1:77). The third paragraph introduces the “ought,” which allows the mind to realize that it was born to something higher, that the human is an aspirant after Right, Truth, and Virtue. These become the end of creation, rather than delight in the experience of

¹⁶⁶ Chapter one addressed this discord as it is presented by Schmidt. Following Wright, some would claim that because Emerson’s only real contribution to the reform of church practices is Emerson’s praise of the Sabbath and the institution of preaching, he fails to address successfully the corporate dimension of religious life, that the church is a community that acts on the social order, and thus fails to reform Unitarianism. Wright, 19. Thus, the true hero of Wright’s account is James Freeman Clarke, who appreciates the criticisms of the church, but answers them with ecclesiastical reforms rather than theoretical reforms.

sensuous nature. Importantly, with the moral sentiment, “the soul first knows itself” (CW 1:79). Emerson is not taking it for granted that the moral sentiment will be fully present in every person alongside the sensuous—rather, work needs to be done, which recalls Emerson’s emphasis on the importance of education and habituation in the sermons. The divide between the spiritual and the worldly is very much the same as it was before: the spiritual is used to mark off that which points toward the cultivation of humanity through the more complete awareness of shared duty. It is thus up to Emerson to say what this “intuition” of the moral sentiment amounts to, and what it dictates for human becoming.

But before going too far, we are confronted with the inevitability of silence as the posture of true knowing. The project itself becomes tenuous: although we can get a loose grasp of the laws of the moral sentiment, and we can relate them to our sense of the spiritual, attempts to fully grasp the objects of sentiment through thought, or state them in words, will never prove adequate for capturing them. But because religion (both in essence and in form, it would seem) depends on saying something about the object of the moral sentiment, we must think and speak it even if our efforts are inadequate and always subject to more self-critical inquiry. Since the intuition is supplying “an insight of the perfection of the laws of the soul,” it is imperative that we have some sense of what the perfection might be—otherwise, human efforts to bring the actual closer to the ideal are cut adrift (CW 1:77). God is again our way of talking about this perfect. Despite knowing that the idea of God as we formulate it is only tentative, it nevertheless performs the work of orienting our becoming. To perform good deeds is to ennoble oneself, and that ennobling is an attempt to strive towards the moral ideal that we talk about as God: “If a man is at heart just, then in so far is he God; the safety of God, the immortality of God, the majesty of

God do enter into that man with justice” (CW 1:78).¹⁶⁷ We have a “rapid intrinsic energy” that causes us to strive towards this figure of absolute goodness, thus making us “the Providence” to ourselves (ibid.). We return here again to the image of the kingdom of heaven: insofar as we make ourselves good, we surround ourselves with goodness, and thus “of their own volition, souls proceed into heaven, into hell.”

Emerson also gives a version of his notion of what he often calls “compensation”: the idea that virtuous action is that which accords with the natural world insofar as it is both conspiring with the natural world, and rewarded by it.¹⁶⁸ I fully explore Emerson’s mature understanding of compensation in the following chapter where it becomes a significant part of *Essays: First Series*. Emerson anticipates his fully developed position in the address by using his later language of compensation as the product of “one will” or “one mind” that is everywhere operative. Echoing the earlier claim in *Nature* that religion treats duty under the personality of God, Emerson makes compensation into a way of viewing moral development in Christian terms. This is what Emerson refers to as the “law of laws,” the idea that there is a universality to the moral sentiment both as it presents itself in persons, and as it presents itself in the world. Importantly, we are also told that the *religious sentiment* is the affective response to universality that Emerson contrasts to “thought,” which “may work cold and intransitive in things, and find no end or unity” (CW 1:79). Here again we see Emerson’s concession to the skeptic that her

¹⁶⁷ This is classically one of the unnerving lines for debates about Emerson’s view on God. If Emerson were more a theist, he might have said “If a man is at heart just, then in so far is he God-like.” If Emerson were more pantheistic, he might have said “If a man is at heart just, then he is God.” Lawrence Buell highlights this passage as one of the prime areas where Emerson is trying to make an impression rather than trying to get across a clear truth. *Literary Transcendentalism*, 14-15. While I think that Emerson surely is trying to make an impression, I take his point to also be that God-talk is a constant wavering, is always in transition.

¹⁶⁸ Emerson spoke of compensation often in his sermons, usually to reassure his listeners that they ought not to worry about bad consequences coming from good actions (CS 1:78, 197-199, 299; 2:19, 218). The doctrine of compensation is also viewed by those who wish to follow a “secular” Emersonian ethics as one of his most difficult ideas to overcome. John T. Lysaker, *Emerson & Self-Culture* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2008).

doubts about the extent of what we can learn solely from the world are correct, while at the same time he rejects the notion that skepticism is conclusive because it does not account for how the growth of this moral sentiment is “divine and deifying.” Instead, the religious sentiment is a democratizing force, for not only does it show “the fountain of all good to be in himself,” but it is also shared “equally with every man” because each is “an inlet into the deeps of Reason” (ibid.).

In fact, religious sentiment presents a guide for public worship: for worship to be ennobling, and thus for it to serve in assisting one in moving the actual closer to the ideal, it can only be provocation. It can only be provocation because it must honor the way that the affective religious sentiment is not something that can be taught. Rather, it must be provoked—or we might say, inspired. This is not something that occurs in one’s isolation, though. For one must be provoked by others in a social space shaped for that to occur. If one wants to know how to evaluate whether forms of public worship are adequate to the religious sentiment, then one asks whether or not it can keep “the high ends of being” in sight, that is, if it can continually provoke people towards that high and higher end, rather than losing sight of it and resting content in the present moment, in the state of beings as they are (CW 1:80).

Thus, Emerson’s advice is not to *sign off*—that is, do not remove oneself from the official register of the church, as Thoreau famously did, thereby signaling that you are no longer a part of your local congregation.¹⁶⁹ One shouldn’t sign off because the loss of public worship exacerbates the problem, because it leads to further fragmentation as the Genius that once found home in “the temple” is dispersed into efforts at worldly gain, not lighting the “eye of youth... by the hope of

¹⁶⁹ Thoreau “signed off” by sending a letter to First Parish in Concord on January 6, 1841. By contrast, Emerson reconfirmed his membership to First Parish in 1865 and 1876, a membership he had never relinquished. These letters are part of the First Parish in Concord collection held by the Concord Free Public Library.

other worlds” (CW 1:89). Critics often point to Emerson’s bold declaration of a solution to the decaying of religious sentiment in the church: “first, soul, and second, soul, and evermore, soul” (92). The point of soul, though, is bring new life to the existing cultus, not to establish a new one, not to contrive new systems. Soul makes these old forms become “plastic and new,” allowing worship to go through continual change and regeneration to match the evolving religious sentiment. Importantly, I take it that Emerson’s anticipation of the “new Teacher” is itself an anticipation for better and more adequate portrayals of divinity (a reformation of theology), which are housed in a more refined understanding of religion. The “new Teacher” is that better attempt at coming up with a unification of human moral life (the spiritual) with the actual circumstances of life, or, as he concludes:

I look for the new Teacher, that shall follow so far those shining laws, that he shall see them come full circle; shall see their rounding complete grace; shall see the world to be the mirror of the soul; shall see the identity of the law of gravitation with purity of heart; and shall show that the Ought, that Duty, is one thing with Science, with Beauty, and with Joy. (CW 1:93)

The new Teacher is a figure that Emerson will come back to again and again in his work, presenting it in various guises as the Poet, the Representative Man, and the redeemer/new speaker. This new Teacher is essential to the project of moral perfectionism not because the teacher somehow presents the ideal in all its specificity so that no further work is needed, but because the teacher is a pinnacle in the presentation of the ideal at the moment, to be superseded, of course, in the next moment. In this sense, we are always looking for the new Teacher. In the Divinity School Address we see how this new Teacher is itself a part of the social community, that is, he has a role to play in the public worship in which the church does its work. And as will become more apparent in the next chapter, the way that this Teacher stands as an emblem of the unity of duty, science, and beauty—or what he will also call moral science, natural science, and

art—reveals that this is not a person that we should expect to find, but one that we are always looking for. It is a vision of the completeness of character, even as we acknowledge that there is no such complete character nor could we hope to become one. In that sense, the teacher is a figure that functions only within a kind of perfectionist striving, an ideal that resembles the theologically ideal divine, one to be pursued but not achieved, to be recognized as our ideal and not an ideal given to us from elsewhere. To make sense of this, we must turn to Emerson's mature period.

CHAPTER THREE – DEVELOPING THE MORAL-RELIGIOUS SENTIMENT

We are not strong by our power to penetrate, but by our relatedness. (CW
7:11.25)

Introduction

After he delivered the Divinity School Address on July 15, 1838, Emerson was surprised by the intensity of the controversy that he had stirred. Surely he knew that parts of the address would offend the conservative Unitarians in his audience, but he had been invited to speak—presumably because of his theological positions, not despite them—and he felt that it would be insulting to his audience and intellectually dishonest to himself to do anything other than speak forthrightly: “I would not pay the nobleness of my friends so mean a compliment as to suppress any opposition to their supposed views out of fear of offence” (*L* II:150). As part of the fallout from the address, Emerson had spurred a public debate about the basis of his supposedly radical new religious views, a debate he silently followed with much chagrin.¹⁷⁰ His longtime friend, Henry Ware Jr., began speaking publicly against him in an attempt to incite Emerson to supply more substantial arguments for his theological positions. In his correspondence with Ware, Emerson made it clear that not only was he unable to do this, but that perhaps there was

¹⁷⁰ For an excellent overview of the varied responses to the address, see Philip Gura, *American Transcendentalism: A History* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2007), 105-116. For an account of the address that relies heavily on the journals and focuses on Emerson’s feeling that his words were a failure of eloquence, and thus a failure to fully actualize the moral law, see John Michael, *Emerson and Skepticism: The Cipher of the World* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1988), 21-32.

something wrong with the very prospect of defending one's theological "thesis" against all who challenge it. He wrote to his friend, "I could not give account of myself if challenged[.] I could not possibly give you one of the 'arguments' on which as you cruelly hint any position of mine stands. For I do not know, I confess, what arguments mean in reference to any expression of a thought" (*L* II:167). Emerson's point was not that one is entitled to believe whatever one wants in religious matters; rather, a public speaker is required to say truthfully how he perceives that which is around him, and what one honestly declares will ultimately be proved either true or false by how it compares to Truth. What this means for Emerson, and what this chapter will explore in what follows, is that these theological views are true only insofar as they remain supportive of the moral sentiment and the goal of continual spiritual uplift, not only in one's own development, but also as part of a social body to which one is in affective relation and towards which one has ethical obligations. Far from being a simple claim that one's theological discourse is true only insofar as it contributes to moral progress, Emerson has a quite distinct understanding of the depth to which social ties constitute human persons, which functions in conjunction with his concern for the individual. It is through the combination of his concern for the social body and the individual that we can understand the religious sentiment as a force enabling change through a constant exchange between persons.¹⁷¹ Consequently, we can see

¹⁷¹ This view is clear in Emerson's response to William Silsbee, a minister in Walpole, New Hampshire, who had written to Emerson seeking his help in clarifying some questions that were being put to him about the religious views of Transcendentalism by members of his congregation. Emerson tells Silsbee that he cannot answer his questions because the kind of definitive proposition that Silsbee is looking for is not one that is amenable to the nature of the religious. Instead, "we generalize & rectify our expressions by continual efforts from day to day, from month to month, to reconcile our own sight with that of our companions." Ultimately, it is this dialectical interaction and constant emendation that ensures "two inquirers have the best mutual action on each other" (*L* 7:320). Rather than a simple evasion of the question, Emerson's move here is supremely telling: he is unable to give straightforward answers to religious questions because the very process of coming to religious expressions is one that has as its main goal the betterment of individuals in social interactions with each other. This kind of aid, rather than simply imparting one's views to another, is "only incidental, lateral, & sympathetic. If we are true and benevolent, we reenforce each other by every act & word" (*L* 7:321). Furthermore, as I developed in the previous chapter, one's theological views, especially one's views on the "Supreme Being," are very much determined by the individual "for, every man's idea of God is the last or most comprehensive generalization at which he has arrived,"

theological discourse as a way in which the religious sentiment is communicated and duty is made explicit.

One of the primary questions animating Emerson's mature work is how one makes sense of these religious feelings, or sentiments, in relation to the moral project. As Emerson begins to speak less on traditional theological questions, he does not abandon the importance of religion for the cultivation of a virtuous life. As I developed in the previous chapters, many readers of Emerson see him diminishing the importance of religion sometime in either the late 1830s or early 1840s. Even the most astute contemporary scholar of Emerson's religious views, David Robinson, begins his influential *Emerson and the Conduct of Life* by giving a partial repudiation of his earlier work, which had portrayed Emerson as building upon the core tenets of Unitarianism throughout his career. Thus, Robinson amends his earlier view in *Apostle of Culture* by focusing instead on how "the 1840s saw an acceleration of Emerson's trajectory into secularism, and we find there a figure who seems less a theologian once removed into visionary romanticism than a protomodernist, struggling against skepticism for some new form of philosophical grounding."¹⁷² Despite this change, Robinson does say that what is consistent throughout the entirety of Emerson's career is his faith in the moral sentiment and how this moral sentiment figures into the lives of individuals.¹⁷³ However, in Robinson's examination of "Worship," he is willing to admit that Emerson is trying to construct "religion in a new form," a

and the effort to state these views "in a few propositions" is always deterred by a "certain religious feeling" (*L* 7:320).

¹⁷² David M. Robinson, *Emerson and the Conduct of Life: Pragmatism and Ethical Purpose in the Later Work* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 4.

¹⁷³ Robinson develops an account that focuses on Emerson's shifting epistemological views on this sentiment—going through various crises and periods of skepticism—but during which he never relinquished the moral sentiment as the central philosophical idea of his work. For Robinson, Emerson ultimately "discovered the courage to act under the shadow of uncertainty." *Ibid.*, 7.

claim that seems undeniable given the prominence of religion in Emerson's thinking during this late period of his work.¹⁷⁴ Robinson's claim about the secularity of the later Emerson seems to be built upon a reading in which Emerson grounds the ethical life in a form of mystical ecstasy early in his career, but ultimately comes to change that ground with his later pragmatic concern with the conduct of life. Or as Robinson puts it, "the fading of visionary ecstasy as a reliable religious foundation eventuated in Emerson's gradual orientation toward ethical engagement as a means of spiritual fulfillment."¹⁷⁵ To put it rather simply, as Emerson abandons his mysticism, he becomes an ethical pragmatist.

The problem with this view on the secularization of Emerson is that "religion" seems to mean two different things at the same time. Take Robinson for example: when he claims that Emerson is progressing into secularism, he seems to be pitting the notion of *religious* ecstasy against *secular* pragmatism. In other words, "religion" is being construed primarily in terms of a kind of individual ecstatic vision or directly experienced revelation that is contrasted with the less-ecstatic, mundane notion of a worldly pragmatism. But because Robinson must make sense of Emerson's explicit concern for rehabilitating religion in his later works, he has to read "religion" in the later works as no longer primarily defined by ecstasy but by a concern for particular forms of religious practice in relation to the everyday conduct of life. Insofar as Emerson is concerned with religion in his later career, it becomes a *lesser* or *secularized* religious interest because it is contained to the more mundane and quotidian practical aspects of

¹⁷⁴ Ibid., 147.

¹⁷⁵ Ibid., 3. Part of Robinson's problem here is that he takes mysticism to be a "private" form of spiritual experience, and thus it must necessarily differ from the public and social kind of spiritual experience that Emerson will also describe. Robinson seems more inclined to call the former religion and the latter ethical pragmatism, thus giving him a way to witness secularization in Emerson's thought. Robinson does highlight the connection between the importance of social development in the domestic sphere in the sermons, and how that is present in *Society and Solitude*, but yet not seem to make the claim that this has been essential to Emerson's "religion" from the beginning. Ibid., 170-171.

religious life. As I hope was made clear in the previous chapter, my own view is that there is far more to Emerson's understanding of what constitutes "religion" than just ecstasy in the early works. The concern for formation, particular practices of worship, the dialectical account of theology as a language of duty, and one's relation to an ongoing tradition all appear to be vital elements of how Emerson situates his understanding of his religious thought throughout the corpus. Furthermore, when Emerson explicitly details his understanding of "religion," it tends to mean not some form of mysticism but rather the particular faculty—call it religious sentiment or the moral part of religion or the spiritual—that has always been central to Emerson's anthropology. This does not mean that Robinson is incorrect to see Emerson as placing more emphasis on mystical ecstasy in the early works and more on ethical pragmatism in the later works. But we ought not to assume that this transition is in any way secularizing—it isn't a movement to becoming more secular precisely because Emerson's commitment to understanding the religious sentiment is a continuing goal throughout, even if particular aspects of that sentiment are emphasized at different points in his work. To put it quite directly, Emerson's religious thought reflects his standing commitment to seeing religion itself as a progressive phenomenon that takes different shapes at different times, and it is only the scholar's interpretive commitment to understanding religion as individual mystical ecstasy as opposed to a practical quotidian experience that makes it seem as though Emerson is becoming more secular.

By paying attention to Emerson's specific conception of religion, we can see how dynamic his religious thought truly is, and how it should be read as a continuous project of trying to hold the religious and the moral together. One of the recurring ways of doing this is by reflecting on the quotidian practices of common life as the primary site of religious sentiment. In effect, I am taking Emerson at his word that there are certain foundational claims about religion

that have informed his entire corpus.¹⁷⁶ Robinson does a better job than most of allowing Emerson's late thought to be essentially informed by his desire to establish a new kind of religion—even if, ultimately, it seems that Robinson thinks this makes him more secular. My goal in this chapter is build upon Robinson's insights, but to forefront the religious sentiment as a continuing thread throughout in a way that does not read its concern for the non-ecstatic ordinary as a move away from religion.

Some critics have not allowed Emerson any amount of continuity in his religious thought on this point, reading his later period as expressing of a proto-modernism in which he rejects his early view that the moral/religious sentiment is built upon an a kind of transcendence (and thus provides an escape from the confines of the natural world), thereby accepting a naturalistic and secular understanding of human morality. The crisis that causes this conversion is a skeptical one according to this story, one inspired by Emerson's growing awareness of the natural sciences that show that our world is all there is—in essence, making the late Emerson an early Nietzsche. Very few have dissented from this paradigm because it makes up one pillar of a dominant metanarrative about American literature in which the middle of the nineteenth century represents the emergence of a non- or irreligious literature out of the previous period of pervasively religious literature. Very few have taken the view which Rene Wellek polemically made in 1965

¹⁷⁶ As I began last chapter, these are: “that the Author of Nature has not left himself without a witness in any sane mind: that the moral sentiment speaks to every man the law after which the Universe was made; that we find parity, identity of design, through Nature, and benefit to be the uniform aim: that there is a force always at work to make the best better and the worst good” (W 11:486). In his otherwise excellent account of Emerson's ethics, Van Cromphout comes closest to making the moral and the religious of a piece, but he reads the moral sentiment as eventually detaching from its earlier traditionally “religious” basis, going from being secured by a personal God, to being completely internalized by the individual once Emerson transformed himself into a pantheist. For instance, Van Cromphout puts Emerson's evolution this way: “In his early thought Emerson did regard the moral sentiment as itself something with which a personal God had endowed the human soul, but the inward and ideal nature of this endowment proved so completely absorbing to Emerson's intellect that God's role inevitably attenuated even before God's personality dissolved into Emerson's pantheistic One-in-All.” Van Cromphout, *Emerson's Ethics*, 34. It is also worth noting that Van Cromphout is concerned with the hierarchy between ethics and religion, but when he treats of “religion,” it is essentially synonymous with doctrine: “Emerson's metaethical efforts were directed primarily toward establishing the autonomy of ethics vis-a-vis religion.” *Ibid.*, 30.

that “Emerson was no mystic, except in the very loosest sense of the term, though he agreed with the mystics in seeing God in nature and nature as an emblem of God.”¹⁷⁷ Accordingly, my account of Emerson looks more like Wellek’s than much of the literature written since. The previous chapter attempted to show how Emerson’s early work is social and ethical because Emerson often showed some skepticism about the metaphysical moves that the mystic must take, moves which stand in some conflict with his concern for the universality of the ethical. I explore this concern about the metaphysical and the mystical in more detail in this chapter. My own account echoes perhaps the first retrospective treatment of the Transcendentalist movement, Octavius Brooks Frothingham’s *Transcendentalism in New England* printed in 1876, which claimed that “Transcendentalism in New England was rather spiritual and practical than metaphysical.”¹⁷⁸ This chapter seeks to show that the continuing development of the religious sentiment in its spiritual and practical form falls in line with the trajectory set out in his “religious” writings of the earlier period, and continues to build a philosophical view on the nature of religion that sees it as a central aspect of modern ethical life.

In what follows, I attempt to show the nuances of Emerson’s account of the religious sentiment through the development of the moral, or what I have been calling the essence of religion for Emerson. That is, religion is both that aspect of individual human life or the human person and the practices of cultivation that surround and develop it, which together allow her to

¹⁷⁷ Wellek adds: “He claimed no illumination or any direct contact with the Unseen, and was skeptical about the supernatural implications of the occult, as we can see from his essay on demonology.” René Wellek, “Emerson and German Philosophy,” in *Confrontations: Studies in the intellectual and literary relations between Germany, England, and the United States during the nineteenth century* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1965), 191. I dealt with Emerson’s “Demonology” lecture in the previous chapter.

¹⁷⁸ Frothingham, *Transcendentalism in New England*, 40. Recently, Joseph Urbas has attempted to reclaim a “metaphysical” Emerson from his so-called “revisionist” readers in the renaissance of Emerson scholarship in the last few decades. Reading Urbas, it would seem that even Frothingham ought to be included as a “revisionist”! Joseph Urbas, “‘Bi-Polar’ Emerson: ‘Nominalist and Realist,’” *The Pluralist* 8, no. 2 (2013): 78-105.

elevate herself out of her individual, partial, and private self to consider herself in relation to that which is universal, whole, and public. In this sense, the “religious” is determined by what it does, not by a kind of connection to a transcendent realm. The elevation that occurs with religion is primarily a moral elevation because it pertains to the development of character, or as Emerson’s will put it, “shar[ing] in the life of things” (CW 3:54). As an interpretation of Emerson, my claim is that he consistently uses the religious aspect of a person to refer to her ability to see both her life and the shared life of humanity as it functions within the world of concrete interaction between persons, and between persons and nature, from a calmer height of love and wisdom—which, when occupied, gives intimations, or what he calls dreams and prophecies, of an ideal wholeness and soundness (CW 3:66). But, necessarily, this religious or spiritual part of a person must be connected in some way to a religious form—that is, it is not a mystical detachment from the natural and/or social world, but rather a more intense turn towards the world as the site where the religious operates. It must result in and come out of concrete practical action, or what Emerson will call “performance.”

I trace this trajectory in four sections. The first examines the lectures that Emerson delivered in 1839-40 which lay the groundwork for what “religion” will mean for the rest of the chapter. The second section turns to *Essays: First Series* to explore the language of unity, the universal, and the variety of terms of oneness that Emerson sees as vital to the ethico-religious project, especially insofar as they emphasize affection and relation. The third section takes up the skepticism about the moral that appears in *Essays: Second Series*, and it tries to show how Emerson reaffirms the ethico-religious project in the face of skepticism, harnessing it to deepen and intensify the project. Lastly, the fourth section reads *The Conduct of Life* as modeling the kind of reflection that characterizes the moral and religious sentiment, in which one views the

universal in the particular, taking oneself to the “calmer height of love and wisdom.”

Throughout, my aim is to continue the project laid out previously: to read the Emersonian corpus as delivering a structured statement intended for an audience to receive and interpreting that statement in light of its theological and philosophical import.

I. Reformulations: Lecturing After the Address

In the winter of 1839-1840, Emerson put together a series of lectures that he titled “The Present Age,” in which he sought to delimit the “Character, Resources, and Tendencies” that make up the current “Epoch,” while at the same time looking forward to the future (*EL* 3:186-187). One lecture is devoted wholly to religion. This lecture is tellingly sandwiched between “Reforms” and “Education,” both of which can be understood as ways that religion manifests in human history: reform movements are instantiations of the religious impulse to improve the world, and education is the process whereby religious sentiment is intentionally cultivated. The “Religion” lecture is important because it is the first thorough treatment of religion after the Divinity School Address, and because it stands as a further development (and sometimes revision) of the “Religion” essay in “The Philosophy of History” lectures, which I addressed in the previous chapter. Passages from this later “Religion” lecture were used extensively as material for *Essays: First Series* in 1841, especially “The Over-Soul,” “Self-Reliance,” and “Spiritual Laws,” thus both thematically and quite tellingly using “Religion” as a major constituting element of these oft-celebrated essays.¹⁷⁹

The lecture begins with the distinction between “the formal church” and the “real,” which mirrors the distinction between formal religion and its essence that I developed in the previous

¹⁷⁹ Spiller and Williams make this connection in their introduction to the lecture (*CW* 3:271).

chapter, but which goes further by addressing the ways that a particular (Christian) church is formed. Emerson here uses the distinction to explain how it is that Christianity began with a revelation of the moral sentiment with “depth and tenacity” to “ten or twenty persons”—i.e. the original followers of Jesus—but how this original revelation, through the corrupted understanding of its essential moral core by its later inheritors, has been turned into a “formal or peculiar” kind of religion (*EL* 3:272, 272).¹⁸⁰ Emerson is careful not to praise the expressions of these early Christians as somehow more genuine or more properly religious than any later Christian expressions. Although their writings express a truly religious “humility and ... trust in the eternal,” they are just as “local and liminary,—narrow, provincial, levitical” as any contemporary Christian doctrine (*EL* 3:272). Admittedly, Emerson’s version of the early formation of the Christian Church is idealized and not particularly attentive to the actual history. Nevertheless, Emerson is trying to give an account in which he can value what he sees as a legitimate spiritual perception that early Christians articulated to the best of their abilities, while distancing that perception from its institutionalization in both textual and ecclesiastical structure. In this way, the early Christians were no different from any other people in any other historical situation: they had to speak in the relative idiom of their day. Importantly, although Emerson can value this nascent Christian spiritual perception, it was not brought about by, nor did it bring about a “new state of things,” but was only a finer perception of things, one that any soul, at any time, could see if “at the same elevation” (*EL* 3:273).

The point is not that we ought to denigrate early Christians for failing to recognize that

¹⁸⁰ Emerson, unfortunately, labels this formal or peculiar kind of religion “Jewish.” Although he is generally pluralistic with his view that the moral core of religion can manifest itself in a variety of different religious traditions, he is unusually harsh with his descriptions of Judaism, which he unfortunately sees as too formal and too particularistic for the needs of the moral sentiment. It is in this way that Emerson continues a generally supersessionist current in liberal American Christianity, viewing Jesus as a reformer of a Judaism that had lost its way.

they are historically situated actors just like any other; rather, Emerson is suggesting that we ought to expect that they should speak in the parlance of their own time, using the symbols and forms of thought available to them. It is rather the fault of subsequent theology and ecclesiastical doctrine that they are treated as more than historical actors, as opposed to something inherent in the utterances of early Christians. In the subsequent lecture Emerson comes to name this way of understanding how one speaks theologically as his version of a “natural theology,” in which “conversation, fiction, proverbs, and the very thoughts of men at the present day” are seen as attempts at embodying theological concepts that necessarily fail to be fully contained by these thoughts and expressions because they are always conditioned by one’s historical location (*EL* 3:286-287). The project of those who wish to reflect on natural theology, then, is to examine and put into perspective how these historically and culturally conditioned thoughts and expressions seek to indicate something beyond them. This exploration of conditioned thoughts and expressions is, for Emerson, prompted by the religious sentiment, in which all equally partake. What is “natural” about natural theology is not that it seeks to read divinity in the natural (that is, non-human) objects of the world, although this is part of it; rather, the essential “natural” part of this theology is the way that humans live in and comprehend their world, themselves, and each other through conversation, fiction, proverbs, and their particular thoughts. In his lecture on “Natural Religion” in 1861, Emerson expands what counts as “natural” to include the negative as well, saying that God “meets us in humble ways” so that “Opposition, poverty and insult, caricatures, nicknames, and abuse are his angels, and our instructors, not less than statehouses, politics, universities, galleries, and literature” (*LL* 2:181). What natural religion is supposed to affirm, according to this late lecture, is fourfold: that the world contains “beneficent inevitabilities” towards the good; that reason leads towards a shared existence; that personal

integrity is what is most important for the individual; and that love is the sentiment of the healthy mind, which has the power to “move the world” (*LL* 2:185-190). Although not articulated until this late period in his career, these four pillars of natural religion are compatible with the earlier account: that is, that the world is oriented towards the good (compensation); our higher faculties lead us to be more public (reason over understanding); completeness of character is an individual’s goal (the ideal); and the affective dimension of the human is integral to moral uplift (love). To do natural theology, or to have a natural theology, is to be able to see these affirmations in the particular expressions of the day.

Despite this noble theological goal, Christendom has been diverted from a proper understanding of theology in relation to religion because it has separated “the utterances and actions” of early Christians from the spiritual perception on which they were based, making “the letter and circumstance” of the scriptures “superstitiously sacred” (*EL* 3:273). As Emerson pithily notes, once one realizes this distinction and the way in which the religious sentiment is not specific to the revelation of a time and place, one is “pained by this poor, cramp, degrading picture of the heavenly law as if it were a history of England or of Judea.” Emerson thinks that we are currently in a “transition state” where increasing numbers of people are coming to realize that the “mythical” character of formal Christian religion no longer holds any relevance for their lives, a position that he will reiterate in greater degree in 1860 with “Worship” (*CW* 6:6.9). Nevertheless, he had already come to see this state as a precarious one in 1840, because it has had the unfortunate consequence of causing many “cultivated” minds to abandon entirely the “happiness and dignity of the religious sentiment” (*EL* 3:274).¹⁸¹ For him, the religious sentiment

¹⁸¹ It is hard to know how much Emerson knew about Schleiermacher at this point in his career, but this is one of the points where they seem to be making similar claims. Schleiermacher’s *On Religion: Speeches to its Cultured Despisers* makes a similar kind of argument about how the “cultured” have misunderstood the true nature of religion. Wellek, probably correctly, notes that Emerson had little exposure to Schleiermacher early in his career

was only truly being expressed in those reform movements that “preach Peace, Temperance, the freedom of the servant and the slave” (*EL* 3:275).

Nevertheless, it would be wrong to suppose that the religious sentiment simply awaits its next in-breaking revelation, one which would tell us what we are supposed to do and which would answer our questions about how we ought to live. Expecting a deity to answer our interrogatories is indicative of a “degraded” understanding of revelation, since as Emerson stresses, “Never a moment did that sublime spirit speak in such patois” (*EL* 3:276-277). We cannot expect our questions to be answered, so we must accept “the tide of being which floats us onward, work and live, work and live, and unawares we are already renewed and raised and the question and answer are one” (*EL* 3:277). This double exhortation to work and live will eventually become the central feature of “Worship,” where the attention to one’s daily activities is the primary way in which to live the religious life.

Without looking ahead to the late essays where the exhortation to work and live is developed to a much more significant degree, it is tempting in these earlier essays to read the command to practical activity as an evasion. In other words, a less charitable reading might suppose that Emerson doesn’t have an answer to the silence that people confront when asking essential religious questions, and therefore he appears to advocate a quietist resignation in the face of the possible nihilism of unanswered questions. But I think Emerson is doing something more subtle here. On the one hand, his aim in these passages is to attack those philosophical and theological portrayals of religion which depend upon what Emerson refers to as “argument and

outside of reading his works on Plato and what he had heard from Hedge. Wellek 195-197. Robert Richardson, while acknowledging that Emerson most likely did not read much Schleiermacher, especially early in his career, nonetheless makes the case for a broad array of similarities between the two thinkers that seem more than just a coincidence. Robert D. Richardson, Jr., “Schleiermacher and the Transcendentalists,” in *Transient and Permanent: The Transcendentalist Movement and Its Contexts*, ed. by Charles Capper and Conrad Edick Wright (Boston: Massachusetts Historical Society, 1999), 121-147.

speculation” (*EL* 3:278). In his immediate context, this is an attack on Unitarian orthodoxy as well as the tradition of philosophically justifying religion through the various traditional arguments (usually cosmological and teleological) that dominated among liberal Anglo-American intellectuals. His *practical* response to religious questions is a criticism of the vacuity of the Unitarian intellectuals’ *speculative* answers to our most serious spiritual concerns. On the other hand, to limit it to just a warning about argument and speculation would be to limit the ambitions of the proposal. The goal here is to understand the religious sentiment as concerned with the particular ways in which one lives one’s life. It is to understand spiritual laws themselves as not assertions of codes written in the heavens, but as essentially a single-word command: “Do” (*EL* 3:278). As Emerson puts it, “The whole course of things goes to teach us faith. We need only obey” (*EL* 3:281). “Faith,” in this context, is what one receives from acting in accordance with the “soul at the centre of nature,” which is Emerson’s way of describing how it is that the order of things that is experienced as itself a form of soul inspires right moral action. We receive a form of ethical cultivation from being overpowered by the “inevitable nature” of soul, which guides our will and which supplies the framework in which we operate in the world. The nature of this soul or order now becomes Emerson’s primary concern, and it becomes one of the dominant themes of *Essays: First Series*.

In the next section I take up the question of soul and why a particular natural order of things has moral authority for a person’s life. For now, I note that the invocation of “natural” in this context is a reference to a kind of right ordering between one’s innermost person and the world in which she lives, an ordering that is brought about by a right perception of the world as it is in quotidian, non-exceptional experience.¹⁸² This is why asking for miracles as a form of proof

¹⁸² David Greenham’s account of “nature” is particularly instructive in this regard: “Nature,” in *Ralph Waldo Emerson in Context*, ed. Wesley T. Mott (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 84-91.

of revelation is such an absurd proposition for Emerson. Miracles ask for a violation of the world as proof of something greater than the world. Emerson has no need for miracles to guide the moral life, for it is virtue itself that is a kind of miracle: “open my eyes by new virtue and I shall see miracles enough in this current moment of time” (*EL* 3:278-279). Emerson understands the religious sentiment as raising one up to a higher form of perception, one in which the unity of things, and not the lack thereof, is both visible and indicative of divinity. This is the purpose of Emerson’s invocation of the soul of a person as the central locus of the religious sentiment, which is meant to indicate that everyone is in the state of becoming, and as such, no fixed human form is suitable. The soul allows one to affirm that we have no “great” or exceptional people, and that there is “no history, no record of any character or mode of living that entirely contents us” (*EL* 3:283). Even those “great men” that are the focus of *Representative Men* exist only so that their individuality—our belief that they contain an “original force”—can point towards a more “catholic existence” for all (*CW* 4:19-20).¹⁸³ It is in this sense that we have neither exceptional states of nature, nor exceptional people in that nature.

It is important to note how the following essay, “Education,” completes the picture given in “Religion.” It is in this subsequent essay that Emerson contrasted the contemporary church with his understanding of natural theology. The problem with the church is that it had become too narrow, narrower than a natural theology should be: “It speaks in a dialect. It refers to a narrow circle of experiences, persons, and a literature of its own” (*EL* 3:287). This is not a problem only for the church, Emerson notes, because one sees the same kind of problems with

¹⁸³ The soul is that part of the human that contains the idea of the Perfect which continuously offers “a fairer possibility of life and manners, which agitates society every day with the offer of some new amendment” (*CW* 1:174). But “soul” here is doing even more, and it ultimately will be developed into a clearer notion in the “Over-soul,” where the moral implications of the oneness and wholeness of Soul, in which everything is of the same, and wherein everything contains every other, are more clearly presented.

Swedenborgianism and phrenology: they develop a narrow system of legitimate and appropriate expressions that intend to make all aspects of human existence coherent and manageable. The alternative, Emerson is suggesting, is that we think about the church not as systematizing life and the world through its own particular and narrowly circumscribed way, but as a project of “Education” that strives to be “as broad as man” (ibid.). Rather than imposing its “dialect” on learners, good education should seek to “foster and demonstrate” the vastness which characterizes the “being” of a person, recognizing that each is a “magazine of unexhausted resources” (*EL* 3:287-288). Emerson thought that systems of education among his contemporaries, which included those systems of religious cultivation that failed to adequately address the nature of the human, “aim[ed] not to retrieve but to conceal; to save appearances; at best to solace him” (*EL* 3:299). If this is put in contrast with Emerson’s natural theology, the picture becomes clearer: natural theology aims to read the high aims of humans in an open-ended set of cultural and intellectual expressions that are constantly being newly generated, whereas the church (and other forms of bad education) uses a narrow and static system of cultural and intellectual symbols to order human life into a coherent whole. Natural theology inspires new cultural and intellectual expressions that would enable ever better and higher aims, whereas the church seems content with a continued application of its retrospective system, “amusing the man with this show of accomplishments instead of exposing him to his fatal want” (ibid.). The former inspires hope insofar as it strives to see the Perfect that accompanies all new events, whereas the latter tends towards despair insofar as it removes divinity by always tending backwards (*EL* 3:290-292). Thus, a “true church,” an idea which Emerson will play with throughout this period and which will become vital to “Worship” (1860), is one that fosters a right education by seeking to develop an individual’s ability to strive after, and hope for, a more excellent and more divine

life.

It is this vision of hope that becomes central to the account of the moral sentiment and its connection to the religious life of a person. It is a hope that will continue despite challenges against it because it is premised on the formative structures of a religious life that raises one out of the merely prudential and material circumstances of one's life to make one a moral being. Thus, it is hope that affirms the moral sentiment despite its skeptical challengers: "Let us be unhappy, let us be unquiet, ashamed, and always tormented by riddles we cannot expound, if this is all the price we pay for docility and intimacy with an Excellence which abashes us by its splendors" (*EL* 3:293). Thus, it is a hope that can withstand skeptical scrutiny by deploying that skepticism to gain a more advantageous position from which to see oneself and one's world.

II. One Mind, Universal Mind, and the purpose of Unity

Essays: First Series begins with the following, which, as Emerson so often did with his opening paragraphs, should be understood as orienting the rest of the book that follows:

There is one mind common to all individual men. Every man is an inlet to the same and to all of the same. He that is once admitted to the right of reason is made a freeman of the whole estate. What Plato has thought, he may think; what a saint has felt, he may feel; what at any time has befallen any man, he can understand. Who hath access to this universal mind, is a party to all that is or can be done, for this is the only and sovereign agent. (*CW* 2:3)

The doctrine of one mind is vital for Emerson's religious thought because it is one key to the perfectionist idea which Cavell has shown to be so central: the power of witnessing in others one's own idea of "his unattained but attainable self" (*CW* 2:5). In short, the doctrine of one mind provides the linkage between one's own ideal and one's identification with the character of others. In isolation, each of these parts would be problematic. On the one hand, having one's own ideal without a relation to others would lead to a solipsism counter to Emerson's overall

democratic social vision. On the other hand, identifying with the character of others without realizing one's own ideal apart from that identification would limit one's ethical becoming to the authority of the social body, a problem that Emerson sees as all too common in his contemporaries. To have one mind common to all, and for that mind to be freely accessible by all regardless of time or place—and, we should add, regardless of race, class, or gender—becomes the core idea of intellectual equality that permits for individual cultivation from within a collective social body. Although it would be a stretch to label Emerson a radical reformer when it comes to race and gender equality, he does become more vocal about each as his career progresses, and he should be considered a progressive even if he was not as progressive as many of his closest friends and fellow Transcendentalists. It is within the notion of one mind that there is a form of collective equality for all members of the social body.¹⁸⁴

While the purpose of the unity of mind is fairly straightforward insofar as it aims to promote individual cultivation in social relations, how we ought to understand the basis for such a claim is highly contentious—in other words, there is a great deal of debate about the ontological and/or epistemological status of what seems to be a strong realist claim about this shared mind. Furthermore, what one makes of the universal mind seems to bear a great deal upon how one views Emerson's religious thought, which interchanges “mind” with “God” and the

¹⁸⁴ Emerson's notion of race has been well developed in the secondary literature, as well as his account of gender. For a charitable reading of Emerson on race, see Len Gougeon, *Virtue's Hero: Emerson, Antislavery, and Reform*, (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1990), 178-85; “Emerson, Self-Reliance, and the Politics of Democracy,” in *A Political Companion to Ralph Waldo Emerson*, ed. Alan M. Levine and Daniel S. Malachuk (Lexington: The University Press of Kentucky, 2011), 185-220; and Eduardo Cadava, *Emerson and the Climates of History* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1997), 53-62. For a much more critical reading of Emerson's use of race, see Nell Irvin Painter, *The History of White People* (New York: Norton, 2010), 151-189. For Emerson and gender, see Phyllis Cole, “The New Movement's Tide: Emerson and Women's Rights,” in *Emerson Bicentennial Essays*, ed. Ronald A. Bosco and Joel Myerson (Boston: Massachusetts Historical Society, 2006), 117-152; Armida Gilbert, “Emerson in the Context of the Woman's Rights Movement,” in *A Historical Guide to Ralph Waldo Emerson*, ed. Joel Myerson (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 211-249; and “‘Pierced by the Thorns of Reform’: Emerson on Womanhood,” in *The Emerson Dilemma: Essays on Emerson and Social Reform*, ed. T. Gregory Garvey (Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 2000), 115-135.

“Divine” as though provoking us to think that it should be natural to see them as equivalent.

Thus, it is imperative to make sense of Emerson’s often opaque assertions concerning the universal if we are to understand how they relate to his religious thought.¹⁸⁵

In the previous chapter I addressed Emerson’s views on the nature of God by arguing against those who would read him as primarily a pantheist, and those who, in a related but slightly different way, see Emerson’s God as a negation of human individuality. My approach was to interpret what Emerson says about God not as a kind of realist metaphysical proclamation, but as a way of speaking theologically for clear ethical purposes. This way of speaking for Emerson is a provisional way of speaking, and it is through this provisionality that Emerson understands it to be different from metaphysics. This is not an assertion of a hard idealism that divides the human from the world; rather, it is an expression of the primacy of ethics as providing the fabric of our lives in the world, but one that is tentative and always shifting. In fact, if his lecturing on metaphysics late in his career can be understood to illuminate

¹⁸⁵ For many readers of Emerson who are interested in the political side of his thought, the relation between the particular and the universal is the question of the place of Emerson’s “religiousness,” to use Kateb’s wording, in a democratic society. According to Kateb and many who follow his political reading, Emerson’s religion dictates the following: “Anything in the world—whether a particular thing or a general idea or a durable phenomenon—matters and is beautiful or sublime only if seen and thought of as part of a designed, intentionally coherent totality; indeed as an emanation of divinity.” George Kateb, *Emerson and Self-Reliance* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2002), 65. I agree with Kateb’s claim that “the ‘All’ or the ‘Whole’ is perhaps only a name for the world’s overall moral nature, which can be seen only when everything is properly interpreted” (68), but I do not think that this “religiousness” makes the world “safe or safer,” nor is Emerson’s focus on the “meaningfulness” of the world when properly interpreted. *Ibid.*, 68, 71. As many commentators have pointed out, the wedge that Kateb drives between thought and action, which allows him to affirm “mental self-reliance” as an ideal, is unable to account for Emerson’s political vision, especially in relation to the question of slavery. Jack Turner, “Self-Reliance and Complicity: Emerson’s Ethics of Citizenship,” in *A Political Companion to Ralph Waldo Emerson*, ed. Alan M. Levine and Daniel S. Malachuk (Lexington: The University Press of Kentucky, 2011), 125-151; and James H. Read, “The Limits of Self-Reliance: Emerson, Slavery, and Abolition,” in *A Political Companion to Ralph Waldo Emerson*, ed. Alan M. Levine and Daniel S. Malachuk (Lexington: The University Press of Kentucky, 2011), 152-184. My emphasis on Emerson as concerned with the practical ethical lives of people leads me to read the moral nature here as not an attempt to find intellectual safety, which for Kateb is the purpose of the metaphysical language, but as an idealism that inspires practical ethical becoming by acting in the world. In this, my position is closest to Jeffrey Stout’s, wherein the struggle with inward experiences is in service of a return to the public world—to transform genius into practical power. Jeffrey Stout, “The Transformation of Genius into Practice Power: A Reading of Emerson’s ‘Experience’,” *American Journal of Theology & Philosophy* 35, no.1 (January 2014): 3-24.

his earlier underdeveloped position with regards to metaphysics, then we can understand the “use” of metaphysical language to be Emerson’s primary concern, and not the potential exactness of the description. As he makes clear late in his career, “My metaphysics are to the end of use” (W 12:13). This is what I read as the meaning of Emerson’s startling line in “Self-Reliance”: “In your metaphysics you have denied personality to the Deity: yet when the devout motions of the soul come, yield to them heart and life, though they should clothe God with shape and color” (CW 2:33). Although the “you” in this passage is undefined, it seems to indicate both the little minds (mainly, “little statesmen and philosophers and divines”) who are accused of “a foolish consistency” in the next paragraph, as well as probably Emerson himself, who can feel the pull of a metaphysical doctrine of impersonal and abstract deity even if he cannot fully adhere to it. Emerson makes a similar kind of move in “Nature,” where he presents a fictitious debate between “the astronomers” and “the metaphysicians,” in which the metaphysicians seem to be the more skeptical of the two because they are concerned merely with the reasonableness of postulates. The point of the passage, though, is for Emerson to conclude that nature has not “waited for the discussion, but, right or wrong, bestowed the impulse, and the balls rolled.” By this he means that nature acts in ways that are not determined through the rational calculations of either scientific or metaphysical inquiries, because there is some “exaggeration” in all things (CW 3:107). The point is that, for Emerson, metaphysics as has been practiced by philosophers has been concerned with a form of rational and systematic coherence that tries to contain nature in a way that always fails. For the type of metaphysics that makes up a traditional view of philosophy of religion, Emerson wants to urge that whatever divinity is, it will also not be contained by the rational methods of the metaphysicians. Their method is not one that the soul obliges, because the soul is interested only in the ethical becoming of the person—an ethical

position which, in an anticipation of pragmatism, he can separate from metaphysics.¹⁸⁶ And if that ethical becoming requires the personality of the Deity, despite all his warnings against reading the “biography” of Deity,¹⁸⁷ Emerson thinks that one must be prepared to yield to that God.

However, this view of the failure of metaphysics as has been practiced by philosophers does not mean that has no interest whatsoever in metaphysics. For, indeed, late in his life Emerson began the process of articulating his “new Metaphysics” that tries to do justice to the openness that has often been taken to be excluded by philosophical metaphysics. Indeed, it is possible to argue that Emerson, especially during the early 1840s, is invested in a metaphysical view about both the relation between humanity and nature, and about the relations between individual humans. This view becomes especially prominent in the essays where both love and nature are concrete realities for human life, and because of our inextricable place in these relations, they are more than merely discursive formations. It might then be appropriate to call Emerson a realist in that sense, but yet skeptical about the methods of the traditional metaphysical project which Emerson sees as too concerned with certainty and a kind of rational mastery. If the late lecture series on the “new Metaphysics” is given weight here—the appropriately titled *Philosophy for the People* and *Natural History of the Intellect*—Emerson is interested not in the “logic” of metaphysics, but in the “power” of it, by which he means its potential ability to speak truthfully in a systematically unsystematic way about the relation

¹⁸⁶ Metaphysics, for Emerson, is the most absolute of philosophical statements. The value of the essay form tends, as Van Cromphout puts it, in the opposite direction: “One should accept one’s own statements or texts as always tentative, inchoate, provisional. Every statement has instrumental rather than intrinsic value: its function is not to say anything final but to provoke a new utterance. True essayists maintain their authorial integrity by avoiding dogmatism and embracing instead a ‘position or perpetual inquiry’.” *Emerson’s Ethics*, 160.

¹⁸⁷ See the previous chapter’s discussion of these warnings about “biography” and the simultaneous acceptance that he might be wrong.

between human structures of thinking and the world in which we are ensconced. The goal of such a project is not to arrive at an ultimate description of the cosmos, but to prompt moral becoming in relation to the cosmos (W 12:13-14). This final unfinished project seems to have been vitally oriented toward finding the means by which to illustrate a way for the truthful, the metaphysical, and the ethical to come together in ways that were perhaps unstated in the mature period—and to show how the poet will ultimately supersede the philosopher in seeing the whole of things.

For my purposes here, it is important for Emerson to appreciate that existing in the present anticipates a becoming that is not fully legible to the past or present. Existing in the present does not negate the need for historical consciousness, that is, it doesn't annul the fact that we are what we are because we are beings that exist in history. Clearly, Emerson's investment in understanding historical figures as presentations of types in *Representative Men*, as well as his claim in the late essay "Quotation and Originally" that to be human is essentially to be a "quoter"—i.e. a being constructed through a particular discourse that has developed in time, and therefore one is not a wholly "original" being—shows how invested he is in seeing history as an important determinant of virtue.¹⁸⁸ Nevertheless, one has to approach this history in the right way so that one does not become dangerously retrospective. Thus, as Emerson had been experimenting with, he uses the saying of the Divine name (which, as Cavell has pointed out, is also a modification of the Cartesian *cogito*), as a way of existing with God in the present, as

¹⁸⁸ In this I agree with Cornel West's portrayal of Emerson as the "organic intellectual" of his day, "a cultural critic who devised and deployed a vast array of rhetorical strategies in order to exert intellectual and moral leadership over a significant segment of the educated classes of his day." I take West's claim that Emerson has more of a "historical consciousness" than many have recognized to be opposed to the "intuitionist" reading of him, even if West ultimately sees a great deal of mysticism in Emerson's idea of receptivity. Cornel West, *The American Evasion of Philosophy: A Genealogy of Pragmatism* (Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1989), 10-11.

being above time as the rose is above time (CW 2:38-39).¹⁸⁹ Or as he will conclude in “Spiritual Laws,” virtue comes from acting in accord with the “nature of things,” which is also “a perpetual substitution of being for seeming” that mimics God saying “I AM” (CW 2:92). It is only from this posture of the present that one can overcome his consistency with the past, that one is able to share in Divinity, and allow the soul to become (CW 2:40).

My goal now is to continue in this same mode as the previous chapter by showing how a similar understanding of religion characterizes the mature period starting with *Essays: First Series*, which, contrary to the analysis I give, is often understood as the period where Emerson’s convictions about divinity begin to wane. Throughout, my hope is to give an account of Over-Soul or Unity that shows Emerson not to be sacrificing individual difference for the sake of avoiding egotism, a move that Sharon Cameron has accused Emerson of making.¹⁹⁰ As I read him, Emerson’s goal is to unite the individual and universal, in which “all public facts are to be individualized, all private facts are to be generalized” (CW 2:12). *Essays: First Series* sets up this overarching theme of the universal and the individual in its first two essays (“History” and “Self-Reliance,” from which I have been quoting above), before exploring the specific ways in which we might understand their joint relation (“Compensation” and “Spiritual Laws”). Then it turns to four essays that are often disregarded in the secondary literature, but which are vital because of how they describe the particular aspects of human life in which virtue needs to be cultivated

¹⁸⁹ Although Cavell’s analysis of this passage shows an extraordinary level of connection to the western philosophical tradition, Cavell neglects that the source for the rehearsal of the Divine name is most directly from the two “Religion” lectures. In the latter “Religion” lecture, the saying of the Divine name is in the middle of an analysis of the reliance on authority in matters pertaining to religion, and in which the failure to say “I am” is indicative of the “decline of religion” and “the withdrawal of the Soul” (EL 3:282). In “Self-Reliance,” the aspect of religious authority is still present—in reference to those who “speak the phraseology of I know not what David, or Jeremiah, or Paul”—yet the emphasis is placed on living with God in the present to a much greater degree (CW 2:39).

¹⁹⁰ Cameron, *Impersonality*, 2007.

(“Love,” “Friendship,” “Prudence,” and “Heroism”). Then we return to the idea of the moral sentiment as a way of elevating ourselves and becoming more universal (“The Over-Soul”), immediately express doubt about our ability to think universally (“Circles”), and end with two essays on human creativity (“Intellect” and “Art”).

If there is a linchpin for my account of *Essays: First Series*, it would be the revelation that Emerson presents in his discussion of the doctrine of compensation, which he claims to have learned at a young age: “Life was ahead of theology, and the people knew more than the preachers taught” (CW 2:55). He expands on this view at the beginning of “Spiritual Laws” when he proclaims that “Our young people are diseased with the theological problems of original sin, origin of evil, predestination, and the like. These never presented a practical difficulty to any man,—never darkened across any man’s road, who did not go out of his way to seek them” (CW 2:77-78). The antidote for these speculative diseases is given in various formulations, all of which make some claim about living the life of nature in which one finds a kind of practical wisdom. This is why Emerson sees such value in the proverbs of the “markets and workshops” which are denied by “the pulpit, the senate, and the college” (CW 2:63-64). What he is aiming for is the wisdom of common people, a wisdom that expresses the “transcendentalism of common life” (CW 2:187). The difference between proverbs and the theological speculations that disease young minds is that proverbs are written as they are “because it is thus in life” (CW 2:64). Emerson’s endorsement of the power of “practical life” to guide us towards virtue is not meant to indicate that he believes our innate or instinctual life—that is, some pre-discursive, almost animal or intuitional aspect of humans—is the guiding voice by which we ought to live. Rather, the point is to realize that we are governed to some extent by laws of nature that are out of our control, and when we attempt to fight against them, especially intellectually, we are

attempting to fight against the very conditions of our existence. Emerson reiterates the claim that he made above in “Religion,” that “the whole course of things goes to teach us faith;” but in the context of “Spiritual Laws,” this faith takes on the role of affirming a sense of duty in accordance with the natural world (rather than in a discussion of miracles in “Religion”). This does not obviate the need for the development of one’s character, for it still remains that “what a man does, that he has” (CW 2:83). In other words, our cultivation is not entirely passive, even as it might require a certain amount of passive reception to laws out of one’s control. To make this clear, Emerson reiterates the conception of heaven that he had first developed in the sermons: what he calls “heaven” is that which he “inwardly aspire[s] after, is the state of circumstance desirable to my constitution” (CW 2:82). It is to aspire after that for which one is being constituted.

What we get from “Compensation,” then, is not a statement of faith that God has preordained a structured world in which moral actions will be rewarded, and immoral actions punished—as some, like Lysaker, have seen—but instead a rejection of the notion that because the wicked sometimes prosper, the system of punishments must be out of this world. This was an idea that Emerson had so boldly stated in his sermons, where he was emphatic that his congregation not defer the consequences of actions to some alternate life. The idea that moral action is required now is why Emerson is at such pains to show that there is no division between sentiment and law—that is, between our subjective experience of the moral rightness of actions and our witnessing those actions in the world (CW 2:60). Likewise, he has to argue that one cannot separate the sensual from the moral, even though humans have spent so much energy trying to separate them, especially in their theology. One cannot “detach the sensual sweet, the sensual strong, the sensual bright, &c. from the moral sweet, the moral deep, the moral fair,”

because no matter the effort to keep them apart, “the parted water re-unites behind our hand” (CW 2:61). This is the main force of the language of unity in “Compensation,” which becomes specifically translated into the theological claims of the omnipresence and omnibenevolence of God: the universe itself is wholly moral, and within it is contained both good and evil, both affinity and repulsion, both force and limitation (CW 2:60). This, Emerson is subtly claiming, is what the “true doctrine of omnipresence is;” it is a way of coming to understand that there is only one universe, and it is wholly moral. Understanding divinity this way makes sense of Emerson’s enigmatic claim at the end that there is an “aboriginal abyss of real Being” that underlies all circumstance, that “Essence, or God, is not a relation, or a part, but the whole,” and that “Being is the vast affirmative, excluding negation, self-balanced, and swallowing up all relations, parts and times, within itself” (CW 2:70). This should not be taken as a quasi-mystical claim about being, but rather as the culmination of a kind of ethical reasoning that Emerson has been building: that our lives are wholly contained to this moral world, and even those concepts which point towards some other world, like heaven, really are to be understood in light of what they inform us about how to live our lives ethically.¹⁹¹ It is for this reason that “Spiritual Laws” directly follows “Compensation” in the book, because it attempts to reinforce the claim that our world is moral, and to do so by means of the nature of human character which is always “publishing” itself. As Emerson writes, “If you act, you show character; if you sit still, if you sleep, you show it” (CW 2:90).

Thus having established the unity of moral lives (along with the unity of Being itself),

¹⁹¹ My reading of “Compensation” connects it to the sermons, which insist that there is only one world because it enables moral action, as well as Emerson’s statement in 1862 in response to the “ardent missionary” whose creed applies to the “other world”: “Other world! There is no other world. God is one and omnipresent: here or nowhere is the whole fact. All the universe over, there is but one thing,—one creator, one mind, one right” (LL 2:269). It also reiterates what David Smith has called a “this-worldly” transcendence (see previous chapter).

Emerson can tell us better how to cultivate our moral lives through particular practical relations. The two essays that follow, “Love” and “Friendship,” are built on the principle that “our intellectual and active powers increase with our affection” (CW 2:113). The point, again, is that the sensual and the moral must be one, and the cultivation of our affective ties to others not only makes us better ethical beings, but also increases our “intellectual” understanding of the world. And, furthermore, these affective ties are only possible because of the “divine affinity of virtue with itself,” in which “the Deity in me and in them derides and cancels the thick walls of individual character, relation, age, sex, circumstance, at which he usually connives, and now makes many one” (CW 2:115). “Heroism” will call into question this connection for certain individuals who “seem ... not to know that other souls are of one texture with [them]” (CW 2:148). The point is not that we ought all to be extreme individuals, but that at certain moments, there is a need for a heroism that supersedes our affinity with others, that friendship and love sometimes must be tempered by heroism. We ought not to forget, though, that heroism also serves the purpose of acquainting the observer of that heroism with himself by seeing that the hero he admires “is only a projection of his own soul” (CW 1:103). “Prudence” admits that our efforts at “securing a present well-being” in the world of immediate appearances sometimes must come at the expense of our higher “spiritual” aims (CW 2:141). The immediate necessities of our material well-being are vital, and thus prudence requires that we attend to them. But prudence cannot dictate the entirety of our practical concern.

Accordingly, the “Over-Soul” provides a way to understand ourselves as not just beings of immediate appearances and necessities, for a being that is only prudent is not a moral being.¹⁹²

¹⁹² It is in this sense that Emerson is carrying on a tradition of moral philosophy that begins with Aristotle and carries through to Kant: individual prudence is not enough to found a moral philosophy that seeks to instill obligations on the self against the self’s own wishes and desires. To be a moral self then requires that the self recognize some form of moral obligation imposed on it against its own desires. This is also a point where Emerson

Thus, Emerson attempts to explicate how we can live above the world of sensation—or, in Emersonian terms, the world of the understanding—by seeing it as symbolic. Those with “common sense” live by “the utility of the symbol”; those with “taste” live by the “beauty of the symbol;” but those with “spiritual perception” live by “the beauty of the thing signified” (CW 2:132). This is Emerson’s adaptation of a Platonic picture of beauty, but one that he uses not to come to knowledge of the true nature of the world, but rather to come to an understanding of ourselves as more than prudent beings who are concerned with their own material well-being.¹⁹³

One way of reading the “The Over-Soul” is to see it as developing the account of how we can see ourselves as moral beings. The essay begins by observing that our past experience in the world does not seem sufficient to warrant our hopes, and yet we do hope, because within us resides a “universal sense of want and ignorance” that orients us toward something more. Emerson’s way of understanding this hope unwarranted by the world is to see it as a product of the soul—the soul which is a “residuum” that philosophy cannot resolve because humans are a “stream whose source is hidden” in some “higher origin” that natural science and philosophy have proved unable to fully explain (CW 2:159). This is the negative sense of philosophy that Emerson will often attack—usually a form of empiricism that Emerson sees as limited to a narrow set of materialist experiences of the world. In his essay on Plato, the representative philosopher, he says that “philosophy is the account which the human mind gives to itself of the constitution of the world” (CW 4:27-28). Emerson will praise those forms of philosophy that enable a kind of integration of unity and the many, or a kind of balance between religion and

stands at some distance from the British sentimentalists, even as he seems to be appropriating some of the language of sentiment from them. While he finds the sentiment to be the site where moral knowledge happens, his idealism causes him to use the sentiment as a counter to egoism precisely because the sentiment’s concern is not individual well-being but one’s obligations to a social body and laws higher than the self.

¹⁹³ For an account of Emerson’s early thinking about the Greek moral tradition, see Van Cromphout, *Emerson’s Ethics*, 7-27.

intellect, that allow for a continually open grappling with how to understand the world, which one must acknowledge is “a thing of shreds and patches” that can never be disposed of (*CW* 4:43-44). The appropriate stance towards the canon of philosophy, then, is not to look for who has gotten things right, but to “exhaust” and “wrestle” with philosophers until their influence withdraws and they become “but one more bright star shining in your heaven, and blending its light with all your day” (*CW* 2:203).

In “The Over-Soul,” this higher origin—or “common heart” and “Supreme Critic,” terms which emphasize both the idea of unity and the sense of dissatisfaction with partiality—is the over-soul: it is what Emerson calls the “impersonal” element that is shared between persons (our “common nature”), which, as I developed in the previous chapter, is Emerson’s way of talking about what is larger than any individual interests (*CW* 2:164). As I noted previously as well, although he describes the over-soul as impersonal, this does not mean that it is thoroughly unlike all persons, since the very fact that it is shared between persons means that it has affinities with persons (usually, thought and will) that express a kind of higher human ideal. Additionally, this “impersonal” or “God” is what enables a “higher self-possession” insofar as it is a kind of wisdom at which all humans are capable of arriving. Far from being a pantheistic claim about a God that is physically present in things, or a mental monism that there is only one actually existent mind, the point of the over-soul is to formulate a way in which individuals are able to connect with each other through something that is higher than their individual self-interests and experiences, and through connecting with this “impersonal” (i.e. not *a* person) and shared common heart, to advance in virtue (*CW* 2:163). It is because of this impersonal divine that Emerson is able to redefine revelation as the “manifestations of [the soul’s] own nature” (*CW* 2:166) and “the disclosure of the soul”—disclosure both in the sense of a revealing, but also in

the sense of an opening up ("we must pick no locks") (CW 2:167, 168). It is both a revealing of the true nature of what we are as connected moral beings with a duty to a higher law than our self-interest, and an opening up for a further development of ourselves in light of the recognition of this joint moral life. A revelation is thus the realization of one's individuality in relation to a common humanity that exists above the individual, that places responsibility on the individual, and which is brought about through an emotional experience or "enthusiasm" that unites seeing and doing, or "obedience" and "perception" (CW 2:167). We are, in a sense, reiterating what was implicit in the essays on love and friendship—the affective connections between us are what grant us entry into a broader understanding of the common ties between individuals both affectively and intellectually, and it is love of another that begins the process of revelation that leads one out of oneself. But one does not simply go out of oneself through affective connections by sacrificing oneself for another, but ultimately one returns to oneself with the realization that "the Highest dwells with him; that the sources of nature are in his own mind, if the sentiment of duty is there" (CW 2:174).

This movement, brought on by a recognition of the over-soul, is what Emerson calls *religious* and it is what he connects back to "genius"—i.e. impersonal truth. The *religious* here is specifically used to reference the process of becoming more human: "It is a larger imbibing of the common heart. It is not anomalous, but more like, and not less like other men. There is in all great poets, a wisdom of humanity, which is superior to any talents they exercise" (CW 2:170).¹⁹⁴ Indeed, the essence of the "religious" is that it makes one less "anomalous." Or as he sometimes puts it, "the religious sentiment is a domesticating sentiment" (LL 2:141). It is important to

¹⁹⁴ In 1859, Emerson describes the moral sentiment thusly: "It puts us in place. It centres, it concentrates us. It puts us at the heart of nature, where we belong; in the cabinet of Science and of Causes; there, where all the wires terminate which hold the world in magnetic communication, and so converts us into universal beings" (LL 2:133).

connect these not always overt elements of the essay because it illuminates the triumphant theological anthropology that one needs if we are to understand how the moral and the religious hold together, which I here quote at length:

Ineffable is the union of man and God in every act of the soul. The simplest person, who in his integrity worships God, becomes God; yet forever and ever the influx of this better and universal self is new and unsearchable. It inspires awe and astonishment. How dear, how soothing to man, arises the idea of God, peopling the lonely place, effacing the scars of our mistakes and disappointments! When we have broken our god of tradition, and ceased from our god of rhetoric, then may God fire the heart with his presence. It is the doubling of the heart itself, nay, the infinite enlargement of the heart with a power of growth to a new infinity on every side. (CW 2:172-173)

It is the “infinite enlargement of the heart” that is most important here; the “idea of God” is an idea that stands in service of this opening of the heart to the infinite on every side. In characteristic fashion, Emerson doesn’t reconcile the apparent incompatibility of the God that “[fires] the heart with his presence,” and the following line, where the heart is doubled but the agent of that doubling is left unstated. Perhaps Emerson merely means “the idea of God” throughout, and not a being that acts to change the human. However, the intention seems to be to leave open the agent in this picture. What seems most important is the posture of awe and astonishment, however one arrives at it—it is a position that one must affectively inhabit.

In “Circles,” which immediately follows, Emerson explores the expansion of this heart—we might say, the expansion of the moral life of the individual—through a process of continually redrawing the horizon of what we know and are. The essay quite literally begins with the image of God as “a circle whose centre was everywhere, and its circumference nowhere,” which Emerson falsely attributes to Augustine,¹⁹⁵ and ends with the notion of a hope that comes only

¹⁹⁵ It is unclear how Emerson came to attribute this view to Augustine, who surely would have been a strange ally, though it would be understandable that Emerson would want to legitimate a canonical Christian conception of God while at the same time reinterpreting it for his own purposes. As David Mikics helpfully notes, the idea that Emerson is expressing actually shows up in Hermes Trismegistus, Alain de Lille, Nicholas of Cusa, and Blaise Pascal. Ralph Waldo Emerson, *The Annotated Emerson*, ed. by David Mikics (Cambridge: The Belknap Press, 2012), 187.

when people are in a position of being perpetually unsettled (CW 2:179, 189).¹⁹⁶ Many commentators have read this essay as being an important statement of Emerson's early skepticism, which anticipates the even more skeptical mature period that follows. But this skepticism, as will be shown for the later work as well, is put in service of a clear moral project—that is, the specific movements of “Circles” are meant to get from the idea that there is “no end in nature, but every end is a beginning” to the position in which character itself depends on the perpetually unsettled openness in which one can be the “advancing man” who puts being before knowing (CW 2:189). It has not often enough been noted that the skeptical movements of the essay, in which one comes to find no permanence in what one knows or who one is, depends on the “fact” that there is no end in nature, which “symbolizes the moral fact of the Unattainable, the flying perfect, around which the hand of man can never meet, at once the inspirer and the condemner of every success, [which] may conveniently serve us to connect many illustrations of human power in every department” (CW 2:179). In other words, the skeptical movements of the essay only make sense if one begins with the moral ideal, which although it is not fully graspable, serves as the grounds to connect the various abilities (or “human powers”) explored in the essay. The importance of this beginning is revealed towards the end of the essay, when Emerson notes:

Yet this incessant movement and progression, which all things partake, could never become sensible to us, but by contrast to some principle of fixture or stability in the soul. Whilst the eternal generation of circles proceeds, the eternal generator abides. That central life is somewhat superior to creation, superior to knowledge and thought, and contains all its circles. Forever it labors to create a life and thought as large and excellent as itself, suggesting to our thought a certain development, as if that which is made, instructs how to make a better. (CW 2:188)

As I read this passage, Emerson is reiterating his early commitment that there is an idea of an

¹⁹⁶ This same form of hope shows up in “Experience,” where succession plays an integral part in human life because “Dedication to one thought is quickly odious” (CW 3:32).

ideal, which he puts in terms of divinity, that serves as a principle of fixture. It is an ideal that leads us towards an ethical becoming, “to create a life and thought as large and excellent” as it is. We believe that we have a “greater possibility” because we sense the ideal, that we “rest at last on the divine soul,” which no matter how hard we strive to properly enumerate, “there is always a residuum unknown, unanalyzable” (CW 2:182). But it is not an ideal that we fully grasp—it is the flying perfect “around which the hands of man can never meet”—but of which we perhaps only have dreams and prophecies (CW 2:179; 3:66). In the context of “Circles,” one way to put this is as the outcome of idealism. When idealism “shows itself ethical and practical,” as opposed to the more “crude” idealism of Berkeley—i.e. a metaphysical idealism—this is when “we learn that God IS; that he is in me; and that all things are shadows of him” (CW 2:184). What one learns, Emerson says, is that “all nature is the rapid efflux of goodness executing and organizing itself” (CW 2:184). This is Emerson’s form of theism that counters theism in its “crude, objective form;” the latter, crude form, ultimately leads to a kind of Promethean desire to steal the fire of the Creator in order “to live apart from him,” and ends in skepticism (CW 2:17-18).

The book ends with the role of the artist, whose task is to express the “spiritual character of the period” through her work, and to inspire in the “beholders” of her work the “universal relation and power” that inspired her, all in order to make new artists (CW 2:210, 215-216).¹⁹⁷ It is the role of the artist to use her “religious heart” to take the material apparatus of modern human living, “the railroad, the insurance office, the joint stock company, our law, our primary assemblies, the galvanic battery, the electric jar, the prism, and the chemist’s retort,” raise them out of their strictly “economical use,” and put them in service of a “divine use”—that is, to make

¹⁹⁷ In this sense, the artist tries to escape the limitations of the intellect which can make us “prisoners of ideas” where one is unable to realize that ideas are good only insofar as they are prospective (CW 2:195). Whereas the intellect can be at its best when it is “receptive,” and therefore silent, the artist is able to represent “the Unknown, the Inevitable, the Divine” in a way that the intellect seems unable to do (CW 2:202-203, 210).

them instruments of the revelation of universality and love, rather than tools of economic servitude. It is the artist who can see universality in the finite, and in so seeing, lead others to the same vision. It is the artist, then, who can exhibit to others the book's opening line, that there is "one mind common to all men" (CW 2:3) by working within the world of culture and representation. The artist then becomes an agent of natural theology insofar as it is a reflection upon the apparatus of culture in an attempt to read the higher ideals that that culture instantiates.

III. The Possibility of Moral Failure

Having established what Emerson means by speaking of the universal as part of the moral sentiment by examining his development of the topic in *Essays: First Series*, I want now to consider the possibility of a failure of the moral. To do so, I turn to *Essays: Second Series*, in which, among many other topics, Emerson grapples with the possibility of skepticism about our moral progress, either because we fail to properly imagine a true ideal, or because the world itself is anathema to our progress. As has already been mentioned, the pairing of skepticism and the moral was a common topic for Emerson throughout his career. In 1843, Emerson lectured on the religious character of New England, which, according to him, is built upon a history of people who were "the most religious in a religious era," even as their particular understanding of religion, along with the body of "sermons and practical divinity" that they have handed down through many generations, is now "unreadable and consigned to remediless neglect" (LL 1:11). In fact, precisely because of its blend of Calvinist piety and Lockean philosophy, New England had become "at once religious and skeptical—a most religious infidel" (LL 1:14). Emerson fairly clearly laments this slackening of what was once an intense religion, even if he realizes that it is no longer tenable in the nineteenth century. Nevertheless, he wants to preserve something of the

religious spirit that characterized early New England divinity because he sees value in its ability to give “an upward look to every hour and every action,” an upward look that reiterates the central feature of Christianity that Emerson identified in the Lord’s Supper Sermon, that it provides “the persuasion and courage” needed “to lead me upward and onward” (CS 4:193). This religious spirit can ultimately serve as the “antidote to the spirit of commerce and of economy;” or, in other words, it can provide a counter force to an increasingly materialist and capitalist culture (LL 1:14, 17).¹⁹⁸

This pairing of skepticism and religion will play a major role in *Essays: Second Series*, where, as I will read him, Emerson wants to take on the possibility of skepticism, see its role in furthering the moral development of persons, but ultimately not succumb to it because of his commitment to the power of the religious sentiment to elevate people out of their partial concerns. For, as he claims, the new “doctrine of life” which posits an ever-new ideal will “comprise the skepticisms, as well as the faiths of society, and out of unbeliefs a creed shall be formed” (CW 3:43).¹⁹⁹ And, in fact, it is the spiritual person who is the most skeptical, Emerson

¹⁹⁸ In the introductory lecture to the “Lectures on the Times” in 1841, he describes the present as a time when the “terrors” of old Calvinist piety have “lost their force,” so that now “our torment is Unbelief, the Uncertainty as to what we ought to do; the distrust of the value of what we do, and the distrust that the Necessity (which we all at last believe in) is fair and beneficent.” Furthermore, this skepticism is intimately tied to a new form of religion: “Our Religion assumes the negative form of rejection. Out of love of the true, we repudiate the false: and the Religion is an abolishing criticism. A great perplexity hangs like a cloud on the brow of all cultivated persons, a certain imbecility in the best spirits, which distinguishes the period” (CW 1:179). Emerson’s point is that this new religious skepticism is continuous with the old Calvinist piety, even as it rejects much of the certainty of that piety. It is thus a local phenomenon, although not limited to the local, as well as one that characterizes the times. The idea of distrusting the value of what we do, along with the idea that this distrust is integral to the new religion, is the central feature of my account that follows. John Michael’s classic account of Emerson’s skepticism takes this passage to be offering a definition of skepticism, but Michael reads him as posing these problems “for the author.” My account differs from Michael’s in that I read Emerson as characterizing and offering an outline for the society in which he lives, rather than reading the essential aspect of this commentary as him enumerating his concerns as an author who grapples with his own skepticism. Michael, xii, 4-5.

¹⁹⁹ On this point I agree with Alan Levine who argues that Emerson’s skepticism has been too easily equated to that of Montaigne and Nietzsche by many contemporary commentators invested in the philosophical Emerson. As Levine notes, although Emerson shares much with Montaigne and Nietzsche, his skepticism is “always bounded by both a moral concern for others and what Emerson deems to be a higher universal reality.” Nevertheless, I differ with Levine in that, unlike him, I don’t read Emerson as invested in the project of metaphysical truths, especially a

would claim in the early 1840s, because he must deny so much of what people typically affirm. In his discourse at Middlebury and Wesleyan Colleges in 1845, he describes the scholar as the “spiritual person” because he must always side with truth out of an honesty and sincerity of character: “Great believers are always reckoned infidels; impracticable, fantastic, atheistic, and really men of no account. And, truly, the spiritualist ever finds himself driven to express his faith by a series of skepticisms” (*LL* 1:98).²⁰⁰ In a way, this is a stance that Emerson shares with Nietzsche, who at the end of *On the Genealogy of Morals* declares that the atheists—those who simply deny what the Christian ascetic ideal confirms—still have a faith in “the absolute value of truth” that is guaranteed by the ascetic ideal. They are, in this sense, not without a faith that prevents them from being truly free.²⁰¹ Like Nietzsche, for Emerson the true inheritors of skepticism are those “spiritual” people who are able to affirm life in the face of skepticisms, and these spiritual persons only appear to be atheistic because they must question so much of what has been taken for granted by both the Christian traditionalist and the atheistic materialist. And for Nietzsche and Emerson, the proper response becomes a question of character rather than metaphysical truth, a question of “self-overcoming” rather than the submission to skepticism.

In this section I focus on *Essays: Second Series* to explore two interrelated skeptical doubts about the moral and the religious for Emerson, doubts which are brought about by Emerson’s work up to this point. First, we can wonder whether the models of complete character or the ideal truly live up to their supposed moral function, or whether they are nothing more than

kind of traditional theistic picture grounded on the being of God, but rather as confined by what he takes to be the moral imperative supplied by the core function of the religious sentiment in a kind of public and social life. Alan M. Levine, “Skeptical Triangle? A Comparison of the Political Thought of Emerson, Nietzsche, and Montaigne,” in *A Political Companion to Ralph Waldo Emerson*, ed. Alan M. Levine and Daniel S. Malachuk (Lexington: The University Press of Kentucky, 2011), 226.

²⁰⁰ Additionally, “reformers” tend to be skeptical because they show “the faults of the old” (*LL* 2:131).

fantasies and delusions. Nature will play a part in how one responds to this skeptical doubt, because it is one's concrete grounding in a particular space that prevents the ideal from becoming a total fantasy, and keeps us from getting out of step with the world.²⁰² Second, we can doubt the possibility of moral improvement by supposing that there is no progress or reform in character, just a ceaseless substitution of like for like. Emerson must acknowledge that we may often have the experience of inhibited growth with no forward focus, and then he must find a way to legitimate that experience without sacrificing the moral to the material. Entertaining these skeptical questions is Emerson's method of making philosophical progress, of "comprising" the skepticisms by putting them in service of ever-new moral formulations—or, as he says, giving "full swing" to his skepticism by "dip[ping] my pen in the blackest ink, because I am not afraid of falling into my inkpot" (CW 6:6.2). My point is that these skeptical moves, rather than showing a weakening of the religious sentiment, actually show an intensification of it by further elaborating on the influence of character, "which will be the religion of the coming age" (LL 1:38).²⁰³

a. Incomplete Models, Private Laws

Essays: Second Series begins with the question of whether our ideal of the complete

²⁰¹ Friedrich Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morals*, trans. Walter Kaufmann and R.J. Hollingdale (New York: Vintage Books, 1989), 3:24.

²⁰² I choose the language here carefully because I do not want to propose that Emerson has a solution to skepticism, but following Cavell, to express Emerson's respect for skepticism as itself an aspect of human experience, one that he shares with Kant and Wittgenstein: "I think of it as their recognition not of the uncertainty or failure of our knowledge but of our disappointment with its success." Or as he puts it elsewhere, "Here my thought was that skepticism is a place, perhaps the central secular place, in which the human wish to deny the unsettled condition of human existence is expressed, and so long as the denial is essential to what we think of as the human, skepticism cannot, or must not, be denied." *Transcendental Etudes*, 35, 118.

²⁰³ In this sense my reading differs from those who would follow in the general outlines of Whicher by seeing Emerson as eventually succumbing to skepticism and therefore offering a more chastened view in the 1840s.

human is adequate for the purposes of ethical becoming, framing the question around the role of the poet. The special function of the highest poet, in distinction to intellectuals, theologians, and those poets who are only concerned with expressions of “the fancy,” is that the true poet “stands among partial men for the complete man, and apprises us not of his wealth, but of the commonwealth” (CW 3:3-4).²⁰⁴ The poet or “complete man” must express himself; he must be able to speak, not just have his private experiences. The poet thus is a further elaboration of the artist, in that both are seeking after expressions that have an influence on others by apprising them of that in which they all partake. It is in the necessity of social “conversation” that the picture of the completeness of the human reveals its public component. The poet both speaks and acts, because “Words are also actions, and actions are a kind of words” (CW 3:6). And yet most (perhaps even all) of us have some “obstruction” or “excess of phlegm in our constitution” that prevents us from achieving this completeness—that is, we cannot adequately speak as we might hope we could. Emerson gives his model poet a theological form by likening it to the trinity of “the Father, the Spirit, and the Son,” which might be properly called a representation of “the Knower, the Doer, and the Sayer,” which map onto the love of truth, the love of good, and the love of beauty (CW 3:5). Knowing, doing, and saying comprise the three components that make up a complete picture of the human, a unification that is seemingly only possible in the poet—who, importantly, is not just creating poetry, but offering “new thought” and “a new scene” in a

²⁰⁴ In “Circles,” the poet is tied to the writing of a literature which is an alternative to other forms of wisdom: “All the argument, and all the wisdom, is not in the encyclopedia, or the treatise on metaphysics, or the Body of Divinity, but in the sonnet or the play” (CW 2:185). Emerson here raises literature (or, at least, a certain body of poetic literature) above science, philosophy, and theology. It should be noted, though, that these are particularly problematic types of each field for him: thus, the encyclopedia is that comprehensive account of scientific knowledge that forms a coherent and complete system; the treatise on metaphysics is a philosopher’s attempt to make concrete and permanent that which is not; and the Body of Divinity is precisely the wrong kind of divinity, namely the personality of God, for the theologian to focus on. The drive for an encyclopedic style of knowledge, in which one simply adds all one learns into a single comprehensive account of everything (“a mechanical whole”), is also dismissed as one of the intellect’s characteristic failings, because the world resists such intellectual projects, leaving them always incomplete (CW 2:201).

larger sense that is analogous to the founding of new religions (CW 3:19-20). It is in this way that the poet is both a creator of the future and a representative of the present.

Rather than viewing “The Poet” as describing an actual person, it is better to read it as a kind of ideal type, one that individual persons may approximate, but which is always beyond their reach. Emerson indicates as much when he says that “the experience of each new age requires a new confession, and the world seems always waiting for its poet” (CW 3:7). The anticipation for the new poet had already appeared with the expectation of the new “teacher” in the Divinity School Address, the “redeemer” who is characterized as the “new speaker” in “Circles” (CW 2:184), and who becomes the “timely man, the new religion, the reconciler” in the form of the poet (CW 3:21).²⁰⁵ This is an anticipation that is never wholly fulfilled, but is intended to inspire an ever-better series of approximations. The poet is the one (or, perhaps more properly, *would be* the one) who is able to reconcile the ideal and make it real, to make the actual world “fall like summer rain, copious, but not troublesome, to thy invulnerable essence,” which has been, and continues to be, the central function of religion in Emerson’s corpus (CW 3:24).

The problem that comes to the forefront here is whether or not the “symbolic language” that we use, and which the poet is constantly recreating to represent nature, actually represents it; or if, conversely, our infatuation with symbols is nothing but an infinite string of iteration that has no grounding other than the endless march of symbolization. The poet may be the herald of new religions, but how would one know that these religions are in any sense normatively better at getting to the ideal? In other words, can Emerson stave off the Derridean position that he is

²⁰⁵ By 1848, Emerson had begun to put the Poet’s duty in terms of the moral demands of the present, where the poet still aims to articulate the reconciliation of God and the world, to “propitiate against this duality in Nature,” but also to speak directly to present moral needs: “It is the office of the poet to justify the moral sentiment and establish its eternal independence on demoniacal agencies. It is the merit of New England that it believes and knows, that Slavery must be abolished. That faith and the expression of it, we demand of the poet” (LL 1:168). The poet must speak to slavery because it is “the greatest calamity in the universe,” which would seem to indicate that morality must deal with it first, before anything else (LL 1:263)

only offering a continuous string of new signification? Emerson comes close to saying as much in his criticism of the mystics who are unable to realize the instability of their symbols and thus see the multiple ways in which symbols can signify: “For all symbols are fluxional; all language is vehicular and transitive, and is good, as ferries and horses are, for conveyance, not as farms and houses are, for homestead” (CW 3:20). If symbols are merely vehicular, then the road might potentially lead only in circles. A similar point came up in “Self-Reliance” where Emerson was challenged to show that the impulses he follows are from “above” rather than “below.” Self-reliance seems to show little hesitation with the question, though, as Emerson notes, “if I am the Devil’s child, I will live then from the Devil.” (CW 2:30). Of course, this reflexive answer only further incites the skeptical question that I am exploring here, since he hasn’t been able to show that he is not acting from the devil.

This point about the potential uncertainty of our notions of the ideal is put rather starkly in “Nominalist and Realist,” where Emerson notes that “there are no such men as we fable; no Jesus, nor Pericles, nor Caesar, not Angelo, nor Washington, such as we have made. We consecrate a great deal of nonsense, because it was allowed by great men” (CW 3:134). The worry would be that if individuals are only ever “relative and representative,” then the models of “soul” that we build according to our examples might not be sufficient for orienting our moral lives—they might include all sorts of superfluous content that is heralded not because it is indicative of the ideal “symmetrical” man, but because of the way that we tend to idolize and misunderstand “great men.” This is a worry that is much more tempered in *Representative Men*, where Emerson depicts his “great men” as “inhabit[ing] a higher sphere of thought, into which other men rise with labor and difficulty: he has but to open his eyes to see things in a true light

and in large relations” (CW 4:5).²⁰⁶ Emerson’s way of approaching this as a skeptical worry to be addressed in “Nominalist and Realist” is to focus on a person’s “habit” rather than particular words or acts—that is, to examine whether it is in fact possible to witness the “universals” that an individual represents over the “poor empirical pretensions” (CW 3:135). Emerson begins with these passages on great men because they establish his anthropology of humans as “amphibious creatures” who are attuned both to the particulars of our existence, as well as the “atmospheric influence” that cannot be accounted for when merely enumerating the particulars.²⁰⁷ The abrupt transition in the text between this anthropology and the discussion of the traditional philosophical debate between the nominalist and realist positions has to be taken not as one of Emerson’s infamous disjunctions, but instead as an elaboration of this amphibious nature that we witness in the actions of individuals, making the discussion of the existence (or lack thereof) of lawlike relations essentially an attempt by Emerson to grapple with the stability of our moral reasoning as creatures with a dual nature—born both to a world of concrete particular individual

²⁰⁶ There is perhaps no more strident declaration of doubt about the ability of the ideal to manifest itself in individual lives than in Emerson’s various addresses on slavery. Although not necessarily raising the specter of doubt about the ideal itself, his vastly under-appreciated “‘Address to the Citizens of Concord’ on the Fugitive Slave Law” in 1851 makes sweeping claims about the moral failure of a large number of American citizens who enabled the passing of the Fugitive Slave Act. In the address he assumes the most pessimistic tone of any of his writing: “The popular assumption that all men loved freedom, and believed in the Christian religion, was found hollow American brag. Only persons who were known and tried benefactors are found standing for freedom: the sentimentalists went down stream. I question the value of our civilization, when I see that the public mind had never less hold of the strongest of all truths. The sense of injustice is blunted,—a sure sign of the shallowness of our intellect. ... Nothing proves the want of all thought, the absence of standard in men’s minds more than the dominion of party” (EAW 55-56). But here, Emerson’s confidence in the “primal sentiment of duty” does not wane, even if he can admit that he had thought that all people were “sharers of a certain experience” that revealed to them the unity of persons through the moral sentiment and drew them up towards virtue, whereas now it appears that few were so impacted by these higher moral laws (EAW 58).

²⁰⁷ There are parallels here with the much discussed “double consciousness” that Emerson developed at various places in his work, including “The Transcendentalist” and “Fate.” As many commentators have noted, this idea of a double consciousness has connections with W. E. B. Du Bois’ development of the same term in *The Souls of Black Folk*: “It is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one’s self through the eyes of others, of measuring one’s soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity. One ever feels his twoness,—an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder.” W.E.B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2009), 7.

concerns and having the ability and obligation to see ourselves from a higher perspective as moral creatures.²⁰⁸ This position then is continuous with “Spiritual Laws,” where laws are understood as the way in which nature reigns over “will in all practical life”—that is, how we govern our actions in the world towards the good, and away from evil (CW 2:78). This understanding of law was present in the earliest sermons, where laws were understood as the means by which God “guides every moral being to his happiness” through doing one’s duty (CS 1:175).²⁰⁹ In “Nominalist and Realist,” though the focus is on the nature of what we identify as “laws,” the most salient “particulars” in the essay are actual persons, and nature itself rushes into particular persons to disrupt the other parts (persons) in order to rebalance the whole (CW 3:139). Thus the somewhat opaque statement, “You are one thing, but nature is *one thing and the other thing*, in the same moment,” is meant to underline the way in which nature is a door to a more public and less particular understanding of persons (CW 3:139). The point seems to be that nature itself, by distributing genius into individual existing humans, provides for “thousandfold occult mutual attractions among her offspring” so that “this wash and waste of power may be imparted and exchanged” (CW 3:140).

Emerson’s tactic for combating skepticism about the efficacy of the ideal for prompting

²⁰⁸ I agree with Joseph Urbas’ reading of this essay as Emerson’s endorsement of both the Nominalist and Realist position, and that such a dual affirmation is, contra Goodman, not a position of unstability, but one of an affirmation of the dual nature of humans. But I disagree with Urbas that this position is ultimately grounded on metaphysical and ontological positions on causality. My own account tries to keep the moral sentiment separate from “natural beliefs” in a metaphysical order, which Urbas explicitly conflates. My worry is that Urbas makes Emerson’s moral sentiment too intellectual, which tends to skew it towards the stability of metaphysical beliefs in a way that explicitly evoking “sentiment” seeks to mitigate against. If sentiment is meant to “vindicate” beliefs, it is not clear to me how moral sentiment is supposed to be anything different from moral belief. Urbas, 78-105.

²⁰⁹ This is an area where Emerson differs from Kant in that he does not make a hard distinction between “laws of freedom” and “laws of nature,” where the former, for Kant, deal with what ought to happen, and the latter deal with what does happen. For Emerson, the prescriptive and the descriptive versions of law are united in the practical lives of individuals—nature contains both the account of what does happen and, by bringing yourself more in accord with these laws of nature, you determine better what ought to happen. Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, trans. and ed. Paul Guyer and Allen W. Wood (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), A802/B830.

moral improvement thus begins to emerge: he embraces a kind of pluralism that sees divergent “ways of living” as complimenting each other in such a manner that it enables individuals to better identify the divinity or genius present in each. As he remarks, “Why have only two or three ways of life, and not thousands?” (CW 3:141). We are, for Emerson, both universalists and partialists—liable to understand ourselves at any given moment, depending on our mood, as either an element of a really existent whole or as a profoundly individual being (CW 3:144). The skeptical worry that I am exploring here is that the moral ideal would fail to fulfill its promotion of a more just and public life, dooming one to a morally nominalist solitude. But as Emerson notes, nominalist solitude works to the opposite of religion and science, which are both ways in which an individual draws out of himself to see and feel himself to be related to, and part of, the universal. In essence, what prevents the skeptical worry from having too much effect is that our ability to stand in relations to others puts a check on our tendency to function as morally autonomous individuals. Though we acknowledge that we can be inclined towards understanding moral laws after a kind of nominalism, we are always tempered by an equal tendency towards realism. As the last paragraph of the book highlights, to suppose that the answer to the nominalist and realist dilemma can be resolved through forms of philosophical speculation is to neglect that this is not a philosophical problem but a description of our condition. As such, the dilemma cannot be resolved by speculations that prove one or the other thesis.²¹⁰ Like Nietzsche, it would seem that philosophical speculation reiterates the problem rather than resolving it.

This becomes most evident in his final example. Emerson describes a conversation that

²¹⁰ My position here is similar to Robinson’s, but reads the final statement of “Nominalist and Realist” as a stronger move towards an affective relation, rather than just a chastened intellectual relation. Robinson writes: “Although it does not abandon the universal, the direction of ‘Nominalist and Realist’ is to suggest that theory and generalization, albeit necessary and inevitable, must always be taken with some reserve of skepticism. That skepticism represents the recognition of the inevitable changes of perception that experience will generate, and if we remain open, the essential ability to adapt to experience, an adaptation that is crucial to the transformation of theory into practical power.” *Conduct*, 76.

he had with the “pair of philosophers” in which he reveals his failure to communicate his position to them. His failure here seems to be a discursive failure to get the central heart of the problem. Instead, he shifts his strategy to put his position in affective terms: he endeavors to show them what he “liked,” “loves” (twice), “revered,” and “was glad” about (CW 3:145). What Emerson wants to convey to them is that “I loved to know that they existed, and heartily wished them Godspeed,” but is unable to give them a “word or welcome,” perhaps because he finds himself to be an incapable approximation of the poet. For, indeed, the Poet is fully able to speak, to give words a transformative power, to engage in unlimited “conversation,” and thus to fully represent the moral sentiment. Presumably the poet would be able to answer the philosophers who seek after an intellectual expression of the true nature of that truth which “sits veiled there on the Bench” (CW 3:145). But since there is no complete person, that truth is obscured.²¹¹ Emerson’s solace is found in those words of sentiment that he hopes to convey to them through his affection for them, despite not being able to solve their philosophical problems. His move is to see their relation through the power of sentiment, to see in them what is indicative of something higher, and to use that to enable better constructions of the ideal. The point is to reaffirm again that the ideal is shifting, and we cannot be discouraged in this. Eventually, this will reaffirm Emerson’s concern for the practical places in which these ideals emerge.

b. Moral Conservatism, Ethical Stagnation

²¹¹ My reading that Emerson is intentionally distancing himself from the poet, or the redeemer/teacher/reconciler explored above, differs from those who would read these figures as self-referential for Emerson. That would be to see him as describing aspects of his own project with these terms. For instance, Len Gougeon in *Emerson & Eros* consistently refers to Emerson using these terms, calling him variously the prophet, oracle, poet, redeemer, or “harbinger of divinity,” among other terms used by Emerson. A central feature of my account, as I have been developing it, is to claim that Emerson intentionally makes this figure an ideal that is never actual precisely because it is meant as a figure to anticipate and towards which we aspire, rather than one that we could expect to find. Len Gougeon, *Emerson & Eros: The Making of a Culture Hero* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2007).

This brings me to the second of the skeptical worries: that moral progress might not be possible, but only a stasis that has no end. As readers of Emerson have often noted, there is no stronger statement of this form of skepticism about the moral than the often heartrending essay, “Experience,” in which it seems as though even the most devastating of our experiences in the world, the loss of “sons and lovers,” either seems unable to prompt us for uplift, or entirely inhibits the uplift that the essay gestures towards at the end with its self-assuring words, “up again, old heart” (*CW* 3:29, 49). The invocation of the empiricist term “experience” is intentional on Emerson’s part, but characteristically, he gives it his own valence. The question is not, then, what knowledge one can have about the world through experience, but rather what one can know about oneself and one’s moral nature through experience.

“Experience” famously begins with a sense of dislocation, of being “on a stair” from which we are unable to see where we came or where we are heading. Thus, we glide “ghostlike” through nature without a proper awareness of our place. The skepticism in this first paragraph echoes Emerson’s understanding of skepticism as a disorientation from the moral—it indicates a lack of the kind of forward-looking or higher vision that one needs to be more than just an iteration of the current prevailing order. The problem of skepticism as it is laid out here is not that we lack “health and reason,” but that we perhaps lack the “affirmative principle” or the “superfluity of spirit for new creation” (*CW* 3:27). This is not a skepticism about the reality of the objects of our knowledge—although it can include that—but primarily a skepticism about the trajectory of our practical moral activity in the world, which Emerson explicitly describes as concerning “what we are doing” and “where we are going” (*CW* 3:27).²¹² This movement from

²¹² Robinson reads the essay as “a struggle for a truce with knowing that will make action possible,” one that begins with epistemology and ends with the possibilities for action. Although I take Robinson’s point that there are epistemological concerns in the first two “lords,” I do think that it is warranted to put the stress on the status of moral activity at the beginning, where the loss of identity that occurs in the opening pages seems clearly to indicate a

the more traditional skeptical question about our knowledge of the physical world to Emerson's skeptical question about knowledge of our moral nature is one that we saw very early in his sermons, and which I traced in the last chapter in terms of how Emerson read the design argument. The skeptical worry for this essay is that it can often appear to us, especially at those moments when we are most challenged, that "our life looks trivial" (CW 3:28). We should expect that those experiences we have in the world, especially those which cause us trauma like the loss of a son, should have some bearing on who we are as moral creatures: "something which I fancied was a part of me, which could not be torn away without tearing me, nor enlarged without enriching me, falls off from me, and leaves no scar. It was caducous" (CW 3:29).²¹³ If it turns out that we are just the "Para coats that shed every drop," then it would seem that the moral sentiment has failed to do its work; it has failed to advance the individual upwards and onwards towards a more complete human existence. We should expect that those people most dear to us—those who we love most strongly—would have the greatest impact on this moral development, for they are so near to us that our very identity seems to be in part determined by our relationship with them; but, if it turns out that they are unable to "touch" us, and we lose the person with whom we most closely feel an identity but suffer no effects on our character, then the project of striving towards moral perfection is doomed from the start. Our affective ties would fail to promote any growth in our character—they might be distractions, rather than prompts for growth. Love played such a large part in my account of the universal above—now it

loss of one's sense of being a moral creature with a trajectory, not just a loss of one's knowledge about the world or herself. *Conduct of Life*, 59.

²¹³ This is certainly the most famous line of this essay, if not perhaps the entire corpus. Often commentators suppose that it is the most important sentiment of the essay. On my reading, it is the entry point to a larger meditation not the endpoint, similar in many ways to the moment of mystical transcendence that begins *Nature*, but which the book looks to supersede. If one is supposed to have an experience of reading "Experience," then it must be read not as a proof-text for certain philosophical positions, but as itself a movement that one has to undergo, in which case the entry point is only a first step, so to speak, and not the final.

seems to be brought to doubt. Put in the terms of the Poet, without this moral growth there would cease to be any new creation, but only a rehearsal of and stagnation in the present.

The goal of “Experience,” then, is not to delegitimize this experience of moral dislocation and hopeless isolation, but to try to understand better why it happens so that we can be in a position to re-affirm the importance of character—which, crucially, is the subject of the subsequent essay. As Jeffrey Stout helpfully points out, commentators have tended to focus on the moments of despondency in the essay to the detriment of the movement of the whole, which when viewed from beginning to end, should be seen as “Emerson’s journey, and ours, into hell and out again.”²¹⁴ Thus Emerson supplies the “lords of life,” which Stout appropriately labels “standard[s] of knowledge and action”—Illusion, Temperament, Succession, Surface, Surprise, Reality, Subjectiveness—which is Emerson’s attempt to detail those sometimes contradictory frameworks of our human experience, those that both lead and mislead us towards an understanding of our place in a process of human becoming.²¹⁵ To suppose that any one of these lords is somehow a truer or more accurate position from which to understand our condition is to overestimate our ability to understand nature, which “does not like to be observed” (CW 3:29). Or, as Barbara Packer notes, Emerson’s goal in the essay is not to find order in the variety of ways that we might experience, but rather to “exploit its ironies.”²¹⁶ The importance of religion, divinity, and the spiritual, ideas which are interspersed throughout the essay, have led many

²¹⁴ Stout, “Transformation of Genius,” 6.

²¹⁵ Ibid., 7. Daniel Malachuk rightly notes that the various moods have varying degrees of skepticism. The point of this skepticism, though, is to “dramatize . . . the main kinds of struggles the transcendentalist must work through,” not because this skepticism is Emerson’s conclusion, but because it must be passed through en route to the conclusion in the final three paragraphs. Malachuk, 288-289.

²¹⁶ Packer, *Emerson’s Fall*, 162. Robinson makes a similar kind of claim: “The lords of life cannot be mastered, but they can be seen to work against each other, freeing us successively from the control of the last. Thus one section of the essay yields to the next, as one mode of experience grows out of another.” *Conduct of Life*, 60.

commentators to see Emerson's skeptical stance here as ultimately casting doubt on the importance of the religious for his project, thus viewing "Experience" as indicative of the movement away from religion that is supposed to occur as Emerson leaves his earlier religious phase. These religious references therefore warrant a closer look because they ultimately weigh upon the question of whether Emerson's support for the religious life and its project of moral uplift has waned to such an extent that, as Robinson would put it, he now embarks on a secular and pragmatic path.

The first two sections, *Illusion* and *Temperament*, present the steepest challenge to the prospects for a religious sentiment that would attempt to take us out of the cycle of illusion in which "Dream delivers us to dream," or the prison of moods that make up the inescapable temperament of an individual (CW 3:30). For, we can wonder along with Emerson, "What cheer can the religious sentiment yield, when that is suspected to be secretly dependent on the seasons of the year, and the state of the blood?" The worry here is that the religious sentiment is reducible to some scientifically or materialistically explainable factor, and if so reduced, it would cease to function as providing a way of seeing oneself apart from a bare physicalist existence. In other words, reducing morality to temperament explains it away. This is Emerson's problem with certain forms of materialist science—they would reduce the individual to temperament and thus "[put] all divinity to rout" by making spirit just another form of matter "reduced to an extreme thinness" (CW 3:31). And once one has accepted the premises of this materialist science, Emerson claims, there is no escape from physical necessity, and, consequently, there is no way to imagine the kind of creative power that is supposed to join to sentiment.²¹⁷ As much as the

²¹⁷ One is reminded here of the contemporary project to form a science of happiness, one which promises to describe the particular things that one ought to do in order to seek after happiness. Not only does this reduce the human to a set of quantifiable factors that can be measured and compared, but it also seems to destroy the kind of

sections on illusion and temperament develop this skeptical worry, they end by not affirming the worry, but instead reaffirming those powers of the intellect and the heart which are uncontainable by any theory of physical necessity. They are, for Emerson, powers that are not reducible to physical sciences and their methods of materialist explanation. In the end, “We hurl it into its own hell, and cannot again contract ourselves to so base a state” (CW 3:32).

Succession presents Emerson’s longstanding view that too much permanence in life or thought becomes debilitating, and therefore continuous expansion depends on instability. Emerson here, also, briefly reiterates the view I established above that symmetry is only found in the whole of society, rather than in any given person (CW 3:34). But skepticism catches up to such a notion, because “Life is not dialectics,” and the intellectual must always be superseded by “muscular activity.” This emphasis on work and labor in a practical sense is not new for Emerson, but it has been too often neglected by the secondary literature that depicts Emerson, especially during the 1830s and early 1840s, as unconcerned with the particularities of ordinary human experience because he is almost wholly focused on a realm of transcendent universal ideals.²¹⁸ What I have tried to show in this chapter and the previous is that Emerson often showed a concern for the ordinary practical activities of individuals as presenting an opportunity for moral and religious improvement, and that, as he described in 1837, it is work or vocation “which makes the globe a workshop wherein every man, every woman drives his or her own trade in companies or apart, [and] teaches the other law of human nature, virtue. It not only gives man knowledge, and power which is the fruit of knowledge, but it gives man virtue, and love

creativity that Emerson thinks is vital to human flourishing. For once we are so reduced, we cease to be interested in creativity that would unsettle the paradigm.

²¹⁸ For an example of this, see Shannon L. Mariotti, “Emerson’s Transcendental Gaze and the ‘Disagreeable Particulars’ or Slavery: Vision and the Costs of Idealism,” in *A Political Companion to Ralph Waldo Emerson*, ed. Alan M. Levine and Daniel S. Malachuk (Lexington: The University Press of Kentucky, 2011), 305-342.

which is the fruit of virtue” (*EL* 2:124).²¹⁹ The importance of acting thus informs a further lord, *Surface*, which rather than being a reiteration of *Illusion*—“we live amid surfaces”—is meant to reinforce the idea that life itself is “sturdy” in a way that doesn’t depend merely on intellectual analysis, which tends away from action in the present. Instead, the emphasis is on what one can do in the present: “but do broad justice where we are, by whomsoever we deal with, accepting our actual companions and circumstances, however humble or odious, as the mystic officials to whom the universe has delegated its whole pleasure for us” (*CW* 3:35). What we ought to seek after is the “middle region of our being” in which philosophical and scientific speculation is brought in accord with ordinary sensuous experience (*CW* 3:36). Emerson’s way of making this more acute is to contrast scholars with farmers: the former are concerned with the universal, the latter with partiality. Either can tend towards excess and therefore lead to “ruin.” Scholars can tend to become “victims of expression,” because of which their work is liable to become a “disease” (*CW* 3:38). As Emerson noted in the “American Scholar,” farmers, at their worst, sink into being merely farmers, rather than “Man on the farm” (*CW* 1:53). Thus, the moral of *Surface* seems to be that an “unmixed” focus on the expression of the universe is harmful. Everyone must find the “mid-world” in which the concrete partiality of the farm (here, with its emphasis on very real practices of work and labor) informs and is informed by a concern for the universal. This is a theme that Emerson first developed in his sermons, where he was very much concerned with how he could inspire non-intellectual laborers to think more ideally about their moral cultivation. For instance, in 1830, he preached that all laborers have a duty to cultivate themselves which begins in family life, but also extends to “the exercise of his trade” which he ought to make “the school for the increase of his knowledge.” This is because “[t]he universe is full of knowledge.

²¹⁹ For a look at the importance of work and vocation, see Cladis, 49-82.

Every place, every event, every man, every conversation, every action are stores of truth” (CS 2:230).²²⁰ To skate along surfaces, therefore, is to be tempered and to focus on one’s modest activity.

Surprise follows *Surface*, though, because it is precisely the incalculability of experience, with the creative newness that it brings, that forces our modest activity into doubt. In other words, *Surprise* upends our work and shows its inadequacy in ways that are wholly unpredictable and which, therefore, make the quotidian life of work unstable. The section on *Surprise* also intensifies the rejection of reductionist accounts of human moral life by developing the idea that there is an element of the incalculable in our lives, always an element of newness that cannot be anticipated (CW 3:40). This is directly tied to the moral sentiment and our religious lives, the places where “action” is integral. It is here, too, that “the coldest skepticism” and “the ardors of piety” come together for Emerson in the idea that “nothing is of us or our works,—that all is of God” (CW 3:40). What he means here is that both skepticism and religious piety annul the moral agency of the individual, and place this agency somewhere else. Soon after, this conjunction of skepticism and faith serves as the grounds out of which a new ways of thinking must emerge: “The new statement will comprise the skepticisms, as well as the faiths of society, and out of unbeliefs a creed shall be formed” (CW 3:43). They are, in other words, positions to be accounted for in a new kind of religious formation.

The section on *Reality* expands beyond *Surface*, but in a way that makes *Surprise* less traumatic. It attempts to declare, in perhaps the most hopeful tone of all the sections, the return of the ideal that lies “Underneath the inharmonious and trivial particulars,” which ultimately

²²⁰ Robinson calls “Surface” a “tour de force of triumphant pragmatism,” which teaches indifference to skepticism as a way to move beyond it. But, as he points out, the seeds of this pragmatism’s destruction are implied in the very terms that he uses to establish it—mainly, its unthinkingness. *Conduct of Life*, 64.

inspires the “Onward and onward!” that anticipates the final sentence of the essay (CW 3:41, 43). *Reality*, thus, tends towards the Realist view in “Nominalist and Realist”—that moral laws are themselves etched upon the fabric of the universe. If *Temperament* and *Illusion* had put into question whether we ever get an accurate representation of the relationship between ourselves and the world, and *Succession*, *Surface*, and *Surprise* are modest in their claims, then *Reality* boldly supplies the connective tissue for our “flux of moods”: there is “that in us which changes not,” which Emerson will call an “unbounded substance” or “ineffable cause” or “Being” (CW 3:42). From the perspective of this Being, we see “interminable oceans,” or “vast-flowing vigor,” which are metaphors intended to highlight the openness of a “prospective” gaze that reiterates the beginning of the essay where we find ourselves on a stair and cannot see where they lead. This “prospective” gaze, though, now becomes an “expectation”—which Emerson equates to “a religion”—that was not present at the beginning of the essay, abandoning the sense of dislocation that had earlier come with the openness of looking forward and bringing it back together with his understanding of the religious sentiment as a hopeful upward and onward.

But before the reader can get too comfortable with the Ideal, Emerson gives his final lord, *Subjectiveness*, which brings back the “Fall of Man”—his way of formulating the subjectivist turn in which one realizes that the subject has no unmediated access to reality, that we see through “colored and distorted lenses” that are prey to skeptical challenge.²²¹ As I highlighted in the previous chapter, this fall in the context of the Divinity School Address was meant to indicate the emergence of a moral self that begins in immediate sensual experience, distinguishes itself

²²¹ In Barbara Packer’s now classic book on the various versions of the “fall” in Emerson’s corpus, she says that this version differs from early ones in that it is much more pessimistic in its implications and the evidence for it is more shocking. Packer connects this focus on the fall to broader Romantic narratives that reinterpreted the Genesis story to contemplate an “unfallen” state, one that we ought to aspire after, seeing as how this “fallen” state is somehow deprived of the vigor or unity of our prior or original state.

from the world by asking about itself, but only comes to know itself once it fully takes account of its moral sentiment. The “Fall of Man” is here doing a similar work when it is used to describe how the subject realizes that “the eye ... makes the horizon,” which prompts the “great and crescive self” to understand that it is “rooted in absolute nature” and not in any of the partial and relative relationships that it might have in the world (CW 3:44).²²² The intellect fails to capture this because it is only present in an affective sense: “The subject is the receiver of Godhead, and at every comparison must feel his being enhanced by the cryptic might.” From the perspective of subject, it is a God; it has all creative power and subsumes all things into itself. If the main thrust of *Reality* is the reality of the ideal which seems to exist apart from whatever an individual may think of it, *Subjectiveness* appears to give the definition of that ideal back to the individual, who seems neither substantially connected to anyone else, nor grounded concretely in any shared concrete endeavors, like those in *Succession*. Each has the “key” to his own facts, and he must, through “vigorous self-recoveries” and “sallies of action” pursue his own facts (CW 3:46).²²³

So what then are we to make of these various directions in which we are pulled, the lords of life that can variously present us with skepticisms about our ability to go onward and upward, or fortify us against them? The solution seems to be somewhere in the final three paragraphs, where Emerson pulls back from the lords of life to speak about where this meditation has left us.

First, Emerson wants to reaffirm the value of reception, which in stark contrast to the opening

²²² Both “falls” have resonance with Hegel’s *Phenomenology of Spirit*.

²²³ The temptation would be to see this final lord as somehow the ultimate position—a position that seems to reaffirm an individual and idealist picture, in which truth is the product of an individual’s effort. Robinson seems to indicate this is his reading: “If Descartes conquered epistemological doubt with the naked fact of consciousness, Emerson overcame moral paralysis with a similar recognition that subjectivity generates ‘self-trust,’ which is valuable finally in insulating us from the imperatives of others. His final gamble is that the acts of the self-trusting individual will cohere with the larger good more closely than those of the imitative or unoriginal individual. This is an affirmation of his old doctrines of instinct and intuition, but a somber one, because Emerson has to accept the irreducible fact of an illusory world as the price of self-affirmation.” *Conduct of Life*, 69.

skepticism about the value of experience for providing growth, seems to be the primary basis for how an individual grows. In response to the skeptical question about the efficacy of our experiences—“where is the fruit?”—Emerson is willing to see a “private fruit,” that is, the effects of these experiences are as “deep and secular as the cause” (CW 3:47-48). Fortune and Genius here return: they inspire “gifts” beyond what can be made determinate (one cannot make “the account square”), and beyond that which can be essayed—even if one must, in a sense, collect them and try them, such as Emerson has here been assaying.²²⁴ Furthermore, one cannot “urge doing” at the expense of “knowing and the intellectual life” (CW 3:48). Some have taken this to be a mystical retreat from a potential focus on practical action—that Emerson is urging an intellectual, and therefore inward and mental, form of self-removal from the needs of practical action.²²⁵ But, I think it would be better to stress that there is an intellectual dimension to all doing, and that Emerson’s criticism here is actually of those “practical” utopian movements that presume all spiritual peacefulness must come with the control of one’s “doings”.²²⁶ So Emerson is able to say: “Life wears to me a visionary face. Hardest, roughest action is visionary also. It is a choice between soft and turbulent dreams” (CW 3:48). The criticism here is with those “manipular attempts to realize the world of thought”—i.e. by trying to remake the world by taking one’s intellectual understanding of it and forcing the world to conform. There seem to be two main problems. First, living itself contains a kind of opportunity for intellectual reflection—it is itself visionary—a point which was above reflected through the image of work and the farmer. One must *do*, but with the proper posture of reflection that allows one to see what is

²²⁴ Stout, “Transformation of Genius,” 23.

²²⁵ This is somewhat integral to Kateb’s advocacy of “mental” self-reliance. Kateb, xlii.

²²⁶ For an in-depth look at one of these movements and Emerson’s tenuous relationship to it, see Sterling Delano, *Brook Farm: The Dark Side of Utopia* (Cambridge: Belknap Press, 2004).

being reflected in the doing. There is a mid-world that one must occupy in which doing and thinking can be brought together. Second, one must be receptive to that which disturbs one's intellectual attempts to make the world. In other words, one must be open to the religious sentiment as a disruption and not just a comfort. I take this to be the point of the penultimate sentence: "We dress our gardens, 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 world he will carry with him" (*CW* 3:49). It is the return of revelation which is striking here—and it is revelation which connects the ending of "Experience" to the religious thought which would seem to have been left out. In other words, the version of revelation that Emerson had been developing throughout the corpus, which pertains to the moral sentiment as the moment of higher perception of the soul's true nature, is what allows him, then, to finally reaffirm the heart amid ridicule and defeat, and to hold out hope that genius can be transformed into practical power.²²⁷ This, I am claiming, is not different from his claim that "Character is the true Theocracy," which "will one day suffice for the government of the world" (*EL* 3:276). The picture of the divinity of Character is the focus of the essay immediately following "Experience," where again we stand in anticipation of some divine person: "A divine person is the prophecy of the mind; a friend is the hope of the heart. Our beatitude waits for the fulfilment of these two in one. The ages are opening this moral force. All force is the shadow or symbol of that" (*CW* 3:66).

For Emerson, one important element of his attempt to combat this form of skepticism is to consider the place of nature in the development of human spirit. We might worry, after all,

²²⁷ This ending also shares, I would argue, with the ending of "Character," particularly when Emerson again reiterates, albeit in stronger terms, the "holy sentiment": "Is there any religion but this, to know, that, wherever in the wide desert of being, the holy sentiment we cherish has opened into a flower, it blooms for me? if none sees it, I see it; I am aware, if I alone, of the greatness of the fact" (*CW* 3:67).

that nature is not supportive of our moral cultivation—that, our models are unrelated to the world in which we exist, and possibly antagonistic to these models. This worry is addressed in many places throughout the corpus. It is put rather acutely in terms of the infamous “crack” that many have pointed to as one of Emerson’s frustrations over the inability to properly join nature and spirit in his first book.²²⁸ Similarly, in a lecture on “Love” that Emerson gave multiple times between 1838 and 1840, he makes the distinction between the idealist’s “strict philosophy,” which treats nature and other people merely as “phantoms,” and the perspective from which one treats “Human Life and its several departments,” the latter being the proper position from which to understand the operation of a love in which the natural world itself becomes “sympathetic” to him (*EL* 3:56-58). One can also think of this in terms of the doctrine of Compensation that I have discussed already, in which our moral efforts are intimately tied to the structure of the world that supports and enables those moral efforts.

This is most clear in the essay “Nature” in *Essays: Second Series*, whose prefatory poem reiterates this sense of love or the heart as the primary means by which one brings oneself in accord with the natural world: “Throb thine with Nature’s throbbing breast, / And all is clear from east to west.” When one has this heart, it eventuates in a forward look: “Self-kindled every atom glows, / And hints the future which it owes” (*CW* 3:97). This sense of intimacy with nature in which the future becomes apparent is developed in uncharacteristically flowery descriptions of

²²⁸ The much debated “crack” occurs in a letter to Emerson’s brother William directly after Emerson’s high praise of Margaret Fuller’s intellect and powers of conversation: “The book of Nature still lies on the table. There is, as always, one crack in it not easy to be soldered or welded, but if this week I should be left alone after the probate affair I may finish it” (*L* 2:32). It is difficult to read this passage without seeing a bit of sarcasm, with Emerson referring to his book *Nature* as the “book of Nature”—that is, the idea, with which Emerson would have been well acquainted, that nature itself is a language that must be interpreted and deciphered, or as Hodder puts it, nature is “a set of signifiers.” The idea that Emerson might “finish” the “book of Nature” this week if he should get some time alone would surely have been meant as a bit of humor for his brother, especially since the rest of the letter focuses on just the kind of practical monetary and business affairs that would have kept him from “finishing” this persistent philosophical conundrum. For an excellent discussion of this tradition of interpretation and Emerson’s appropriation of it in his first book, see Hodder, *Emerson’s Rhetoric*, 12-22.

the natural world as an “old home,” one in which we “nestle” and “draw our living as parasites from her roots and grains, and we receive glances from the heavenly bodies, which call us to solitude, and foretell the remotest future” (*CW* 3:100).²²⁹ For Emerson, the worry is not about whether nature can give us a sense of the moral ideal because of our intimacy with it, but that nature will “lead us on and on” without actually taking us anywhere (*CW* 3:110). If such is the case, then the supposed “ends of nature” would only create “an aimless society” or “aimless nations”; we would be “fools of nature” (*CW* 3:111, 112). But for this, Emerson has a explanation: “The uneasiness which the thought of our helplessness in the chain of causes occasions us, results from looking too much at one condition of nature, namely, Motion” (*CW* 3:112-113). We see Motion when we focus on the particulars of nature, when we become “enslaved to them.” But nature is also governed by Rest, which we see only when focused on “innate universal laws,” which exist in our minds as ideas, but which can be witnessed “embodied” in nature (*CW* 3:113). Emerson’s examples for a focus on Motion are telling, since they are all technological inventions (the locomotive, the balloon, the new engine, electro-magnetism) that are supposed to make life easier and faster. Thus, Emerson can return to the idea of “divine circulations” at the end of the essay, for which “The world is mind precipitated, and the volatile essence is forever escaping again into the state of free thought” (*ibid.*). One must find the wisdom that is “infused into every form” not by retreating from the world of particulars (here, the world of Motion), but by being able to see in those particulars more than just the succession of particulars. “Experience” gestures in this direction, but doesn’t ground itself so strongly in the experiences of ordinary human practices because it is concerned with experiences

²²⁹ Emerson also puts it thusly: “A man is made, at one point, coincident with the axis of things. There is somewhat constitutional in him to do so, somewhat which he does with joy, and with the consent of all men and things, and which nature backs him in doing.” Asking about the “truth” of this working for the good “sounds a little cold and scholastic;” the solution is to work for the benefit towards which all things aim (*LL* 2:133-134).

that trouble the paradigm of moral uplift. But the attempt to find the universal in the particular, which “Nature” uses to move beyond skepticism, has been Emerson’s longstanding commitment, even if it isn’t until *Conduct of Life* that it gets its fullest expression.

IV. Reading the Higher in the Now

The account that I have been developing of Emerson as a philosophical and theological thinker has, for the most part, taken a decidedly abstract turn as it worked through the 1840s. By turning to *The Conduct of Life*, my hope is to follow Emerson as he reaffirms a commitment that was central in the sermons, that is, seeing the practices and context of ordinary life as the site of ethical cultivation, rather than seeing one’s removal from that context as a necessary condition for ethical reflection. By removal I do not mean that Emerson relinquishes the importance of times of solitude; rather, even solitude is ultimately aimed towards giving one the space to reflect on ordinary life without, in a sense, leaving it. The emphasis on daily cultivation through living a religious life is most evident in “Worship,” which I will read in conjunction with Emerson’s lectures leading up to the publication of *The Conduct of Life*. In doing so, my aim is to further develop the claim Emerson made in “Circles,” but which I have deferred until now, that there is a wisdom contained in the “transcendentalism of common life” (CW 2:187). In this way, I follow Barbara Packer’s commentary on *The Conduct of Life* where she notes that “Emerson always believed that philosophy should transmute the local and temporary into the universal and eternal.” This method rarely led him to specify in his texts the historical occasions or circumstances that prompted his philosophical statements. He does this, Packer points out, not primarily because he is trying to protect himself from criticism by assuming a posture of “literary decorum,” but because it is Emerson’s “expression of faith that thoughts arising from the

confusion of experience could still arrive at the timelessness of truth.”²³⁰ This philosophical method goes hand in hand with the project of the moral sentiment, which, as I have been developing, allows a person to rise above his material circumstances to consider himself as more than just those circumstances, that is, to see himself as part of a universal humanness and to be able to act out of obligations to others beyond his personal interest.²³¹ Or as Emerson says specifically about religion in 1843, it has the ability to raise “every trivial incident to a celestial dignity,” thereby “[consecrating] the nearest objects” and “refining men” (*LL* 1:11, 14).²³² The point of this section is to lay out this philosophical method as itself a further development of the moral sentiment, and as such, to see it as an essential feature of any religion that is properly moral. Here, though, “religion” will take on its most concrete and formal structure—Emerson will give an outline of the practice of religion must be in order to realize the essence of religion, which is the moral sentiment.

a. Idealism and Compensation

The idea that individuals are more than merely an iteration of their circumstances shows up in numerous places throughout *The Conduct of Life*. In a discussion of “riches and poverty” in “Illusions,” Emerson uses the human ability to reflection on ourselves to show how both in thought and in action we are able to regard ourselves apart from the capitalist-materialist

²³⁰ Barbara Packer, “Historical Introduction,” in *The Conduct of Life*, vol VI of *The Collected Works of Ralph Waldo Emerson*, ed. Douglas Emory Wilson (Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2003), lxvi-lxvii.

²³¹ The moral sentiment, as Emerson developed it in the 1840s, was such that it overcame distance between people and made them not strangers: “And though a man should go among strangers or to the antipodes and find himself among just men, he would at once find himself more at home than among his acquaintances and kindred” (*LL* 1:71).

²³² Compare this also to a lecture from 1854: “Religion is the perception of that power, which constructs the greatness of the centuries out of the paltriness of the hours” (*LL* 1:363).

mentality that would reduce humans to a commodity: “For we transcend the circumstance continually, and taste the real quality of existence; as in our employments, which only differ in the manipulations, but express the same laws; or in our thoughts, which wear no silks, and taste no ice-creams. We see God face to face every hour, and know the savour of Nature” (CW 6:9.18).²³³ In another essay, “Considerations by the Way,” Emerson ends with a return to the figure of the farm as one of the places of “employment” that can serve as the basis for reflection that leads to the cultivation of oneself, but he now adds the city as well: “The secret of culture is to learn, that a few great points steadily reappear alike in the poverty of the obscurest farm, and in the miscellany of metropolitan life, and that these few are alone to be regarded ...” (CW 6:7.30). In “Wealth,” the point of reflection on material wealth is to witness how the economic models of wealth are themselves symbolic of something higher—that “wealth is moral,” and thus can be regarded as an extension and expression of our moral life, especially when that life puts wealth to immoral uses. One sees this moral side of wealth when inquiring into the “generals” instantiated by particular employments: “The comptingroom-maxims liberally expounded are laws of the Universe. The merchant’s economy is a coarse symbol of the soul’s economy” (CW 6:3.23, 3.47). Emerson’s point is not to offer an apology for the economic system as though that system is somehow spiritually grounded in the laws of the universe, but to use the economic language with which people would be familiar to drive home his final metaphor: “The true thrift

²³³ The proximity between “savour” and “saviour” seems to be intentional here: that is, the power or quality that nature has to excite us is also the power that functions as a saviour, which we realize through the revelatory “face to face” encounter. The reference seems to be to 1 Corinthians 13:12, a passage on which Emerson preached multiple times in the 1830s: “Now we see through a glass darkly, but then face to face; now I know in part but then shall I know even as also I am known.” Emerson uses this sermon to speak against the view that God would provide knowledge of a future life, and thus we should not seek out revelation that assures us of a future life of goodness. Instead, one ought to prepare oneself to receive goodness in this life: “Keep the commandments and you shall reap their fruit. Do God’s will, you shall enter into his rest.” Importantly, for the “nature of heaven” to be opened to the mind, it must be revealed through “seeing,” which involves “the actual presence of the heart itself with all its love and the obedience of all its powers”—i.e. “it must be present within you” (CS 2:180). A similar kind of position is being evoked in the passage from “Illusions”: it is the “seeing” of God that is the transcendence of circumstance, but

is always to spend on the higher plan; to invest and invest, with keener avarice, that he may spend in spiritual creation, and not in augmenting animal existence” (CW 3.48).²³⁴ The terms “thrift,” “spend,” and “invest” are being deployed to augment an economic system that is too easily enamored with “animal existence.” In doing so, these terms are loaded with a moral value that points beyond animal existence, hoping to find in them a way of seeking after spiritual laws.²³⁵

This current of idealism runs throughout the book, promoting that which is “spiritual” as the “real”—i.e. “that law which executes itself, which works without means, and which cannot be conceived as not existing”—while always tempering the prospects of any certain knowledge of these spiritual laws with the realization that we are beings who “see” mediately, that there is “interference from our organization” (CW 6:9.6; see also *LL* 2:134 where the spiritual is “the moral” which is both of nature and pertains to our “universal motives”). There is no clearer presentation of this than Emerson’s candid inversion of Plato’s cave metaphor at the beginning

it is a seeing that is as much an affective position, performed with love, not just intellect.

²³⁴ Neal Dolan has very helpfully explored Emerson’s usage of the language of property to both invoke the tendency of the people of his day to reduce all relationships to “marketplace calculation” while he simultaneously hopes to disrupt that particular way of thinking. In doing so, Dolan treats Emerson’s usage of the language of property (or, here, the language of wealth) in a similar way that I treat Emerson’s theological language in his Sermons in the previous chapter. Dolan explains: “Emerson used the language of property in part to appeal affirmatively to his postrevolutionary audience’s hard-won, proudly held legal right to own things. He used words like ‘own’ and ‘profit’ and ‘pay’ at once to recognize and to keep the attention of notoriously busy folk by referring to an intimate and pressing aspect of their ordinary daily experience. But at the same time, Emerson inflected this economic idiom in distinctive ways in an attempt to raise his audience’s understanding of their rightful property, and thus of their rightful selves, to a yet higher, more spiritual, and more ecstatic plane. Dolan, “Property in Being,” 344-345.

²³⁵ “Wealth” marks one of the major differences between Emerson and Thoreau, even as they both share a general stance of antagonism towards the American economic system. Emerson begins his essay with the observation that one cannot remove oneself from the concerns of the economy: not only must one pay his debts, adding to the “common wealth.” But Emerson also observes: “Nor can he do justice to his genius, without making some larger demand on the world than a bare subsistence. He is by constitution expensive, and needs to be rich” (CW 6:3.3). The reference to “bare subsistence” would seem to be Emerson’s counter to those transcendentalists like Thoreau who would try to remove themselves from any concern for wealth, and who, like Thoreau, would perhaps have viewed Emerson as living a bourgeois lifestyle. Robinson, *Conduct*, 140-145.

of his final essay, “Illusions.” Whereas for Plato one must escape the cave in which one sees illusion in order to behold the sun, for Emerson one enters the cave from the sunlight in order to discover, in its deep recesses, that all has been an illusion. Emerson is rather blunt about what this inversion of Plato reveals: “Once, we fancied the earth a plane, and stationary. In admiring the sunset, we do not yet deduct the rounding, coordinating, pictorial powers of the eye” (CW 6:9.5). In other words, there is no moment in which one escapes one’s subjectivity to witness some true reality—even Plato’s beholding of the sun is not the unmediated beholding of some independent reality. Nor is there much hope for a sublime or ecstatic moment that could escape illusion and reveal some eternal truth, for it is just as much the case that we give joy “to the circumstance” rather than the circumstances giving us joy (CW 6:9.6). Science provides no escape, for the scientific project is as subject to “whim” as any other kind of activity, which Emerson describes as akin to having all of the fancy pears at a State Fair picked by someone who has “a whim for a particular kind of pear;” therefore, the picker only cultivates that particular variation of pear in his orchard (CW 6:9.9). Our thoughts themselves are not secure, nor are our selves, both of which are prey for illusion—Emerson’s way of seeming to abandon the grounds of intellectual foundation for both Descartes and Kant in one swift move.²³⁶

Given the seemingly inexhaustible possibility of illusion, what are we then to do? For Emerson, no matter what our stance is towards the ultimate status of our thoughts, there will always be the common and quotidian aspects of human life which require our attention.²³⁷ For

²³⁶ The passage reads: “And what avails it that science has come to treat space and time as simply forms of thought, and the material world as hypothetical, and withal our pretension of *property* and even of self-hood are fading with the rest, if, at last, even our thoughts are not finalities; but the incessant flowing and ascension reach these also, and each thought which yesterday was a finality, to-day is yielding to a larger generalization?” (CW 6:9.14). I read the reference to space and time being forms of thought as an allusion to Kant, and the claim that even thoughts are not finalities, and therefore unable to ground the self, a reference to Descartes.

²³⁷ As Robinson has helpfully elaborated, this focus on “solid human living” is pronounced in *Representative Men* as well. For that reason, the book expresses a kind of circular thought that “our dependence on others arises from our

him, “We must work and affirm, but we have no guess of the value of what we say or do” (CW 6:9.15). The lack of security concerning what we do is no reason not to work and affirm, and though we might demand of the gods that we get some “great task” for ourselves, all we receive is the command to attend to those most simple of household dealings: “plod and plough, vamp your old coats and hats, weave a shoestring” (CW 6:9.15). When we think that we have some greater perspective, that “the mist rolls up,” it is only still the succession of dreams—even if we have gotten some new perspective on those dreams. The only foundation left to us is “strict and faithful dealing at home,” in which we can find “honesty and truth” (CW 6:9.17). Emerson’s security is to content ourselves with relations: “At the top or at the bottom of all illusions I set the cheat which still leads us to work and live for appearances, in spite of our conviction, in all sane hours, that it is what we really are that avails with friends, with strangers, and with fate or fortune” (CW 6:9.17). This attention to the grounding of living one’s life and the particular virtues that one can find in this living—here, honesty and truth—is the antidote to the potentially debilitating prospect of illusions. Or as Emerson quotes: “Fooled thou must be, though wisest of the wise: / Then be the fool of virtue, not of vice” (CW 6:9.20). As much as the image of the “snow-storms of illusion” lifting at the end of the essay seems to indicate the possibility of an escape from illusions, Emerson’s inability to say any more of this, placing it at the very end of the book without comment, seems only to hold out the possibility of the absence of illusion, not to see the lifting of illusion as a readily available experience. Nor does this final possibility, “there are the gods still sitting around him on their thrones,—they along with him alone” prove

ultimate independence.” This turn to the individual in social context, with its attendant requirements of human living, is often easily missed when the book is taken to be about a set of heroic individuals who are able to rise above their circumstances to achieve greatness. Robinson’s point, one with which I concur and have tried to trace in my presentation here, is that Emerson is actually quite critical of those ways that his “representative men” fall short of representing the “actual life of contemporary men and women.” Robinson, *Conduct*, 91-93.

to be particularly comforting, especially since we are not told whether that experience would even be comforting to us. These gods pour on a person “benedictions and gifts” and beckon “him up to their thrones”—an image that reiterates the upward movement of the religious sentiment and the figure of the ideal that sits at the heart of it—but there seems to be some doubt about the value of actually being with these gods “alone,” which seems to leave behind all the moral sentiment is supposed to stand for, that is, the more public and therefore more connected and loving character (CW 6:9.21).

Robinson sees “Illusions” as Emerson’s attempt to present the “potential tragedy of the everyday,” that is, if illusions seem to be so ever-present that we concern ourselves only with a routine of the everyday, then there is the chance of entirely losing the ethical to our concern for the trivial.²³⁸ Whereas “Fate” seems to threaten moral life by supposing that moral action cannot be premised on the freedom to act rightly, but is ultimately superseded by a sense of power in the everyday, Emerson seems to leave the tragedy of the everyday as always a potential for us—to let it linger, just as the final image of standing before the gods lingers in a kind of tension against the ethical promise of social affective ties. What Robinson helps to show, and which I think is Emerson’s intention, is not that we are in this state of tragedy, but that the potential of the tragedy keeps one from becoming too content with the ways that she lives at the moment. The lingering image works much the way that skepticism has been working—as a tool for moral cultivation, not debilitation. To show that this final figure of illusion ought not to be taken as pessimistic, and to show that it actually affirms, rather than denies, the importance of the particular manner in which we live as a site of philosophical reflection, we must turn to how the doctrine of compensation gets figured in *The Conduct of Life*, and the particular way that religion

²³⁸ Robinson, *Conduct*, 156.

is reframed as a public and social power for the betterment of individuals in “Worship”.

The interplay between the first two essays, “Fate” and “Power,” has been well examined by Emerson interpreters, especially in the last quarter of the twentieth century.²³⁹ While “Fate” sets out the guiding question for the book, “How shall I live?,” it also offers up an initial answer: by the “laws of the world” (CW 6:1.2-1.3). To live by the laws of the world is to see that one is “hooped in by a necessity” to such an extent that one begins to question her ability to act out of her own freedom (CW 6:1.25). In his address on the Fugitive Slave Law in 1854, fate and freedom took on a concrete political role as a way of negotiating between the Whig and the reformer. Emerson’s point is that for us, this is not just an abstract philosophical question, but cuts to the very core of how one acts morally in the world through the particular political allegiances that one forms.²⁴⁰ The implication is that if reform is possible—or, put more generally, if moral growth is at all possible on a large scale—then freedom must be a coherent notion. “Fate” does allow the moral sentiment and “thought” to have some ability to stand against fate, but neither is left on particularly firm ground. The will is described as being driven by the combination of insight and affection, but most in society lack the energy of will to properly act according to their will (CW 6:1.39). In fact, the seeming freedom that one might have in the will turns out to be only another form of fate, the knot between freedom and fate being so tied together around the idea of an “ascending effort” that it seems unclear how to separate the two (6:1.49-1.50). This knot is a reiteration of the “double consciousness” that

²³⁹ These essays have been central to the “de-transcendentalized” Emerson of that period. See Buell, “The Emerson Industry,” 117-136; Michael Lopez, “De-Transcendentalizing Emerson,” *ESQ* 34, no. 1-2 (1988): 77-139; and Malachuk, “Emerson’s Politics.”

²⁴⁰ “There are two forces in nature by whose antagonism we exist: the power of Fate, of Fortune, the laws of the world, the order of things, or, however else we choose to phrase it,—the material necessities, on the one hand; and Will, or Duty, or Freedom, on the other. *May* and *must*. In vulgar politics, the whig goes for what has been, for the old necessities, for the *musts*; the reformer goes for the better, for the ideal good, for the *mays*” (LL 1:340-341)

Emerson had evoked elsewhere, in which humans are by nature both private and public, and thus seemingly both free and fated—with a foot on the back of one horse, and the other foot on the back of another.²⁴¹

The subsequent essay, “Power,” starts where the conclusions of “Fate” left us, but takes a turn towards the doctrine of Compensation—“that nothing is got for nothing” (CW 6:2.3). Just as the doctrine had done in Emerson’s earliest writings, the point is to view oneself as very much in this world and therefore to expect that one’s actions have their moral value only in this world: here, “All power is of one kind, a sharing of the nature of the world. The mind that is parallel with the laws of nature will be in the current of events, and strong with their strength” (CW 6:2.6). Emerson specifies two techniques for how to exert power in the face of what we are by constitution and by necessity: concentration and drill/use/routine. It is through concentration that “You must elect your work; you shall take what your brain can, and drop all the rest. Only so, can that amount of vital force accumulate, which can make the step from knowing to doing” (CW 6:2.28). This step from knowing to doing recalls the finale of “Experience” where genius must be converted into practical power. The suggestion here is that practical action is achieved through the concrete domain of “work”—not the domain of idle thought, which the artist may have, but the domain in which that thought is turned into “fruitfulness.” This is how Emerson can speak of the poet and the artist alongside politics, war, trade, and “all management of human affairs”: they all share in the need to concentrate on one domain and exert some force for good (CW 6:2.29).

The second technique is often given short shrift, but is in fact vital insofar as it recalls the importance that Emerson placed on both habit and education. Indeed, the power of habit/routine

²⁴¹ This seems to be a reference to Plato’s chariot allegory in the *Phaedrus*, in which the charioteer is driven both by a rational/moral horse, and by an irrational/hedonistic horse.

for cultivating oneself (here, as a “substitute for temperament”) is somewhat crudely called “husbandry,” giving the notion a connotation that invokes the reproductive forces of nature (CW 6:2.31, 2.34).²⁴² Emerson coyly notes that there are powers that are being left out here (“I know what I abstain from”), which would leave open the possibility of an ecstatic rupturing—possibly the kind of experience that is left open at the end of “Illusion.” Nonetheless, this notion of intentional and habitual cultivation in “the work of the day” stands as an essential feature of what it means to be a moral being (CW 6:2.33). Emerson notes that he is unable to do full justice to this notion at the end of “Power,” and thus will defer the topic until “Culture” and “Worship,” the two essays where it becomes clear that religious practices and institutions are one of the main sites for this particular form of cultivation through habit. Or as Emerson connects them, using the language of “flowering” that evokes husbandry and cultivation: “the whole state of man is a state of culture; and its flowering and completion may be described as Religion, or Worship” (CW 6:6.6).

Before turning to the religious life, it is important to say a bit more about Compensation. As before, Compensation is one of the ways that Emerson rebuked a pernicious form of skepticism, which Emerson often described in a Humean way as “unbelief in cause and effect.” But just as Emerson did in the sermons, as well as a variety of essays that followed, skepticism is reinterpreted not as a claim about the knowledge of things, but a claim about our moral lives. Skepticism in this sense would be the doubt that “we are the builders of our fortunes,” which is another way of describing the doubt that “As we are, so we do; and as we do, so is it done to us” (CW 6:6.22). This is the “law” at the heart of both the human mind and Nature—in that way, Emerson glosses it as the “moral sentiment.” Here, a thorough “skepticism” indicates that one

²⁴² Robinson calls this second technique “persistence,” a term that I avoid because it lacks the implication of cultivation that habit and routine imply. *Conduct of Life*, 139.

lacks “any sense of greatness,” which Emerson equates to “atheism” because, for him, to lack an ideal towards which one aspires is precisely to lack a god (*LL* 2:3-4). For this strict skeptic, there is no sense that one aspires towards something higher because there is no sense in which moral action is firmly tied to good consequences. Whether or not we have good fortune, in other words, does not depend for the skeptic upon what one does in the world—it is all a matter of luck. This “eclipse” of the “light of the mind” is precisely the situation that Emerson believes America has found itself in the 1850s—and it is because of this conception of God as an ideal that Emerson is able to claim that the Fugitive Slave Act denies any higher law in the universe. In a striking turn, he even connects the law to the pervasiveness of skepticism because it “uprooted the foundations of rectitude and denies the existence of God” (*LL* 2:7).²⁴³

In “Considerations by the Way” the law is explored by means of a theodicy. Emerson admits that there are far more “malefactors” in the world than “benefactors,” and that “the majority are wicked,” a fact which is represented often by Emerson in his addresses on slavery (*CW* 6:7.3, 7.7; *LL* 1:262, 335). To make sense of this, Emerson turns to a natural metaphor: “The frost which kills the harvest of a year, saves the harvests of a century, by destroying the weevil or the locust. Wars, fires, plagues break up immovable routine, clear the ground of rotten races and dens of distemper, and open a fair field to new men” (*CW* 6:7.8). Reading this passage, it is hard not to see it as Emerson’s attempt to justify the increasingly likely physical conflict between the north and south—the “rotten system” that is to be shattered by “war or revolution or bankruptcy” seems to be the rotten system of chattel slavery. Emerson’s increasing sympathy for violence has been well noted, and his speech on John Brown, which was delivered

²⁴³ Emerson makes the passing of the act analogous to a French mockery of reason, where mocking reason is presented as a form of atheism: “In the French Revolution, there was a day when the Parisians took a strumpet from the street, seated her in a chariot, and led her in procession, saying, ‘This is the Goddess of Reason’.” (*LL* 2:7)

in 1860 (the same year that *The Conduct of Life* was published), makes it a point to see him as a religious man, informed by “Orthodox Calvinists” who served humankind by living toward “ideal ends,” and preparing all for a “higher world” (EAW 122). In his not so veiled attempt to justify physical conflict, Emerson came to see that evil could be necessary for the project of reform because sometimes only evil can shatter an evil system. Just as plants are “fed from manure,” “We only insist that the man meliorate, and that the plant grow upward, and convert the base into the better nature” (CW 6:7.13). Evil becomes justified in the present as necessary for the achievement of the good, as being the only thing powerful enough for melioration to occur, and thus for the possibility of uplift. Whereas in the past Emerson perhaps had other grounds for his doctrine of compensation, it seems clear that compensation is here a necessary prerequisite for potentially immoral acts against the calamity that is slavery. One has to have a hope the one’s actions will ultimately bring about a more moral world, and that an evil will ultimately led towards the good. Without this, a moral revolution seems impossible.

b. Religious Life

My claim up to this point has been that *The Conduct of Life*, together with a good deal of Emerson’s work in the 1850s and 1860s, was an attempt to focus on how the way in which one lives in and through daily tasks can both serve as a site for ethical growth, as well as a site for ethical reflection. The goal, ultimately, is to arrive at “culture” which “redresses [a person’s] balance, puts him among his equals and superiors, revives the delicious sense of sympathy, and warms him of the dangers of solitude and repulsion” (CW 6:4.10). It is in this notion of “culture” that we find Emerson developing the importance of social ties (“A great part of our education is sympathetic and social”), as well as the capacity to transcend oneself to achieve the “loftiness of

thought and power to marshal and adjust particulars, which can only come from an insight of their whole connexion” (CW 6:4.25, 4.35). The culmination of these two points occurs in “Worship,” where the “flowering and completion” of one’s intentional cultivation becomes “religion” (CW 6:6.6).

A good chunk of “Worship” was taken, word for word, from the third lecture of Emerson’s *Mind and Manners of the Nineteenth Century* lecture series, “The Tendencies and Duties of Men of Thought,” first delivered in 1848. In modified form, this lecture also came to be the final lecture in a series that he titled, “Natural History of the Intellect.” Both this lecture and “Worship” reiterate the claim that was central to the Divinity School Address, that is, that the mid-nineteenth century is a “transition period” where those former faiths which “have made the nations” have “spent their force.”²⁴⁴ This has left people in search of something to replace faiths which no longer seem viable (LL 1:188; compare to CW 6:6.9). The disorientation and skepticism that comes from this loss of the old faiths is so pervasive that “the question of Religion” has now become that “universal question of modern times” (LL 1:188). The strategy in both texts is similar: the loss of the old faiths does not mean that religion is somehow absent from modern life—that is, it is not the case that one is entering a new secular period—but that religion is taking on new “forms,” ones that are perhaps not recognized as such because they are still in the earliest stages of formation. Indeed, the greatest “believers” are always viewed as atheistic infidels (LL 1:98). For Emerson, “there is as much [religion] now as ever there was,” a point which people have failed to see because they tend to promote one “element” of religion over all other elements, distorting what the essence of religion is, and thus presuming to see the disappearance of religion itself in the disappearance of a particular form (LL 1:109). This, I take

²⁴⁴ Emerson, of course, held that we are always in a transition period. It just so happens that his transition period has presented itself as a particularly acute crisis of religion.

it, is also symptomatic of the “fatal trait” that is dooming many particular forms of religion for him, that is, “the divorce between religion and morality” (CW 6:6.9). Understanding religion in its moral form thus allows one to see how people have “run mad for the pronouncer [of a religion], and forgot the religion;” in other words, the popular opinion is that once the particular “holy person” is forgotten, then the religion has disappeared (LL 1:189). Both texts end with the vision of “a new Church founded on moral science,” which is supposed to serve as a potential answer to the “question of Religion” and its prospects of a morally aimless society (LL 1:189; CW 6:6.52).

What is interesting about the earlier lecture is that it focuses more on reworking the idea of inspiration in a way that is not central to the later essay. This can be partly attributed to the lecture’s context within a discourse about the intellect, whereas “Worship” is a central piece of Emerson’s examination of practical morality in the conduct one’s life. In the former, inspiration is intended to do much of the work that the moral sentiment is supposed to do: to provide “a public or universal light” by being “the continuation of the divine Effort that built the man” (LL 1:178). Inspiration, for this lecture series, is closely grounded in the identity between the intellect and nature (LL 1:155-156). Once one recognizes this identity, one can attempt to bring one’s life “into union with nature,” which will make “his thoughts run parallel with the creative law” (LL 1:162). This way of understanding the intimacy of human and nature was one of the strategies for facing skepticism about the moral that I explored in the previous section. Here, Emerson seems to take it a further step by elaborating this identity through the theory of *Omoioimeria*, that all things are composed of the same stuff (Emerson sees that this need not be atoms). The identity between human and world is parallel to the identity between intellect and nature: even that “act of Imagination is the sharing of the ethereal currents” (LL 1:162).

Practically, Emerson thinks that he can find this identity through the idea of “instinct.” For him, “the Instinct begins at this low point on the surface of the earth, and works for the necessities of the human being, then ascends, step by step, to suggestions, which are, when expressed, the intellectual and moral laws” (*LL* 1:177). Furthermore, inspiration is instinct “at last put in action.” By grounding inspiration in instinct, Emerson is making the connection between our most abstract and universalized forms of thinking and the very concrete and practical ways that we must act in and with the world. For modern readers, this invocation of instinct should seem quaint and simplistic—it is at once glaringly optimistic in its universality, while at the same time reductive in a way that seems at odds with Emerson’s concern for the irreducible complexity of both persons and nature. These concerns, at least, don’t make their way into the lecture. Instead, Emerson wants to use this basic activity to reaffirm his insistence that “we have a higher than a personal interest”—which had been expressed as the moral and the religious, but here takes on a sense of universality through adherence to nature—by making that higher interest an outcome of our very being as creatures (*LL* 1:182). In doing so, he finds an “ethics of thought,” a sort of “religious office,” which forces us to understand our thoughts about the world as connected to our efforts to hope and strive (*LL* 1:183). The point for Emerson seems to be that intellect is always also moral and must point towards the betterment of people.

Curiously, the lecture ends with two sentences that Emerson omitted from “Worship,” even though he kept the rest of the paragraph: “The joy of knowledge, the late discovery that the veil which hid all things from him is really transparent, transparent everywhere to pure eyes, and the heart of trust which every perception fortifies,—renew life for him. He finds, that events spring from the same root as persons; the Universe understands itself, and all the parts play with a sure harmony” (*LL* 1:189). This assured transparency is in strident contrast with *The Conduct*

of Life's emphasis on illusion being an ever present possibility. Perhaps Emerson realized that his emphasis on intellect in the earlier lecture would not get him to the kind of social ethics that he wanted to develop. Certainly, the intellect does not play a large role in "Worship," where it is overtaken by a sense of work and practical cultivation. Emerson retains the "intimate interdependence" between intellect and morals from the earlier lecture, but instinct ceases to be a driver of religious practice (CW 6:6.17). One way to explain the difference would be to emphasize that instinct became too difficult to maintain as ineluctably moral in the face of the growing need for violence over slavery. Furthermore, Emerson might also have realized that his claims about instinct seem to fly in the face of his rejection of the reductionist accounts of human persons that he eagerly criticized in *Essays: Second Series*.

Nevertheless, "Worship" retains the sense that there is some force that works beneath the human, and thus ensures a particular kind of moral universe, even if this force is no longer instinct. In fact, he completes the essay by returning to the theory of *Omoioimeria* as the "last lesson of life": "Man is made of the same atoms as the world is, he shares the same impressions, predispositions, and destiny" (CW 6:6.50). This idea seems to be the main function of the prefatory poem as well, where "Jove" is treated as a person who can be subject to various forms of torment, but remain unscathed; who is misunderstood as "Fate" because he is able to "crown / the truth, and hurl wrongdoers down;" who can be seen in the eyes of another; and who "Floods with blessings unawares" (CW 6:6.1). Most importantly, though, Emerson's final point in the poem—which reiterates his central theological commitment—is that there is no "mystic line" that divides the human from the divine, and there is no clear division between "his" and "thine." This intimacy is expressed in the nearness of humans to the world in which they must always be present, just as in the earlier lecture. The way to think about this is through Emerson's organic

metaphors, which seem to function in much the same way that his discussion of instinct had previously: “We are born believing. A man bears beliefs, as a tree bears apples” (CW 6:6.4).²⁴⁵ Because of this relationship between human and the world, Emerson offers the consolation that we ought not to be too uneasy, as many have been, about the loss of the “old faiths” because although there seems to be some “anarchy in our ecclesiastic realms,” we still “make shift to live” (CW 6:6.4).²⁴⁶ The “public nature”—that is, “the religion”—cannot be gotten rid of as easily as the loss of one of these old forms of faith (CW 6:6.5). The goal, then, is to specify how this making “shift to live” can promote the public nature of humans, thus forming a kind of new Church, the one that much of Emerson’s eschatological and Christological anticipation (the “new teacher”) have pointed towards throughout his career.

The modern condition that the early sections of “Worship” describe, in which there is “a feeling that religion is gone,” is generally presented as a kind of skepticism that produces “distrust in human virtue” (CW 6:6.9-6.10). This distrust in human virtue leads people to be concerned only with present material comforts, reducing morality to the “arts of comfort,” and denying any virtue that doesn’t produce immediate visible results. Many of the prevailing forms of religion have failed to hold sway over this new skepticism because the churches “stagger backward to the mummeries of the dark ages,” a criticism of the formal churches that fits with criticisms in many of his sermons (CW 6:6.9). Yet despite this current state, with all the usual

²⁴⁵ This accords with Emerson’s response to Montaigne’s skepticism, which is to acknowledge its power while limiting its claims: “We are natural believers.” Part of Emerson’s point is a kind of anticipation of Charles Sanders Pierce’s position: it is possible to be skeptical, by only within a larger system of beliefs, which for Emerson, is just part of the natural condition of humans who must believe because of our relation to the natural world and our activity within it (CW 4:96).

²⁴⁶ By this point in his thinking, anarchy in the ecclesiastical realm might actually be a good thing because of the support that some Christian churches, both explicitly and implicitly, had given to chattel slavery. The fact that Christians kept slaves shows that “no forms, neither constitutions, nor laws, nor covenants, nor churches, nor bibles, are of any use in themselves; the devil nestles comfortably into them all. There is no help but in the head, and heart, and hamstrings of a man” (LL 1:342). That is, there is no help but in the moral nature of a person. The issue of

criticisms of religion with which his audience would have been familiar (the ““universal decay of religion’, &c. &c.” indicates familiarity with these criticisms), “the moral sense reappears to-day with the same morning newness that has been from of old the fountain of beauty and strength” (CW 6:6.13). This is described as a kind of “ecstasy,” although an ecstasy for which we have a “total inexperience” in the world, one that points us towards some ultimate moment (perhaps purely anticipatory) where we “deal with real being,—essences with essences.” In the swinging pendulum between individualism and “religious training,” Emerson celebrates that the trend of the times is towards individualism, where the “the Spirit,” invoked in Christian terms, speaks to the individual: ““How is it with thee? thee personally? is it well, is it ill?”” This is the kind of movement that would be necessary for a religious revolution to occur: the old training and its codification in a “representative system” must be pushed aside for a renewed religion of “wild beauty” like the crab fruit.

Emerson turns to “ecstasy” at this moment because it is not a product of the understanding that deals with the knowledge we can have about the world. It gives him the inroads to turn to sentiment, which is not containable by the material and prudential reasoning with which the understanding functions. Crucially, the primary experience of sentiment for him is love, “the redeemer and instructor of souls” (CW 6.6.17). As Emerson concludes, we ought to replace “sentimentalism by realism,” because what these sentiments like love and human relations teach us is not just how we feel in response to particular events, but rather they teach us something about the laws that govern the world (CW 6:6.14). This is not gotten by “theologic creeds” or “theologic discipline,” but, rather, comes from obeying “your moral perceptions at this hour.” That is to say, discovering these laws does not require the kinds of theological creeds

“slave-holding and slave-trading religions” is central to the lack of credible religion in “Worship” too (CW 6:6.9).

or discipline that have characterized the Calvinist theology of New England, which seeks to change one's sentiment from something it was not previously, but rather an attention to and cultivation of what was available already.

This does not preclude worship, of course, because as a kind of "performance," worship can serve as a "source of intellect" by instigating and promoting the moral sentiment. It is in worship that individuals come together, where they impress upon one another the moral sentiment, thus inspiring each other to further refine that sentiment. Thus, "holiness" is only gotten by public force, being able to know the nature of things not just in one's private way, but in a way that is open to all (CW 6:6.16). How then does Emerson connect this sense of the moral sentiment to the performative idea of work and labor which becomes one of the major topics of the latter half of the essay?

In "Worship," both religion and worship are understood as "the attitude of those who see this unity, intimacy, and sincerity; who see that, against all appearances, the nature of things works for truth and right forever" (CW 6:6.19). This "attitude" is clearly in contrast to the attitude of the skeptic who does not see unity, intimacy, or sincerity, and who doubts that things work towards the right and truth. This attitude is not something that one has in his private self, though, because what you are is always "secretly conveyed" from you to another (CW 6:6.29). Emerson's point is that although character might treat the development of individuals, character is not itself a private matter because the character of one person is instantly communicated despite efforts to "hold it back" or "articulate something different" (CW 6:6.32). This again is a consequence of the one-world idea of Compensation: if one were able to have a character that was merely private, to act in ways that do not convey that character but disguise it or make others think that you are something different than what you are, then the essential moral

imperative to cultivate oneself would have a degree of separation from the practical consequences of that cultivation in the world. Character would then be making one private, rather than making one more public. And just as Emerson did in the earliest sermons, he invokes the idea of immortality as a way to reinforce this idea: “Immortality will come to such as are fit for it, and he who would be a great soul in future, must be a great soul now” (CW 6:6.48). Crucially, if immortality must be “proved,” which was the demand that so pressed on his congregation in the 1830s, then it can only be proved “from our own activity and designs, which imply an interminable future for their play.” Rather than immortality referring to a future life, it here comes to be a way of thinking about the future of our life—it comes to be a way of looking forward and therefore holding hope, while at the same time driving home the imperative that moral activity has to focus on activities now.

The present focus, thus, revolves around Emerson’s usage of work and labor, or those places of performance. As Emerson makes clear, “What is called religion effeminates and demoralizes” (CW 6:6.49). Unfortunately for modern readers, Emerson is using “effeminates” to indicate a lack of action, a lack of practical performance, one that Emerson at times thought lead towards the negative side of mysticism. Emerson operated with an essentialized form of gender, while at the same time, he seemed to advocate for a kind of balancing of the masculine and feminine in all individuals, regardless of gender.²⁴⁷ For example, Emerson criticized Margaret Fuller’s theological writing as being too feminine in the sense that it was too mystical and removed from the practical lives of individuals.²⁴⁸ For him, “The weight of the Universe is

²⁴⁷ See Gilbert, “Woman’s Rights Movement.”

²⁴⁸ Jeffrey A. Steele, “The Limits of Political Sympathy: Emerson, Margaret Fuller, and Woman’s Rights,” in *The Emerson Dilemma: Essays on Emerson and Social Reform*, ed. T. Gregory Garvey (Athens, Ga.: University of Georgia Press, 2001), 115-135. Steele argues, correctly, that Emerson was unable to see how Fuller’s mystical theology, which reinterpreted central core ideas of theology, could have a practical effect by empowering women.

pressed down on the shoulders of each moral agent to hold him to his task. The only path of escape known in all the worlds of God is performance” (CW 6:6.49). What is “masculine,” then, is this willingness to act. Emerson formulated his idea of work in various ways in the essay: in terms of loving to do one’s work “rightly” (CW 6:2.28); that one’s “task is his life-preserver” and that knowing one’s work is “dear to God” “defends him” (CW 6:6.36); and that the one who “finds support in labor” by “sympathy with the invisible and real” therefore makes the choice of virtue and religion (CW 6:6.45). Rather than religion being an escape from work and labor, religion here is inflected upon work and labor—it becomes the particular “attitude” with which one does one’s quotidian activities in the world. This attitude finds the virtue in labor, sees it as the site of cultivation, and thus sees it as a site where divinity is present, where one is able to express the “intimacy of Divinity in the atoms” by acting virtuously. Putting this into an organic metaphor, he says that this is when “assurances and previsions emanate” from a person’s body and mind, just as “incense exhales” from flowers (CW 6:6.35).

Emerson’s final call, then, is for a religion that is intellectually sound—that is, a religion with a faith grounded in that which is “its own evidence” (CW 6:6.51). This is a faith for the “scientific mind,” but not a scientific faith in the Lockean sense; rather, it is a faith that seeks after the practical wisdom found in life. It is this practical wisdom—which I established above—that is its own evidence because it can be immediately affirmed by experience, as having arisen out of it, and therefore garnering a kind of assent that is not had by theological and philosophical argument that operates at a remove from the practical lives of individuals. It is also scientific in the sense that it sees only one world and humans as a piece of that one world—this is the essential conclusion about science that Emerson’s idealism has been after from the beginning. Thus, Emerson concludes with the “new church founded on moral science” (CW 6:6.52). This

“church” aligns with the reinterpretation of the “church” that I explored in the previous chapter, which sees it as essentially “education,” one which is broad and inclusive. This church would “embody” truths and laws “in outward form, for the sake of preserving to the seer himself the remembrance of his vision, and of provoking all men to efforts after this beatitude” (*EL* 2:93). Because it embodies truths and laws, it is appropriate to call it a church of “moral science,” meaning one which takes its essential role as promulgating the unifying purposes of the moral. As I showed in my discussion of the Divinity School Address, this is an effort to remake the church into something that is universal, useful, and exalting. It will have a preacher who seeks to “convert life into truth” (*CW* 1:86).

But this church will be different from the current church. It will be “without shawms, or psaltery, or sackbut,” terms that serve as “ornamental reminders of the old church” and thus allow him to distance this new church from foreign ideas and a foreign history (*CW* 6:6.52).²⁴⁹ Instead, this is a church that is not confined to a building (“it will have heaven and earth for its beams and rafters”), uses the natural world as its material (it will have “science for symbol and illustration”), and which builds its own set of representative media (“it will fast enough gather beauty, music, picture, poetry”) (*CW* 6:6.52). It will connect each person to the universal and public part of himself (“the nameless Thought, the nameless Power, the superpersonal Heart”), which makes him a more public and therefore more complete person. It will point him towards “great duty,” and the “neighborhood of the great.” In sum, this is a church of the moral sentiment. But as I have been stressing in my reading of *The Conduct of Life*, although Emerson finds a way to use ecstatic moments for religious purposes, his religious thought is not focused on these ecstatic moments as the prime site for religious life. In other words, to be religious one

²⁴⁹ See Joseph Slater’s notes (*CW* 6:6.52n).

ought not to seek ever more intense mystical states. Rather, sometimes ecstasy is needed to get us to view the daily activities of life differently, to prompt us to take a different attitude towards our activities. This is why “Worship” ends with the church rather than the individual spiritual quest. Worship is the culmination of the progress of the religious sentiment, and Emerson’s worries about mysticism (especially Fuller’s) make it so that religion always returns to the public rather than escaping from it. In fact, to “find” the church is to see how one’s quotidian activities, especially in concrete relations to others, indicate and reflect these “transcendental” implications of church. It is thus to find this church, and thus to find the performance of worship, in the “transcendentalism of common life.”

V. Conclusion - Taking Stock

As this chapter and the previous methodically worked through Emersonian corpus to trace his religious thought over the course of his career, it is important to make a few conclusions. As with all things for Emerson, there is an openness to the traditional categories of what is commonly taken to be the religious. This means, of course, that any conclusions are bound to be tenuous. Nevertheless, the following three themes should stand out in the account that I have developed.

a. (Natural) Theology

I began this chapter by observing how Emerson formulates his version of a “natural theology” that intends to read the high aims of humans in an open-ended set of cultural and intellectual expressions that are constantly being newly generated, which he broadens to include “conversation, fiction, proverbs, and the very thoughts of men at the present day” (*EL* 3:286-

287). This positive take on theology is generally overshadowed by his more numerous condemnations of those kinds of theology that he dismisses as a form of “dialect” that speaks only in a limited system of representations, a view that ultimately leads him to declare that the cramped confines of the formal church is a “system of despair” (*EL* 3:291). But rather than take these condemnations of theology as being a rejection of theology itself, I have hoped to show that there is a way to read Emerson as invested in a theological project throughout the corpus. In short, that theological project is an attempt to view how the ideal is conveyed in the actual, which is a form of theology insofar as it seeks to express how the divine (the ideal) appears in the finite forms of the human.

This seems to be one of the main worries that emerged after the Divinity School Address. If theology is no longer a distinct domain of knowledge that requires a special professional class to do it, then Emerson would seem to be working a revolution in who and what is able to speak with theological authority. For example, this is one of the undercurrents of Andrews Norton’s famous attacks on Emerson’s theology, which he derides as infected by the pernicious influence of the Germans. According to Norton, there is a responsibility for the theologian to work out his doctrines systematically, making sure that “future investigation will not lead him to change them.” This sets up a special class of theologians, like the institutionally employed Norton, who are able to bear this burden of intensive study and reflection, so much so that to be an “instructor” one must have “labored to qualify himself morally and intellectually for its proper performance.”²⁵⁰ For scholars like Norton who had spent a lifetime mastering biblical languages and texts in order to qualify himself in an academic setting concerned with the rational and systematic presentation of theological ideas, it came as a shock to think that theology could be

²⁵⁰ Andrews Norton, *A Discourse on the Latest Form of Infidelity* (Cambridge: John Owen, 1839), 61-62.

found not only in a variety of cultural productions outside of interpretations of scriptural canon, but also in the quotidian thoughts and wisdom of the common people. Although he was not the only one to do so at the time, Emerson's theological revolution democratized who could speak theologically, and in turn, inspired people to find ways to express how divinity could be present in nearly all aspects of a person's life. It is in this way that an Emersonian understanding of theology resembles more a liberation theology than it does much of the systematic and rational theology out of which it emerged.²⁵¹ It might be more proper to call what Emerson is doing a form of theological thinking, one that stresses the turn towards the ordinary lives of people as a place in which to theologically reflect on their particular manner of relating the ideal and the actual. In this sense, the farmer has as much right to speak theologically as the "theologian," if that farmer can witness in his own life the way that the ideal is present and can reflectively take hold of his efforts at making the ideal actual. It is through this way of thinking theologically that people are able to seek after the divine by recognizing and expressing their duty. Theological thinking, then, is one form of the transcendentalism of the common life. My claim throughout has been that a turn to literature—which is often the way of justifying a "secular" reading of Emerson—is actually a move to make theology more plural and hence a more adequate expression, not to abandon it.

b. Mysticism and Metaphysics

²⁵¹ I don't want to stretch the comparison too far, but there are some striking similarities. For instance, Emerson shares with Gustavo Gutierrez the idea that theological reflection starts with the life of all believers, that it is a kind of "reflection" or "critical attitude" that follows historical praxis. For Gutierrez, theology is "critical reflection on humankind, on basic human principles," one that doesn't aim to achieve a permanent set of "truths," which would be "sterile," but to be always changing in such a way that it has a prophetic function. Obviously, Emerson does not share the same sense of an ecclesiastical community as Gutierrez that gives preferential treatment to the poor, but the actual function of theology is similar. Gustavo Gutierrez, *A Theology of Liberation: History, Politics, and Salvation*, revised edition, trans. Sister Caridad Inda and John Eagleson (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1990), 9-10.

If we take Emerson as our guide here, there is a way in which mysticism and metaphysics both tend towards the same problem: they end up being static rather than dynamic. When Emerson presents Swedenborg as his representative mystic, he admires Swedenborg's ability to see the natural as indicative of spiritual truth—this is the sense of mystical correspondence that commentators through the twentieth century fixed upon as Emerson's primary theological position. Nevertheless, Emerson ultimately finds Swedenborg's mysticism to be problematic because it “fastens each natural object to a theologic notion,” rather than allowing these relations to be under constant evolution and change. This is what ultimately leads Swedenborg's theology to be under a kind of “cramp”: it is permanently bound to a static, and hence unprogressive, set of Christian “symbols” (CW 4:68, 77). Thus, Swedenborg's mysticism tends towards a “coherent and elaborate” system, the mere intimation of which is enough for Emerson to question its intellectual promise. The metaphysician, for Emerson, is often doing the same, seeking after a “completeness of system” which he claims is like “the gnat grasping the world” (W 12:12). These are instances of intellectual hubris because they suppose that a finite human has somehow escaped the confines of his finite knowledge. In turn, their inquiries are limited and they cannot appreciate the multitude of ways of seeing oneself that Emerson wants to enable. Metaphysics has the tendency to divorce itself from life, to ignore “rough experience” in an effort to create a coherent account of the world (W 12:13). But it is within the rough experience that Emerson wants to locate his way of doing philosophy.

Nonetheless, Emerson does have an interest in metaphysics—which I think parallels his interest in mysticism—but one which is in “not the logic, but the power, if any, which it brings into science and literature.” Or as he puts it, “My metaphysics are to the end of use” (W 12:13). Similarly, mysticism serves Emerson only insofar as it proves useful. One could say it is useful

insofar as it enables better selves in rough experience. Emerson's critique of Fuller is that she is often "tainted with a mysticism" in which "a host of trifles" is exaggerated into "a dazzling mythology."²⁵² This dazzling mythology takes away from the moral import of her thought, because rather than inspire a common moral sentiment, the reader becomes stuck trying to interpret the meaning of the author's symbols, which only turn out to be a product of her private concerns. Even Emerson's transparent eyeball passage—that supposedly paradigmatic mystical moment in his work—I read as ultimately an experience that is supposed to lead into the meditation of *Nature*, not as itself a moment of private intuition. I think the question for both metaphysics and mysticism, when they appear in Emerson's work, is what *use* they are being put towards—which ultimately seems to redound to the promotion of the moral sentiment.

There are places, of course, where Emerson seems to step outside these more constrained notions of mysticism and metaphysics. In his attempt to add poetic content to our experiences, he sometimes seems to verge on intuitionism—that he has received a kind of direct intuitive revelation about the nature of things. This is, of course, how he can be included among the intuitionist school of American philosophy late in the nineteenth century. Indeed, I think we might question Emerson when he seems to go outside the bounds of his own stated concerns about mysticism and metaphysics. There is always the tension between the circumspect, self-reflexive Emerson and the optimistic, prophetic Emerson. Both of these Emersons exist in his corpus. If I have overemphasized the former, it is because the latter is overrepresented, not because the latter does not exist. For instance, there is Emerson's claim that nature itself, because partaking in divinity, tends towards the promotion of virtue in the individual—as though the world itself was metaphysically structured in a way that encourages human goodness. This claim

²⁵² Margaret Fuller, *Memoirs of Margaret Fuller Ossoli* (Boston: Sampson and company, 1857), 279.

appears in Emerson's work, and it has been enough for many to reject him as naively optimistic, unable to handle the dark side of human experience. To honor what I take to be the importance of instability in his religious thought, the idea that any overarching metaphysical claim is intellectual hubris, I deemphasized claims like this. Instead, I argued that what was more important for Emerson is not the viability of the claim, but the moral reasons he has for making it. As Emerson himself seems often to be pointing out, our assertions are always poised somewhere between an idealism and a realism, somewhere between the human grounds for making such a claim and the world which is not always responsive to those claims. Nevertheless, these are interpretive choices on my part, and they open up spaces of difference between my claims and certain portions of the corpus.

c. Churches, Theism, and Post-Christianity

My claim throughout these two chapters has been that I read Emerson as not abandoning the Church, but some churches. In fact, given his pluralistic commitments, it might be better to think only in terms of local churches. Emerson had an ecclesiology, although at times his calls for the cultivation of the individual tend to obscure the role for a church. On his account, a church's function is to serve as a site of education through the preservation and dissemination of the means of moral cultivation. He is, in this way, not signing off, nor does he advocate signing off. Rather, he is a reformer who sees himself as describing what was implicit within the Christian church all along (although not exclusively), but which was neglected when the Church (through its various churches) elevated adherence to dogma over the cultivation of its members, and when it chose to speak only through a narrow sets of canonical terms to the exclusion of all other spheres of culture. What this reveals, I think, is that Emerson would reject the notion that

he is a secularizing precisely because he is rejecting the notion that there is an autonomous domain called the “secular”—that one can actually sign off. To think that there are certain “religious” aspects of life, like the church, that stand in distinction to the “secular” pursuits (like literature, or any other of the “aesthetic” arenas that critics often place him into in opposition to the “religious”) is to subscribe to the same narrowness that Emerson thinks afflicts many of the churches of his day. It is akin to his recurring claim that to look for miracles is to fail to see how “All our life is a miracle” (*CS* 3:80).

For churches themselves, Emerson makes it clear that while they will necessarily retain some traditional elements, such as the “office of the preacher,” there is much that will change: “No man can tell what religious revolutions await us in the next years; and the education in the Divinity colleges may well hesitate and vary” (*LL* 2:182). This is, for Emerson, the proper evolution of the Christian tradition—it is towards the identity of religion with morals, towards “beneficent inevitabilities” (*LL* 2:185). And this evolution towards morals is one that shows how one is led out of private life to public life: “All which men value themselves for as religious progress,—going alone, renunciation, self-mortifying, to attain a certain religious superiority,—is the way *from*, not the way *to*, what they seek; for it is only as our existence is shared,—not as it is self-hood, but as it is humanity or godhead,—that it is divine” (*LL* 2:188). It is because religious life should tend towards shared existence that a public church enabling public worship, and therefore public formation, is needed.

Perhaps this makes Emerson a post-Christian.²⁵³ There are both reasons to like this term and reasons to resist it. Buell seems to hit upon both in his concluding remarks on Emerson’s religion. He notes that, on the one hand, Emerson can be criticized for not effectively addressing

²⁵³ And some have called him one. Van Cromphout, *Emerson’s Ethics*, 79; Robinson, “A Religious Demonstration,” 53; Robinson, “Divinity,” 96.

how “subjective and/or ideological projection” might play a more significant role in his account of religion than he realizes because he neglects to fully situate himself historically. But, on the other hand, by abandoning a sense of exclusive salvation and a singular conception of human flourishing, Emerson sought to create a way to make sense of “moral or spiritual universalism ... without homogenizing ‘the definition of humanity in all its inconceivable variety’.” This strategy, for Buell, remains an admirable goal in a society that is increasing pluralistic and which aims to find a kind of balance among competing moral identities.²⁵⁴

With that in mind, if the term “post-Christian” is meant to obscure the historical indebtedness of Emerson to a Christian way of thinking—especially its often pernicious attempts to universalize itself—and therefore make him past-Christianity, perhaps past-religion, then the term tends to deny what I take to be most interesting about Emerson’s religion: that it is an attempt to reformulate, not abandon the tradition in which he was shaped. Like Buell, the term “post-Christian” in this sense can also obscure the tendency toward ideological projection—in which one universalizes one’s self—by omitting that Emerson operates under a particular Christian schema even as he seeks to widen it in new directions. But if, instead, “post-Christian” is meant to indicate the ways in which Christianity itself is an evolving tradition, which Emerson thinks it is, and how it can remain a part of individuals’ lives, which Emerson thinks it can, by way of informing the means of moral uplift, then the term is helpful. That is all to say, if the “post-” is meant to indicate that nothing in Christianity is so fundamental that it is immune to change, or recalling my Cavellian appropriation, that nothing is so sacred that it becomes immune to the process of endless criticism and revision, a criticism and revision that begins out of historical necessity within the context of Christian tradition, for this is the audience to whom

²⁵⁴ Buell, *Emerson*, 197-198.

Emerson is speaking, then the post-Christian label seems appropriate for Emerson.

CHAPTER FOUR – MORAL PERFECTIONISM

The human soul, the world, the universe are labouring on to their magnificent consummation. We are not fashioned thus marvellously for nought. The straining conceptions of man, the monuments of his reason & the whole furniture of his faculties is adapted to mightier views of things than the mightiest he has yet beheld. Roll on then thou stupendous Universe in sublime incomprehensible solitude, in an unbeheld but sure path. The finger of God is pointing out your way. And when ages shall have elapsed & time is no more[,] while the stars shall fall from heaven & the Sun become darkness & the Moon blood, human intellect purified & sublimed shall mount from perfection to perfection of unmeasured & ineffable enjoyment of knowledge & glory. Man shall come to the presence of Jehovah. (JMN 1:46)

Introduction

In the previous two chapters I presented a reading of the Emersonian corpus that takes a certain kind of religious project to be a central thread of seemingly disparate parts. My goal was to show that rather than abandoning religion, Emerson was engaging in a renegotiation of what counts as religion in his American context. This renegotiation entailed participating in an ongoing normative conversation about how individuals ought to live their lives. The essential insight of his renegotiation of religion is that there is a human faculty, the religious sentiment, which is at its core fundamentally moral. This proximity of the religious and the moral is Emerson's way of changing the conversation around religion into a discussion of how one is to live a moral life in the world as we have it. This understanding of the moral and religious relies on constant work to elevate oneself, upward and onward, towards a postulated ideal. This ideal is often conceived by Emerson as the divine—i.e. whatever one uses to orient herself in the process

of becoming becomes for her a god. In this chapter, I want to open the possibility that an Emersonian ethics is a theological ethics precisely because the conversation about whether or not it qualifies as *theological* can reveal much about what that category means. In other words, if Emersonian religion aims to open the category of the *theological* to incorporate new possible configurations of divinity—that is, new expressions as well as new material for theological reflection in heretofore unconceivable ways, appreciating tradition but not being bound to its continuous iteration—then it must begin by upsetting the prevailing currents of what counts as theological. It must also, as I hope to have made evident in the previous chapters, open the boundaries between the religious and the philosophical.

My focus on perfectionism in this chapter aims to bring together philosophy, ethics, and religion specifically through the work of Cavell, who offers a powerful account of Emerson's moral perfectionism, one that I find both extremely useful and in need of supplementation.²⁵⁵ The first section of the chapter explores three topics: Cavell's account of the ordinary, his "(secular)" perfectionism, and the moral importance of acknowledgment. While I see these three Cavellian elements as crucial to any form of perfectionism, I change the Cavellian reading by understanding them as integral parts of Emerson's reworking of a religious project, and thus not a form of "secular" philosophy—although, of course, my hope is that these boundaries will become fuzzy. Accordingly, in the second section of the chapter, I articulate three worries about Cavell's perfectionism, and I turn to specific parts of my account of Emerson's religious thought that I believe correct for these inadequacies: specifically, I focus on the moral sentiment, the

²⁵⁵ From this point on, I will refer to "Cavellian perfectionism" not to confuse it with the account that I will draw directly from Emerson, even if this cuts across the grain of Cavell's terminology. I do this because the term "Emersonian perfectionism" in Cavell is constructed by elements that come from a range of places outside the Emersonian corpus, and which seems more Cavellian than it, at times, seems Emersonian, even if it is always in the *spirit* of Emerson.

actual and ideal, and religious formation. By putting Cavell back into conversation with Emerson, I offer a way of thinking about how these Cavellian tools of perfectionism can be aligned with Emerson's much neglected religious thought and not just Cavell's philosophical Emerson. To make sense of what is *theological* about my reworked understanding of perfectionism, I elaborate the importance of love and develop an account of a pragmatic theological ideal drawing on both Emerson and Dewey. My choice of Dewey as a conversation partner for Emerson not only highlights how Cavell inadequately rejects the perfectionist connection between Dewey and Emerson, but also shows how a shared focus on a *religious* perfectionism between the two thinkers does a better job of detailing how ordinary individuals are formed within communities to have affective and intellectual relations with one another, that is, how their social life makes possible the kind of perfectionist ethical thinking that interests Cavell.²⁵⁶ My main focus in this chapter is Cavell because his particular way of reading Emerson has done so much to orient the field for those who would take Emerson seriously as an American philosopher, providing many valuable tools for constructing an Emersonian moral philosophy. But as will become clear throughout, the chapter is also about a legacy of inheriting Emerson, and thus as much about how we understand him as it is about Cavell. By constantly going back to Emerson, I hope to call up those submerged resources that were left out of the late twentieth century retrieval of the philosophical Emerson.

Although Cavell's work is seemingly intentionally ambiguous about the relation between religion (and, concomitantly, theology) and philosophy, there are ways that Cavell's

²⁵⁶ However much Cavell has advanced scholarship on a perfectionist ethics, he has also denied that the American pragmatists—those who are typically considered to be Emerson's inheritors—ought to be considered as belonging to the ranks of the perfectionists. This becomes most clear in Cavell's comments on Dewey: "But for my taste pragmatism misses the depth of human restiveness, or say misses the daily, insistent split in the self that being human cannot, without harm to itself (beyond moments of ecstasy) escape, and so pragmatism's encouragement for me, while essential, is limited." Stanley Cavell, *Cities of Words: Pedagogical Letters on a Register of the Moral Life* (Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2004), 5.

perfectionism is an extension of, and retains central features of my account of Emersonian religion. Much of how Cavell conceives of philosophy as a kind of cultural criticism, one that is primarily concerned with the ordinary (or, in Emersonian terms, the “common”), is similar to Emerson’s understanding of the purpose of natural theology as I presented it in the previous chapters. In Cavell’s appropriation of Nietzsche, it is philosophy that has taken over the task of the criticism of culture from religion—or, alternatively, a “criticism of life”—once religion’s authority had “become questionable.”²⁵⁷ This view enables Cavell to bring the resources of philosophical reflection to bear on various aspects of culture that are not typically included in analytic philosophy’s purview, that is, films, music, and literature.²⁵⁸ Conversely, for Emerson *religion* has not become questionable, but rather certain religious *forms* have become questionable. Thus, there is a way that *religion* retains its position for offering a criticism of culture, but religion understood in a different way. Ultimately, Emerson’s understanding of natural theology offers a way of reflecting on all aspects of one’s life in a similar manner to Cavell’s expanded vision of philosophy. For an Emersonian natural theology, one examines how historically and culturally conditioned thoughts and expressions indicate something beyond themselves, and it criticizes these cultural forms in order to serve human ethical becoming.

The relationship between philosophy and theology in Cavell’s work has been an active topic of conversation among scholars. My discussion will operate at some distance from this

²⁵⁷ Cavell, *Cities*, 223.

²⁵⁸ *Must We Mean What We Say?* poses the question of whether the boundaries between philosophy and literary criticism (or, also, criticism itself) are as clearly defined as the institutional structures of philosophy in the contemporary world would make them seem. Cavell doesn’t want to deny that there is a difference, but he wants to draw attention to the ways that philosophy might serve as a criticism of culture in ways that have been discouraged by the particular institutional factors that have constructed the field in its current form. Stanley Cavell, *Must We Mean What We Say? A Book of Essays*, updated edition (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), xxx.

body of work for reasons that I will explain shortly.²⁵⁹ My contention is that part of what has made the conversation about theology in Cavell's work so difficult is that little attention has been paid to the specific importance of Emerson in providing a set of background assumptions about the role and function of religion in any perfectionist project.²⁶⁰ Perhaps this can be attributed to this literature's general lack of regard for anything theological in Emerson, or the supposition that whatever the secular Cavell takes from Emerson, it is in some way severed from his positive theological claims.

The criticism that Christian theological discourse has made against Cavell, exemplified by people like William Desmond and Epsen Dahl, is that his pervasive sense of self-declaration is theologically problematic because it seems to be a form of self-redemption and the "deification of human works."²⁶¹ Beginning with a sense of original sin and the notion that redemption can only be granted from outside the human sphere, many Christian theologians are unable to follow Cavell when he avoids or dismisses the question of sin, and instead assumes a kind of priority for the works of human agency that one finds with Emerson.²⁶² I should note that it is not entirely clear that Cavell's ambiguous statements concerning sin are intended to dismiss the idea or if he

²⁵⁹ For a general overview of the recent literature on the topic, as well as the general categories under which this research might be grouped, see Epsen Dahl, *Stanley Cavell, Religion, and Continental Philosophy* (Bloomington In.: Indiana University Press, 2014), 3; and "Finitude and Original Sin: Cavell's Contribution to Theology," *Modern Theology* 27, no. 3 (July 2011): 498. Although I have questions about what counts as "theology" on Dahl's view (see below), these are otherwise excellent maps of the field.

²⁶⁰ In fact, this is Peter Dula's criticism of Epsen Dahl's book, but would seem to function for the conversation as a whole. Peter Dula, review of *Stanley Cavell, Religion, and Continental Philosophy*, *Notre Dame Philosophical Reviews* (1/8/2015) <http://ndpr.nd.edu/news/54987-stanley-cavell-religion-and-continental-philosophy/>.

²⁶¹ Dahl, *Stanley Cavell*, 141-142.

²⁶² Stanley Cavell, *The Claim of Reason: Wittgenstein, Skepticism, Morality, and Tragedy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 352; and Cavell, *Transcendental Etudes*, 58. The claim that Cavell is unable to accommodate a picture of Original Sin, and thus unable to accommodate a Christian (partial) denial of the liberal individual self, is Stephen Mulhall's main criticism of Cavell's project. Stephen Mulhall, *Stanley Cavell: Philosophy's Recounting of the Ordinary* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1994), 290-291.

intends to comment on it by marking his proximity to it; this continues to be an active discussion among scholars.²⁶³ My path in this chapter is not to discern whether or not Cavell's occasional Christian references indicate a dismissal of theology or its presence behind his work—which has seemed to be the focus of much of the literature. Rather, I hope to indicate the connections with Emersonian religious thought, where such a picture of sin and redemption, while not completely foreign, is nonetheless not a fundamental starting point of theology. In other words, the bounds of what is and is not theological are not defined by the presence or absence of sin.²⁶⁴ On my view, an engagement with Cavell should not begin with a dichotomy between Christianity and Cavell (as many theologians have done), but should begin with a sense of competing conceptions of Christianity (or, more broadly, between various conceptions of “religion” itself, since Cavell is not exclusively interested in Christianity). That is, if we are willing to grant, as I have been arguing, that, 1) Emerson continues a tradition of Christian thought even while he begins to look outside of Christianity, a tradition rooted in a distinct trajectory of liberal theology in America that has its own worked out picture of what counts as the religious; and, 2) Cavell stands in this line by way of his inheritance of Emerson, then we might consider both to be offering a developed and provocative reimagining of the religious that participates in this liberal tradition but is not exclusive to it. What is at issue are various normative conceptions of “theology”—

²⁶³ Peter Dula's argument is an important example: he takes Cavell's “absences and refusals of Christianity” to be an invitation to see their presence in his work. Peter Dula, *Cavell, Companionship, and Christian Theology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 156.

²⁶⁴ The question of faith versus works was one that Emerson grappled with in some of his early sermons. His ultimate position is that both options express, in their own way, an essentially coextensive view that has been distorted by the vitriol of theological partisanship: “By *faith* is not meant, a mere assent to certain statements of doctrine on the one hand, neither on the other, by *Works*, is meant any imperfect or merely formal discharge of decent duties. But both terms are often used to cover the same ground. One Christian means by faith such a living conviction as shall influence the acts of every moment, and the other, by works, means that steadfast holiness of life which can spring from no principle less broad than a Christian faith.” And although these principles are each “imperfect without the other,” Emerson does want to put slightly more emphasis on works: “All the theology in the world that disparages good works must melt away,—as smoke before their everlasting beauty” (CS, 2:47-48).

what counts and doesn't count—and the place where theological notions are understood to have become “secular,” if such a distinction makes sense.²⁶⁵ Part of the problem with the theological conversation around Cavell by commentators (with no remediation by Cavell himself) has been that they fail to subject the ideas of the theological and religious to the kind of criticism concerning their boundaries to which Cavell subjects philosophy. Too often theology and religion become static points of comparison for a shifting philosophy.²⁶⁶ The question for many commentators has been too intently focused on what resources Cavell might be able to offer the Modern Christian theologian, rather than what kind of theology Cavell might be enabling, albeit unwittingly.²⁶⁷

Given the account of Emerson that I have presented—which in important ways contains ideas central to Cavell, even as it exposes them as part of a wider engagement with the social practices of religion—I will now endeavor to ask what Cavellian perfectionism shares with Emersonian perfectionism that is in a substantial way informed by Emerson religious reimagining. In doing so, I am not abandoning the central features of Cavell's perfectionism—mainly, acknowledgment, conversation, the unattained but attainable self, and the endless

²⁶⁵ I should note here that this conversation also often substitutes “religion” for a particular Christian theology, so that the prospects of a philosophy of religion have been reduced to those of a particularly Christianized philosophy of religion.

²⁶⁶ For instance, *Must We Mean What We Say?* describes the situation of “the modern,” in which conventions can no longer be taken for granted and disciplines like philosophy must contend with their own relevance; that is, they must account for themselves. In this vein, Cavell asks a series of questions to begin the book: “What is the audience of philosophy?” “What is philosophy? How is it to be written?” And, “What is the teaching of philosophy?” The thrust of these questions is to make us question whether history, tradition, or convention provides appropriate boundaries for identifying the thing “philosophy.” Why not also for theology? Cavell gestures in this direction, lumping “modern theology” together with the status of various arts in the “nineteenth-century's radical breaking of tradition,” but it is not a question that gets serious attention in his work. Cavell, *Must We Mean*, xxxiv-xxxv. I would also argue that part of Cavell's portrayal of Kierkegaard seems to bring to the fore the question of “What is Christianity?” although Cavell seems to back away from the question as soon as it is raised, perhaps because he seems to indicate that such a question, as it is present in Kierkegaard, might be directed towards an in-group of theologians trying to keep the faith, a position that Cavell does not see himself as occupying. *Ibid.*, 156, 162.

²⁶⁷ Peter Dula might be the important exception here, since his work goes further than most at taking Cavell on his terms and trying to extend outward into Christian theology. Nevertheless, I think this criticism stands in the main.

working on the self that reaches no final state—but turning them back to my account of Emerson. I do this because my primary concern with Cavell is that he has unnecessarily hinged perfectionism to a linguistic model of human becoming that seems to leave out central features that Emerson regards as vital for perfectionism: specifically, it requires affective relations to others, and it aims not for a merely intellectual self, but a self that has political and community engagements in practices that make it what it is. In fact, human philosophical and religious reflection ought to be primarily concerned with these practices.²⁶⁸ This is not to say that Cavell completely denies these elements, but only that they are not emphasized in a way that would properly hedge against the critique that his perfectionism is too remote from the ordinary lives of everyday people. Cavell's view of Emerson has him, in a sense, too dependent upon “an attitude toward or investment in words.”²⁶⁹ Accordingly, by going back to Emerson, I draw from him what commentators like Lawrence Buell have seen as Emerson's critical advantage over Cavell: although Emerson shares with Cavell the interrogation of “the strangeness of ordinary usage,” nevertheless “it is not only the subject of language that Emerson treats this way (nor Wittgenstein, either), but also feelings, persons, social scenes, natural forms, fabricated objects, and so on.”²⁷⁰

²⁶⁸ In this sense it is a form of what Stout describes as “ethical inquiry,” but one that is concerned with practice as well as discourse: “Ethical inquiry is a form of reflection on ethical discourse. Another way of putting this point is to say that ethical inquiry is ethical discourse gone reflective. The reflective mode, even when assisted by historical, ethnographic, and comparative findings, does not evade implication in the sorts of commitments that belong, in any event, to ethical discourse itself. It might well have the effect of making those commitments explicit - the better to ask critical questions about our entitlement to them - but it does not elevate any inquirer to a point of view that neutralizes the effects of normative commitments altogether.” Jeffrey Stout, “Commitments and Traditions in the Study of Religious Ethics,” *Journal of Religious Ethics* 25, no. 3 (1997): 30.

²⁶⁹ Cavell, *Conditions*, 34.

²⁷⁰ Buell, *Emerson*, 217. I briefly made a similar kind of criticism in chapter three. See Friedman, review essay, 117.

I. Cavellian Perfectionism

Cavell's philosophical work is wide-ranging and diverse, developing in numerous directions that make him somewhat unique among Anglo-American philosophers. In the account of Cavell that follows, I will focus on just three: the claims of the ordinary, his "(secular) perfectionist outlook,"²⁷¹ and the moral importance of acknowledgment. Since my interest is Cavell's usage of Emerson, I will say little about how Cavell situates himself with regards to Austin and Wittgenstein, the two other figures playing important roles for the development of his philosophical work. Nor will I have much to say about Cavell's writing on film. My hope is to reconstruct enough of these three central aspects of Cavell to make sense of his relation to Emerson without systematically covering his thought.²⁷² My aim is ultimately to use these Cavellian resources to highlight what I believe (along with Cavell) is contained in much of Emerson's work. In doing so, I will be setting up my next section in which I will make it apparent what Emerson still has to contribute.

a. The Ordinary

An essential commitment of Cavell's work is the idea of the ordinary. The ordinary shows up early in his corpus in relation to ordinary language philosophy, and it is later put in relation to his interest in romanticism. Cavell's interest in the ordinary is what he says drew him

²⁷¹ The usage of parenthesis is meant to leave it open how the "(secular)" modifies perfectionism. There is perhaps no better comment on Cavell's usage of parenthesis in regards to religious matters than Fergus Kerr's: "[Cavell's] resort to parenthetical remarks, when he touches on theological matters, on the pretext that he is saying something incidental, provisional, incomplete or supplementary, seems defensive, placatory, even evasive. The brackets that supposedly contain the theological asides become signals for the entry of sensitive and contentious issues. The asides are more like traps in the middle of the road." Fergus Kerr, *Immortal Longings: Versions of Transcending Humanity* (Notre Dame, In.: University of Notre Dame Press, 1997), 132-133.

²⁷² For an excellent short introduction to Cavell's work on Emerson and the many ideas that he develops from him, see David M. Robinson, "Stanley Cavell, 'Aversive Thinking,' and Emerson's 'Party of the Future,'" in *Stanley Cavell, Literature, and Film: The Idea of America*, ed. Andrew Taylor and Aine Kelly (New York: Routledge,

to Emerson, who talks of it as the “common,” and to romanticism in general, with Wordsworth’s attempt to make “the incidents of common life interesting.”²⁷³ For Cavell, what the ordinary is meant to do when it is invoked in these romantic sources (as well as in Wittgenstein and Austin) is establish a form of response to a skepticism that expresses a modern loss of intimacy with the world. Accordingly, romanticism can be understood as focusing on the ordinary in an attempt to redeem the world, and thus to restore a lost intimacy.²⁷⁴

Cavell’s work has been centrally concerned with the effort to take skepticism seriously as a legitimate expression of what it means to be in the human condition. His strategy has been not to dismiss skepticism as an intellectual error or something otherwise to be philosophically solved and thereby gotten over; nor has it been to agree with the skeptic’s conclusion that, in fact, we have no knowledge of reality apart from whatever assurances we might have of our individual selves (i.e. that I am a mind, even if there are no others). In Cavell’s diagnosis of skepticism, we are not to *overcome* or *solve* skepticism precisely because it is an indication of the character of human life itself. What the skeptic has done—and consequently, where the skeptic errs—is what Cavell famously calls interpreting “a metaphysical finitude as an intellectual lack.”²⁷⁵ What this means is that our relationship to the world as it is presented in external world skepticism and our relationship to other people as presented in skepticism about other minds are not fundamentally relationships of knowing. By assuming that these relations are ones of knowing, the skeptic

2013), 42-56.

²⁷³ Cavell, *Transcendental Etudes*, 144, 36.

²⁷⁴ One way to think about the ordinary is to understand how Cavell’s “modernist” project is expressive of what Charles Taylor describes as a post-reformation, but yet “secularized” “affirmation of the ordinary.” Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self: The Making of Modern Identity* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1989), 14. See also, Dahl, *Stanley Cavell*, 20. What Cavell presents as the modernist condition, in which the present is severed from its history, is reminiscent of Taylor’s understanding of the secular present.

²⁷⁵ Cavell, *Must We Mean*, 242; Stanley Cavell, *In Quest of the Ordinary: Lines of Skepticism and Romanticism*,

hopes to overcome skepticism by coming to some kind of rational certainty about the existence of a reality outside of himself. Instead, Cavell argues that we must understand how our relationship to the world and the people in it is fundamentally one of *response*.²⁷⁶ What philosophical skepticism represents, then, is an attempt to abdicate our responsibility for this response by converting our limited abilities of response (our metaphysical finitude) into a problem of knowing (an intellectual lack) rather than a problem of how we ought to exist in relation to the world and others. In skepticism we abdicate our responsibility for response by, as it were, the “insinuation of absence, or a line, or limitation, hence the creation of a want, or desire.”²⁷⁷ In other words, we admit that we have lost intimacy with the world and the people in it, and we seek to overcome our distance by gaining knowledge over it. But this attempt to gain knowledge does not re-institute responsibility, but rather makes the skeptic impotent.²⁷⁸

Thus, Cavell’s turn to the ordinary is not meant to be a protection against the threat of skepticism, but rather a kind of “prize” that one has to achieve in reaction to it.²⁷⁹ The emphasis on the achievement of the ordinary is a rejection of the idea that the ordinary is something there

(Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988), 51.

²⁷⁶ Cavell, *Must We Mean*, 243.

²⁷⁷ Cavell, *In Quest*, 51.

²⁷⁸ Ludger Viefhues-Bailey offers an excellent summary of the position of the skeptic according to Cavell’s understanding of modern philosophy: “In this imagination the skeptic expresses simultaneously a vision of penetrating potency and of isolated impotence. The skeptic seems to imagine the world as a suitable object of intellectual desire, something readily available for his epistemic grasp, all the while he envisions the knowing subject as one who is (ideally) *mastering* its object. In this *master-vision* of the subject, the epistemic ideal has to be total epistemic access and access to totality. I have to know all of the object, under all circumstances. Yet, at the same time, the epistemic subject is construed as being impotent vis-a-vis the world, because the knowing subject’s position is eternally fixed as one of separation. I am isolated from the world. The same distance that makes possible the vision of mastering the totality of the world engenders the fearful suspicion that the object of intellectual desire is perpetually removed from my grasp. The skeptic gazes longingly at the world with a desire for total epistemic control, and he experiences himself as being ‘sealed off from the world.’” Ludger Viefhues-Bailey, “Releasing the Feminine Voice: A Cavellian Epistemology for the Philosophy of Religion,” *Modern Theology* 27, no. 3 (July 2011): 545.

²⁷⁹ Cavell, *Transcendental Etudes*, 34.

waiting to be discovered, as though we have a body of common beliefs or common sense that could supply a final answer to the skeptical challenge. If this were the case, then one would only need to fall back on what he already knows in order not to be misled by the abstractions of the skeptic. To take skepticism this way, Cavell argues, is to misunderstand the projects of Austin and, perhaps to a greater degree, Wittgenstein. As Dula helpfully points out, a good way of thinking about the ordinary for Cavell is to picture it as a kind of activity of “relationship or conversation,” one with a “commitment to a form of questioning, a mode of criticism, a way of doing philosophy, a way to think.”²⁸⁰ We might also call this a form of “presentness” and “attentiveness.”²⁸¹ The notions of presentness and attentiveness seem most apparent when Cavell writes about his sense that our “relation to the world’s existence is somehow closer than the ideas of believing and knowing are made to convey.” To understand our relation to the world in terms of belief or knowledge makes our relation to the world a linguistic feat, one which we are able to accurately describe and convey to others—this is the fantasy that the skeptic hopes for. But, in fact, Cavell thinks that it is possible that our relation to the world might be best expressed not in words, but in silence.²⁸² Our relation to the world (and to other persons in the world), rather than one of belief and knowledge, is a kind of “natural relation,” but not in the sense that it can be taken for granted. It is “natural” in the sense that it is a part of our condition as finite creatures—it is one of the “conditions of humanity.”²⁸³ What matters, then, is how we approach this condition through the particular attentiveness with which we stand in relation to it, and by which

²⁸⁰ Dula, *Companionship*, 13-14.

²⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 18.

²⁸² Cavell, *Transcendental Etudes*, 22-23. He calls the realization that our relation to the world is not one of knowing the “moral of skepticism.” Cavell, *Claim of Reason*, 241.

²⁸³ Cavell, *Transcendental Etudes*, 23.

we find our ability to be responsive to it. We are, in effect, “closer, or more intimate, [to the world] than the ideas of believing and knowing are made to convey.”²⁸⁴ The only remedy for skepticism, then, is to “wean” ourselves from expressing ourselves in ways that do not “satisfy” us—that is to say, to attempt to find new ways of presenting our closeness to the world, rather than our distance from it.²⁸⁵ To respond to skepticism is fundamentally to take responsibility for ourselves in order to escape the despair of a lost intimacy. To avoid the natural condition of humans as intimate with the world is not to make ourselves inhuman; rather, the attempt to escape the conditions of humanity is “itself only human,” because it indicates an attempt to avoid responsibility and responsive to the world and persons in it. For Cavell, only the human could seek to avoid its conditions of being human. Similarly, Cavell has argued that the attempt to deny the humanity of others is one of the most characteristically human acts. It is human to wish to—and therefore to create intellectual ways of furnishing the wish to—escape responsibility to another (whether world or person), even if it is also fundamentally human to acknowledge that responsibility.

Cavell finds this attentiveness to the intimacy of the world in the work of Emerson and Thoreau. Cavell reads Emerson’s claim in “The American Scholar” that he “explore[s] and sit[s] at the feet of the familiar, the low” to be Emerson’s assertion that he takes the familiar and the low as “his study, his guide, his guru.”²⁸⁶ In sitting at the feet of the familiar and low, he comes upon the “physiognomy of the ordinary,” which Cavell equates to Kierkegaard’s “perception of

²⁸⁴ Stanley Cavell, *Themes Out of School: Effects and Causes* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1984), 192-193.

²⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, 192.

²⁸⁶ Cavell, *Transcendental Etudes*, 24.

the sublime in the everyday.”²⁸⁷ Importantly, this is not a position in which everyone always exists, even if the ordinary is made up of those things most near to us (“The meal in the firkin; the milk in the pan; the ballad in the street; the news of the board; the glance of the eye; the form and the gait of the body”). For Cavell, the Romantics were especially good at describing the state of alienation from the world in which the ordinary is not present. This is the state in which people are “uninterested” in the world, which means that they are not responding to it with attentiveness. This lack of attentiveness or interest forms the alienated state that Cavell oftentimes will equate to Thoreau saying that people live in “quiet desperation,” or Emerson pointing to people’s “secret melancholy.”²⁸⁸ This is why Thoreau must act as a “chanticler” to the people of Concord, and why Emerson is at pains to convince people that they need not look to Europe to understand themselves, but must approach themselves anew in their lives in America. There must be a constant call to take on this ordinary, to win the prize of the ordinary through a particular redeemed stance in relation to it. This is what Cavell finds in Emerson and Thoreau’s efforts to address their neighbors to bring them to the task of the ordinary. At times Cavell will relate this to his attempt to sketch the “uncanniness of the ordinary” in his examination of skepticism by pointing out of how ordinary language has the ability to repudiate itself—it both describes the world and fails in that project. In other words, Cavell seeks to show how we can discover that language expresses how we desire to speak (or “word”) the world and thereby assert ourselves, while at the same time recognizing that what we say does not fully

²⁸⁷ Ibid., 25.

²⁸⁸ Ibid., 19, 39. In the earlier essay, Cavell actually substitutes “silent melancholy” for Emerson’s “secret melancholy,” a substitution that David LaRocca argues is an intentional move indicating Cavell’s demands upon his readers—that is, he “requires that his readers read.” Cavell’s substitution of the more linguistic “silent” for the “secret” which could be voiced but is withheld indicates to me the general Cavellian emphasis on whether or not we can speak ourselves to each other. David LaRocca, “Reading Cavell Reading,” in *Stanley Cavell, Literature, and Film: The Idea of America*, ed. Andrew Taylor and Aine Kelly (New York: Routledge, 2013), 29-30.

assert ourselves, and thus we can “despair of it.” Cavell’s philosophical project, then, is to “[outline] the necessity, and the lack of necessity, in the sense of the human as inherently strange, say unstable, its quotidian as forever fantastic.”²⁸⁹ The strategy of making apparent human strangeness is part of the Romantic imperative to redeem the world by returning people to it.²⁹⁰ Making the human strange enables a recovery of what had become uninteresting, and hence had ceased to be an object of interrogation. In doing so, we cease to despair of the world with which we have lost intimacy by finding new ways of responding to it.

This is the particular “mood” in which Cavell finds his philosophy. It is a “perpetual turning, and returning” to the ordinary. As Cavell points out, this is essentially anti-metaphysical because it is a “this-worldly” turning. Like Emerson, Cavell sees metaphysics as a turn towards the other-worldly, away from the ordinary in which we are called to be responsive.²⁹¹ And as this turn away from metaphysics in Emerson is warranted by an understanding that every claim we make is moral in some way, and as moral it must register to the practical lives of individuals (he asks, what is the *use* of metaphysics), so too I see in Cavell a similar kind of concern for the ordinary as the site in which philosophy, with its inherently moral nature, finds its home against an other-worldly discourse of separation. Aligning himself with Emerson and Wittgenstein, Cavell writes: “ethics is not a separate field of philosophical study, but every word that comes from us, the address of every thought, is a moral act, a taking of sides, but not in argument.”²⁹² Cavell takes from ordinary language philosophy an emphasis on the way that words are used to

²⁸⁹ Cavell, *In Quest*, 154.

²⁹⁰ Sandra Laugier describes this as “nextness new to the world, at once near and far.” Sandra Laugier, “Rethinking the Ordinary: Austin *after* Cavell,” in *Contending with Stanley Cavell*, ed. Russell B. Goodman (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 82.

²⁹¹ Stanley Cavell, “Responses,” *Modern Theology* 27, no. 3 (July 2011): 522.

²⁹² Cavell, *Transcendental Etudes*, 204.

make claims, in which the philosophical is a particular mode or mood in which one attempts to take a concept “from confusion to clarity,” that is, to try to clarify what a word means as it is used by “anyone with the ability to use it.”²⁹³ That is not to say that there are not endless ways in which we might be critical of the ordinary usage of concepts. Indeed, Cavell’s turn towards romanticism seems to heighten the possibility of critique.²⁹⁴ The crucial idea for him is that one takes sides not through arguments, but through one’s response in the ordinary, which is the place where we respond to responsibilities. Finding intimacy is thus essentially moral—it is a matter of taking the right stance towards ourselves, others, and our world.

b. Perfectionism

The prize of the ordinary is central to Cavell’s perfectionism, in which one finds oneself occupying a “way of life from whose perspective all other ways of life are judged as wanting.”²⁹⁵ Like his notion of the ordinary, Cavell’s perfectionism can be difficult to put into simple formulations. Indeed, this difficulty is an integral part of its structure: perfectionism is not a theory of moral life that can be formulated and applied, but rather “a dimension or tradition of the moral life” that has been apparent, in some form or another, over the entire course of Western thought, a dimension that any particular moral theory “may wish to accommodate.”²⁹⁶ It is

²⁹³ Cavell, *Must We Mean*, 154.

²⁹⁴ Dahl gives a good overview of the way that Cavell works out certain themes in his move from ordinary language philosophy to romanticism. Dahl, *Stanley Cavell*, 8-13.

²⁹⁵ Cavell, *Conditions*, xxiii.

²⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, 2, xxxi. One wonders, why just western thought? To my knowledge, Cavell has not given a clear answer as to why it should be described this way. Presumably perfectionism is not *solely* a feature of western thought, though it might be more characteristic of it. One might be able to say that it figures prominently in Greek thought, and by consequence, has marked the tradition of western thought which has intentionally built itself upon Greek foundations. But given Cavell’s concern with the (natural) human condition, it would seem incorrect to say that the human condition is invariably Greek.

important to note at the outset that Cavell sees perfectionism as “embodied and developed in a set of texts.” Although the usage of “embodied” here might seem to be ironic—for rather than describing perfectionism as a set of bodily practices, and, say, likening it to rituals of formation, we are here talking clearly of texts which *embody* thoughts without clearly having bodies—it does not seem to me that Cavell is intending to point out this irony.²⁹⁷ The particular practices that interest Cavell are reading and writing and sometimes conversing, all of which essentially provide *texts* for a perfectionist reflection performed by creatures for whom “language is our form of life.”²⁹⁸ This point will be critical when I turn to Emerson in the next section.

The essential idea of perfectionism, insofar as it can be simplified, is that the human is a movement or becoming between two selves: a current self and a “next self” or “further self.”²⁹⁹ Or to use the Emersonian phrase, my present self and my “unattained but attainable self.”³⁰⁰ As Cavell also puts it, using excessive quotations marks to indicate his suspicion about the terms of the formulation, “‘having’ ‘a’ self is a process of moving to, and from, nexts.”³⁰¹ The next self, or unattained self, can be thought of as an ideal self towards which we aspire. Cavell rightly notes that, for Emerson, the ideal stands at “the beginning of moral thinking, as a condition, let us say, of moral imagination, as preparation or sign of the moral life.”³⁰² This means that to have a moral life at all, to suppose it possible that one can be or is a moral self, one must begin with an ideal towards which one’s transformation can be directed. The presence of the ideal signals to the

²⁹⁷ Ibid., 4.

²⁹⁸ Cavell, *Transcendental Etudes*, 140.

²⁹⁹ Cavell, *Conditions*, xxiii, 125.

³⁰⁰ Ibid., 57.

³⁰¹ Ibid., 12.

³⁰² Ibid., 62.

present self (gives it an “intuition”) that it stands in a relation of “partial compliance” with the ideal self, and therefore is at a position of distance from it. It is the overcoming of that distance that makes up the moral life.³⁰³ Once one is able to see that she is at a distance from her next self, she gains a notion of the future: she is able to consider herself not just in relation to the present, but in relation to the future that she desires. But in considering this self, we are not just considering a self in isolation, but a self in relation to the world in which it is situated and which makes that self possible. This means that what we gain is a perspective on “human existence” in general, and a way of judging it and finding it lacking. There is perhaps no better statement of this divided self than in *Cities of Words*:

The very conception of a divided self and a doubled world, providing a perspective of judgment upon the world as it is, measured against the world as it may be, tends to express disappointment with the world as it is, as the scene of human activity and prospects, and perhaps to lodge the demand or desire for a reform or transfiguration of the world.³⁰⁴

To put it somewhat simply, perfectionism is a way of seeing the relation between the present and a future, what is and what could be, and to find in that distance the impetus to close the gap.

These are what we could call the essential structural features of any perfectionism.

Although Cavell will include many religious thinkers in his loose association of perfectionists and will claim that the religious language about “the state of one’s soul” carries the perfectionist dimension, he distances his own (Emersonian) perfectionism from a religious perfectionism. A religious perfectionism, for Cavell, could have two potential features that his Emersonian perfectionism does not.

First, religious perfectionisms can take a view of the world as “cursed,” or can have a

³⁰³ Ibid., xxxi.

³⁰⁴ Cavell, *Cities of Words*, 2.

sense of the world as “a kind of punishment for being human.”³⁰⁵ While philosophy (for Cavell) can seek after the redemption or self-recovery of the self in the world, it cannot seek after recovery from sin because “Philosophy cannot say sin.”³⁰⁶ Although not necessarily a repudiation of sin as a description of our human condition, what I take Cavell to be indicating here is that philosophy is unable to say that we are unredeemable in our world. We might similarly claim that philosophy cannot say “grace.”³⁰⁷ If philosophy is able to say sin, then it would be required to doubt the possibility of achieving the future self—the future would be no longer *unattained* but now *unattainable*. While Cavell does think that Emerson has a sense of the world as fallen, he reads this fallenness as a failure imputed to the individual when she does not live up to her own self-creation.³⁰⁸ The point is that an Emersonian perfectionist cannot see himself as constitutionally prohibited from pursuing his next self by virtue of a nature that is not, at least in part, his own work.³⁰⁹

Second, religious perfectionisms can imagine a state of ultimate perfection, and imagine that state as *finally* achievable. Part of this seems to be because religious perfectionisms can have a sense of the absolute, whereas Emersonian perfectionism can only have the ordinary and everyday. It is in this sense that Cavell claims that Emerson’s view “specifically sets itself

³⁰⁵ Ibid., 3.

³⁰⁶ Cavell, *Transcendental Etudes*, 58.

³⁰⁷ It is an interesting question to ask if Emerson can say “grace.” Certainly there are some, including Jeffrey Stout, who might want to view Emersonian natural piety as a form of grace—that is, an unearned gift that one must respond to with gratitude. Certainly the perfectionist’s point would be that if grace were to make sense, it would have to involve a notion of proper responsiveness, and thus is not entirely outside the question of the merits of works.

³⁰⁸ Cavell, *Transcendental Etudes*, 89.

³⁰⁹ I am laying aside some large theological issues here. My intention is to make sense of why “sin” shows up at this point in Cavell, rather than trying to determine whether or not Cavell is correct in his placement of it.

against any idea of ultimate perfection.”³¹⁰ The Cavellian perfectionist must constantly work to redeem herself, achieving the next self only to move beyond that next self to a further next. In other words, there is no rest for the Emersonian perfectionist, whereas there might be for the religious perfectionist.³¹¹

Taken together, these two potential features of a religious perfectionism allow Cavell to distance himself from religion insofar as it invokes a sense of fallenness and the (possible) final achievement of perfection. Of course, why these particular features are given weight with regards to religious perfectionism is not always clear, and, indeed, Cavell does not address those who would disagree with him that these features might be problematic for religious reasons themselves. Indeed, insofar as Cavell’s interest is in those moments where religion invokes quietest resignation or triumphalism contentment, we might wonder whether there are other quite good reasons from within particular religious traditions for rejecting those views. If such is the case, then Cavell’s is merely a warning against a particular kind of religious perfectionism, not the category as such. This is a point that I will return to below.

c. Acknowledgment

If this were all there was to perfectionism, then it would be insufficient for informing a truly *social* perspective. In order for moral perfectionism to work, it is imperative that one be able to incorporate a response to the other that is found in the ordinary and everyday. What this means is that we must understand how we can take responsibility for ourselves in relation to

³¹⁰ Cavell, *Cities of Words*, 3.

³¹¹ Of course, there might be religious perfectionisms that share this view. I would argue that Kant shares this view when he offers his argument for immortality in *Religion within the Bounds*: the reason we must suppose ourselves to be immortal is because we must be able to conceive ourselves as always getting closer, without ever achieving, the construction of a perfectly good will.

another, and, just as importantly, in relation to our world. Taking responsibility for ourselves in relation to the world is perhaps a provocative yet underdeveloped aspect of Cavell's perfectionism, especially if that means taking responsibility for something like "nature" or the environment. I develop this idea in more detail with my discussion of Emerson in the next section as well as the following chapter. Most of Cavell's discussion of this ethical response focuses on our relationship with other persons. Tyler Roberts has helpfully made clear the connection between a struggle with self and a struggle with others that the perfectionist must encounter: "Perfectionism, as the turn from the 'actual everyday' to the 'ordinary' or 'eventual' everyday, is the work of attentiveness that one performs on self and culture, a struggle with words and with others by which, living beyond habit and false necessity, one remains committed to and expands our ordinary agreements."³¹² In this context, to expand our ordinary agreements means to be able to overcome what Cavell will sometimes call "soul-blindness" by treating "persons as persons" as opposed to things.³¹³ Being able to treat the other as a person is a matter of responding to the other and finding the ordinary together.

This brings me, then, to what I take as the central ethical imperative of the perfectionist: you must work to make yourself intelligible to yourself and to others. For a perfectionist to be able to reflect on her present self in relation to her next (ideal) self and therefore engage in the task of philosophical reflection, she must make herself intelligible to herself. This is the way that Cavell understands moral reasoning, which aims "to take me from confusion to (relative) clarity in seeking a world I can want."³¹⁴ In order to seek this world that I can want, I have to come to

³¹² Tyler Roberts, *Encountering Religion: Responsibility and Criticism after Secularism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2013), 212.

³¹³ Cavell, *Claim of Reason*, 372.

³¹⁴ Cavell, *Cities of Words*, 32.

some clarity about why I want it, which involves clarity both about my present self as well as about the next self that I seek and desire. One does this by “providing reasons for one’s conduct, for the justification of one’s life,” an activity that only occurs in “confrontation and conversation” with another as we seek to determine whether “we can live together, accept one another into the aspirations of our lives.”³¹⁵ Cavell sees this as an extension of Wittgenstein’s basic insight that we are social creatures, and that our ability to engage and communicate with one another requires that we share a form of life. This is why Cavell puts such weight on the relationship with the friend that helps one along one’s moral journey: the friend is the person with whom we can be invested in a shared form of life.³¹⁶ One of the primary means of accepting this responsibility of making ourselves intelligible, and thus determining whether we can live together, is Cavell’s notion of acknowledgment.

Cavell’s first major formulation of the notion of acknowledgment occurs in his essay “Knowing and Acknowledging,” where he grapples with what the skeptical problem of others minds—specifically, whether I can ever really *know* another’s pain—might tell us about our relations with each other. Cavell is interested in that point where the question of whether I can know that another person feels pain becomes a question of whether or not we can feel the same thing. In order to get the proper perspective on the problem, the skeptic asks herself whether she can know another’s pain like she knows her own, turning the knowledge of pain into a point which might unite the two. Crucially, Cavell claims that the skeptical question about knowing another’s pain (which is accepted by the anti-skeptic as well) opens a gap between the skeptic

³¹⁵ Ibid., 24.

³¹⁶ Ibid., 27. The notion of companionship with the friend as a kind of theological relationship is essential to Dura’s development of Cavellian position that is between the liberal subject and its communitarian critics. Dura, *Cavell*.

and the other whose pain she wishes to know.³¹⁷ The ordinary observation that a person's behavior is not always indicative of pain, because there might be circumstances in which that pain is concealed, is allowed to expand into a question of whether any pain behavior at all indicates a real presence of pain. Thus, we are thrown into doubt about whether we are the same kind of being, or whether one of us is a cleverly disguised automaton. What this skeptical problem draws out, then, is that our questioning of whether or not we can know another's pain leads into, or is expressive of, a denial of intimacy in which we are at a distance from each other.

When Cavell introduces the idea of acknowledgment into this discussion, I take it that he hopes to indicate the ways in which intimacy is lost if we focus on *knowing* as the central means of overcoming the distance between people. That is, Cavell points out that one of the ordinary usages of the peculiar phrase, "I know I am in pain," when spoken by an individual, is to acknowledge it to another, and therefore to admit it to another.³¹⁸ What I am doing when I acknowledge my pain is that I allow myself (or even, offer myself) to be known by another, and to be responded to with sympathy. Conversely, when another expresses pain to me (whether by stating it, or by acting in a way that indicates it), I can and should acknowledge that pain with sympathy. In this interaction, we are making mutual claims to acknowledge each other and respond accordingly. "To know" another's pain, in the ordinary expression, would then mean to express the appropriate response, not to have a certainty about another's experience. As Cavell explains: "But why is sympathy expressed this way? Because your suffering makes a *claim* upon me. It is not enough that I *know* (am certain) that you suffer—I must do or reveal something (whatever can be done). In a word, I must *acknowledge* it, otherwise I do not know what '(your

³¹⁷ Cavell, *Must We Mean*, 230.

³¹⁸ Ibid., 236-237.

or his) being in pain' means. Is."³¹⁹ Cavell's claim is that something like acknowledgment is central to this ordinary interaction between people. I take Cavell's crucial move in the discussion of acknowledgment to be when he points out that a failure to acknowledge another is to be interpreted as a "Spiritual emptiness," or what we might think of as a morally imputable lack of response: "A 'failure to acknowledge' is the presence of something, a confusion, an indifference, a callousness, an exhaustion, a coldness."³²⁰ Rather than simply a failure to know that pain, what we have discovered is actually a spiritual emptiness, a moral failing.

Cavell's point in all of this is to illustrate how the skeptical problem of denying that I can know another's pain, rather than indicating our "intellectual lack," really expresses our "metaphysical finitude." Our form of life in the world requires that we treat behavior as expressive of mind (that privacy is not a real problem). For Cavell, taking a cue from Wittgenstein, this is built into the very grammar of behavior. And yet, we are confronted with a "powerlessness" to fully respond to and acknowledge another's claims, a powerlessness that manifests in our ability to doubt that one's behavior expresses something true about them. So we treat this powerlessness as ignorance of another's experience.³²¹ What this discussion reveals is Cavell's central emphasis in his later work on making ourselves intelligible to each other—to acknowledge another, and to be acknowledged, is a matter of trying to make myself intelligible, while also trying to see the other as intelligible, and responding accordingly. Expressing our pain is just one way that we try to make ourselves intelligible. But this need to make ourselves intelligible goes far beyond dealing with pain; it becomes the process by which we engage in

³¹⁹ Ibid., 243.

³²⁰ Ibid.

³²¹ Ibid., 242.

perfectionist reflection. By acknowledging each other, we let ourselves matter to each other.

Cavell sums this up quite nicely:

To let yourself matter is to acknowledge not merely how it is with you, and hence to acknowledge that you want the other to care, at least to care to know. It is equally to acknowledge that your expressions in fact express you, that they are yours, that you are in them. This means allowing yourself to be comprehended, something you can always deny. Not to deny it is, I would like to say, to acknowledge your body, and the body of your expressions, to be yours, you on earth, all there will ever be of you.³²²

Acknowledging each other and letting ourselves matter to each other becomes how perfectionist ethics is social—it is how we take responsibility for ourselves and each other in the process of moral becoming.

When Cavell takes this notion to Emerson, he finds Emerson acknowledging himself by expressing himself as a writer seeking an audience, to “leave [his] character unguarded,” and thereby, “give over control of one’s appropriations, as if to learn what they are.”³²³ As Cavell tries to make clear, acknowledgment is not an alternative to knowing (he pithily notes that “acknowledge” contains “knowledge), but rather an “interpretation of it.”³²⁴ As such, acknowledging is not just a mode of feeling that is opposed to a (philosophical) mode of knowing. It is a response to the invitation of intelligibility, or even, a response made to the claim on you by another to acknowledge him, and therefore, to converse. One’s of Cavell’s models for this is *Walden*, which he treats as an “invention of a discourse” that itself aims to reorient you towards yourself—that is to say, to engage in philosophy.³²⁵ This is why he reads both Emerson and Thoreau not as commonly caricatured individualists, but instead as paradigmatic examples

³²² Cavell, *Claim of Reason*, 383.

³²³ Cavell, *Transcendental Etudes*, 57.

³²⁴ *Ibid.*, 39.

³²⁵ *Ibid.*, 50.

of a concern for the other. For Cavell, they represent the attempt to open oneself to being read, and in that process, of being known and ultimately changed.

II. Emersonian Perfectionism

Having laid out what I take to be some of the central features of Cavellian perfectionism, let me now turn to my reading of Emerson. The previous two chapters laid out what I take to be the central religious—and, on Emersonian terms, therefore *moral*—thought in Emerson's main corpus. Cavell has shown an overwhelming amount of insight in his reading of Emerson, illuminating ways of reading him that have initiated a new tradition of interpretation. Nevertheless, there are places where Cavell importantly differs from Emerson's moral thought. In this section I will focus on three. First, I examine Cavell's notion of acknowledgment in relation to Emerson's development of the moral sentiment in an attempt to answer the question of moral motivation, or, why ought one acknowledge the other, by developing the importance of affective connections. Second, taking to heart the importance of the moral sentiment, I raise three concerns with Cavell and give three senses in which Emerson might offer an alternative perfectionism: attention to particular practices of formation, the importance of the natural world, and less dependence on moments of crisis. And third, I offer a way in which this alternate Emersonian perfectionism is *religious* on his view by exploring the importance of the ideal, a point that I will explore in relation to John Dewey. My hope is to build this discussion of Emersonian perfectionism in relation to the tools that Cavell has offered, not by rejecting them, but by putting them into a different light.

a. The moral sentiment as acknowledgment

So far I have not fully addressed the question of what motivates us to acknowledge another. Or, put differently, why ought we try both to open ourselves to another and to be responsive to the other? Insofar as acknowledgment is a kind of risk—that I might not be acknowledged, that I might open myself up to the pain of not receiving a response, that in responding to the other I might sacrifice what is important to me—why should I pursue it?³²⁶ What these questions get at is the core of our moral obligations to others and how they relate to an individual's own sense of becoming, that is, the pursuit of a future self.³²⁷ By focusing on this question, my hope is to illustrate how important the notion of the moral sentiment is for Emerson as an answer to the question of what motivates us to see ourselves as taking part in a shared human life, one in which we are public beings with public obligations. It is through the moral sentiment that Emerson, more so than Cavell, is able to tie together a perfectionist striving with recognition of one's obligations to others in ways that are essential to the constitution of the human.

One way of thinking about the difference between Cavell and Emerson on the question of our moral obligations is to focus on what Cavell sees as Emerson's difference with Kant. In his presentation of Kant, Cavell rightly notes that reason is what affirms for the Kantian that we are in a world in which we have duties to others, that is, that we share a moral universe. For the Kantian,

³²⁶ Roberts asks a similar question. Roberts, 223.

³²⁷ As Alex Zakaras puts it, Emerson at times tends towards a "reciprocal instrumentalism" in his writing on human relations, that is, "we use each other to boost our own private pursuits of transformation." In this sense, Emerson can prompt us to ask the same query that I am asking of Cavell: why ought I to open myself to the other? At those moments that Emerson leans towards instrumentalism, it can no longer be taken as a given that I ought to open myself to another, because whether or not I ought to is always determined by whether or not the particular relationship in question will prove to be for my profit. This, I take it, is an extension of an instrumentalist approach. But Zakaras thinks, and here I agree, that Emerson will sometimes move away from this position towards seeing a closer association between persons (as represented by the claims of Judith Shklar). Nevertheless, Zakaras ultimately finds this unsatisfying. Alex Zakaras, *Individuality and Mass Democracy: Mill, Emerson, and the Burdens of*

Without Reason we would be condemned to the random promptings of impulse, desire, affection, which are by their nature subjective, prompting only to me, and only when they are present. Reason provides us with the idea and the possibility of a shared world, a moral universe by—as in the discourse of the *Critique of Pure Reason*—providing our judgments with universality and necessity. Only here, in the moral realm, reason provides these characteristics not for judgments that yield the possibility of knowledge of objects in the world but for the principle of actions that secures their objectivity in the world.³²⁸

In this Kantian picture, it is reason that both provides for the possibility of a shared moral world in which I abide by moral constraints that do not apply just to me but to everyone, and the possibility that my moral reasons for acting have some objectivity in that world—that is, that they are not just my actions, but they are actions rooted in some objective, and therefore publicly accessible principle. Therefore, we might say that for Kant reason is what allows one to overcome his individuality and isolated subjectivity, not just instrumentally, but as an integral part of what it means to be a human moral being.

Tabling whether or not this is an appropriate interpretation of Kant, my concern here is more explicitly the contrast that Cavell draws with Emerson. As I noted in previous chapters, Emerson frequently invokes the idea of Reason (or *the Reason*), which he inherits from Kant through various British and American sources especially James Marsh's reading of Coleridge. In Emerson's early work, it is Reason that serves in a Kantian way to refer to that which all people share. In *Nature* he equates Reason to "universal soul" and says that "it is not mine or thine or his, but we are its" (CW 1:18). In the Divinity School Address, Emerson notes that we are "inlets" to Reason, and this indicates a moral conclusion: "When he says, 'I ought;' when love warms him; when he chooses, warned from on high, the good and great deed; then, deep melodies wander through his soul from Supreme Wisdom" (CW 1:79). In broad terms,

Citizenship (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 83-85.

³²⁸ Cavell, *Cities of Words*, 129-130.

Emersonian Reason performs the Kantian function by establishing a shared moral world and ensuring objectivity within it, even if it differs from Kant in what counts as reason. Rather than treating it as a faculty, Emerson often presents Reason as a particular force or quality that directs people to something beyond their particular experience, thereby making human intersubjectivity possible. This is why Emerson can interchange “reason” with “Wisdom” or “Genius,” all of which indicate an access to an intersubjective realm of thinking. Thus, it is somewhat curious when Cavell makes the following distinction between the two figures: “Kant’s constraint is that of duty, obligation, as I recognize the power of reason to overcome inclination. Emerson’s constraint is that of attraction, recognizing myself as drawn, as it were, beyond my present repertory of inclination, to my unattained but attainable self.”³²⁹ While Cavell is right to draw out this difference according to the way that I am constrained, it is not so clear to me that Emerson doesn’t also have a sense of constraint that is not fully encapsulated by the idea of being drawn to a further self. That is to say, although Cavell will have a way of bringing together my sense of obligation to my higher self with my sense of obligation to others—that we are drawn together through a concern for the society in which our pursuit of our next selves is possible—he seems to be starting from a place in which that kind of reasoning is subsequent to my realization of my obligation to my (future) self. And because it is my obligation to a future self that is primary for my moral reasoning, rather than a Kantian obligation to obey the moral law that is not only mine, there will always be a lingering question of why I am further constrained by duties to others. That is, I will always need further reasons or motivations for acting in a way that is not solely in my personal pursuit of moral becoming. In other words, I would need to have a sense in which my desire for my future self is also the desire for responsiveness to the claims of others, rather

³²⁹ Ibid., 32.

than a sacrifice of myself to those claims.

That is, of course, not to deny that a Cavellian perfectionism might have compelling reasons for seeing oneself as drawn to the acknowledgment both by and of the other. Indeed, this becomes the core of Cavell's political theory—to illustrate that one's individual perfectionist striving is also a desire for the kind of social responsiveness that seems necessary for a democratic spirit. Building upon the work of Cavell, Naoko Saito offers a view in which “an idea of citizenship that takes the friendship of the neighbor as a necessary condition for realizing democracy as a way of life” serves to express the moral obligation to a broad and inclusive politics.³³⁰ Saito builds upon Cavell's reflections on Rawls and the sense that the prerequisite for a functioning democracy is the ability for all to flourish within it. In this sense, a perfectionist needs a picture of an ideal democracy to make possible the type of moral becoming that the perfectionist pursues. Taking insights from Emerson's essay on friendship, Saito highlights that the relation between a person and her neighbor cannot be one of assimilation; if we are only able to acknowledge that which is like ourselves then we would have to remake the neighbor into another me in order to acknowledge her. However, an ideal democracy would require the opposite: as Emerson describes in the context of friendship, the relationship we are to have with others is such that “the *not mine* is *mine*” (CW 2:122). Thus, for Emerson's perfectionist, one must allow the friend to be her own in a way that persistently escapes comprehension even as one stands in intimate relation to her. What we get from this is a respect for difference within an intimate relationship where transformation of each side is possible without a reduction of one to the other. In David Robinson's discussion of Emerson and Cavell on friendship, he notes how

³³⁰ Naoko Saito, “Leaving and Bequeathing: Friendship, Moral Perfectionism, and the Gleam of Light,” in *Emerson & Thoreau: Figures of Friendship*, ed. John T. Lysaker and William Rossi (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2010), 183.

friendship serves as an alternative to conformity within a given society, which can stand as an example of a new relationship in an unrealized just society.³³¹ Because the Emersonian friendship does not appropriate the friend, but respects the differences between friends by avoiding a “conformist sameness,” it serves as an ideal democratic relationship.³³² This is the point that Cavell is at pains to show in his essay in response to Rawls in order to counter the claim that perfectionism is an undemocratic elitism.³³³

Nevertheless, what I am hoping to draw out of this discussion is the way that the moral sentiment as an encompassing affective relation is seemingly absent from a Cavellian picture. The lack of attention to this aspect of Emerson’s work comes out most acutely in Cavell’s interpretation of the doubleness of perfectionism. For him, the “divided self” or “doubled world” is the play between the present and the future which drives transformation.³³⁴ He also calls this, picking up on Emerson’s persistent language of ascension, being *vertically* “halved.”³³⁵ The way that I escape my present individual concern is to see my current self and its current world in relation to a future self and the future political context in which this self can arise. This kind of perfectionist thinking, Cavell claims, is the prerequisite for democracy. Because we and our world are “divided” this way, Cavell thinks that we see ourselves as not just our present and

³³¹ David M. Robinson, “‘In the Golden Hour of Friendship’: Transcendentalism and Utopian Desire,” in *Emerson & Thoreau: Figures of Friendship*, ed. John T. Lysaker and William Rossi (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2010), 67.

³³² Cavell makes this a relationship of both turning away and turning toward: “Since his aversion is a *continual turning away* from society, it is thereby a continual turning *toward* it. Toward and away; it is a motion of seduction—such as philosophy will contain. It is in response to this seduction from our seductions (conformities, heteronomies) that the friend (discovered or constructed) represents the standpoint of perfection.” Cavell, *Conditions*, 59.

³³³ See “The Conversation of Justice: Rawls and the Drama of Consent” in Cavell, *Conditions*.

³³⁴ Cavell, *Cities of Words*, 2.

³³⁵ Cavell, *Conditions*, 59.

private concerns, but also that future self in a future world, achieving the Kantian goal of seeing the self from a public (or impersonal) perspective. It is important here to note that while there are places where one might find this idea in Emerson, it is not what Emerson calls the “double consciousness.” In fact, it is precisely Cavell’s difference from this Emersonian double consciousness that causes him to leave out the notion of a moral sentiment that Emerson sees as at the heart of the human. For Emerson, the doubleness of human life points to the fact that we are both “understanding” and “soul” (or Reason), a doubleness that Emerson takes from a Coleridgean interpretation of Kant, one reminiscent of a Platonic model of the self: we live a life of partial and individual desires, while at the same time having a connection to that which is “infinitude and paradise” (CW 1:213).³³⁶ I take the latter higher part, the soul or Reason, to be our capacity for moral sentiment, i.e. the aspect of the human condition that causes us to consider ourselves apart from our individual material concerns and in light of our connection to those in a shared moral universe. Emerson wants more here than just my obligation to my unattained but attainable self: he is after a broader sense of belongingness to an idea of human shared life, to seeing ourselves as public beings with public obligations, and that this is an inescapable, although sometimes repressed, aspect of what humans are.³³⁷

Cavell tries to get this sense of publicness in the *Claim of Reason* with his quasi-

³³⁶ Coleridge is not always consistent in his usage of reason. Emerson seems to have picked up on the particular construction of it in *The Friend* as “an organ bearing the same relation to spiritual objects, the universal, the eternal, and the necessary, as the eye bears to material and contingent phenomena;” as such, it is the “organ of the super-sensuous.” One of the important common elements is that while Coleridge identifies reason as this particular organ, it is simultaneously identical with its spiritual objects, such as “God, the soul, eternal truth, etc.” Thus, the reason is the part of the human that participates in that which is above the human—we are doubled this way. Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *The Major Works including Biographia Literaria*, ed. H.J. Jackson (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 634.

³³⁷ In the Sermons, this double self is more clearly linked to the infusion of Divinity into the individual: “there are two selves, one which does or approves that which the other does not and approves not; or within this erring, passionate, mortal self, sits a supreme, calm, immortal mind, whose powers I do not know, but it is stronger than I am, it is wiser than I am, it never approved me in any wrong... It seems to me the face which the Creator uncovers to his child” (CS 4:215).

theological idea about the role of the other in securing our knowledge of ourselves. In Cavell's understanding of modernity, the other has come to take the place of the God before whom one is known. Protestantism (in Cartesian form) changed the way humans came to know themselves by denying theologically defined social roles and focusing instead on an individual relation to God as a means of securing one's self-knowledge. With the departure of God, the (human) other must take God's place in bearing the burden of showing one that he is not alone in the universe. Where formerly one's place among a social body was divinely secured, it is now secured by one's philosophical assurances of the other. This is one of his insights regarding skepticism about other minds—that I can only be secured if I can have certainty about the existence of the other. But this places a tremendous burden on the other, one which ultimately becomes unbearable. Because it makes “infinite demands upon finite resources,” we are left with an interminable skepticism about the other as a feature of modernity.³³⁸ Cavell takes from this the idea that to know my own existence depends on “the fact and ... the idea of another being's existence,” which skepticism expresses as an attempt to have certainty about that existence.³³⁹ As an alternative, Cavell's romanticism tries to make a recovery of the self by means other than *proving* the existence of this quasi-theological other. Romanticism doesn't disprove this skepticism, but finds ways to accept it and recover from it.³⁴⁰

This brings to the fore the basis of the identification that an individual makes with both

³³⁸ Cavell, *Claim of Reason*, 470.

³³⁹ Ibid, 483.

³⁴⁰ As Simon Critchley points out, Cavell's work exemplifies the state of philosophical modernity which “is the attempt to live with(in) the disappointment of religion,” that is, to live with the absence of God. According to Critchley, this makes Cavell neither Christian nor anti-Christian—philosophy can say neither *sin* (as Cavell remarks) nor *salvation* (as Critchley adds), but must accept finitude and limitedness as its permanent condition, as a kind of tragic fate. In such a tragic fate, Critchley believes that romanticism is unable to provide much of a recovery. Simon Critchley, “Cavell's ‘Romanticism’ and Cavell's Romanticism,” in *Contending with Stanley Cavell*, ed. Russell B. Goodman (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 49.

the social and natural world around her. For Cavell, what seems to be functioning as moral motivation is a shared sense of the human as both needing to acknowledge and in need of acknowledgment, prompted by the desire to regain intimacy with the world and others, and therefore to return me to myself. This picture of distance is what has interested those theologians who wish to reverse the burden on the quasi-theological other by translating the loss of intimacy between persons back into a loss of intimacy with God. This move back to God reads the attempt to achieve acknowledgment as a way of thinking about the human standing in relation to God, a relationship both of distance and intimacy that mirrors what Cavell says about the relationship with the friend. It is, in effect, a refusal of Cavell's particular story of modern secularization, a refusal that does not accept that the other must take the place of an absent God. Thus, for instance, Dula reads Cavell with an insistence on the possibility of God taking the place of the other.³⁴¹ The paradoxical relationship with God mirrors the paradoxical relationship with the friend: the sense that we are the same and yet incomprehensibly different from this *other* with whom we are in close connection.

What this theological reading gets right is a curious fact about Emerson's essay "Friendship": that for all the praise that Emerson seems to offer for friendship as a mutually uplifting relationship, the essay ends with the bold observation that the more we expect from friendships, the less likely we are to have them with real people. As he writes, "Friends, such as we desire, are dreams and fables" (CW 2:125). Emerson ultimately realizes that the friendship he has been describing is an ideal relationship, one that we ought to strive after, even though we know that we will never receive the truth and tenderness that we seek in the friend, and that in

³⁴¹ "Christian faith insists upon not just a line, but a massive chasm between God and human or, more precisely, a massive chasm between God and us, but a basic unity between God and human." Dula, *Cavell*, 170.

the end we will remain alone: “Let us feel, if we will, the absolute insulation of man” (ibid.).³⁴²

There is then a kind of parallel here between ideal persons and ideal friendships, a fact that Emerson in provocative fashion makes the final line of the essay: “[Friendship] treats its object as a god, that it may deify both” (CW 2:127). The previous essay, “Love,” had primed us for this with its Platonic sense that love raises us above the partial and incomplete world. Emerson returns to this notion of love at the end of “Friendship,” where true love “dwells and broods on the eternal.” But Emerson is not content with this, because true love would lead us to devalue the actual objects of our friendship since we would know, perhaps only vaguely, that the objects of our friendships are not worthy, and we could not speak of love without “a sort of treachery to the relation” (ibid.). As a consequence, Lysaker calls this “ethical friendship” in distinction to other types of more casual friendship—these friendships are special relationships of ethical import.³⁴³

The special burden of these friendships is that we must treat each other as gods in order to deify, not because we know that these are the eternal objects that we ought to love, but because in the relationship we raise each other up to be like the divine. Rather than making friendship a relationship that one must have with God, Emerson seems to be telling us that ethical friendship *ought to be* a relation in which we make each other divine. God is not absent for Emerson, making him similar to Cavell’s theological readers, but neither is God to be understood in an orthodox way as separated from individual persons. It is precisely because God is present, as an ideal integrated into persons, that friendship becomes possible. But like most of Emerson’s claims about the ideal, it is both ours and we ought to expect that we never achieve it. Having an

³⁴² As Lawrence Buell points out, this is essentially a Kantian view of the friend. Lawrence Buell, “Transcendental Friendship: An Oxymoron?” in *Emerson & Thoreau: Figures of Friendship*, ed. John T. Lysaker and William Rossi (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2010), 28.

³⁴³ John Lysaker, “On the Faces of Emersonian ‘Friendship’,” in *Emerson & Thoreau: Figures of Friendship*, ed. John T. Lysaker and William Rossi (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2010), 86-103.

ethical friendship is an extraordinary burden, as both Cavell and Emerson make clear, but it is one that is inescapable for perfectionist becoming.

This, I want to claim, brings us back to thinking about the moral sentiment. For Emerson, as I argued in the previous chapters, it is love of another that leads one out of oneself and into a process of revelation in which one becomes “more human.” The picture that Emerson offers for this in the “Over-Soul” is a “larger imbibing of the common heart” that makes us less anomalous by bringing us together with others (*CW* 2:170). This is a profound connection of sentiment between people that is an aspect of what we are as humans existing in relations with others, a connection that is not fully expressible in language, and which is not entirely accounted for by individual wants and demands.³⁴⁴ It is what I have been labeling Emerson’s essence of religion, that sense of affective connection to a shared moral world that takes shape between friends in religious language as the attempt at becoming divine.

As I have tried to point out as well, this sentiment is not always expressible—it cannot be made into the language of the philosopher.³⁴⁵ As Robinson puts it, friendship is the product of effort and affection, not philosophy, and is “the one resource left to us after philosophy fails.”³⁴⁶ My suspicion is that this portrayal of sentiment is different than Cavell’s emphasis of the perfectionist ideas of “confrontation and conversation” as we seek to determine “whether we can

³⁴⁴ This puts me at some distance from Kateb’s discussion of love. I take the difference to be this: if we agree with Kateb that mental self-reliance is Emerson’s highest virtue (i.e. “the attempt to think one’s own receptive thoughts and think them through”), then it will also remain a question as to why any individual solitary self would need to leave its solitude. Indeed, this is how Kateb frames his chapter on love—the affective connections that love entails become a problem for mental self-reliance, which now has to explain why others will enable the self to think through its own thoughts. As I have been trying to make clear, the point of speaking about moral *sentiment* is precisely to engage the question of affective relations in ways that show them to be other than the mental (or individualized) sense of self-reliance that Kateb develops. Kateb, 96.

³⁴⁵ As Emerson puts it, this is why it is easier for youth to experience love, as opposed to older people who have “a mature philosophy,” which “[chills] with age and pedantry their purple bloom” (*CW* 2:99).

³⁴⁶ Robinson, “Golden Hour,” 65.

live together.”³⁴⁷ Emerson’s question is not whether we can live together, but how to live out the realization that we are in essence together. Cavell’s discussion of the importance of the friend approaches the question of moral motivation as though the friend’s purpose is securing myself, instrumentalizing the friend to my own perfectionist becoming, and making it more difficult to answer the question of why one ought to engaging in social relations. By not beginning with the fact of human interrelation, as does Emerson in his understanding of the moral sentiment, Cavell’s becomes the individualist Emerson who shuns friends when they prove to be no longer useful. Instead, love becomes premised on my pursuit of a future self.

To show the alternative, consider again the case of “Experience.” In the account I offered in the previous chapter, “Experience” can be read as Emerson’s attempt to come to grips with the potentially debilitating skepticism about oneself as on a moral trajectory when confronted with the deaths of sons and lovers. That is to say, on my reading, the skepticism in “Experience” is a result of a loss of intimacy, but it is specifically a loss of intimacy with one whom one loves, the loss of that person whom one “fancied was a part of me, which could not be torn away without tearing me” (CW 3:29). The skepticism of the essay comes from the feeling that this loss of a part of myself (this loss of what was intimate) seems to have had no effect, has “left no scar.” And if it has left no scar, then love would seem to no longer have the moral weight that Emerson had put on it. The essay occurs in the wake of this mournful possibility. My claim is that Emerson’s essay seems to be less interested in regaining intimacy (Cavell’s romantic reformation) than it is in describing ways in which we ought not to abandon intimacy in those moments when it seems as though it has failed. The essay then becomes a meditation on the ways that one might account for this loss, even though each will prove to be insufficient, while

³⁴⁷ Cavell, *Cities of Words*, 24.

preserving the sense that the love for another is a critical aspect of what we each are. There are resonances here with some of Emerson's earliest statements in the sermons about love. For instance: "We *must* love. The man does not live who has no fellow being whose happiness he enjoys and sometimes proposes as an end of his own exertions" (CS 1:221). It is love for another that Emerson identifies as a first experience of a sentiment that eventually comes to reveal its larger significance for both one's civic relations and one's relationship to the natural world.³⁴⁸ Or, we might say, it is an affective relation of the moral sentiment that ultimately binds one to others, and to lose that is to lose a vital part of what it means to be human. I take Emerson's point in "Experience" to be that the intimacy of love can be extremely painful, and that it is no easy task to let another be a part of oneself. In fact, there are moments in "Experience" where it seems as though Emerson thinks that it might be easier to live without intimacy, that is, to try to occupy a mood (a "lord of life") in which things don't have to "touch" us. The mediation of "Experience" reminds us that these moods are always shifting, that to try to anchor oneself in one of them is to try to escape experience through "manipular" means. These manipular means, Cavell seems right to remind us, can involve trying to secure others through certain knowledge of them, and thereby securing ourselves.

b. Love and Formation

The discussion of love and its role in a particular kind of perfectionist striving leads to the question of what role social practices ought to play in creating the social spaces in which

³⁴⁸ "The introduction to this felicity is in a private and tender relation of one to one, which is the enchantment of human life; which, like a certain divine rage and enthusiasm, seizes on man at one period, and works a revolution in his mind and body; unites him to his race, pledges him to the domestic and civic relations, carries him with new sympathy into nature, enhances the power of the senses, opens the imagination, adds to his character heroic and sacred attributes, establishes marriage, and gives permanence to human society" (CW 2:99).

acknowledgment can occur, while also creating the kinds of ethical creatures that are able to properly acknowledge one another. Philosophical perfectionism could be enough if we were strictly philosophical creatures—Cavell’s interest in classic Hollywood films already, in a sense, indicates philosophy’s limits. Instead, what Cavell develops in his philosophical reflection are the conceptual tools that can be applied to particular questions about the social lives that we live and in which we find our moral reflection. As many readers of Cavell have noted, his work naturally leads to a strong sense in which philosophy becomes intricately tied to social criticism. That is a spirit that he shares with Emerson as well as Thoreau. In this section I explore how Emerson’s work can give us insight into how specific forms of relationality between family members, friends, and social groups might help to cultivate the particular demands of acknowledgment that would enable Cavell’s democratic vision. In fact, this perfectionist reflection situated amidst social practices shows up most forcefully in Emerson’s work on the role of religion in educating and cultivating particular communities towards better future moral lives. Because Emerson is not committed to any essential practical core of religion, but uses a philosophical reflection on the ongoing transformation of religious tradition to meet a novel world’s moral needs (as he often reiterates, the core of religion is moral), he is able to see religious practices as a site in which to locate these questions about love and perfectionism. Indeed, Emerson’s openness to the particularity and contextuality of religious life would have allowed him to agree with contemporary theorist Constance Furey’s idea that thinking about religious subjectivity can show how “religion is itself produced in and through intense, sustained relationships.”³⁴⁹ For the perfectionist, then, it is important to think about how particular practices of formation can be put in place in order to nurture this religious subjectivity through

³⁴⁹ Constance M. Furey, “Body, Society, and Subjectivity in Religious Studies,” *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 80, no. 1 (March 2012): 25.

affective relations. This, I have been claiming, is a strong force of both Emerson's earliest work in the sermons and his later work in *The Conduct of Life*.

This section focuses on three places where Emersonian perfectionism clearly attends to the social spaces of ethical formation: 1) particular practices of formation; 2) the importance of the natural world; and 3) an emphasis on the quotidian and mundane against the extraordinary or critically acute. My claim throughout is that these are three areas where Emerson succeeds in turning philosophical reflection into social criticism, engaging with specific cultural tools to change his social world. As such, these are also places where Emersonian perfectionism might escape the criticism of Cavell that I laid out at the beginning of this chapter: that it is often too linguistic and too focused on a particular philosophical discourse to the detriment of its aspirations to social criticism.

Particular Practices of Formation

In one of Emerson's most popular sermons that he preached 27 times between 1827 and 1831, he draws a link between the social affections and the importance of home as a site for cultivating moral growth through both love and friendship:

God gave us our social affections not as instruments of pain, not as fetters to enslave us, but as bands of strength wherewith we might better bear our burden by sharing it; to be sources of delight, to furnish new motives to industry in multiplying the powers of the body and the mind. By drawing us to each other by the strong cords of friendship and love, he invested the fireside with its sacred delights, appointing therein to man the place to be born and the place to die, and surrounding the name of home with its sweet and solemn associations. (CS 1:124)

Despite the doubt and sense of solitude that sometimes accompanies essays like "Friendship" and "Experience," the sermons are preoccupied with the idea that we are primarily social beings whose "natural home is society," and who are "limbs of a body" (CS 1:217). The social connections between people in the sermons are palpable, and they often are used as a guide to

right conduct.³⁵⁰ These social spaces (or as in the above quote, “the home”) are the ordinary for Emerson: they are places that need to be regained, but regained rightly. In many of these sermons, Emerson’s goal is to find a balance between love of self and love of neighbor, where both the demands of our “infinite self” and the demands of “our fellow man upon us” find an equilibrium (CS 2:132). Emerson’s attention is often on the community and the household as the sites where these demands are most present, aware that one’s home, and the particular habits that one has in that home, “is the true soil where virtue flourishes” (CS 4:25). Nonetheless, Emerson is aware that we are cultivated through habit, and this is not always a good thing, since we are just as capable of forming bad habits as good. What is important is that one is able to reflect on these habits, in effect to take hold of them, so as to exercise them rightly: “It is the great law of the affections that they grow by their own exercise. Habit comes in to the aid of inclination. ... Do what is right and use shall make it pleasant” (CS 1:273). It is in this sense that Emerson opposes the severity of what Jennifer Herdt has termed the “hyper-Augustinians,” a point which is salient in the way many Augustinians reject Emerson’s religious liberalism.³⁵¹ In chapter three I noted that Emerson does have some anxiety about being able to perform virtuously without a prior virtuous disposition, and this causes him to hesitate somewhat concerning the full power of habit. This, in a sense, relates back to the conversation about original sin and Cavell: on Emerson’s particular picture of Unitarianism, although we might be incompletely virtuous at all times, we are not categorically corrupted. I see this as partly the reason that, in his lecture on George Fox, Emerson notes that the realization that “God is within us” can rightfully be made

³⁵⁰ “To find the whole import and extent of the duty, we have only to consider the connexion in which we stand to other beings, and to make our whole conduct suitable to that connexion. If God had appointed each of us to a solitary existence, with no being but Himself to whom we should have any relation, our duties had been few and simple. But other duties are assigned us, and a greater scope of life appointed” (CS 1:127).

³⁵¹ Herdt, *Putting On Virtue*.

into inspiration only when it is under the condition of “total self renouncement.” Realizing that the claim that God is within us might lead to unchecked self-assertion, Fox makes the renunciation of one’s will a prerequisite (*EL* 1:180-181). Nonetheless, Emerson is still committed to the sense that it is “use” which makes an act pleasant, that is, one can intentionally take up habits that are meant to turn one into the kind of being that one thinks one should be.

This emphasis on community and personal relationships in the sermons is often overshadowed by the popular specter of the individualist and self-reliant Emerson of the late 1830s and early 1840s. Although I believe that there are elements of a social self during this period, it is difficult to deny that the best writings of this time often tilt more towards the individualist. Nevertheless, in his books Emerson seems always to temper these “individualist” essays by surrounding them with essays that complicate and nuance them. Scholars tend not to read these essays as often, sometimes because they seem too sentimental, and sometimes because they simply lack the force of their more well-covered counterparts. For instance, “Self-reliance” is preceded by “History,” in which the first line declares that there is “one mind common to all individual men,” and followed by “Compensation,” in which the opening paragraph details a common people’s theology of a moral world (*CW* 2:3, 55). This strident individualism, however, is not major feature of the later period where the sociality of Emerson’s thought becomes central to his intended intervention. We can see the same attempt to balance self-love and love of the neighbor in the opening of *Society and Solitude*, where he recalls the themes that he had earlier emphasized in the sermons: “Solitude is impracticable, and society fatal. We must keep our head in the one, and our hands in the other. The conditions are met, if we keep our independence, yet do not lose our sympathy.” He goes on to say, “a sound mind will derive its principles from insight, with ever a purer ascent to the sufficient and absolute right, and will accept society as the

natural element in which they are to be applied” (CW 7:1.16). By keeping one’s “head” in solitude, Emerson emphasizes the kind of aversive thinking that allows one to be more than just a mirror of society by forming a critical (though still immanent) perspective on it. While at the same time one’s “hands” must always remain in society, meaning that one’s actions (or work) should always be in and for the benefit of a society, not in refusal of it. But this relationship between the head and the hands does not merely travel from thought to action, for as Emerson’s numerous references to work indicate, there is a sense in which what one does is integral to what one becomes.³⁵² What one does is always within a public space in relation to others, as one attempts to become the kind of public human that is the goal of perfectionist thinking. Again, this is another way of putting Emerson’s double self as both an obligation to the private and the public.

It is important to note that many of the chapters of the often maligned *Society and Solitude* focus entirely on social relations, touching on domestic duties, clubs, work life, and a host of other mundane aspects of one’s life. These are the social spaces of the ordinary, the places where our interrelatedness as social beings is most evident. As part of these spaces of social relations, Emerson sees the moral sentiment in the ability to address others as moral beings (what he calls in this work “Eloquence”):

It is what is called affirmative truth, and has the property of invigorating the hearer, and it conveys a hint of our eternity, when he feels himself addressed on grounds which well remain when everything else is taken, and which have no trace of time or place or party. Everything hostile is stricken down in the presence of the sentiments: their majesty is felt by the most obdurate. It is observable, that, as soon as one acts for large masses, the moral element will and must be allowed for; will and must work, and the men least accustomed to appeal to these sentiments invariably recall them when they address nations. (CW 7:4.40)

³⁵² Despite Emerson’s suspicion of capitalism, this is a place where he is decidedly not a Marxist in his thinking that the head must always remain distinct from the hands, for, otherwise, one would lose the critical perspective on one’s labor that allows him to think of himself apart from it.

Emerson's point is that we have the ability to address ourselves to each other in ways that draw out the moral sentiment, and which allow us to avoid understanding each other reductively as just a member of a particular party and nothing else. This is a kind of perfectionist address, in which we are not treated as our attained self, but are held to be more than that, and hold each other to be more than that. It is a kind of address that is more apparent when one "acts for large masses," which means that one acts in society. It is within these actions in society that the moral element "will and must be allowed for." And, as Robinson puts it, religious forms are the places where an "enduring moral energy" can find its continuing development in society.³⁵³

Whatever the consistency is of Emerson's views on this point, I take the larger insight to be that some attention to formation in particular social and interpersonal relationships is vital to perfectionism. Cavell is right to see that acknowledgment is an essential feature of Emersonian perfectionism. In interpersonal encounters, I am acknowledged as a moral being in the same way that you are a moral being, and this imparts a claim upon each of us to treat the each other as such. This means acknowledging the other as individual without reducing the other to one's own interests. As Roberts writes, acknowledgment "is a 'spiritual task' of recognizing and relating to the other between our commonality and separateness."³⁵⁴ Yet unlike Cavell, Emerson is more faithful to the romantic tradition insofar as he put an emphasis on the affective nature of this relationship in the ordinary—that what draws us together is not just the conversation, but particular ties of affection. And these ties can and must be cultivated through particular places and spaces. This further develops the idea of the ordinary: what Emerson provides is attention to how those social spaces in which the ordinary is found are both places of cultivation and

³⁵³ Robinson, *Conduct of Life*, 198.

³⁵⁴ Roberts, 213.

incitements to reflection. The turn to the ordinary requires a sense of returning to a given space anew by seeing it differently. What Emerson provides, especially in his early and late work, is a concrete discussion of how we are to approach the ordinary sites of our lives as securing an intimacy for us, but securing it only when approached correctly.

The Importance of the Natural World

However, as much as acknowledgment seems to be a useful ethical tool for understanding relations between people, it is not entirely clear that it also works for our relation to our world. As I illustrated above, Cavell builds his response to skepticism around two lines of skeptical argumentation: skepticism about a world independent of mind, and skepticism about other minds. Much of the development of acknowledgment as I have presented it is structured around overcoming the loss of intimacy between people. But what about the loss of intimacy with the world? Or to use the language of romanticism, in what way ought we to think about the role of our environment in how we come to think about ourselves as ethical creatures and our moral obligations to a natural world. My claim here is that if we are to have a comprehensive ethical vision, then we need to take account of the human relationship to the environment as itself an ethical relationship of acknowledgment, and that Emerson, more so than Cavell, understood as much.

Cavell raises the idea of intimacy with the world as an ethical relationship when he writes about animism. There is no better exposition of Cavell's discussion of animism than Stephen Mulhall's chapter, "Criteria, Counting, and Recounting," where Mulhall presents animism as a kind of philosophical "myth" that ought to be rendered intelligible insofar as it might give us insight into our condition as humans in the world.³⁵⁵ As Mulhall explains, the skeptic often finds

³⁵⁵ Mulhall, 174.

himself in a position where he has to treat his senses as offering him a testimony about the world in such a way that his perceptions take the position of a speaker making a claim upon him, a speaker who can either be acknowledged or ignored.³⁵⁶ This specific relationship to the world is entailed by how the skeptic supposes that belief and doubt are the operative concepts for securing his relationship to the world, concepts that he has taken over from his relationship to speakers. It is in this way that the skeptic treats the world as making a claim upon him as though it is another with whom he has lost intimacy. But because he is unable to come to the certainty that he seeks in order to secure his intimacy with the world, his skepticism ends up making the world “dead” to him so that it cannot satisfy his desire for it. As Mulhall says, “the world disappoints him precisely because he interprets his goal of achieving and maintaining certainty about the world’s existence as a matter of achieving and maintaining an undispossessable possession of that world—a literally fantastic, necessarily unattainable ideal.”³⁵⁷ To avoid having the world “die” at our hands due to an attempt to appropriate it as a thing about which we ought to have certain knowledge, we have to find an alternative picture that restores its life by giving us a different mode of access to it.³⁵⁸

Mulhall does an exceptional job of pointing out that Cavell’s suggestion is not that we give up treating the world as in need of acknowledgment, but to think about how that acknowledgment can be different from the quest for mastery through appropriation (through knowledge of it). In other words, we need to make the world parallel to the reconstruction of acknowledgment for persons: one must “acknowledge it as his necessary other whose existence

³⁵⁶ Ibid., 147.

³⁵⁷ Ibid., 151.

³⁵⁸ Ibid., 158.

is thus both separate from and essential to his own.”³⁵⁹ To do this, Cavell turns to the only writing he can identify in “the Anglo-American analytical tradition” that gives a rational justification for this kind of animism, John Wisdom’s “Gods.”³⁶⁰ According to Cavell, Wisdom “incites” the accusation that he is engaging in the pathetic fallacy when he questions whether flowers “feel” and concludes that some people *act* as though flowers do indeed feel. For the skeptic, this is an unmistakable emotional projection, because the skeptic knows that flowers do not feel. At least, flowers do not “feel” in any way similar to the way sentient animals feel, presumably the only way that would count as “feeling” for him. Cavell combines this with a discussion of Wordsworth, who attempts to both talk and listen to nature.³⁶¹ Take, for instance, the pair of lines in which Wordsworth describes communicating with a flower: “To me the meanest flower that blows can give / Thoughts that do often lie too deep for tears.”³⁶² There is a kind of rebirth or awakening in Wordsworth that Cavell equates with a return to the ordinary—we are returned to the ordinary (in this case, an ordinary encounter with a flower) but see it differently than before, such that we are returned to ourselves but returned redeemed. This returning us to ourselves is something that the flower can do, specifically, as Wordsworth seems to indicate, by producing thoughts in us that were “too deep for tears,” thoughts that we seemingly already had, but that we did not yet *have*. To use one of Cavell’s favorite lines from Emerson, “In every work of genius we recognize our own rejected thoughts: they come back to us with a certain alienated majesty” (CW 2:27). The point is to see the ways that we can “talk”

³⁵⁹ Ibid., 158.

³⁶⁰ Cavell, *In Quest*, 68.

³⁶¹ Ibid., 71.

³⁶² Quoted in Cavell, *In Quest*, 72. The line is from the poem “Ode: Intimations of Immortality from Recollections of Early Childhood.”

and “listen” to the flower, the ways that it would make sense to treat it as though it is offering its transformative power for us. This does not mean that the flower needs to be treated as a human speaker, an expectation that really would be absurd; but it does mean that it is not nonsense to acknowledge the flower. Indeed, this is what Wisdom is pointing out with his examples of the care that people take with their treatments of flowers, and Wordsworth with his “communication” with flowers, two claims that would seem obviously absurd to the skeptic. What this means, Mulhall helpfully writes, is that one may acknowledge the world by “allowing it to elicit the responses it requires and requests from [one] in its own way and according to its own nature.” It is through the giving and taking of responses that one becomes interested in and attracted by the world without “imposing his interests and needs upon it.”³⁶³

What Mulhall reminds us, though, is that this discussion and recuperation of a philosophical animism takes place within Cavell’s complicated discussion of criteria in Wittgenstein. What is at issue is what we consider to be a “flower” in our form of life—i.e. “our shared criteria for the word ‘flower’”—and how an attention to this criteria can give us an opportunity to think about the flower anew.³⁶⁴ By asking about how we are drawn to the flower, and about how the flower draws us, we are making conscious the nature of what it is to be a human in a form of life such that the human is drawn to flowers. This is what it means to have a return to the everyday in Cavell’s linguistic context—it is to explore worded objects within a linguistic form of life. In a sense, we are returned to the same problem that I took to be present in the treatment of persons: to acknowledge the world becomes a question of how one engages in a “conversation” with it. The conversation is predicated upon the kinds of speaking that are

³⁶³ Mulhall, 158.

³⁶⁴ Ibid., 161.

happening, and the criteria of what counts as speech is always sociolinguistically determined. There is a way that the question of what one *feels* towards the flower is a nonstarter for Cavell unless it becomes a question about the negotiation of the criteria for what it would mean to feel in response to the flower. In only asking about *our* criteria, Cavell is limited in his description of what it means to achieve intimacy with the world—that is, to be responsive to the flower. We might add here, too, that we are not only concerned with being responsive to the flower (as an expression of aesthetic and/or pastoral beauty), but just as concerned with being responsive to, and therefore acknowledging toxic waste dumps, asthma-producing air pollution, and the variety of concrete urban landscapes.

If we are to turn to Emerson, then, the question becomes whether or not his idealism about nature can serve the purpose of detailing specific ways in which to relate the human and environment that allow for perfectionist striving amidst the recognition of the importance of particular practices.

In Emerson's essay "Love," he is pained by the accusation that his lectures have been too intellectual and thus "unjustly cold to the personal relations" (CW 2:101). In response, he links together three ideas: the sense that "persons are love's world," the power of nature to evoke this love, and the impact of love on the "social instincts." For Emerson, this is a linkage that occurs in youth and reverberates throughout the life of the individual even as she might no longer be able to "see" nature in that youthful way (CW 2:102). What is striking about this essay is Emerson's usage of a kind of animism to describe how nature can be an object of love that becomes ethically significant. Through this love, he says, "Nature grows conscious."³⁶⁵ Emerson

³⁶⁵ This is also a common sentiment in the journals. For instance, in a passage related to *Nature*: "I love the wood god. I love the mighty PAN. Yesterday I walked in the storm. And truly in the fields I am not alone or unacknowledged. They nod to me & I to them. ... We distrust & deny inwardly our own sympathy with nature. We own & disown our relation to it" (JMN 5:179).

even evokes the idea of the flower, among other things in nature, as a kind of intelligent being:

Every bird on the boughs of the tree sings now to [the youth's] heart and soul. The notes are almost articulate. The clouds have faces, as he looks on them. The trees of the forest, the waving grass and the peeping flowers have grown intelligent; and he almost fears to trust them with the secret which they seem to invite. Yet nature soothes and sympathizes. In the green solitude he finds a dearer home than with men. (CW 2:103)³⁶⁶

What the essay is concerned with is the “training” for a love that looks for virtue and wisdom everywhere, and uses one’s affection for the natural world as a place in which to cultivate this virtue and wisdom (CW 2:109). Emerson is clear that there is a current of idealism operating below the surface here, which is why, in the above quotation, the clouds have faces only “as he looks on them.” This hearkens back to the idealism of *Nature*, where Emerson reminds us that “Nature always wears the colors of the spirit” (CW 1:10). It is not that when one looks on nature with the right eye one sees it as it truly is, but that when one looks on nature with a particular kind of eye for it, then it will become the kind of animated intelligent thing that can, in a Cavellian way, become a thing to which we ethically respond. Emerson accepts the Kantian point that we do not see nature *as it really is*, but he rejects the idea that this empties nature of its ethical power in shaping us. Thoreau will develop more forcefully this sensitivity to the shaping power of an affective relation to nature, which later gets taken up by the tradition of nature writing that extends from him. The sin, as Wendell Berry points out, is not that our ideas imprison us, but that we presume, as does the Cavellian skeptic, “to reduce life to the scope of our understanding,” which “is inevitably to enslave it, make property of it, and put it up for sale.” When we do this, we reduce the “moral complexity” of the world—or we could say, we are no

³⁶⁶ The personification of the flower as having important value for ethical formation is a common thread in Romanticism. Dorothy Wordsworth writes about the daffodils in *The Grasmere Journal*: “I never saw daffodils so beautiful they grew among the mossy stones about & about them, some rested their heads upon these stones as on a pillow for weariness & the rest tossed & reeled & danced & seemed as if they verily laughed with the wind that blew upon them over the Lake.” This passage became the source material for William Wordsworth’s poem, “I wandered lonely as a Cloud,” where the daffodils continue their dancing. Dorothy Wordsworth, *The Grasmere and Alfoxden Journals*, ed. Pamela Woof (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 85.

longer able to acknowledge its claim on us.³⁶⁷

In the next chapter I develop a full account of how this form of Emersonian environmental idealism can be put in relation to contemporary concerns in environmental ethics. At the moment, the point is that Emerson's concern for an affective relation to the world, one which can be trained and out of which virtue can sprout, takes a step beyond the interrogation of our criteria, and hence a step beyond the Cavellian attempt to regain intimacy with the world through an acknowledgment of it. As I will attempt to show in the next chapter, Emerson's position vis-a-vis human-environment relations involves a sense of ecstatic relation in conjunction with an acknowledgment of human power.

The Quotidian and Mundane

My third and final concern is that Cavell may rely too heavily on moments of ethical crisis for ethical becoming rather than recognizing the remarkable power of more mundane acts of habitual formation. In my discussion of both intentional formation through practices and one's ethical relationship with the natural world, there has been an undercurrent focusing on the daily and incessant way that our ethical lives play out, sometimes unknowingly, along a path of ethical becoming. If I am right about these emendations to Cavell, then it seems that we ought to think less about the importance of moral crises for our perfectionist becoming, and more about the quotidian ways in which we live out our lives and find ourselves—incessantly and monotonously—in it. This means emphasizing the relationships of acknowledgment in which we are always possibly finding ourselves, acknowledging them as a constituent part of who we are, and as doing “work” not just at moments of unsettling or crisis. As Naoko Saito points out, one

³⁶⁷ Wendell Berry, *Life is a Miracle: An Essay Against Modern Superstition* (Washington DC: Counterpoint, 2000), 7-8. There is a way that Berry's call for the moral complexity of nature as itself a miracle is an example of the kind of animism that I am talking about here.

of the central issues for Cavell's perfectionism is how we ought to understand the power of "practice" and what it means for the ordinary experience of common people.³⁶⁸ By stressing *practice* more than *crisis*, there is a way in which Emerson's perfectionism, in contrast to Cavell's, gets closer to the heart of what a lived ethics ought to look like—one that is concerned with moments of turmoil, but which also pays close attention to the routine, the extraordinarily ordinary. Certainly Emerson will write about moments of crisis (perhaps "Experience" being the most memorable). But true to the romanticism that he inherits from Wordsworth, Emerson is just as concerned with the habitual and the quotidian, with the kind of reflection on these experiences that isn't always prompted by a moment of their failing, but is as equally prompted by their normality, which one can only see when assuming a certain reflective posture.

In *Cities of Words*, Cavell describes how he connects the genre of remarriage comedy with the tradition of moral perfectionism through a focus "on the worth of a way of life, or my way of life, which has come to a crossroads demanding self-questioning, a pause or crisis in which I must assess something that has been characterized as my being true to myself, something the romantics (explicitly including Emerson) articulated as the imperative to become the one I am."³⁶⁹ Cavell emphasizes how the moral conversation with another can require you to "reveal" yourself, a sense of self-disclosure during which confrontation can occur. For Cavell, these are the crossroads out of which moral progress occurs. Although Cavell does not make this connection, the focus on crossroads as a special agonistic moment has a parallel with the mystical Emerson who requires those moments of ecstatic rupture in order for true

³⁶⁸ Naoko Saito, *The Gleam of Light: Moral Perfectionism and Education in Dewey and Emerson* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2005), 48.

³⁶⁹ Cavell, *Cities of Words*, 49.

“transcendental” knowledge to be acquired.³⁷⁰ In Cavell, this is most apparent in his seeming commitment to the Wittgensteinian view on philosophical problems as beginning in the sense that “I don’t know my way about,” which Cavell reads as a moment created by a “loss of self-knowledge; of being, so to speak, at a loss.”³⁷¹ While Cavell is surely right to think that this sense of loss is the fundamental philosophical moment in Wittgenstein—in other words, to be philosophically found, one must first be philosophically lost—it raises questions about this philosophical moment’s relationship to the ordinary practices of common life.

The commitment to an Emerson that is somewhat doubtful of the exceptional, coupled with my view that Emerson is more attuned to and invested in speaking about the practical ways in which people are shaped through the ordinary as itself an incessant daily formation (counter to the ecstatic or crisis-producing extraordinary), leads me to put more weight on Emerson’s discussions of practical formation and education as vital components of his perfectionism. This is not to exclude those moments of ecstasy from the perfectionist conversation—indeed, I will return to the notion of ecstasy in “The Method of Nature” in the next chapter. But I do think that Cavell’s reading of Emerson does not properly pay heed to the ordinariness of Emerson’s concern for the common lives of people because his interest remains on the discourse of professionalized academic philosophy to such an extent that it limits his recuperation of the ordinary as itself unextraordinary. Indeed, this has been a standard criticism of Cavell by pragmatists for some time, articulated most strongly by Richard Rorty, among others.³⁷² In

³⁷⁰ This is the picture I tried to counter earlier.

³⁷¹ Stanley Cavell, *This New Yet Unapproachable America: Lectures after Emerson after Wittgenstein* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1989), 36.

³⁷² This comes out in Rorty’s early criticism of Cavell (originally published in 1981) that for all his interest in breaking philosophy of its myopia by bringing attention to other cultural forms such as literature as valuable philosophical texts, Cavell is still very much invested in preserving disciplinary boundaries for philosophy in the academy. One of Cavell’s responses to this criticism, in “Declining Decline,” was to accept that he cannot fully

distinction, Emerson as preacher and social critic is more concerned with addressing ordinary people in the ordinary settings of their lives with the terms that make sense to them. This is not to deny that Emerson can be “inherited” by academic philosophy, as Cavell argues, but merely to acknowledge that Emerson’s understanding of philosophy was not confined to the academy. Rather, philosophy was a capacious intellectual inheritance for all people, and needed to address people as they are. This seems also to be why Saito, though deeply informed by Cavell’s work, is more interested in a Deweyian sense of growth, informed by Emersonian perfectionism, that can guide the kinds of practical educational projects that are required, especially for children, to ensure “creative democracy.”³⁷³

This also returns me to my focus on religion as one of the prime places, at least in Emerson, where we can think about how the cultivation of persons occurs. In doing so, I am not only trying to make sense of the Emersonian view of religion, but I am also trying to take seriously Courtney Bender’s idea that *practicing religion*, to use her phrase, is a way of thinking about how a variety of intimate social interactions produce, and are produced by, particular conceptions of religion.³⁷⁴ Viewing religion this way emphasizes how religion permeates through a variety of realms, including, then, what we can think of as foundational democratic relationships. By reworking what “religion” means for a particular people, Emerson is, in subtle

participate in Rorty’s “post-philosophical cultural conversation”—a claim which makes sense in light of Cavell’s attempt to preserve, in that essay, the sense that philosophy depends on inheriting Wittgenstein. Richard Rorty, “Cavell on Skepticism,” in *Contending with Stanley Cavell*, ed. Russell B. Goodman (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 10-21; Cavell, *This New Yet Unapproachable*, 72. In a later essay, reflecting on Rorty’s criticisms, Cavell notes that his own teachers were interested in furthering pragmatism’s cultural role outside of the merely academic philosophical discourse, and while he also “craves” this same approach, he is more interested in “understanding and furthering philosophy’s quest for itself.” Stanley Cavell, “Responses,” in *Contending with Stanley Cavell*, ed. Russell B. Goodman (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 158.

³⁷³ Saito, *Gleam of Light*, 141.

³⁷⁴ Courtney Bender, “Practicing religions,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Religious Studies*, ed. Robert A. Orsi (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 273-295.

ways, trying to shift the way that this cultivation happens, and what gets to count as the “religious” aspect of democracy. This doesn’t happen just in moments of being lost—those moments of crisis—but in the everyday interpersonal relationships that the individual finds herself in.

c. Theological ideals

The return to the topic of religion brings us back to the ways that Cavell distances his “(secular)” perfectionism from a religious perfectionism. Cavell suggestively raises the question of how perfectionism attempts to “take over, or mask, or say secularize, a religious responsibility,” which he reads as a main thread of the Divinity School Address.³⁷⁵ If I am correct to say that Emersonian perfectionism is part of Emerson’s overall reworking of both the conceptual and the practical aspects of religion in his day, then I would contend, contra Cavell, that it makes more sense to ask how perfectionism is part of a renegotiation of religious responsibilities, and not what perfectionism takes over from religious responsibility. To do the latter is to inject a rigid secular-religious binary into Emerson that he clearly did not have, and if I am correct, would have resisted. Accordingly, we need to answer the question of what makes something religious in the Emersonian sense and the particular practices that it ought to cultivate to regain intimacy with the world. As I developed in chapters two and three, another way to put this would be: what is the content of the particular community’s structure and the individual’s specific constitution that make them religious for Emerson. As I showed in those chapters, this centers on the question of a “natural theology” for Emerson, one that seeks to find the ideal toward which individuals strive by reflecting both on the media of our social life, as well as the

³⁷⁵ Cavell, *Conditions*, 54.

particular activities in which we engage in our quotidian lives.

Cavell doesn't always understand perfectionism in terms of striving for an *ideal*, although the ideal does have a role in his explication of Emerson's perfectionism. As I noted above, Cavell sees that for Emersonian perfectionism, the ideal "occurs at the beginning of moral thinking, as a condition, let us say, of moral imagination, as preparation or sign of the moral life."³⁷⁶ Cavell follows this observation by noting that the precondition for morality is "established in personal encounter," without which we would exist in a "premoral state."³⁷⁷ While part of this observation is relatively benign (for what would it mean to exist in a moral state if not that one is in a situation of having to respond to an encounter with another), Cavell's important observation is that the Emersonian ideal is not only a precondition for moral thinking in the first place, but that the ideal only appears in the personal encounter. This is not the mystical Emerson receiving ideals in his solitude and applying them to the world, but a social Emerson who sees that the most subjective moment of moral thinking (how I relate myself to the ideal that I have found in myself) can only occur because it was preceded by a encounter between people (which in Cavellian terms, is both an encounter with another and an encounter with myself in the other). This, I believe, opens a kind of space to inquire about how ideals are not just mine but ours, how they are produced through our form of living together, and how we might, each in his or her own way, reflexively identify and take responsibility for them. As Cavell often points out, there are ideals that a person is living that he does not yet have the ability to express, but that others may be able to formulate for him; this is what happens when another

³⁷⁶ Ibid., 61.

³⁷⁷ Ibid.

reveals me to myself.³⁷⁸ As I mentioned above, for Cavell our community is a particular kind of task to which individuals are to relate themselves. More so than Cavell, thought, I would stress that this task is one of persistently interrogating the ideals instantiated by one's relationships to community, loves, and world, recognizing them as in part one's own ideals, but also the individual's sense of aversion to those ideals. In Cavellian terms, this is a turning and returning.

The relationship between ideals and community becomes most clear when we turn to the common perfectionist strands between Emerson and Dewey, especially insofar as both see perfectionism as closely related to important aspects of their religious thought. This connection is all the more important because Cavell has been a strong critic of aligning Emerson and Dewey in their perfectionist thinking. His essay, "What's the Use of Calling Emerson a Pragmatist?" portrays Dewey and the classical pragmatists in general as not interrogating the language of philosophy enough, and therefore not engaging in philosophy in a substantial enough way to recognize the immense difficulty of Emerson's call to change.³⁷⁹ "Pragmatism misses," Cavell claims elsewhere, "the depth of human restiveness, or say misses the daily, insistent split in the self that being human cannot, without harm to itself (beyond moments of ecstasy) escape."³⁸⁰ In response, numerous scholars have contested this division between Dewey and Emerson by arguing that Cavell misrepresents the challenge of Dewey's call for the reconstruction of philosophy and thereby makes Dewey's faith in intellect and scientific reasoning too flat and

³⁷⁸ This seems apparent in the importance of poetry and the idea of God at the end of "Knowing and Acknowledging," Cavell, *Must We Mean*, 245.

³⁷⁹ Cavell, *Transcendental Etudes*, 223. Or as he puts it in this same essay, "I once characterized the difference between Dewey and Emerson by saying that Dewey wanted to get the Enlightenment to happen in America, whereas Emerson was in the later business of addressing the costs of the way it has happened." Ibid., 222.

³⁸⁰ Cavell, *Cities of Words*, 5.

optimistic.³⁸¹ For scholars who object to Cavell's disjunction between the two figures, Dewey's less poetic language does not make him any less Emersonian. In fact, as many have argued, Dewey's critiques of philosophy's myopia mirror in many ways what Dewey found to be most praiseworthy in Emerson: "Looked at in the open, our fences between literature and metaphysics appear petty."³⁸² In particular, my approach resembles the criticisms of Cavell's contra-Deweyian position made by Douglas Anderson, who worries that Cavell's overly linguistic project detracts from the sense of how Emerson and Dewey were concerned with the practices and actions of ordinary people, and not the kind of intellectual remove that, despite its claims to the ordinary, characterizes contemporary academic philosophy.³⁸³ Running through these criticisms is the idea that Cavell's attention to the ordinary leaves out what is essential to an Emersonian and Deweyian notion of the "common": that a philosophy of the common must be concerned with and directed towards the common people and the problems they encounter.³⁸⁴ By focusing too intently on the splitting of the self rather than particular social, democratic, and educational practices, Cavell risks turning perfectionism into the kind of moral theory that Putnam rightly critiques in *Ethics Without Ontology*, that is, a "noble statue standing at the top of a single pillar" rather than a Deweyian attention to the lives of ordinary people, where ethics

³⁸¹ See especially, Russell B. Goodman, "Cavell and American Philosophy," in *Contending with Stanley Cavell*, ed. Russell B. Goodman (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 100-117; *American Philosophy and the Romantic Tradition* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 103; Saito, *Gleam of Light*, 41-49.

³⁸² John Dewey, "Emerson—The Philosopher of Democracy," in *The Middle Works of John Dewey, 1899-1924*, vol. 3 (Carbondale and Edwardsville: Southern Illinois University Press, 1978), 188.

³⁸³ Douglas R. Anderson, "American Loss in Cavell's Emerson," *Transactions of the Charles S. Peirce Society* 29, no. 1 (1993): 82, 83, 85.

³⁸⁴ I don't want to stress this criticism too much, since Cavell's analysis of Hollywood films does much to bring his sometimes arcane linguistic philosophy to the very core of the form of culture that most nearly unites the American people, that is, popular film.

resembles “a table with many legs, which wobbled a lot, but is very hard to turn over.”³⁸⁵

One way to view the perfectionist connection between Emerson and Dewey is through the lens of how each negotiates the nature of the religious. There has been a good amount of work devoted to the perfectionist continuities between the two on ethics and education, but very little on the connection with how they view the religious commitments of their contemporaries.

The omission is all the more important because Dewey’s famous essay on Emerson ends by remarking on his religion in terms that sound similar to sections of Emerson’s “Worship.”

Calling Emerson “the only Christian of the intellect,” Dewey praises Emerson’s attention to “the common nature,” out of which will emerge “a philosophy which religion has no call to chide and which knows its friendship with science and with art.”³⁸⁶ A religious vision in which science, art, and philosophy come together is at the core of Emerson’s thought.³⁸⁷

There is perhaps no better depiction of Dewey’s Emersonian religious inheritance than *A Common Faith*.³⁸⁸ There are many parallels that one can trace between the two thinkers in this work. Dewey’s attempt to view how religion could be if it were “free from all historic encumbrances” resembles Emerson’s claim that what is problematic about religious forms are

³⁸⁵ Hilary Putnam, *Ethics Without Ontology* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2005), 28.

³⁸⁶ Dewey, “Emerson,” 192.

³⁸⁷ Not only is this the main feature of “Worship,” but it is also the vision of the “new Teacher” at the end of the Divinity School Address, the one who will “show that the Ought, that Duty, is one thing with Science, with Beauty, and with Joy” (CW 1:93).

³⁸⁸ Rockefeller places *A Common Faith* during the final stage of Dewey’s intellectual development, which begins with *The Quest for Certainty* in 1929, and marks a reemergence of religion as a central philosophical issue for Dewey. Indeed, this late stage of Dewey’s thought displays a more thorough and charitable view on religion than most of the mature work preceding it. Steven C. Rockefeller, *John Dewey: Religious Faith and Democratic Humanism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991), 19-22. For instance, Dewey’s essay “The Influence of Darwin on Philosophy” from 1909 is far less charitable towards religion, claiming that “religious emotions are not creative but conservative.” John Dewey, “The Influence of Darwin on Philosophy,” in *The Middle Works of John Dewey, 1899-1924*, vol. 4 (Carbondale and Edwardsville: Southern Illinois University Press, 1978), 5.

their unreflective adherence to history.³⁸⁹ Dewey's separation of the institutional "religions" from the attitudinal "religious" echoes Emerson's separation of formal religion from religious sentiment.³⁹⁰ They share a rejection of notions of sinfulness and the corruption of the heart which are incurable except through divine grace.³⁹¹ Both dismiss supernaturalism because it takes people away from the world in which they must act in relation to one another, and consequently harms the democratic ideal.³⁹² They both have the sense that the natural world and human dependence on it ought to figure into moral-religious thought, what Dewey calls his "natural piety."³⁹³ Both generally view religion as a dynamic, ever-changing, ever-adapting element of people's lives. And, perhaps most controversially given Emerson's popular depiction, both are hesitant to grant mystical experiences a kind of special insight into what is and is not religious.³⁹⁴ Nevertheless, for my purposes here, the most important thing to note is how Dewey's notion of a "moral faith" develops a kind of religious perfectionism where the ideal plays an integral part in

³⁸⁹ John Dewey, *A Common Faith* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1934), 6.

³⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, 9-10.

³⁹¹ *Ibid.*, 77. In the Jamesian terminology, they both present "once-born" religions, or religions of "healthy-mindedness." William James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, in *William James: Writings 1902-1910*, ed. Brice Kuklick (New York: The Library of America, 1987), 79-80, 85-86.

³⁹² Dewey, *Common Faith*, 80. This was my reading of the importance of the idea of compensation for Emerson.

³⁹³ For instance: "[Natural piety] may rest upon a just sense of nature as the whole of which we are parts, while it also recognizes that we are parts that are marked by intelligence and purpose, having the capacity to strive by their aid to bring conditions into greater consonance with what is humanly desirable." Both the idea that we are parts of a natural whole (Dewey's organicism) and the idea that we are to work with the natural in order to bring about a better human condition, echoes the main lines of argument in Emerson's *Nature*. *Ibid.*, 25-26.

³⁹⁴ For instance, Dewey writes that the claim by some that mystical experiences offer a kind of special knowledge of religious objects that is not available to scientific inquires only reflects the cultural biases of the person undergoing the experience, who uses his previous understanding of what counts as a religious object to determine what kind of experience would qualify. Emerson makes a similar criticism of mysticism in his essay on Swedenborg, who suffers from the problem of thinking that he has gotten access to an extra-scientific object, but which is really just a product of his own Lutheranism, and reflects a "Swedish polemic." Dewey, *Common Faith*, 39-40; *CW* 4:76-77.

how humans morally develop as individual selves in communities of shared aims.³⁹⁵

What I am calling the perfectionism of *A Common Faith* is Dewey's attempt to find the unification of the self through an imaginative attachment to an ideal beyond the self, one which integrates the self into an envisioned complete form and into the world as a whole. As Dewey puts it:

The *whole* self is an ideal, an imaginative projection. Hence the idea of a thoroughgoing and deep-seated harmonizing of the self with the Universe (as a name for the totality of conditions with which the self is connected) operates only through imagination—which is one reason why this composing of the self is not voluntary in the sense of an act of special volition or resolution.³⁹⁶

As Dewey hopes to show, ideals can have authority over “choice and conduct”—they can have claims over “our desires and purposes”—by positing a particular ideal end towards which we ought to aspire.³⁹⁷ These ideals have a power over us not because they are particular facts to which we must intellectually assent, either facts about the natural world or facts about some reality above or behind the world. Rather, ideals have power over us because they offer a potential unification of the self that empowers us to act in the world as we have it. In this sense, the ideal of the whole self that any person may have is not a voluntary construction, but one that is necessary for her to act morally. It is because of the recognition of the authority of the ideal, what Dewey calls “conviction,” that growth and positive change become possible: “For all endeavor for the better is moved by faith in what is possible, not by adherence to the actual.”³⁹⁸ Just as Emersonian perfectionism introduced a kind of perspective on life through a vision of a

³⁹⁵ As William D. Hart says of Dewey's position on the religious: “Rooted in organic life, the religious function qualifies ordinary experiences and unifies self and group in light of inclusive ideal ends.” William D. Hart, “Reconstructing a Common Faith,” *American Journal of Theology & Philosophy* 29, no. 3 (Sept. 2008): 272.

³⁹⁶ Dewey, *Common Faith*, 19.

³⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, 20-21.

³⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, 23.

future that *could be*, Dewey thinks that we should view this introduction of perspective into the shifting circumstances of life as the function of anything that is properly labeled “religious.”³⁹⁹ By saying that this unification of self through ideal ends is presented to us through imagination, Dewey does not mean that the ends are in any way *unreal*. Ideals are very much real because they are “vouched for by their undeniable power in action.”⁴⁰⁰ For Dewey, the imagination is the organ through which all possibilities (anything that is not yet actual) are presented to us, and these possibilities are certainly *real* in how they drive us to act in moral ways. One is reminded of Emerson’s claim that the true meaning of the spiritual is “*real*” (CW 6:6.14). As Dewey notes, ideals “exist in character, in personality and action.”⁴⁰¹ Ideals empower people to act for the possible that has power over us because it reveals a moral end towards which we must strive. Importantly, we need not postulate that the ideal is an antecedent reality—it is not a thing to be discovered in the world apart from human life.⁴⁰² What this means, for Dewey, is that we must always remember that ideals are our ideals, things that are created by us for our action, not objects found in, behind, or above the world.

One of the important ways that Dewey overlaps with an Emersonian perfectionism is through the importance that both place on emotion as a way of bringing together the ideal with the actual. Like Emerson, Dewey’s perfectionism is guided by two kinds of affective connections: those between individuals that join together in cooperative effort in pursuit of better realizing an ideal, and those between the human and the natural world which is imagined as a

³⁹⁹ Ibid., 24. Or, as he writes, “Any activity pursued in behalf of an ideal end against obstacles and in spite of threats of personal loss because of conviction of its general and enduring value is religious in quality.” Ibid., 27.

⁴⁰⁰ Ibid., 43.

⁴⁰¹ Dewey, *Common Faith*, 48.

⁴⁰² At times, the view that Dewey criticizes looks similar to the idea of human goods that Charles Taylor develops in *Sources of the Self*.

whole, or “universe,” into which the human must be integrated. For both Emerson and Dewey, we do not pursue the ideal because we have made a decision that it would be in our best interest to do so; rather, we pursue the ideal because it is recognized as constituting what we really are as human creatures, or, in language they both share, the ideal represents the potentially “whole” self. When one has a “religious attitude,” he sees himself as a part of a larger whole on which he depends, and which he supports, a whole that is both representative of his individual self and that self in relation to the larger whole to which it is bound.⁴⁰³ “God,” in this context, becomes the “active relation between ideal and actual,” a kind of symbolization of a function that Dewey sees operating in many different religious traditions, and without which a people can tend towards a position of defiance against what they perceive as a hostile world.⁴⁰⁴ In other words, “God” can be an idea of encouragement if it is understood rightly as a way of expressing how humans can engage in cooperative projects that strive after inclusive ideal ends. Dewey has some reservations about continuing to use the language of “God” because it can be easily misinterpreted as pertaining to a particular metaphysical being that is distinct from the practical moral projects of individuals. But Dewey also recognizes the power of the idea for people, and insofar as it inspires a right attitude, with a sense of hope and possibility in the ideal, it should be a continued presence in philosophical thought.⁴⁰⁵ Dewey believed that once people have found religious

⁴⁰³ Dewey, *Common Faith*, 53.

⁴⁰⁴ Ibid., 52, 53.

⁴⁰⁵ This openness to referring to a “God” in *A Common Faith* is recognized by some interpreters as a departure from Dewey’s views in the other works of the mature period leading up to the 1930s. For instance, in 1908, Dewey writes on the changes occurring in relation to religion: “Yet nothing is gained by deliberate effort to return to ideas which have become incredible, and to symbols which have been emptied of their content of obvious meaning. Nothing can be gained by moves which will increase confusion and obscurity, which tend to an emotional hypocrisy and to a phrasemongering of formulae which seem to mean one thing and really import the opposite.” John Dewey, “Religion and Our Schools,” in *The Middle Works of John Dewey, 1899-1924*, vol. 4 (Carbondale and Edwardsville: Southern Illinois University Press, 1978), 169. It is difficult, I think, to read this passage without hearing Dewey condemn liberal efforts to reinterpret, while still holding onto, traditional religious symbols including God as anything but simply finding a new way to clothe outmoded ideas. Douglas R. Anderson argues that Dewey’s

supernaturalism to be dubious, they can have a naturalized sense of moral faith that will bring people together under the common project of working towards an ideal, however they work it out. Indeed, not only will this connect us to those around us, but it will also connect us to people of the past and the future, those by whose work we have profited, and those who will profit from our work. Dewey's vision of a continuous humanity recalls his earlier Hegelian emphasis on organic relations—in this case, seeing humanity as one organism that progresses through time, of which we are all equally parts. In one of his more eloquent moments, Dewey writes: "Ours is the responsibility of conserving, transmitting, rectifying and expanding the heritage of values we have received that those who come after us may receive it more solid and secure, more widely accessible and more generously shaped than we have received it."⁴⁰⁶

On the surface, at least, this picture of religion seems to fly close to Cavell's worries about the *unsplit*, and therefore untroubled, self of the pragmatists. Indeed, conversations about

conception of God amounts only to a "half-God." Anderson claims that this is because Dewey's God is "not a particular being and is never a fully actual entity. ... [Dewey's God] is realized only when the ideals that arouse us are being actualized in experience." Anderson finds this problematic because it must, according to Dewey's naturalism, dismiss the "half" of the traditional view of God where purposes and ideals are linked in some "infinite immanent or transcendent center of purpose or intention." While Anderson is surely correct that such a picture of God is unlike that of the traditional transcendent being of which we might have some idea, he seems to misunderstand Dewey's real aim with his discussion of the grounds of ideals and their union in a "God." Anderson seems to be reading Dewey as making more ontological claims than Dewey would in fact allow—thus forcing him into confusions over the "reality" of certain ideals and purposes, especially with regard to this idea of unification in imagination. Douglas R. Anderson, "Smith and Dewey on the Religious Dimension of Experience: Dealing with Dewey's Half-God," *American Journal of Theology & Philosophy* 14, no. 2 (May 1993): 161-176. Alternatively, James Flaherty reads much more continuity in Dewey's attitude towards using "God." Looking at *A Common Faith*, Flaherty argues: "What is not open to debate, I submit, is that Dewey's notion of God is nothing more than faint praise offered to a way of thinking he would rather do without i.e., a way that maintains there is a reality beyond the natural world that cannot be wholly captured in natural terms." James Flaherty, "Pragmatism and Polytheism," *American Journal of Theology & Philosophy* 28, no. 2 (May 2007): 222. On my reading, Dewey has worries about the ease with which formerly supernatural terms can continue to maintain their negative supernaturalist valence. Rather, Dewey is open to a naturalistic understanding of God that accords with contemporary naturalistic science (bringing the religious in accord with the changing intellectual climate), which has a power that is not derivative of its formerly supernaturalist basis. God-talk, in other words, is a viable philosophical option on Dewey's account. For an interesting examination of Dewey's personal usage of religious language, including the supernaturalist language of God and mysticism, see Miedema's examination of the poetry Dewey wrote from 1910-1918. Siebren Miedema, "Heart and Reason: A Comparison of John Dewey's *A Common Faith* and his 'Religious' Poems," *Religious Education* 105, no. 2 (March 2010): 175-187.

⁴⁰⁶ Dewey, *Common Faith*, 87.

whether or not Dewey has a sense of the tragic have interesting parallels with those about whether Emerson is more than a sunny optimist.⁴⁰⁷ It seems as though whether or not one reads Emerson and/or Dewey as an optimist or pessimist will determine whether or not one sees them as closely aligned.

This is where an Emersonian natural theology can be helpful. Dewey reminds us that ideals are instantiated and instilled by both cultural products (art, poetry, philosophy) and by practical action (reform movements, religious practices, democratic life). The function of the religious has been to offer a kind of perspective on these ideals, and consequently, on ourselves, our actions, the culture around us, and our world. This is the job of Dewey's religious attitude, and Emerson's religious sentiment. Oftentimes, the ideals that we will find ourselves living out and surrounded by will prove to be insufficient. We either did not know that these ideals were *our* ideals, or we knew they were our ideals, but we had a view of them that made them seem more complete than they actually are (say, for instance, a commitment to racial equality that is not fully realized by the institutional forms which purport to pursue racial equality, as is currently coming to light at the moment in American universities). It takes a particular kind of criticism to draw this out. It is only through the reflection of this criticism that new practices, new forms of life, new worship can be brought about. This criticism must be strident, and perhaps troubling, because it cuts to the core of the ideals around which people structure their lives.

As I have been arguing in Emerson's case, the essential feature of religious sentiment is

⁴⁰⁷ See, for instance, Eddie Glaude's account of the "tragic sensibility" in Dewey, in relation to Cornel West. Eddie Glaude, *In a Shade of Blue: Pragmatism and the Politics of Black America* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2007), 17-46; Cornel West, "Pragmatism and the Sense of the Tragic," in *Keeping Faith: Philosophy and Race in America* (New York: Routledge, 1993), 107-118. The study of Emerson is still attempting to get over the condemnations of him as a poet who ignores evil made by Santayana. George Santayana, *Interpretations of Poetry and Religion* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1900), 228.

its moral function of enabling a person, through a variety of means, to become a more complete, universal, and public human. As Emerson put it, “As soon as we love, or think profoundly; or pray; or are rapt by music; or by grand works of imagination; or address ourselves to any task which absorbs the mind and heart; we are no longer related to our native village or to the current year and month, but are citizens of the world, and at home in all ages” (*LL* 1:125). These are all specific ways to transcend ourselves. They are not individual mystical withdrawals, but can serve as the basis for structures of renewed Emersonian worship. But the project of striving to be more public and universal is exceptionally difficult, and never finally achievable. It is not just a matter of seeing oneself rightly, but constantly working to maintain the slimmest possibility of seeing ourselves rightly. As Emerson notes at the end of “Illusions,” we might ever only see the air clear, and the Gods reveal themselves, for an instant (*CW* 6:9.21). To make more apparent how this functions religiously, let me now turn again to Emerson’s “Natural Religion” lecture which he delivered numerous times in the 1860s.

As I have highlighted in the previous chapters, Emerson saw the office of the preacher as an integral part of the life of the community. The preacher has no special insight and no special theological knowledge. Instead of grounding his work on whatever theological system is currently in style at the divinity schools, he grounds himself with the people to whom he is speaking. He is to speak from his experience (which he shares with his audience) and his own exploration of ethical life in order to lift up his audience: “He cannot utter any ethical statement out of his experience, to any assembly of living men, but he will find it received into welcoming, tender, and jubilant hearts” (*LL* 2:182). His subject matter is not abstract theologies or metaphysics; he aims to speak “to the height of lowliness” because it is in this lowliness that the “great God” meets us—that is, where we find the heights of human character (*LL* 2:181). It is in

this sense that “The progress of religion is steadily to its identity with morals,” where it sheds its sectarian claims about the exclusivity of its revelation and realizes its part in the project of moral cultivation (*LL* 2:183). As Emerson provocatively notes in the margin of the manuscript, one might substitute “soul or citizen” for the term “clergy” (*LL* 2:183n17).

If this moral cultivation is read as centrally the perfectionist project, which Emerson inherits from Channing among others, then we can see how even these late lectures took the core of religious form to be about the cultivation and development of a perfectionist moral outlook. What then are the tenets of this perfectionism when it takes its religious form? Emerson gives us four, which in the broadest strokes are meant to give the general apparatus under which any particular religious form might operate if it is to realize its moral force. First, we must realize that we do not fully *know* the value of what we say and do, that we speak and act in ways that are expressive of ideals that we don’t always recognize. Put differently, we don’t have entire self-clarity. Nevertheless, “Blessed be the inevitabilities” because ultimately, the laws under which we live will “execute themselves” (*LL* 2:185, 186). Like Dewey, Emerson sees change in religious traditions as necessary, and that there is something troubling about an inflexible reiteration of history. This leads to his second tenet, that “Theocracy—or the only power—is Reason,” whose aim is to make us more public and universal, and less likely to “egotize” (*LL* 2:187). As I have stressed in my account of Emerson, religion is often treated as moderating what Emerson here calls “self-love,” or that excessive self-concern that takes one away from his obligation to others. Too often, he claims, people have understood religion in ways that remove them from their obligations to others—that is, they seek “religious superiority” by “going alone, renunciation, self-mortifying”—but this is a path away from religion, because “it is only as our existence is shared,—not as it is self-hood, but as it is humanity or godhead,—that it is divine”

(*LL* 2:188). By claiming that Reason is a true “Theocracy,” Emerson is giving prime place to that which connects us, to that faculty, the Reason, which expresses how others “are only extensions” of oneself (*ibid.*). This is why public worship is still a significant aspect of Emerson’s thought. One cannot stay in one’s religious closet, but must participate in the collective activities of the community in ways that make apparent one’s interconnectedness with that community.

The third tenet deals with the “plain doctrine of integrity,” which stresses that we must work to be consistent moral creatures. Integrity, in this sense, is an ideal, not something that we see very often (“Yet how hard to find a complete character!”) (*LL* 2:189). Emerson gleefully notes that there have been many great thinkers who were terrible to their families, and thus failed this test of integrity because they were unable to integrate their high ideals with their practical action in the world. Here, one is reminded again of the closing of “Experience,” where the vision that we hope to achieve is the “transformation of genius into practical power.” This leads to his fourth tenet, the “doctrine and discipline of love” (*LL* 2:189). Emerson notes that it is easy to love that which is partial to us, those people who are near to us and provide some benefit (classically, we might call this *eros*). It is difficult to have an “omnipotent” love where one acts not out of the benefit that one receives from the beloved, but “only a noble regard for a man as a man” and the wish to display to the neighbor that you do not love him out of “prejudice” (*LL* 2:190). This is a love that has to power to hold together a “political community” by displaying how each is responsible for the other, not because they have entered into an agreement of mutual benefit, but because each has engaged in a discipline of love that makes her see each as sharing in a humanity.

Here, then, we have circled back to Cavellian acknowledgment, but now inflected with a sense of religious practice: it is through the particular formative practices of religious worship

that a community can cultivate the bonds that are necessary for acknowledgment to be possible and sustainable. Emerson thinks that most religions have been doing this in partial form, but they have yet to fulfill their ethical core—they are still progressing towards the identification with morality. Emerson gives particular importance to America as a place where the “pure religion” might be introduced, but he is not claiming that this “American” religion will supersede all others, or even that there is a single American religion.⁴⁰⁸ Rather, it is the meeting of many religious traditions that Emerson sees as most important, and the discovery amongst them that each in its own way pursues a moral goal. He has the hope that this meeting of religious traditions sparks a recognition of the moral claims of the other.

In sum, what theology does for Emerson is read the higher in the now—it is a part of the “transcendentalism of common life” and the raising of “every trivial incident to a celestial dignity” (*CW* 2:187, *LL* 1:11). Theology serves as a language in which to express human duty by examining all parts of human life and asking what kinds of duties are being expressed, what kinds of ideals are implicit, and what we are aspiring towards. Theology deals with “the whole world” as “an omen and a sign,” but these are our omens and signs, not signs of another world (which would be demonology), and when we see these signs we are better able to rectify our actions (*EL* 3:170). Theology in this sense is not far from what he often means by philosophy, and I take this to be part of his point. The best forms of theology are searching and critical, but they point towards a hopeful future. It is in this way that the Cavellian contestation of the boundaries between literature, film, music, art and philosophy gets extended to theology as well.

III. Prospects

⁴⁰⁸ This would be contra Bloom.

Cavell has two worries about a religious perfectionism: that it might view human moral effort as insufficient for moral progress because of human sinfulness, or that it might posit the end of moral effort and the achievement of perfectionism (whether inside or outside of this world). Coupled with Cavell's insinuation that religion cannot be endlessly self-critical—and thus it is distinct from philosophy, which can be—Cavell enacts a separation between his version of a “(secular)” Emersonian perfectionism and the varieties of striving after the ideal that one might find in religious traditions. The worry, then, becomes how this perfectionism relates to the concrete social practices of ordinary individuals, those who perhaps are not engaged in the philosophical tradition in which Cavell finds his expression of perfectionism. Insofar as Cavell's perfectionism tends towards the textual, linguistic, and often intellectualized form, it fails to fully descend to the ordinary messiness of the manner in which lives are daily lived and formed, a place where *religion* often functions as the constellation of ideas, activities, relations, and traditions that are integral to a perfectionist striving. What my reading of perfectionism has emphasized is that an openness to religious expressions can reveal the many ways that the lived practice of religions involve formative practices that are both affective and intellectual, which involve both one's solitude and one's social relations, that are vital to the way that one lives out the ethical imperative of perfectionism. These elements are essential features of an Emersonian, romantic, and I would add a *pragmatist*, commitment to the common or ordinary. What I have hoped to show with my discussion of Emerson and Dewey is how there is a version of perfectionism that is concerned with the lives of ordinary people and, in particular, the religious institutions and ways of life that inform a perfectionist effort onward and upward that escapes these legitimate worries. In fact, I have argued that there is a form of theological discourse within the Emerson-to-Dewey trajectory of American philosophical and religious thought that achieves

precisely this.

Furthermore, this liberal strand of American thought has been viewed as untheological precisely because it does not adhere to an Augustinian conception of sin and grace, and therefore goes largely ignored by those theologians who are interested in using Cavell's perfectionism for theological purposes. My emphasis on Emerson as renegotiating the meaning of the religious, the ways in which he takes what is recognizable and visible to his audience and reinterprets it for a progressive purpose, injects a malleability to what is and is not religious that has often been missed by those who would support Cavell's "(secular)" perfectionism and explore its theological resonances. My aim is ultimately similar to Ludger Viefhues-Bailey's attempt to use Cavellian resources to support "alternative religious imaginations that enable something like Emersonian becoming."⁴⁰⁹ My claim has been that this was Emerson's project all along, but it is a project that can be easily misunderstood as irreligious because it sees religion itself as needing to undergo continuous transformation. Accordingly, Emerson's prompting is that one should not define what is and is not theological by how theology has been done, but how it can be done in order to support the religion that he imagines is coming about.

⁴⁰⁹ Dahl lists Ludger Viefhues-Bailey in the camp of those who identify and affirm Cavell as a "secular and atheist philosopher" operating in the wake of the "death of God," and who then extend their own work in this trajectory. What strikes me about this claim is how it reads Viefhues-Bailey's attempt to find a new "religious imagination" as essentially secular, atheistic, or otherwise non-religious. I take Viefhues-Bailey's point to be that, in part, the categories under which we formerly and currently understand what counts as "religious" are themselves presentations of a masculinist picture, and therefore, we need a new account—or at least, we need a drastically reworked imagining. In this way, I see his handling of religion as similar to Emerson's. Thus, if I am granting to Emerson that he is still within the fold of the "religious," then certainly Viefhues-Bailey is as well. But the reworking of Christianity has now come to the fore as a project, and this, for many Christian theologians it would seem, makes it no longer Christian. Dahl, *Stanley Cavell*, 3, 147n7; Ludger H. Viefhues-Bailey, *Beyond the Philosopher's Fear: A Cavellian Reading of Gender, Origin and Religion in Modern Skepticism* (Hampshire, England: Ashgate, 2007), 8.

CHAPTER FIVE – ENVIRONMENTAL INTIMACY

Introduction

The previous four chapters have all, in different ways, made the case that Emerson's religious project has been either misunderstood or unfairly dismissed due to a lack of attention to the intricate ways that he hoped to change how people understand what it means to live a religious life. My claim has been that, in misconstruing Emerson's corpus as either too secular or too spiritual to be "religion," we have missed many of the valuable resources that Emerson's work can offer us for addressing the contemporary intersections between theology, ethics, and philosophy. Attending to the way that these categories bleed into one another—that is, how Emerson treats all three as primarily concerned with the question of how to promote human moral becoming—we might be able to gain a critical perspective that does not begin with their categorical separation, but calls upon resources insofar as they prove to be efficacious for the task at hand. Accordingly, this final chapter focuses on one particular place where an Emersonian account can contribute: how we both think about and ethically respond to the environment. As my account relies in significant ways on how the theological, ethical, and philosophical were woven together by Emerson into what he understood as the progressive function of the religious life, my approach for offering Emersonian resources for thinking about how humans ought to respond to the ethical demands of environmental degradation will be situated within this discussion of the religious life. That is, it is concerned with how to create forms of community education and social practice that shape individuals to be able to reflect

properly upon, and hence be able to take hold of and change, the ideals they instantiate and which guide their activity in the world.

To begin, then, let me trace the trajectory of the past four chapters in order to show how the previous discussion culminates in what will be the focus of this chapter, that is, ethical intimacy with the environment.

In the first chapter I argued that scholarly attempts to read Emerson's work as promoting either a proto-secularism or a mysticism and spiritualism have contributed to a picture of him as not "religious." These accounts tend to give too much place to the particular social and cultural movements that claimed Emerson as one of their own after his death—both the "secular" American literary tradition and the New Thought, spiritualist, and mystical movements in the United States—rather than attending to the ways that Emerson saw himself as standing in a long tradition of religious evolution. I argued that in order to see Emerson as leaving religion behind, scholars have too often relied upon a static and rigid conception of religion that, in fact, does not fit with Emerson's own anti-essentialist and malleable conception of religion. To view Emerson as proto-secular or spiritual leads one to be unable to make sense of the enduring concern that Emerson had for cultivating a particular notion of religious life that he believed had very real and urgent social value. This chapter also argued that these scholarly accounts of the irreligious Emerson mistakenly divorce Emerson from the traditions of religious thought that informed him. Specifically, I argued that we can see Emerson's religious thought as continuing a local family tradition, which he inherited from his Aunt Mary Moody Emerson, but which is also deeply connected to the nexus of competing traditions in early nineteenth century New England. By foregrounding this inheritance, it becomes more difficult to claim that he is doing something radically new or different. Instead, Emerson serves as a node in a continually evolving mixture

of various inherited Christian traditions, and he understands himself to be situated in the always tenuous negotiation between previous iterations and forms of novelty.

Chapter two begins my interpretation of Emerson's religious thought with the earliest sermons. Because my focus is on Emerson the preacher, who has a real pastoral concern for the lives of the people around him, I develop an account of his religious writings that stands apart from many of the treatments of it thus far. In particular, most accounts of Emerson's religion treat it as autobiographical—that is, the accounts of religion that Emerson offers in his works are primarily his attempt to work out his own series of personal crises prompted by the events of his life. I believe this trend has been unfortunate because it occluded the ways that Emerson was offering a structured vision to an audience who he hoped to impact in real and practical ways. Thus, I read the religious writings as meant for an audience as a piece of prophetic cultural criticism, engaging with his audience on their terms in an effort to affect how they live their lives. I also argue that Emerson is not as hostile towards the project of theology as many readers have assumed, but that he was hostile to a particular model of theology that removed it from the common lives of ordinary people by getting caught up in interminable academic debates. Instead, Emersonian theology focuses on how theological speech might provide a means for people to reflect on and therefore improve their lives as they live them. Theology, in this sense, is what Emerson calls the language of human duty. I lay out the broad goals of Emerson's religious project by focusing on how he takes up the traditions of the people around him, evaluates them in light of how they contribute to or detract from the improvement of the community, keeps what works, and reimagines what doesn't work in hopes of moving the tradition forward. This makes him a reformer more than an iconoclast.

In the third chapter I continue this reading of Emerson's religious thought by focusing on

how his concern for the religious life continues through the period where most scholars have seen Emerson becoming more secular. The standard narrative of Emerson's life in the secondary literature sees the publication of *Essays: Second Series* as marking the point at which all of Emerson's optimism regarding religion has disappeared, after which it is more appropriate to view him as a secular ethical pragmatist. My account challenges this view by reading the works of this period as a further elaboration upon what Emerson calls the religious sentiment—that multifaceted concept that is intended to preserve and promote the idea of an affective connection between people that has important moral value. Many accounts of this period have focused on the interplay between skepticism and morality. Few scholars have followed Emerson in stressing that the religious sentiment is at its core a part of human morality. I trace this movement up to the final works of Emerson's career, where he takes a determinately practical view of developing the religious sentiment by attempting to describe how systems of formation, including religious worship, can provide for the betterment of individuals in the lives that they currently live. In other words, Emerson's notion of a "transcendentalism of common life" comes to play a central role in *The Conduct of Life* and *Society and Solitude*, the two main works that describe how ordinary people can reflect upon their daily activities as instantiations of higher ideals, which, for him, is the central theological task.

In the fourth chapter I turn to Stanley Cavell's work on moral perfectionism to draw out a specific moral theory from Emerson's work that stresses intimacy and relationality over individualism and autonomy. I argue that Cavell's work is problematic precisely at the point where he strays from Emerson the most: when he separates his "philosophical" Emerson from the practical social project of improving lives through direct address (that is, Emerson in his pastoral or "religious" mode). I then make the case for a version of Emersonian moral

perfectionism that puts more of a stress on the affective connections of love and the orienting possibilities of the theological ideal. I argue that it is within Emerson's broader development of religious practices, with the forms of education that they pursue, that both love and the theological ideal can be promoted and cultivated. That is to say, because an Emersonian theology is focused on how to reflect on one's social practices with an eye towards the ideal, and because this reflection is not simply a given but must be cultivated through forms of community worship, to speak meaningfully about moral perfectionism requires a sense of both the community and the particular social bonds in which one is situated. It also requires, as I note at the end, a strong account of how humans are constituted by forms of intimacy that make them what they are, and which ought to be honored as having ethical importance. Intimacy, in this sense, is a way of speaking about both one's social ties as well as one's environmental connections, bringing back a sense of nature as an intimate moral partner in the development of both persons and the world.

This fifth chapter is thus the culmination of the previous: if moral perfectionism can only be considered within boundaries set by one's social *and* physical environment, then an account of ethical intimacy is needed that makes sense of how the human-environment relationship should be understood. It is at this point that Emersonian moral perfectionism becomes an environmental ethics: it responds to how we ought to understand both our duties to the environment, as well as how the environment makes us into the kinds of moral creatures that we are. Simply put, Emerson's answer is that we are in an inextricable relation of intimacy with our environments, an intimacy in which we are both creators of and created by the places in which we live our daily lives. To say this is to operate with a view of the environment as encompassing a wide range, one that accounts not just for the untouched wilderness, but for lead-contaminated city water supplies and the toxic soils which are concentrated in poor communities. In fact, it is

precisely the picture of Emerson which has been problematic for most ecocritics—that he is too much of an idealist—that allows for Emerson to provide a notion of an environmental ethics that addresses more than just the pristine wilderness. That is to say, a certain form of idealism enables us to speak about the formation of human subjects in environments that perpetuate human social inequalities, where the environment is itself produced by human social inequalities, and therefore functions as a site calling out for the workings of environmental justice. Understood correctly, Emerson’s environmentalist idealism offers ethical resources to account for the environment not just in “manipular” ways, nor in such extreme abstraction that there is no concern for the physical, but in acknowledgment of the power of human creativity and the need for that creativity to be wielded according to the intimate bonds of the self that both make it what it is and that it can intentionally make better.

I. Environmentalist Idealism

In light of what now seems to be an inevitable ecological catastrophe caused by human activity on earth, any ethical, philosophical, or religious framework is incomplete which does not in a substantial way engage with how it either furthers or inhibits a model of human life and thought which is part of the environment in which it occurs. Thus, the question becomes whether a viable form of moral perfectionism, viewed as a form of theological ethics, can account for human ecological obligations. Although Emerson could not have anticipated the extent to which human activity could be destructive to the natural environment, he does offer resources for understanding the human-environment relationship that prove to be amenable to an ecological concern. Specifically, the Emersonian model demands the notion of intimacy with the natural world as an essential aspect of any philosophical view, an intimacy that carves a path between an

entirely receptive materialism and a world-denying idealism. In this sense, the Emersonian model provides a way forward by skirting both the pitfalls of ecocentrism and anthropocentrism, holding onto a notion of the human while at the same time depicting that notion of the human as never so autonomous as to become independent. To put it simply, the human is permeated by obligations to a larger world than its own. The goal of an Emersonian intervention in religious practice, then, is to find creative ways of representing and therefore cultivating these obligations in ways that address how a community understands itself. Crucially, what makes this intervention different from many others is that it seeks to address particular communities in terms that they would understand, using the resources inherent in them in creative ways that might lead to social transformation.

In this section, I begin with a general account of recent proposals for pragmatism in environmental ethics. I follow Willis Jenkins in viewing religious ethics as having a vital role within this pragmatic tradition insofar as it is able to elaborate on and intervene in the particular social practices that communities use to make sense of themselves. I then turn to what an Emersonian model would have to look like in order to attempt to develop ways of “representing” environmental intimacy, using Rob Nixon’s terminology, through a particular perfectionist understanding. Because this section is meant to lay the groundwork for the Emersonian model, I put off a conversation about the Emersonian religious thought and the environment to the next section.

Most work on environmental ethics and religion and ecology begins with some kind of distinction between the human and nature—even if the goal is, as some deep ecologists might argue, to eventually show how the distinction fails to get at what is most fundamental about the human-nature relation. Roger Gottlieb’s recent anthology on religion and ecology begins with

this distinction, framing the book with a traditional theological problem concerning human relations with nature: how are humans to deal with creation? Our power to damage the earth, Gottlieb writes, has grown to such an extent that we have essentially changed the conversation from the antedated concern for a *natural* world, to a contemporary question of humans and the *environment*. We ought no longer to speak of “nature” in such a framework because it invokes the notion of an autonomous causal order and the theological apparatus that regarded it as a created thing apart from human power. The conceptual change to “environment” reminds us that an autonomous causal order is no longer imaginable. Instead, what we have is “a nonhuman world whose life and death, current shape and future prospects, are in large measure determined by human beings.”⁴¹⁰ Although we might begin with this conceptual binary between human and non-human, Gottlieb makes the point that this relationship is a dialectical totality—as we focus our ethical work on the impact that humans have on the environment, we should not forget that the environment also deeply changes us. The notion of a dialectical totality is meant to bridge the oftentimes too easily juxtaposed poles of ecocentric and anthropocentric views of the environment, offering a way of conceptualizing the human-environment relationship as one in which each element is determined by and yet also determines the other.

Many scholars have been dissatisfied with this paradigm that focuses on human frameworks for understanding the world, arguing that these meta-philosophical debates about how the environment is conceptualized only distract from very real and practical environmental problems, whereas we ought to spend more time offering concrete suggestions for effective strategies to combat them. These scholars are often grouped together under the category of environmental pragmatists. They typically take one of two interrelated paths. The first path

⁴¹⁰ Roger S. Gottlieb, “Religion and Ecology—What Is the Connection and Why Does it Matter?” in *The Oxford Handbook of Religion and Ecology*, ed. Roger S. Gottlieb (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 5.

focuses on specific environmental problems and the concrete ways in which interventions can be made, whether legal, scientific, or social. For those who go in this direction, the ethics of environmentalism might be interesting, but practical problem solving doesn't need to wait for these ethical conversations to be settled before offering up strategies for turning back climate change, cleaning up local waters, or investing in renewable infrastructure. The second path also turns to practical action as its primary orientation, but pragmatists on this path are interested in using social practices as sites in which human and environment concretely interact in complex ways that produce our thinking about our obligations to act. Rather than just offering technical problem-solving, these pragmatists recognize that modifying social practices is a prime route for offering concrete practical strategies, while, at the same time, an emphasis on social practices allows one to attend to the broad ways that people understand their worlds in hopes of finding effective and long-lasting change. Nevertheless, even on this second path the overall goal is not to begin with the question of how we view the world, but instead to focus more on the particular environmental crisis which confronts us now and the social practices that are relevant for actionable response. For instance, Anthony Weston has argued that a pragmatist strategy should begin with experiences of nature and the feelings and values that arise from these experiences in order to bypass the philosophical gridlock that comes when we think that real change only happens once we have settled the moral framework in which we must operate.⁴¹¹ The concrete experience of nature is taken to be a relevant social practice from which effective strategizing can emerge, rather than a metaphilosophical conversation about what the right kind of experience of nature would be.

Nevertheless, many versions of environmental pragmatism have been hampered from

⁴¹¹ Anthony Weston, "Beyond Intrinsic Value: Pragmatism in Environmental Ethics," in *Environmental Ethics*, ed. Andrew Light and Holmes Rolston III (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2003), 307-318.

making a large impact because they tend to exclude a discussion of religious practices by assuming that religion can only offer a reflection on metaethical views that stand at some remove from the practical experience of the environment. In this case, religion is seen as too general and metaphysical for the project of finding a consensus from which to address concrete problems. Willis Jenkins' recent book on how ethics ought to be redirected to meet future needs tries to remedy this lacuna by developing a pragmatic strategy that pays careful attention to how individual social practices and social responses to environmental problems can filter up to a cultural level by means of religious organizing. For Jenkins, religious ethics is just what is needed here because it can engage people in their particular situations while criticizing social dysfunction and making broadly transformative claims.⁴¹² The goal is to promote a "pluralist moral experimentation" in an effort to create new competencies for responding to problems, an experimentation that is not possible when policy consensus is the primary goal (as it is for many environmental pragmatists).⁴¹³ In this sense, religious ethics should begin with the concrete problems that arise when people confront the environment, and it should use these concrete problems as "a site of interpretive production" to revise a religious tradition to better transform and adapt a people to confront problems. Jenkins' claim is that religious ethics is particularly well-suited for this task because it is able to tap into a network of established social practices in which people are already heavily invested. Therefore, religious ethics is able to offer a better possibility of transforming how people see their environments than would an ethics that is merely built around solving particular environmental problems. Religious ethics does not

⁴¹² Willis Jenkins, *The Future of Ethics: Sustainability, Social Justice, and Religious Creativity* (Washington D.C.: Georgetown University Press, 2013), 168.

⁴¹³ This is the goal articulated in Ben A. Minteer and Robert E. Manning, "Pragmatism in Environmental Ethics: Democracy, Pluralism, and the Management of Nature," in *Environmental Ethics*, ed. Andrew Light and Holmes Rolston III (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2003), 319-330.

exclude other forms of ethical inquiry; rather, religious ethics is one particularly powerful strategy that ought not to be ruled out merely because it tends towards broad metaethical claims.

My claim here is that this is precisely the point at which Emerson can contribute. The environmental pragmatists and those who see some merit in their approach often call upon the so-called “scientific” pragmatism of Dewey because his views about the slow and experimental progress of intellect seem most amenable to the kind of practical responses they are after.⁴¹⁴ Dewey is seen as the practical problem solver who is not invested in complex metaethical demands or overly broad metaphysical commitments. As an alternative to this “Deweyian” picture, Jenkins finds a role for the prophetic pragmatism of Cornel West, although it is not quite clear how deep a role this prophetic pragmatism is playing in Jenkins’ project.⁴¹⁵ What I want to claim in supplement to Jenkins’ Westian pragmatism is that an Emersonian claim about “nature” has a kind of prophetic appeal, and it has this precisely because it seeks to call nature into human ethical discourse. The question then becomes what a pragmatic ethics would look like if the proto-pragmatist Emerson serves as a guiding voice.

To illustrate what is at stake in this model that draws upon “nature” as an integral philosophical partner, let me briefly consider a criticism of Emerson by Roger Lundin, who accuses Emerson of unwittingly denying the very thing that I am here attempted to reclaim. Lundin gives what I take to be a somewhat familiar expression of discontent with modernity and the perceived liberalism of an Emersonian religion that represents that modernity. In his book, *From Nature to Experience*, Lundin tracks the loss of a kind of authority offered by the natural

⁴¹⁴ It seems debatable whether the environmental pragmatists are giving an accurate reading of Dewey, or whether the absence of Dewey’s understanding of the need for a kind of ideal after which we strive from their works is indicative of a flattened sense of how Dewey’s ethics would inform environmental work.

⁴¹⁵ The juxtaposition of West and Dewey here is somewhat artificial, and perhaps distorts what many scholars have found in Dewey’s ethical and religious writing.

world as the locus of God's revelation, which he argues is replaced in the American context by the authority of individual experience. For Lundin, this is a story of the decline of religion in the face of secularizing pressures, a decline which can be seen in miniature in the Emersonian corpus. In the eight-year period from *Nature* to "Experience," Lundin sees the crucial moment where American intellectual culture moves away from the authority of (Christian) tradition. This loss of traditional authority represented by the turn to experience would eventually take hold among the American pragmatists, culminating in the evacuation of all forms of non-experiential authority for the ungrounded, endless theorization that he claims to find in Richard Rorty.⁴¹⁶ By turning the locus of authority from nature to experience, Lundin argues, the human becomes the measure of all things, and therefore the measure of nothing. Lundin has a reluctant sympathy for Emerson, who he reads as trying to preserve a thread of moral reality for nature through his doctrine of correspondence, as though Emerson saw the writing on the wall but was helpless to do anything about it. Many readers of Emerson (Lundin singles out Richard Poirier) have de-divinized Emerson by removing that last thread of moral reality from him, emptying him of all his "metaphysical dimensions."⁴¹⁷ From Lundin's rhetoric, it is clear that this is a story of immense cultural decline. The last line of his book reinstitutes the kind of authority that he feels has been lost in the liberal turn to experience: "In that silence [of the cross], we may hear a word of abiding comfort, and in this insulted face, we may see an authority that we can indeed call master."⁴¹⁸ As Lundin presents it, the loss of authority other than the self is clearly a theological problem, and it is only made worse by an Emersonian theology which, as he conceives it, gives

⁴¹⁶ Roger Lundin, *From Nature to Experience: The American Search for Cultural Authority* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2005), 2-3, 8-9.

⁴¹⁷ Ibid., 63, 68.

⁴¹⁸ Ibid., 202.

authority to individual experience against the authority of tradition, an authority that cannot be dethroned by anything other than the active self. And if the active self is the only locus of authority, then there will be little regard for any ethical obligation imposed on the self from outside it—in this case, by one's environment.

In many ways this is one of the longstanding criticisms of Emersonian religion. A version of it is found in Orestes Brownson, the Transcendentalist turned Roman Catholic who departed from Emerson over the latter's commitment to promoting the moral sentiment as an insight into one's own soul, rather than seeing that morality required "obeying the command of a power out of him, above him, and independent of him."⁴¹⁹ According to this criticism, the Emersonian active self that needs only to obey itself loses the sense of obligation entirely—or, as Brownson put it, morality becomes just "transcendental selfishness" and "pure egotism."⁴²⁰ Oftentimes this became, in Emerson's day, the claim that Emerson dismissed traditional Christian practice when it seemed personally disagreeable to him (the Lord's Supper sermon is case in point), making it so that individual distaste becomes the primary determinate of one's morality. One could offer a similar criticism of Cavell's work to the extent that it promotes an Emersonian self that seems interested only in its untethered linguistic becoming. Without some strong claimant outside the self that can serve as a source of authority that dampens the individual self, the criticism goes, the self swings too freely, and in the Cavellian case, revels too intently in its own playful creative power.

One way to answer this accusation is to follow the work of Jeffrey Stout and situate Emerson within a broader tradition of American democratic life that is constituted by and

⁴¹⁹ Orestes A. Brownson, "Mr. Emerson's Address," *Boston Quarterly Review* 1 (October 1838); reprinted in *Orestes A. Brownson Selected Writings*, ed. Patrick W. Carey (Mahwah N.J.: Paulist Press, 1991), 194.

⁴²⁰ *Ibid.*, 196.

perpetuated through the social practices that form subjects within that tradition. The claim would be, then, that the very kind of self which Emerson is developing depends on the long history of the evolution of the institutions and practices that allow that self to be what it is. Rather than a self that is untethered from any form of authority other than itself, this self is dependent upon those social structures that set the parameters for what it can become. For Stout, self-reliance doesn't require that one neglect one's dependence on another—rather, a proper self-reliance would lead to a sense of piety that recognizes one's “dependence on the natural and social circumstances without which it would be for nothing.”⁴²¹ Stout's Emersonian perfectionist self is able to freely acknowledge that it has received gifts that have neither been fully earned nor can be fully reciprocated, and it can celebrate them with a Nietzschean joy.⁴²² This is Stout's answer to what he describes as the Augustinian trend that is suspicious of the Emersonian self's ability to show gratitude, and therefore its inability to cultivate virtues that are more than egoism.

I agree with Stout that this sense of piety is present in Emerson's work. It complicates the too easy dismissal of Emerson as only offering a self-indulgent liberalism. But to apply it to an environmentalist ethic, I think that we need more than a sense of piety: what we need is a way of connecting the self to the environment in ways that are mutually constituting. In Emerson's essay “The Method of Nature,” he even says that we need something more than thanks and prayer—we need a sense of “reception” that mimics the “God in us” which proclaims, “I am: all things are mine: and all mine are thine” (CW 1:122). This means that we need more than just gratitude for the sources of our existence provided by the natural world. Gratitude is important, but it must be coupled with an acknowledgment that the sources of our existence in the world are also being

⁴²¹ Jeffrey Stout, *Democracy and Tradition* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004), 38.

⁴²² *Ibid.*, 39.

actively shaped by our hands. Gratitude is, in this sense, a response to a gift. But this interaction is not a simple giving and receiving—rather, the interplay between the human and the environment is one of mutual constitution and dependence. That is to say, we are in a reciprocal relation of making that involves piety, but which also inspires active creative intervention in the very relation which is mutually constituting. To respond to Lundin’s criticism above, we need a strong sense of the self that is both creator and receiver.

As an example of what this would be like, consider Emerson’s portrayal of himself in “Circles.” He boldly declares that “I am God in nature” but follows it immediately by forcefully declaring “I am weed by the wall” (CW 2:182). Critics of the Emersonian self often only hear Emerson declaring himself God. Nevertheless, Emerson’s point is that we also have to hear his moment of piety in declaring himself a weed. The question for environmental ethics is what would happen if we take Emerson at his word that we are both God in nature *and* weed by the wall. What would it mean to take seriously our smallness and limitation as just as necessarily a part of the human as its creating power? The picture of the heroic Emersonian self who is world-maker is well-represented in the secondary literature—the Emerson who is attentive to human impotence before the world is less so. But as has been apparent in much of my previous chapter, there is a strong sense of how the Emersonian self is affected by its non-voluntary connections with both persons and the natural world. In the midst of these non-voluntary formative relations, the self is as receptive as it is active. To have one without the other is problematic—you are either led to quietest fatalism or inimical egoism. It is here where we find the aspect of Emerson’s work that has power for environmentalist thought.

Douglas Anderson is one of the few scholars who has attempted to draw out this environmentalist line from the sense that humans are not solely world-makers, but involved in a

complex relation of making and receiving. As noted in the previous chapter, Anderson has been suspicious of what he views as Cavell's anti-Deweyian reading of Emerson because it tends to treat linguistic becoming as the only viable philosophical interest for Emerson. Much of the literature inspired by Cavell continues this trend by treating Emerson's avoidance of metaphysics as a *de facto* turn to language, making the tangible connection to the natural world into just another linguistic feat achieved by the creative power of the self. But, in fact, Anderson sees much more in Emerson's conception of nature. When harnessed correctly, it holds potential for thinking about a broader connection between the Emersonian person and the environment. By focusing on the importance of *natura naturans* (nature in action) in the essay "Nature," Anderson gives a reading of nature as not a passive recipient of human action, but an agency that runs through the human, "doing, creating, making, moving." As Anderson puts it, "Nature is not an objective environment but a creative environing."⁴²³ This way of understanding the relationship between the human and the environment rejects the supposition that agency is an either/or: either the human is the active creative agent and nature the canvas, or nature is the active creative agent who merely works through the passive human. The former would lead to the Baconian view of nature as an instrument of human ends, one which Lynn White attributed to the dominance of a particular Christian understanding of the mastery of nature; the latter resembles a form of deep ecology that rejects entirely the constructive special agency of humans because of the intuition that nature is a kind of nondistinct unity.⁴²⁴

These extremes are, of course, well-worn in conversations in environmental ethics, and it

⁴²³ Douglas R. Anderson, "Emerson's Natures: Origins of and Possibilities for American Environmental Thought," in *New Morning: Emerson in the Twenty-first Century*, ed. Arthur S. Lothstein and Michael Brodrick, (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2008), 154-155.

⁴²⁴ Lynn White Jr., "The Historical Roots of our Ecologic Crisis," *Science* 155, no. 3767 (March 10, 1967): 1203-1207. For what makes "deep" ecology and the role of intuition, see Warwick Fox, "Deep Ecology: A New Philosophy of our Time?" *The Ecologist* 14 (1984): 194-200.

is now common to search out some middle or alternative way. Emerson's model is one such alternative. As Anderson pithily notes, Emerson accepts that nature works through the human, but he just as quickly reminds us to "be men instead of woodchucks," which means that while we must be receptive to nature's judgment upon us, we must also accept the creative responsibility of constructing the world.⁴²⁵ To suppose that humans are somehow distinct from and therefore separate from nature is to promote the worst kind of egoism for Emerson, an egoism that only drives the materialist and consumerist aspects of culture about which he worried. To take the other route, insisting that humans are merely another iteration of nature, is no answer either, because it leads one to disregard the world-making power that humans have both collectively and individually. Instead, what we ought to do is wield that world-making power in ways that are attentive to the very real connections that we have with the natural world. It is both to honor the way that nature works through the human, while preserving the sense that humans have creative abilities to shape and reconfigure nature. For Anderson, to do this we need the notion of an "acquaintance" with nature: "One must engage nature directly to know by acquaintance; this is the enduring relevance of wilderness to human beings."⁴²⁶ The idea of acquaintance requires that the active self and the not-me of nature (in the language of *Nature*) work together through reciprocity, transaction, and integration, assuming "an attitude that is at once receptive to nature's language and open to human possibility."⁴²⁷

What Anderson brings to the fore is the question of what an environmentalist idealism looks like that sees nature as both determining and determined by the human. Whereas Anderson

⁴²⁵ Anderson, "Emerson's Natures," 155.

⁴²⁶ Ibid., 156.

⁴²⁷ Ibid., 158, 159.

sees this move as productive for environmentalist thought, Catherine Albanese understood this to be a confusion that Emerson contributed to the American conception of nature, where matter is presented as both “really real” but also “illusion and unreality.” When one operates with the former conception, one seeks “harmony with nature” as the really real; by operating with the latter conception one seeks “mastery over nature” because it is viewed as a creation or projection of the self.⁴²⁸ These possibilities seem to mirror the conversation about nature in environmental ethics: they are the realist and the idealist strands that are seen as irreconcilable. This is also the supposed “crack” that scholars have long identified in *Nature* between a nature which presents itself as a real and independent guide for proper living, and a self which seems to construct nature according to its own intellect, one that is often treated as unsolved by Emerson himself. Anderson’s move to focusing on the essay “Nature” rather than the book *Nature* is helpful here since the former is best regarded as Emerson’s response to his earlier work where he amends and corrects the views that were now beginning to make him famous. Instead of the infamous “crack” that scholars have pointed to in *Nature* between the strands of realism and idealism that appear to be unreconciled, we now get productively agonistic forces, perhaps not reconcilable, yet real and persistent aspects of how the human-nature relationship ought to be understood.

It is here where the Emersonian notion of ethical intimacy with the natural world can supply the needed conceptual lever to augment environmental pragmatism. I developed this notion of intimacy in chapter four with my discussion of Cavell and Emerson. There, intimacy was a key way of thinking about how Emerson offers a perfectionism that is not devoted merely

⁴²⁸ Albanese, *Nature Religion*, 82. Albanese paints a more sympathetic picture of Emerson in *Reconsidering Nature Religion*, where she notes that Emerson “understood nature as a tangible, and even intoxicating, presence.” She sets up the idea of nature religion in a way that recalls Stout’s notion of piety, but with regards to the natural world: “Nature religion, as an idea and phenomenon, reiterates democratic values, to be sure, by acknowledging the essential similarity and equality of human experience embedded in the reality that constitutes nature. But it also acknowledges forces and factors that delimit the human project—aspects of life over which humans, literally, have no control and before which they must bow.” Albanese, *Reconsidering Nature Religion*, 67, 24.

to the individual's ethical becoming, but recognizes how perfectionism is necessarily also a social ethic because it relies on forms of intimacy that make a person what she is apart from her individual self-creation. In other words, because humans exist in bonds of affection with both humans and the natural world, those things outside of the self shape the self and provide for its possibilities. Intimacy, in that chapter, was discussed primarily in terms of human-human relations, since this is the form in which Cavell mostly appropriates it. Relations between human and environment involved a form of philosophical animism—that we can treat non-human objects as the kinds of beings that can make claims upon us and which can speak for us. Although my account of perfectionism took its cue from Cavell, it offered a picture in which linguistic becoming is not a person's primary aim. Rather, forms of affective intimacy take the place of orienting one's sense that she is not fully self-constituting. By going back to Emersonian perfectionism, my aim in that chapter was to find a perfectionist sense of what Terry Tempest Williams calls a "Pansexuality," or an "Erotics of place," where we call out and the land calls back.⁴²⁹ It is an intimacy that is not based only on intellectual exchange, as the Cavellian model sometimes appears to be, but on the affective relation of love as Eros. Like any relationship of intimacy, we lay bare, open, and vulnerable to the nonhuman world as it lays bare, open, and vulnerable to us.

It might seem unusual to choose Emerson over Thoreau as a paradigmatic example here. After all, Thoreau is the one who inspires environmentalists like John Muir, and who is credited as being perhaps the first American naturalist. In his work, the land speaks to him in often finely attentive ways. There is no debate about who is better at carefully attending to and then depicting the natural world. Thoreau's volumes of natural description and extended natural metaphor are

⁴²⁹ Terry Tempest Williams, "Yellowstone: The Erotics of Place," in *An Unspoken Hunger: Stories from the Field* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1994), 81-87.

so clearly superior to Emerson's occasional observations that no one would dare put them on the same level. In Buell's formative volume for understanding the American environmental imagination, he makes Thoreau's treatment of the personified nonhuman world the central thread of the work. This environmental imagination calls upon a particular tradition of poetic animism as providing the bond between ecology and ethics. As Buell rightly highlights, Thoreau had a "personal intimacy with nature," in which an animated Walden functions as "a living presence, not merely a 'neighbor' but a mentor, a role model."⁴³⁰ Buell defends Thoreau's blatant use of the pathetic fallacy as a means by which to present environmental care with a voice, a way of conceptualizing the environment as sacred on social terms. That is to say, because Thoreau was able to recognize an intimacy with nature through conceptualizing its presence to him in terms of human social relations, he was able to respond to it as though responding to a person—as, in a sense, allowing the things of the environment to speak to him in his own language. He is able to treat Walden as a mentor precisely because he has augmented himself in order to stand in a relationship of intimacy with it. It is through nature's personhood that Thoreau brings ecology and ethics together.

Accounts that are more sympathetic to Emerson, such as John Gatta's *Making Nature Sacred*, still tend to side with the more ecocentric animism of Thoreau. Pitting Thoreau's "heartly empiricism" against Emerson's "metaphysical abstractions," Gatta finds the latter to dwell too much on the idea that humans are creators of the visible world, and that the environment is too often nothing more than the mind's projection.⁴³¹ Gatta reads Emerson as failing to attend

⁴³⁰ Lawrence Buell, *The Environmental Imagination: Thoreau, Nature Writing, and the Formation of American Culture* (Cambridge, Ma.: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1995), 209, 208.

⁴³¹ John Gatta, *Making Nature Sacred: Literature, Religion, and Environment in America from the Puritans to the Present* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 89.

properly to how his own understanding of “nature” was historically mediated in those moments where he sensed that he had somehow gotten to the truth of nature by means of a heightened individual experience.⁴³² Thus, Gatta celebrates Thoreau as the one who finds a way of accounting for how human imaginative abilities “half-create” our interaction with a place, avoiding a simple celebration of the pristine and untouched wilderness by portraying the human-environment relationship as one of co-creation.⁴³³ Thus, as Thoreau interprets nature through his carefully crafted empirical observations, he is able to come to self-consciousness about himself as interpreter. In the end, Gatta finds in Thoreau a theology of creation that makes the idea of living deliberately in close relation to the natural world an intentional act of acknowledged co-creation.

The problem, though, is that the juxtaposition between Thoreau and Emerson, where one is the empirical observer and the other is prone to metaphysical abstraction, privileges an empirical model as the primary means by which to understand the environment. We are given the impression that if one is to be environmentally conscious, then he must become a naturalist. While “nature” is acknowledged to be a human construct for this model, it is only the particular empirical observations of a natural world that are seen as humanly constructed. A picture of nature as pristine wilderness seems to be lurking always in the background for this empiricism, always supplying that which is to be constructed by human cognition. What we lose, then, are the ways that nature is *physically* constructed by humans, not just conceptually. The theology of creation that ecocritics like Gatta engage with is a theology of natural creation as made and bestowed to humans apart from their own activity—that is, their real, impactful, physical

⁴³² Ibid., 95.

⁴³³ Ibid., 131.

activity. What such a theology of creation fails to give us is a way of understanding, for instance, that environmental racism is not only a conceptual construct: our social and political systems have been inflected by racist ideologies and have formed the environment into a physical instantiation and instrument for the perpetuation of racism. This theology of creation fails to allow us to attend to the ways that the formation of the environment comes to represent a type of slow violence, to use Rob Nixon's term, one in which human actions cause changes in the environment which, in disproportionate ways, map onto socially marginalized peoples and cause them violence in long temporal durations.⁴³⁴ That is to say, the physical landscape itself becomes the carrier for social injustice, remaking and remapping the environment according to social and political power.

As Nixon notes, to respond to the contemporary situation of slow violence, more than a careful empirical attention to the environment is needed. In fact, the notion of wilderness that too often gets substituted for the environment in the ecocritics generally serves to obscure these formations of social and political power. Instead, we need creative representations that make visible what often goes invisible—i.e. the forms of environmental change that have disproportionate impacts on the socially marginalized because they occur in non-spectacular ways. As Gottlieb pointed out above, there is no longer a sense of an environment that is not a product of or subject to human power. To return to the discussion of environmental pragmatism, this is precisely what gets left out when the approach to environmental problems is to focus on immediate problem-solving. Problem-solving has no way of conceptualizing long duration violence. My contention here is that the kind of creative representation that is needed can and should be incorporated into the creative ethical responses of religious communities and

⁴³⁴ Rob Nixon, *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2011), 2.

traditions. That is to say, one way in which to respond to environmental change is to follow Jenkins in viewing religious traditions as an important site in which the kinds of new representations that Nixon is looking for occur.

This is why the turn to Emerson is needed. More than Thoreau, Emerson is attentive to the ways that forms of religious practice produce in people particular sets of ideals that then motivate their activity in the world. Rather than eschewing these forms of moral education, as Emerson calls them, for a direct experience of the natural environment—of which Thoreau’s excursions into the woods provide the paradigmatic representation—what we need are ways of thinking about the evolution of religious practice to bring it more in line with pressing moral demands. Emerson, I want to claim, gives us two things that are needed in this regard: an ideal of intimacy with the world, and the particular ways of going about producing and cultivating that idea through community projects. This, I claim, is a product of Emerson’s idealism when understood properly. That is, his idealism is not concerned with the mastery of creation through “manipular” means, nor is it about metaphysical abstraction to the point of disregard for the physical—rather, it is about a careful acknowledgment of the power of human creativity and the need for that creativity to be wielded appropriately in relation to the very real bonds of the self with that outside of it.

In the next section, I return to the notion of an Emersonian theology as a language of human duty, one that is concerned with naming and reflecting upon the ideals that are instantiated in quotidian social practices. When performed in particular local communities, this provides the guidance for the formation of community educational practices. The goal is to make the ideal of ethical intimacy a central part of these practices. This becomes one of the central tasks of religious ethics.

II. Transcendental Intimacy

In this final section my goal is to briefly turn the conversation back to religious ethics and the specific relation between the previous discussion of environmental ethics and Emerson's overarching religious project. Rather than offering a systematic treatment, it functions as a kind of prospectus—offering a set of concepts that together would inform an environmental ethics that takes account of the social practice account of ethical formation that has come to some prominence in religious studies. Some of these concepts move along the edges of Emerson's religious thought, pushing it in new directions. As such, it might be more proper to call these *Emersonian* in that they follow in the spirit of Emerson, even if they take him further than he could have imagined.

In the previous chapter I developed Emerson's understanding of a natural theology in which the primary aim of theological reflection is to make explicit and therefore to engage with the ideals that lay implicit in the various media of social life. This theology is "natural" in that its material is the stuff of our everyday experience in and of the world, including "conversation, fiction, proverbs, and the very thoughts of men at the present day" (*EL* 3:286-187). Emersonian natural theology deals with the world as an "omen and a sign," but these omens and signs are not indicative of some transcendent realm, nor are they meant to point towards something that lies behind our moral actions in the world as a kind of fabric for the universe. To engage in a theological discourse, then, is to be able to reflect on the world as we represent it in relation to a set of ideals. Furthermore, it is Emerson's somewhat unique understanding of theology as a language of human duty that allows him to see it as a vehicle in which humans are able to rectify

their actions with the ideals they aspire towards. In other words, natural theology is one of the ways of going about achieving a moral perfectionism that strives to bring the actual closer to the ideal. As Emerson stresses throughout his corpus, he is more interested in the wisdom contained in the common life than he is in academic theological debates. Because Emerson is concerned with opening the theological to this much broader sense of human duty, which consequently opens it to a more robust religious pluralism, he eschews the necessity of a God reference, a move which John Dewey will mimic in his *A Common Faith*.

For many scholars, Emerson's attempt to read natural facts as omens or signs of spiritual facts has been precisely the problem with his work—this is the problem I highlighted above as featuring prominently in many ecocritics. In an attempt to find transcendence within nature, they claim that Emerson ultimately devalues the natural world by making it merely a sign of an anthropomorphic spiritual world. In other words, whatever the importance of the natural world is, it is merely subservient to some higher human or human-like interest—it is, in other words, an anthropomorphic creation theology. If such is the case, then it would seem that Emerson is merely instrumentalizing the natural world for human purposes—a move that will inevitably lead to the downgrading of our concern for the environment as such. One might even be tempted to say with Harold Bloom that Emerson's first book is titled "Nature" but actually means "Man," considering how little the book seems to be about its supposed subject.⁴³⁵

One's first reaction to this criticism might simply be that this misunderstands what Emerson's means by both transcendence and the spiritual. As I have stressed throughout my account of Emerson's religious thought, both transcendence and his invocation of those spiritual

⁴³⁵ The full quote is: "Emerson's first book is a blandly dissociative apocalypse, in which everything is a cheerful error, indeed a misreading, starting with the title, which says 'Nature' but means 'Man.'" Bloom, "Emerson: The American Religion," 43.

aspects of the world are fully immanent concepts for Emerson that are meant to indicate postures that one might take on oneself and the world from within the world, rather than any attempt to escape from it. Thus, I read Emerson's often maligned doctrine of correspondence not as a claim about the relationship between this world and some heavenly world of spiritual laws in which a god adjusts moral action to right reward, but as a position that one must take in this world in order not to defer our present moral responsibilities to some future heavenly state. Emerson is Kantian in this regard because he considers what must be the case in order for us to think it even possible to live a moral life; although, of course, Emerson does not ultimately posit the noumenal as an answer to this moral question. As Emerson famously responded to a young spiritualist asking him about how to reflect on the "other world," "Other world! There is no other world" (*LL* 2:269). Therefore, whatever we take transcendence and the spiritual to be about, they are, to use David Smith's phrase, "this-worldly," and they do not refer to something other than our way of experiencing the world as we have it before us.

But this is perhaps not enough to answer the criticism. For if Emerson's understanding of transcendence and the spiritual are postures that one takes in this world, attitudes or ways of reflecting on ourselves in relation to the world, this doesn't yet resolve the worry that they ultimately lead one to disregard the inherent value of the world as such, reducing its place in human life to a mere means of reflecting on something more crucial or more fundamental to human existence. For if Cavell is correct to think that moral perfectionism is primarily concerned with how the self gets from its current self to a future self, then one might be tempted to suppose that nature is just another tool at one's disposal, the world needing to be properly constructed such that one might reach his future self. That is to say, whatever "nature" ends up being for Emerson, it might be too thin a concept to support an environmental ethics. This is the

question that any Emersonian view must answer.

Indeed, there are places in Emerson's corpus where this problem seems evident. Emerson's definition of "nature" at the very beginning of his first book seems to present it in such a way that the human is instantly defined in contrast to what is not human, making his fundamental anthropology essentially a negation of nature. He famously begins by asking "to what end is nature?" and by dividing the universe into "Nature and the Soul" (CW 1:7-8). One of this scheme's virtues is that "nature" includes everything other than soul, at least in its "philosophical" definition, so that all forms of human artifice are counted as manifestations and modifications of "nature."⁴³⁶ Nature in this configuration looks more like the present-day "environment" than it does the untouched wilderness, and would allow for human-created environments to count the same as any other. Nevertheless, the "Soul" seems to be given pride of position, forcing us to wonder whether this hierarchy of existence hinders an environmental concern. However, as Emerson scholars have long noted, this separation between nature and soul is tenuous at best, and Emerson's most profound contribution to thinking about a concept like nature in the early part of the nineteenth century is to a great degree to collapse the distinction between nature and soul while still holding on to the terms. This comes to the forefront in his early lectures on the natural sciences during the 1830s where he views science as a means for understanding the human, bringing advances in the natural sciences to bear on his moral project.⁴³⁷ Famously, in his 1837 address "The American Scholar," he formulates what would

⁴³⁶ Emerson calls the distinction between "essences untouched by man" and the products of human "will" the "common sense" of "nature" which makes a distinction between nature and art. Although he immediately adds the rejoinder that art is so seemingly insignificant in the larger picture of things—"a little chipping, baking, patching, and washing"—because its results do not do much to change nature. One of the persistent questions for this passage from *Nature* is how the reader should understand the relation between the philosophical and the common senses of nature, and how Emerson seems almost glib in his claim that he will use the word in both senses without telling the reader exactly how he will handle the clearly large difference between them (CW 1:8).

⁴³⁷ As Jaroslav Pelikan points out in *Nature*, "the study of Nature and the study of human Nature belonged together,

become a kind of naturalist creed: “So much of nature as he is ignorant of, so much of his own mind does he not yet possess. And, in fine, the ancient precept, ‘Know thyself,’ and the modern precept, ‘Study nature,’ become at last one maxim” (CW 1:55).

Nonetheless, it would be wrong to simply collapse human and nature for Emerson—and it is here where we can see one of his most important contributions. As David Greenham helpfully puts this emerging understanding of the human in nature that draws open Emerson’s version of a post-Kantian idealism, “the wider world can only come into being *for* the self as it is constructed *by* the self, and the self can only come into being *by* constructing just such a world.”⁴³⁸ It is in this human-nature relationship that we can see how the human is not just shaped by nature, but also shapes it precisely because, as Greenham puts it, “nature corresponds to our way of knowing it.”⁴³⁹ This correspondence is a product of the active shaping of nature by the human, which ultimately is not something material that stands opposed to the human—as the original distinction between nature and the soul might lead us to believe—but is ultimately what we are because we have shaped it. Emerson’s transcendentalism is thus urging people to discover themselves in the very processes that they use to shape the natural world.⁴⁴⁰

Admittedly, Emerson himself is somewhat non-committal on the exact nature of this relationship, especially in the late 1830s and early 1840s, often evoking religious metaphors that seem to do more to confuse than clarify. For instance, in “The Method of Nature” from 1841, he claims that nature is mind “precipitated,” a metaphor that seems to place an anthropocentric

by reason of the ‘proportion’ or ‘fitness’ or ‘beauty’ that was in both.” Jaroslav Pelikan, introduction to *Nature*, by Ralph Waldo Emerson (Boston: Beacon Press, 1985), 25.

⁴³⁸ Greenham, 88.

⁴³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁴⁰ Ibid., 90.

vision of universal mind as creative force of nature itself (CW 1:123). Nevertheless, his ultimate vision of nature for finite humans (albeit with infinite depths) is that we must conceive of it as “a work of *ecstasy*,” one that is forever overflowing our attempts to contain it both intellectually and materially (CW 1:125). To suppose that you have found the intellectual key to understanding nature, or to suppose that you can physically master it, is a form of human hubris. This move to mastery is a way of falsely supposing that nature aims towards human gain. Because nature is in “perpetual inchoation,” humans cannot consider themselves to be the final ends of nature, nor can nature be conceived as aiming finally towards the more perfect production of human flourishing. We might add here that this might morally disappoint us, as we witness the cruelty of the natural world in ways that seem to confound our sense of moral law, but which would appear as a kind of excess or ecstasy.⁴⁴¹

To formulate a response, it is helpful to return to Cavell’s understanding of skepticism as it was developed in the previous chapter. To reiterate, Cavell understands external world skepticism to be an expression of the human tendency to take metaphysical finitude as an intellectual lack. That is to say, when confronted with our inability to satisfy our desire for mastery in the world (in this sense, intellectual as well as physical) the skeptic supposes that this inability (this finitude) is the product of an intellectual lack that he must overcome by gaining new grounds for certain knowledge. This is the culmination of the tradition of epistemological skepticism for Cavell, one that, as Ludger Viefhues-Bailey has pointed out, is a product of a kind of masculinist desire for mastery.⁴⁴² Thus, the skeptic tries to solve the skeptical problem by

⁴⁴¹ One of the persistent problems for ecotheologians is their tendency to accept the cruelty of nature because it is a created thing. See Andrew Linzey, “So Near and Yet So Far: Animal Theology and Ecological Theology,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Religion and Ecology*, ed. Roger S. Gottlieb (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 348-361.

⁴⁴² Viefhues-Bailey, “Releasing the Feminine Voice,” 545.

cleaving to his search for certainty, a certainty that would shore up the loss of the world that he feels. Cavell's response to such a move is not to advocate for an answer to skepticism, but to focus on the nature of the response to it by acknowledging human metaphysical finitude, with its ineluctable tendency toward skepticism, as a characteristic part of what it means to be human. He suggests that we ought not to seek certain knowledge as a way of dealing with our condition, but to seek an appropriate response that shoulders the responsibility the world places upon us. The skeptic, when confronted by his loss of intimacy with the world, a loss that has become definitive of the modern condition, has the wrong kind of response and thereby only further loses intimacy with the world—he removes himself from his responsibility by deferring his response until after he has certainty of the world's existence. In short, to achieve the ordinary, for Cavell, is to find intimacy with one's common and low surroundings.

This attempt to regain intimacy with the world is an extension of Cavell's reading of Emerson. Although Cavell puts many of the tools in place to turn this into an environmental ethic, Emerson is clearer about what it means to regain intimacy with the natural world (as opposed to one's social world). In terms that evoke Cavell's development of the skeptic's problem, Emerson in "The Method of Nature" uses the idea of ecstasy to reorient our relation to nature away from that of knowing. As he says: "known [nature] will not be, but gladly beloved and enjoyed" (*CW* 1:125). In this ecstatic state, "His health and greatness consist in his being the channel through which heaven flows to earth," a state in which we become intimate partners with the natural world itself (*CW* 1:130). In the ecstatic state one doesn't go out of one's self to some mystical other world, but rather one attends to one's own intuition, which in contrast to one's understanding aims to "suggest" rather than "describe" (*CW* 1:124). That is to say, intuition with regards to the natural world supplies us with an open-ended picture that appreciates the human

inability to state with certainty facts about the world. It is in this sense that we come upon “immanent divinity,” the closest Emerson will come to an idea of pantheism (CW 1:136).

Perhaps what is most important at this juncture is that Emerson reminds us that humans are active shapers of the world. His idea of immanent transcendence is meant to indicate the special place that humans have in this shaping—as beings that become intentional through a particular posture of reflection on ourselves, one of the core tenets of his moral perfectionism. However, there is a problematic aspect to this. Emerson seems to base his notion of transcendence on the special capacity of humans to act as conduits of what he calls Genius. That is, humans have a special ability to be active creators because they have a seemingly unique reflective and poetic capacity, which includes a commitment to moral action. However much humans are meant to read themselves in nature, there is always the sense that something special is happening here, that humans ought not to be woodchucks. This is why it is so easy for him to slip between the mind of individual humans and a greater concept of Mind or Soul that exists as a postulated ideal, one that functions as a kind of extreme satisfaction that is partially reflected by individuals. Although he admits that humans are not the ends of nature, his picture of it does not do enough to clear the suspicion that this projection serves more than human interests.

Instead, let me propose a more pragmatic reading of transcendence. Instead of viewing transcendence as a special capacity of humans, we can view it as a *de facto* recognition of relative human creative power. In other words, this means making creative power empirically descriptive of the human rather than definitional. This is another way of saying that life in the anthropocene must recognize, as Emerson’s idealism recognizes, that the world is now created by human power in ways that we don’t yet understand. Our contemporary ecstasy is the burgeoning awareness that we don’t have control over the world, while, at the same time, the

effects of human creative power are productive of a world that is contrary to human ends. This has been something that environmental justice advocates have known for decades now, and which concepts like “slow violence” have attempted to make clearer: that the environments in which we live are created by human action, but yet exceed our present abilities to fully understand them because they illustrate our own representational failure. We are creators of the world that we are created by—Emerson’s point is that we must live within this unresolvable tension.

What then would be an appropriate Emersonian response? Much of my goal in rethinking Emerson’s religious thought has been to reinvigorate the social and practical aspects of Emerson’s work to counter the overemphasis on his individualism and anti-institutionalism. What this has meant is focusing on the particular ways that Emerson offers a vision for a reinvigorated form of worship that fits with his reinterpretation of the nature of religion. Rather than stopping at moments of ecstasy, Emerson has a quite developed understanding of ethical formation by means of community education (which he alternatively names “church”). This education intends to supply people with the tools to engage in reflection upon their common lives and their everyday actions (his example is often the farmer) to realize the ideals that are implicit in these actions, and to take an active role in pursuing them. This is what I stress as the “transcendentalism of common life,” the fundamental reorientation of his natural theology.

In closing, let me briefly show how this vision informs the end of his 1860 essay “Worship,” where he specifies the outward forms that his long developing notion of religion must take. For many decades Emerson had been arguing that science and religion were more closely aligned than most of his contemporaries had thought. In fact, he rejected the idea that they were merely compatible for the idea that they were in essence coming upon the same

territory when properly understood. This meant rejecting both the idea that religion is concerned with the supernatural (that which is above scientific investigation) and the idea that science has no bearing on human moral becoming (that fact and value are distinct).⁴⁴³ As he writes: “The religion which is to guide and fulfil the present and coming ages, whatever else it be, must be intellectual. The scientific mind must have a faith which is science” (CW 6:6.51). He then gives a faint sense of what this new religion will look like:

There will be a new church founded on moral science, at first cold and naked, a babe in a manger again, the algebra and mathematics of ethical law, the church of men to come, without shawms, or psaltery, or sackbut; but it will have heaven and earth for its beams and rafters; science for symbol and illustration; it will fast enough gather beauty, music, picture, poetry. (CW 6:6.52)

There are two important pieces to note. First, this new church will be primarily focused on the moral lives of its members, and will do this by purging notions of tradition that point backwards to what Emerson saw as outmoded ecclesiastical rituals, which are here represented by the intentionally arcane references of shawms, psaltery, and sackbut. These will be replaced by a church that is fully situated in and of the world, with “heaven and earth for its beams and rafters,” without reference to any other. And it will take on science as “symbol and illustration,” meaning that its core content is represented by the actual investigation of our world in conjunction with our moral reflection on it (here, moral science and natural science are brought together). Second, because this new church is part of the project of natural theology that I have here laid out, it includes the production of and reflection upon representational materials (“beauty, music, picture, poetry”) that express human ideals.

The purpose of this community worship is not to impart the proper virtues on individual

⁴⁴³ Emerson here sets the pragmatist stage running through William James and eventually leading to Hilary Putnam’s attack on the fact/value dichotomy. Hilary Putnam, *Pragmatism: An Open Question* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1995); *The Collapse of the Fact/Value Dichotomy and Other Essays* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2004).

humans. Rather, the purpose of this worship is to form individuals into the kinds of subjects that are able to engage in the “transcendentalism of common life.” That is to say, it is not enough to simply be a part of this reimagined worship—one must also do the work of one’s self that it requires, sending oneself “home to his central solitude” (ibid.). What one finds in her central solitude, however, is not that she is self-sufficient. As has been the thread of this entire Emersonian discussion, the pervasive sense of intimacy as creator of and created by, interpenetrated while also distinct, is what one ultimately discovers. And as Emerson often stresses in his religious thought, the goal of the human in her religious reflection is to become less private and more public, meaning that one looks into oneself in order to be drawn out of oneself, all the while discovering that the approach that one must take towards the environment is one of response in acknowledgment of responsibility.

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