

Review Essay

What Is “Emersonian” Enlightenment?

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Daniel A. Campana, *The Faith of Emerson: American Transcendentalism, Kantian Epistemology, and Vedantic Thought* (Lanham, Maryland: Lexington Books, 2023), 169 + xv pp., \$95.00 hardcover.

The Faith of Emerson provides us with a compact, well-articulated exposition of readings that enabled Emerson to formulate his transcendental philosophy through early assimilation of Kantian and Vedantic thought. For Emerson, what Kant argues as universal and necessary in the mind (the transcendental) can be identified in Vedantic literature as the “self” or “soul,” which partakes of the Atman or Oversoul. Campana finds consistent evidence for Vedantic thought throughout Emerson’s work and argues that “the themes on which his critics fasten in order to demonstrate the incongruity of his later thought with his earlier are themes that were essential in his earlier thought as well” (Campana 134). The central argument is convincing, but there is of course more to add. The following review essay both critiques and adds to Campana’s arguments.

In his first four chapters, Campana argues convincingly for the influence of Kant and Vedanta through a close look at Emerson’s early reading as evidenced in his journal and letters and book borrowings. This was the age of the first translations of Indian literature in the West. Charles

Wilkins translated the *Bhagavad Gita* in 1785, and Ram Mohan Roy, Sir William Jones, and Henry Thomas Colebrooke were publishing essays on Indian philosophy and translating essential texts. But much of Emerson's early exposure to Kant and Vedanta comes through secondary accounts, particularly in histories of philosophy which included Indian thought by comparing it to ancient and modern European philosophy. Among these was Dugald Stewart's *Elements of the Philosophy of the Human Mind* (1792-1814) which Emerson read in 1820 during his senior year at Harvard. In addition, the popular *Cours de L'histoire de la Philosophie* (1827) by Victor Cousins provided Emerson with an account of Indian philosophy. Yet the most relevant expression of Vedantic thought, not mentioned by Campana, is Charles Grant's "Poem on the Restoration of Learning in the East" (1807). Robert C. Gordon points out that the poem reinforced "the close relationship between Berkeleian and Hindu Idealism."¹ Gordon suggests that the following lines introduced Emerson to metempsychosis:

At Brahma's stern decree, as ages roll,
New shapes of clay await th' immortal soul.

But Grant's lines are ambiguous. The immortal soul might refer to metempsychosis, an individual self in a new body, or more significantly, to the universal Self (Atman) that resides in everyone. Thus, early exposure to Indian philosophy and religion was from secondary sources. It is only later, in 1856, that we find evidence of direct quotes from Warren Hastings's preface to Wilkins's translation of the *Bhagavad Gita*, in Emerson's *English Traits* (CW V:259).

Dugald Stewart's *Elements* also contains a lucid account of Kant's transcendental argument as do Victor Cousin's *Cours*, Madame de Stael's *Germany* (1814), Gerando's *Histoire comparée des systèmes de philosophie, relativement aux principes des connaissances humaines* (1822), and especially Coleridge's *The Friend*, *The Statesman's Manual*, *Biographia Literaria*, and *Aids to Reflection*. These works all provide brief but intelligible accounts of the difference between Understanding and Reason and the transcendental argument for universal and necessary components of experience as formulated in *The Critique of Pure Reason*,

but they conclude that Kant is basically a skeptic and an idealist, in spite of his claim to have dispelled the scandal that philosophy had not found a rational proof of the existence of the external world. More importantly "[James] Marsh's fifty-eight-page 'Introduction' to Coleridge's *Aids to Reflection* served to focus the reader's attention on those aspects of Kant's philosophy that Coleridge was using" (Campana 68). For Coleridge, the outward forms of Christianity are to be identified with the merely phenomenal Understanding, while core Christianity is identified with the universal and necessary ideas of Reason: "On Coleridge's account Reason is the soul in relation to God" (Campana 68). The language of Marsh and Coleridge "expressed Kant's ideas in a way that seemed to liberate one from being a passive receptor of experience and empower one as the active agent in that experience [...]. All this was leading to a new sense of faith" (69). Nevertheless, Coleridge's journey leads back to a return to the orthodoxy of the Anglican church, while Emerson turns to the articulation of a transcendental view that is at once more devout and more secular.

While considering Kant and Vedanta, two salient influences on Emerson, Campana focuses on "faith," a somewhat problematic term. Faith commonly means subscribing to the declared beliefs, rules, and practices of a distinct religion or denomination (i.e., a "Faith," capitalized). Such rules are sometimes written down, signed, and sworn to. The history of Protestantism since Luther is one of creating new "Faiths" by breaking off from an existing church to form a new sect. Campana takes pains to show the radical split (mostly over the concept of original sin) between the Calvinism of the Andover Theological Seminary and the liberal Unitarianism of Harvard Divinity School. Unitarianism, however liberal, held to the sacrament of communion which Emerson eventually rejected:

I have sometimes thought that, in order to be a good minister, it was necessary to leave the ministry. The profession is antiquated. In an altered age, we worship in the dead forms of our forefathers. Were not a Socratic paganism better than an effete, superannuated Christianity?²

While Emerson is often most critical of Wordsworth, I think we can recognize here a debt to the line from the 1807 Sonnet, "The World Is Too Much With Us," which is quoted in the Divinity School "Address" of 1838:

One would rather be "A pagan, suckled in a creed outworn," than to be defrauded of his manly right in coming into nature and finding not names and places, not land and professions, but even virtue and truth foreclosed and monopolized. You shall not be a man even. You shall not own the world; you shall not dare and live after the infinite Law that is in you, and in company with the infinite Beauty which heaven and earth reflect to you in all lovely forms; but you must subordinate your nature to Christ's nature; you must accept our interpretations, and take his portrait as the vulgar draw it. (CW 1:132)

What Campana calls a "new sense of faith" led Emerson in 1832 to resign as minister of the Second Church in Boston.

Emerson's religious path is eerily prefigured in Kant's *An Answer to the Question What is Enlightenment* (1784). Kant says that "Enlightenment is man's emergence from his self-imposed immaturity [*selbstverschuldeten Unmündigkeit*]. Immaturity is the inability to make use of one's own understanding without the guidance of another." Whether Emerson knew of Kant's essay, the argument of overcoming immaturity is certainly in accord with "Self-Reliance" (1841) and many other writings right up through *Immortality* (1875). Furthermore, Kant argues that a citizen must obey rules but has a duty as a scholar to publicly express his thoughts about impropriety. So too, "a clergyman is bound to lecture to his catechism students and his congregation according to the symbol of the church which he serves; for he has been accepted on this condition." If he disagrees with some of the doctrines, he can say: "our church teaches this or that; these are arguments that it employs." However, "if he believed he found such a contradiction in them, he could not in conscience conduct his office; he would have to resign." This is where Emerson found himself in 1832 when he resigned from the ministry. Six years later in his Divinity

School "Address" he gave the public the scholarly argument that Kant was calling for. He questions the practice of Christianity in his time:

It is the office of a true teacher to show us that God is, not was; that He speaketh, not spake. The true Christianity,—a faith like Christ's in the infinitude of man,—is lost. None believeth in the soul of man, but only in some man or person old and departed. (CW 1:127).

This soul or self he speaks of is a universal, reflecting both the inward turning of liberal Protestantism and the secular analysis of Kantian critical thinking. The inner intuitions of Reason, self, or soul win out over the avowed practices of his Faith. Emerson's faith in the self or soul led him to reject the practices of a Faith.

Campana's question (the title of Chapter 5) is "Did Emerson Lose His Faith?" The answer is "No," but a question more relevant might be "What had that faith become?" We read that "Emerson would have agreed that, *in the sense in which he and his peers understood it*, he had indeed lost the faith" (85, Campana's Italics). In Chapter 6, we learn that "It is interesting that for all of the themes Emerson covered in his essays, addresses, and poems, he commits little to the topic of faith" (98). As is pointed out in Chapter 11, "Because religions faith had come to mean a static belief in propositions that comprised the doctrines of the church, Emerson seldom used the word faith to describe his deeply religious experience" (147). Such admissions do not, I think, offer a means of entirely deconstructing this book, but they do alert the reader to the oblique angle from which it approaches Emerson's works. Campana does provide a clear-headed evaluation of the influence on Emerson's literary life of the tragedies of his personal life, as in the deaths of his first wife Ellen and later his son Waldo. He specifically rejects those critics who read in the essay *Experience*, "the quintessential expression of Emerson's despair and acquiescence" (135). While Campana concedes that *Experience* is written in a "dark mood," he sees it as "a re-telling of the story of *Oversoul* and *Self-Reliance* in the *Essays: First Series*. At that time the tone was naively optimistic; but in this case optimism is tempered with maturity, Emerson's

transcendentalism is unchanged” (136). Again, “in Vedantic terms Emerson stresses in this essay the cosmic *Karma* in relation to human experience which takes place in maya—illusion” (136). But a few years earlier Emerson had already articulated his own version of Karma in the essay “Compensation” (1841) which Campana mentions only briefly, and which deserves a larger treatment.

“Compensation” has been judged harshly by literary critics, partly because it runs together a hodgepodge of binaries found in every part of experience: in sensation (“darkness and light”), biology, zoology, medicine (“the systole and diastole of the heart”), the earth’s polarity, physics, magnetism, electricity, mechanics, and so forth. Emerson begins by explaining his motivations: “Ever since I was a boy I have wished to write a discourse on Compensation; for it seemed to me when very young that on this subject life was ahead of theology and the people knew more than the preachers taught” (CW 2:93). At an early age he felt some distance from church doctrines and drew from the documents of lived experience. As a keynote for the essay, he offers a delightfully ironic account of a sermon in which the preacher expounds the doctrine of the Last Judgment: “He assumed that judgment is not executed in this world; that the wicked are successful” (CW 2:93-95). Emerson argues that people in their speech and actions know better. In the traditional view from the pulpit the wicked are rewarded in this life and the saints in the hereafter. Emerson rejects this. For him compensation for sinner and saint is realized immediately in this life, not in some existence after death and not in some Karmic transmigration of the soul. Its immediacy affects not just great moral questions but every act and thought in every moment of existence. It is outside of time and within the individual. M.H. Abrams describes a long and vigorous history of the development of this internalized “Last Judgement” in a section of his *Natural Supernaturalism* entitled “Christian History and Christian Psycho-Biography.” Citing the phrase “the kingdom of God is within you” (Luke 17:21) as evidence, Abrams says that an “important and dramatic phenomenon was the tendency, grounded in texts of the New Testament itself, to internalize apocalypse by transferring the

theater of events from the outer earth and heaven to the spirit of the single believer."³ The title *Natural Supernaturalism* is appropriated from a chapter of Thomas Carlyle's *Sartor Resartus* [Tailor Re-tailored].⁴ The book, which Emerson as a friend of Carlyle helped get published, was a satire of German Romanticism and an attempt to defend and reframe religion in terms of contemporary philosophical ideas.

Another passage from the gospels not alluded to by Emerson is even more closely related to his moral vision of immediate compensation. When a revolutionary Jesus angers the Pharisees who question why he and his disciples break the law by not washing their hands before eating, Jesus answers: "Not that which goeth into the mouth defileth a man; but that which cometh out of the mouth, this defileth a man" (Matthew 15:11). Jesus speaks from the confidence of the inner self, while Peter, the "man of faith" who frequently questions, asks what this means. The answer: "Do not ye yet understand, that whatsoever entereth in at the mouth goeth into the belly, and is cast out into the draught? But those things which proceed out of the mouth come forth from the heart; and they defile the man" (Matthew 15:17-18; see also Mark 7, 1-23). In *Compensation* Emerson takes pains to explain how what one speaks immediately illuminates what he is, and creates what he has become by his speech action. Emerson finds this instant Karma in Buddhism. As he says in *The Transcendentalist*: "The Buddhist, who thanks no man, who says, 'Do not flatter your benefactors,' but who, in his conviction that every good deed can by no possibility escape its reward, will not deceive the benefactor by pretending that he has done more than he should, is a Transcendentalist" (CW 1:337). This "immediate Karma" of compensation is essential to Emerson's view of transcendentalism.

Emerson's idea of compensation expands what is meant by the moral. Emerson compiles evidence from a vast array of human experience and presents it in stroboscopic flashes. He speaks with the voice of his insight. His authority comes not from faith, but from the kind of vision he finds everywhere. Binaries are viewed through the lens of morality:

The same dualism underlies the nature and condition of man. Every excess causes a defect; every defect an excess.

Every sweet hath its sour; every evil its good. Every faculty which is a receiver of pleasure has an equal penalty put on its abuse. It is to answer for its moderation with its life. For every grain of wit there is a grain of folly. For every thing you have missed, you have gained something else; and for every thing you gain, you lose something. (CW 2:98)

Compensation can be seen in labor, greed, love, pride, truth, human calamity, and the natural world. The self or soul sees in nature a reflection of its own morality: "Thus is the universe alive. All things are moral. That soul which within us is a sentiment, outside of us is a law" (CW 2:102). It is the same with words: "The human soul is true to these facts in the painting of fable, of history, of law, of proverbs, of conversation" (CW 2:107). He adds that "The Indian mythology ends in the same ethics" (CW 2:98). This law of compensation is an induction from a compilation of lived experience. Cumulatively, the arguments go beyond cause and effect because cause and effect collapse into each other. They are larger than traditional notions of crime and punishment in some karmic next life or apocalyptic end of time.

While Campana's review of the influences of Kant and Vedanta is convincing, an understanding of Emerson requires a broader look. The Reformation, Enlightenment, and Romanticism, to which Emerson was heir, leaned toward a secular approach to philosophy. In the words of M.H. Abrams, "It is a historical commonplace that the course of Western thought since the Renaissance has been one of progressive secularization" (NS 13). Significantly, Kant undertook a critique of reason to counter philosophical skepticism in order to make religion possible: "I have therefore found it necessary to deny *knowledge*, in order to make room for *faith* [Glaube]"⁵ Nevertheless, his critical philosophy is specifically secular, based, not on faith, but on Greek philosophical thinking; the Categories of Understanding come from Aristotelean logic. In Kant, the Romantic movement found a way to move away from empiricism's emphasis on the dead objects of sensation toward an emphasis on mind or

spirit in perception. It was an attempt to preserve the human in the experience. From Abrams' broad historical perspective, Romantic writers undertook, whatever their religious creed or lack of creed to save traditional concepts, schemes and values which had been based on the relation of the Creator to his creature and creation, but to reformulate them within the prevailing two-term system of subject and object, ego and non-ego, the human mind or consciousness and its transactions with nature. (NS 13)

Additional binary terms such as spirit (*geist*) and world, or mind and matter, or soul and world, or inner and outer all re-enact a fundamental problem in describing what we are (as subjectivity) and what we experience in sensation. In Kant's view the issue is difficult because the world of sensation comes to us already digested by the Understanding. In some sense, one's view about what is real, mind or matter, depend on whether one agrees with the Empiricists that mind is a relatively simple receptor of sensation, or with Kant and his followers that the structure of cognition contributes much to experience.

Compounded with Enlightenment secularism was the Reformation's reaction against outward forms of religion and its tendency to want to return to an "early Christianity" marked by a turning inward for religious meaning. For instance, the Quakers found that the "Inner Light" is in everyone. This is concisely expressed in William Penn's apologia entitled *Primitive Christianity: Revived in the Faith and Practice of the People Called Quakers* (1696).⁶ Penn explains the doctrine of Inner Light which is in everyone: "That as the Fingers shute out of the Hand, and the Branches from the Body of the Tree, so, true Religion, in all the Parts and Articles of it, Springs from this Divine Principle in Man" (*Primitive Christianity*, introduction). Once, when asked about his religious position, Emerson answered "with greater deliberateness, and longer pauses between his words than usual, 'I am more of a Quaker than anything else. I believe in the "still, small voice," and that voice is Christ within us.'" ⁷ As was noted above, Kant's transcendental argument looks for what is

universal and necessary in experience. So too the Inner Light of Quakerism is Universal. Speaking of the gospel of John, William Penn says “the Text does not only prove the Divinity of the Light, but the Universality of it also ” (*Primitive Christianity*, Ch 1, Para 4). And speaking of the Quakers in the third person Penn says: “By this Principle they understand something that is Divine and though in Man, yet not of Man, but of God” (*Primitive Christianity*, Ch 1, Para 2). It is no great leap for Emerson to go from the universality of Inner Sense to the universal and necessary that defines transcendentalism. Insofar as it is universal, it is not what we mean by egotism.

Similar thought occurs in the *Bhagavad Gita* in lines such as the following: “I am the Self, Arjuna, seated in the heart of all beings.”⁸ The first six chapters of the *Bhagavad Gita* are devoted to *Karm Yog* or the Path of duty, a deontological argument similar to Kantian ethics. Krishna tells Arjuna that he must act out of duty and not be concerned with ends. “Yog,” an easily recognized Indo-European term, indicates the “yoking” of the self or soul to the larger Self. In Chapter XII, entitled “Yog through Distinguishing the Field and the Knower of the Field,” Arjuna is told about the “field” of mind (intellect, ego, self), and that through the discipline of the self, the larger Self can be realized: “Within the body also resides the Supreme Lord. He is said to be the Witness, the Permitter, the Supporter, Transcendental Enjoyer, the ultimate Controller, and the *Paramātmā* (Supreme Soul)” (*Bhagavad Gita* 13:23). But methods of yoking the self with the Supreme Self are multiple. Krishna explains:

Some try to perceive the Supreme Soul within their hearts through meditation, and others try to do so through the cultivation of knowledge, while still others strive to attain that realization by the path of action. There are still others who are unaware of these spiritual paths, but they hear from others and begin worshipping the Supreme Lord. By such devotion to hearing from saints, they too can gradually cross over the ocean of birth and death. (*Bhagavad Gita* 13:23-26).

Most appropriate to Campana's work is the description of those who follow the path of devotion. Such people require *faith* that by worship they will achieve enlightenment. But for those who like Emerson have achieved some measure of a realization of the larger Self, it is not a question of faith. Faith is needed when insight has not been achieved. It is like Mumon's koans: they are brickbats used to knock on the gate to be tossed away once the gate is open.⁹

Significantly, Quakerism has a similar relation to more conventional Christianity as Buddhism has to Vedanta. With the Quakers, because everyone has direct access to inner sense there is no need for priests. In the same way, for the Buddhists, authority lies within everyone. But the Buddhists of course go a step further by denying Atman (Self) as yet another impediment to the realization of Being.

The experience of a moral Inner Light is for some people a profound experience of the dissolution of self and object. To better understand this we turn from Campana's argument to the terms of a more secular era, an era which the Reformation and the Enlightenment and the Romantic movement in literature all helped bring about, because of (and in spite of) the leading thinkers in these movements. In *Civilization and Its Discontents* (1930) Freud discusses the "Oceanic Feeling":

It is a feeling which he would like to call a sensation of "eternity," a feeling as of something limitless, unbounded, something "oceanic." It is, he says, a purely subjective experience, not an article of belief; it implies no assurance of personal immortality, but it is the source of the religious spirit and is taken hold of by the various Churches and religious systems, directed by them into definite channels and also, no doubt, used up in them. One may rightly call oneself religious on the ground of this oceanic feeling alone, even though one reject all beliefs and all illusions.¹⁰

The term "oceanic feeling" was suggested by his friend Romain Roland, who criticized Freud for not discussing this in *The Future of an Illusion*

(1927). Coincidentally, at that time Roland was writing two books concerning religious mystics: *La Vie de Ramakrishna* (1929) and *La vie de Vivekananda* (1930), and perhaps borrowed the terminology from William James's *Varieties of Religious Experience* (1902). Emerson alludes to such experiences repeatedly, especially in terms of identity of self and nature. The famous passage from *Nature* describes an experience in which the self drops away: "all mean egotism vanishes. I become a transparent eyeball; I am nothing; I see all; the currents of the Universal Being circulate through me; I am part or parcel of God" (CW 1:10). Emerson experienced such moments with varying intensity and interpretation. Robert D. Richardson says, "Emerson's moment of insight into the interconnectedness of things in the *Jardin des Plantes* was a moment of almost visionary intensity that pointed him away from theology and toward science."¹¹ But the "nature" that Emerson observes is one that includes subjectivity and object. He is a scientist who observes not just "nature," but the role of mind in observing nature. Such a method of dual observation is inherent in Enlightenment philosophy in idealists such as Descartes and Berkeley, and empiricists such as Locke and Hume, and of course in Immanuel Kant. But Emerson also found it in the higher Self described in the *Bhagavat Gita*.

Kant's refutation of Cartesian "material" idealism argues that the "I" of the "I am" depends on consciousness of permanent objects outside of us (CPR B 275-76). This reverses the notion of the inner sense being a certainty and the outer world being ideal and testifies to the interdependence of mind (self) and nature. Emerson incorporates this into his discussion of language in *Nature*: "This immediate dependence of language upon nature, this conversion of an outward phenomenon into a type of somewhat in human life, never loses its power to affect us" (CW 1:39). Reversing direction, he says: "The world is emblematic. Parts of speech are metaphors, because the whole of nature is a metaphor of the human mind. The laws of moral nature answer to those of matter as face to face in a glass" (CW 1:32-33). But this "relation between mind and matter" is something beyond theory; it is vision:

William Dennis Horn, "What Is 'Emersonian' Enlightenment"

It appears to men, or it does not appear. When in fortunate hours we ponder this miracle, the wise man doubts if at all other times he is not blind and deaf; [...] for the universe becomes transparent, and the light of higher laws than its own shines through it. It is the standing problem which has exercised the wonder and the study of every fine genius since the world began; from the era of the Egyptians and the Brahmins to that of Pythagoras, of Plato, of Bacon, of Leibnitz, of Swedenborg. (CW 1:35)

Emerson's vision of the interrelationship between mind and nature, clearly articulated in *Nature*, is expressed from a more idealistic stance in *Self-Reliance*, and is maintained as a central theme throughout the essays. For instance, *The Transcendentalist*, written in the third person like Penn's *Primitive Christianity*, says "His experience inclines him to behold the procession of facts you call the world, as flowing perpetually outward from an invisible, unsounded centre in himself, centre alike of him and of them, and necessitating him to regard all things as having a subjective or relative existence, relative to that aforesaid Unknown Centre of him" (CW 1:334). This marriage of self and world is equally expressed in later works such as *Experience*, which maintains that "The universe is the bride of the soul" (CW 3:77). Such a use of the word "bride" echoes New Testament figurations of Christ as the bridegroom (*Romans* 7:4, See NS 48). Again, we agree with Campana that Emerson maintains a faith, but it is a faith expressed in a more secular religion of self and nature.

We see frequent use of biblical language and allusion everywhere in Emerson's work as is well documented by Harriet Rodgers Zink.¹² His use of biblical terms and images often counteracts his attempt at a new language for his personal experience and the enterprise of a uniquely American scholarship. Emerson's familiarity with the Bible is exceptional, yet the problem remains endemic to post-Enlightenment Western culture. Abrams quotes the following from the "humanitarian Atheist" Pierre Proudhon: "[I am] forced to proceed as a materialist, that is to say, by observation and experience, and to conclude in the language of a believer, because there is

no other; not knowing whether my formulas, theological despite myself, ought to be taken as literal or figurative.”¹³ Campana briefly discusses Emerson in terms of twentieth-century ordinary language philosophy. He says that from the point of view of Wittgenstein’s philosophy, “To believe in a Last Judgement is to see one’s life in the shadow of such an event. The nonbeliever who does not believe in the Last Judgment does not contradict the believer; she simply does not participate in a religious form of life” (Campana 90). We have seen that the “shadow” exists for the preacher of *Compensation*, but for Emerson the immediacy of compensation is not a threat hanging over us, but a simple observation of the reciprocity of ordinary experience. Such an insight is sufficient. To reappropriate Freud, “one may rightly call oneself religious” by virtue of this insight alone.

It is unfortunate that Campana does not discuss the *Immortality* essay of 1875, because we find in this the most convincing evidence to support his claim that the themes of Emerson’s early thought are carried throughout his career. Interestingly, here, late in life, Emerson pays homage to Wordsworth’s “Immortality Ode” as “the best modern essay on the subject” (CW 8:346). The *Immortality* pieces by both authors reveal Neoplatonic themes, but Emerson’s essay moves to a more radical and explicit vision of the subject, possibly in spite of editing by Ellen Emerson and James Elliot Cabot that aligned the essay with a more conventional faith, as explored by Glen Johnson.¹⁴ In this late essay Emerson holds many of the same attitudes expressed in the Divinity School “Address.” In fact, he offers the same kind of ironic contrast seen in *Compensation* between a childish view preached from the pulpit and the transcendentalist’s mature understanding of life. He admonishes the vulgar view satirically:

You shall not say, “O my bishop, O my pastor, is there any resurrection? What do you think? Did Dr Channing believe that we should know each other? did Wesley? did Butler? did Fénelon? [...] Let any master simply recite to you the substantial laws of the intellect, and in the presence of the laws themselves you will never ask such primary-school questions. (CW 8:346)

Here again, we see the "self-imposed immaturity" argued by Kant (*What Is Enlightenment*). As in *Compensation*, the law of immediate compensation answers to the minister's Calvinist view of the Last Judgment, so here we see an answer to the childlike view of immortality:

Future state is an illusion for the ever-present state. It is not length of life, but depth of life. It is not duration, but a taking of the soul out of time, as all high action of the mind does: when we are living in the sentiments we ask no questions about time. (CW 8:347)

"Sentiments" here refers to the moral dimension of soul as expressed in Quakerism, and while Emerson includes duty as necessary, this is not the deontology argument of Kantian ethics.

The *Immortality* essay begins with an historical account of visions of immortality which included the Egyptian attempt to preserve the physical body. This physical notion was counter to Greek culture which took "death only as the distributor of imperishable glory" (CW 8:325). But the "barbarians who received the cross" believed in a physical resurrection after the Egyptian custom. Emerson's position includes neither physical resurrection nor the continuance of the ego self. He defends this position by referring to the Gospels:

It is strange that Jesus is esteemed by mankind the bringer of the doctrine of immortality. He is never once weak or sentimental; he is very abstemious of explanation, he never preaches the personal immortality; whilst Plato and Cicero had both allowed themselves to overstep the stern limits of the spirit, and gratify the people with that picture. (CW 8:348)

Even Emerson's hero, Plato, is castigated for pandering to those whom Kant might consider to be in the state of "self-imposed immaturity." Or, as Emerson says, echoing St. Paul: "The youth puts off the illusions of the child, the man puts off the ignorance and tumultuous passions of youth; proceeding thence puts off the egotism of manhood, and becomes at last a public and universal soul" (CW 8:348, See 1 Corinthians 13:11).

While it would seem to some that Emerson did not “keep the Faith,” he certainly kept “his faith” in the transcendental; that is, in intellect, soul, self, heart, and in Atman, the larger Self. Emerson ends *Immortality* with a succinct account of the story of Nachiketas, the son of Gautama, and Yama, the lord of Death, from the *Katha Upanishad*. Yama gives Nachiketas three wishes. The first two are granted, but for the third Nachiketas desires to know if the “soul exists after the death of a man” (CW 8:349). Yama argues that Nachiketas should ask for anything else:

Choose sons and grandsons who may live a hundred years; choose herds of cattle; choose elephants and gold and horses; choose the wide expanded earth, and live thyself as many years as thou listeth. Or, if thou knowest a boon like this, choose it, together with wealth and far-extending life. Be a king.... (CW 8:350)

When Nachiketas insists on knowing, Yama acknowledges that he is capable of realizing the truth of Brahma and explains that

The soul is not born; it does not die; it was not produced from any one. Nor was any produced from it. [...] The soul cannot be gained by knowledge, not by understanding, not by manifold science. It can be obtained by the soul by which it is desired. It reveals its own truths. (CW 8:351-52)

In that which “reveals its own truths” we recognize the “self” from Emerson’s early work. Yes, Emerson maintained a faith, but not in any pedestrian sense.

In summary, while the title of each chapter of *The Faith of Emerson* contains the word “faith,” we find only a vague and conventional conception of what that term might mean. The conventionality that this loose use of the term implies does not measure up to Emerson; he surely goes beyond this in his views and beliefs. As we have seen above, a close look at Emerson’s work from early to late reveals a closely articulated vision of man and nature, that is, of Being, from the view of his intellect and his profound personal experience. Campana’s scholarly work is helpful in revealing early influences on Emerson, and maintains quite

correctly that the transcendentalist's early themes are maintained throughout his career. Importantly, this book counters those critics who want to find some basic change in attitude due to the tragedies of Emerson's life. Campana has the right idea, but more clarity and understanding could be provided with less emphasis on "faith" and more on an unflinching examination of the topics Emerson actually discusses.

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Notes

The abbreviation CW refers to Ralph Waldo Emerson, *The Complete Works of Ralph Waldo Emerson*, Centenary Edition. 12 Volumes, Ed. Edward Waldo Emerson. Digital edition: <https://quod.lib.umich.edu/e/emerson/>.

¹ Robert C. Gordon, "Emerson's Earliest Interest in India," *Infinity Foundation*, Digital Edition: https://www.infinityfoundation.com/i_es_gordo_emerson_frameset.htm. Accessed 12 January 2024.

² Journals of Ralph Waldo Emerson 1820-1872 with Annotations, ed. Edward Waldo Emerson and Waldo Emerson Forbes. 2 June 1832. Digital Edition: https://archive.org/stream/journalsofralphw02emeruoft/journalsofralphw02emeruoft_djvu.txt

³ M.H. Abrams, *Natural Supernaturalism: Tradition and Revolution in Romantic Literature* (W.W. Norton & Company, 1973), 47, hereafter cited parenthetically as NS.

⁴ Thomas Carlyle, *Sartor Resartus: The Life and Opinions of Herr Teufelsdröckh* (Boston: James Monroe and Company, 1836) Book 3, Chapter 8).

⁵ Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, translated by Norman Kemp Smith (London: MacMillan and Co., 1929), B:xxx. The abbreviation CPR refers to *Critique of Pure Reason*.

⁶ William Penn, *Primitive Christianity: Revived in the Faith and Practice of the People Called Quakers* (London: T. Sowle 1696).

⁷ Frederick B Tolles, "Emerson and Quakerism," *American Literature*, Vol. 10, No. 2 (May 1938), 142.

⁸ *Bhagavad Gita* 10:20. Digital Edition: <https://www.holy-bhagavad-gita.org>.

⁹ Mumon Ekai 1183-1260. In the summer of the first year of Jōtei, Ekai was in Ryūshō Temple and as head monk worked with the monks, using the cases of the ancient masters as brickbats to batter the gate and lead them on according to their respective capacities. “Mumon’s Preface to *The Gateless Gate*,” <https://sacred-texts.com/bud/zen/mumonkan.htm>. Accessed 12 January 2024.

¹⁰ Sigmund Freud, *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, ed. James Strachey (London: Hogarth Press, 1981), XXI:64.

¹¹ Robert D. Richardson Jr., *Emerson: The Mind on Fire* (Berkeley & Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2015), 143.

¹² Harriet Rodgers Zink, *Emerson’s Use of the Bible* (*University of Nebraska Studies in Language, Literature, and Criticism*, No.14. Lincoln, Nebraska, 1935).

¹³ Pierre-Joseph Proudhon, *The System of Economic Contradictions* (1847). Qtd NS 66. Also see a digital edition: <https://theanarchistlibrary.org/library/pierre-joseph-proudhon-system-of-economical-contradictions-or-the-philosophy-of-poverty>.

¹⁴ Glen M. Johnson, “Emerson’s Essay ‘Immortality’: The Problem of Authorship,” *American Literature*, Vol. 56, No. 3 (1984), 313-20.

